



by Bart Mendoza

Mention Billy Watson to blues aficionados and you'll get an instant smile. Best known for his virtuoso harmonica playing, he's also a genuinely nice man with a passion for music that is contagious. He makes music because he loves it, simple as that. He's released seven albums to date, but even if you don't own one of those, chances are, if you're a blues fan, you've heard his music. In concert he has been heard performing alongside such luminaries as Robin Henkel, the Mississippi Mudsharks, 2000 lbs. of Blues, the Blues Pharaohs, the Boogiemen, the Joint Chiefs, and Blue Largo, to name a few. Meanwhile, he can be found on many artists' recordings, including Jack Costanzo, Anna Troy, Billy Bacon and the Forbidden Pigs, and Todd Steadman and the Fat Tones. He also takes part in Thomas Yearsley's Exotiki group, performing Polynesian-Hawaiian tunes on the bongos.

The San Diego Troubadour was fortunate enough to sit down for a conversation with Watson last month, at Berkley Sound studios. What's most evident is Watson's love of making music and also his wicked sense of humor. Below are excerpts from that interview; further excerpts can be seen and heard on the San Diego Troubadour's home page: sandiegotroubadour.com.

Ironically, though Watson is now considered a top musician, all early indications were that he would spend his time doing something else. Born in New York, Watson is a native of Jersey City, graduating from the New York School of Visual Arts with a Bachelors degree. Post-college he was soon drawn to California for the surfing, arriving in 1988.

"I just got tired of the East Coast," he said. "I had a friend that lived in La Jolla; he was a civil engineer with the Navy. So, I had a place to live for a month or two to get established. At first, I thought I would come out here for a vacation but I just stayed."

He initially made his name locally as an artist, exhibiting his paintings in local coffeehouses. While he had success selling his work (over 300 pieces), the grind of moving his work from space to space eventually saw his interests going elsewhere. "I would just move this crazy show around," he said. "I did that for two years. And some of the pieces got vandalized, some of it got stolen. It just got to the point where I was like 'you're not really doing this right'. You either have to take it seriously and go through galleries and get a better business sense or just do it for fun. And I chose the 'for fun' part."

While occasionally he still does art, music would be his new focus. The harmonica entered his life at age 15. "I had a cousin I looked up to," Watson recalled. "He was a recovering alcoholic and drug addict. He gave me a harmonica and he also turned me on to a 1950s harmonica player named Sonny Boy Williamson II. I started listening to that guy a lot and that kind of got me into listening to the right kind of blues for a harmonica player, in terms of traditional blues." Part of the attraction was that no one else he knew played harmonica. "No one was attracted to them. I would go to school, but everyone played guitar, drums, even bass. The only bummer was no one played harmonica music," he laughed. "The only harmonica you heard was, 'oh, you can play this Neil Young song,' and it was like two seconds and that was it; you're done. Now what," he laughed.

It was show by Little Charlie and the Nightcats at the Belly Up Tavern that started Watson thinking about becoming a musician, though not strictly on musical terms. "I love comedy and Rick Estrin was like Groucho Marx, playing harmonica and fronting the band. I'd never seen that before; I was too young, I didn't realize it until I moved out here. The Belly Up Tavern was a place that had that kind of music. On the East Coast

there was really nothing like that around, it was like 'Bruce Springsteen at the Circuit'; it was Asbury Park. But here the music scene was a little diverse, I thought."

A show by the Paladins convinced him that music was the way to go. "And then I went and saw the Paladins; that took it to another level. I was listening to music at that time and pop music was just terrible. As soon as I saw Dave Gonzalez come out and that room was full of people swing dancing and having a good time, that was it. I was hooked." Watson soon met other key players such as James Harmon. "Eventually I got to hang out with these guys; they were my mentors."

By 1992 he had begun his career as a musician. "The music and art [crossed over]," he said. "We were having art shows and we would hand out percussion instruments. He soon ran an open mic session in Carlsbad. 'I learned a lot about people and musicians and what to deal with. There were some real tough times there. Musicians and artists are difficult some times [laughs]. There's egos and everyone's sensitive. I'm not saying I'm excluded from that, I fall right into that category, but you kind of get seasoned at it. You want to do it with love and keep it cool. It all comes back to just surrounding yourself with people that want to do that."

Though Watson can be found playing under all sorts of situations from solo to sideman, he prefers fronting his own band, Billy Watson and the International Silver String Submarine Band. "I actually stole that from an episode of the *Little Rascals*," he revealed. The tale involves the youngsters in the series getting a gig and the trials and comedic mayhem that ensue. "What I dig about it now is that it closely parallels all the bull crap that musicians go through. Back then and even today."

It's been joked that Watson's band has a cast of thousands and while that is a slight exaggeration, you never know who might be in his band on any given night. His website lists 20 musicians that join in from guitarist Buzz Campbell (Sha Na Na, Hot Rod Lincoln) to bassist Greg Willis (Iron Butterfly, Candye Kane). "The reason I have a bunch of different guys is because I don't want them get tired of me," Watson joked. "I've been in bands and I feel that blues music's already got a form to it, so you really don't need to rehearse it. If you hire guys that know how to play it, really know how to play it, you can have a different band every night and that's what I've done," he explained. "The reason is that it's improvised music, similar to jazz. And jazz kind of came from blues music. It sounds better when it's improvised, flying by the seat of your pants; it's fresher and the guys don't get bored." The latter is important to Watson. "When you're in a band you start getting tired of each other and it becomes a drag, then it becomes like you're in a day job. You get all jaded, you start fighting, the bass player gets married, has a couple of kids, then the wife gets mad he's out late at night. I don't have time for that and I don't think anyone has time for me. I'm a moody guy, I don't want them to deal with that, I don't want them to be married to me. Go have a family, not a band [laughs]. Using tour musicians between road trips has been the perfect solution."

"You've got to hire the guys that know how to back you up and support you," he remarked. "There's a million great guys out there, thousands of guys I could call, but if the guy comes on the gig and he buries me while I'm trying to talk to people, and he's over there cracking jokes and getting drunk, I can't hire that guy. You've got to weed them out. You've got to find the guys who are cool, gentlemanly, and professional. Even though we're having a good time and I'm clowning around, putting funny masks on, I need a band that can hang and support me even though it looks like we're a bunch of

Photo: Dennis Andersen



BILLY WATSON  
Love What You Do

Photo: Bengt Nyman



Blues buddies: Robin Henkel, Anna Troy, Watson, Nathan James, Ben Hernandez

Photo: Bengt Nyman



Watson with Candye Kane

clown maniacs. You'd think it'd be great to hire a bunch of freaks, but you've got to hire guys that know what to do."

Humor is a big part of Watson's appeal. Often described as "madcap," he has been known to wear a fez or a Tor Johnson mask, but live it's anything goes to win an audience over. "The influences come from when I was kid. I would watch the Marx Brothers and Laurel and Hardy. The most powerful moments in a lot of those movies were the musical parts and they were often comedic. If you watch Chiccolini Marx play the piano, it doesn't get better than that. When I saw that it had a big influence on me." He observes that in the films "the people in background were always laughing. And I don't think you had to tell them to laugh, they didn't have to hold up a sign. You can see them naturally laughing and reacting to those guys, because they were really funny. And that's how I

wanted to be. I wanted to do stuff that made people [react]. If they're just sitting there with a stink face, I wanted to make it so funny that even the most uptight guy would crack a smile. Because it's fun, I like to get people laughing."

With decades of stage experience, he has a myriad of strange stage tales. "I was playing the other night. I like to go out to the audience and I try to get the tip can going, because that's the only way we get paid now. I can't rely on the clubs, I can't rely on CD sales. I just do this little show. I push the tip can out and play harmonica all by myself and I go out in the audience and the band's waiting for me to come back in. People start tipping. As they throw the things in there, I play something funny for each person; I try to match it with the body type. On one occasion, I went up to these people and their backs were facing me the whole entire time.



Photo: Dennis Andersen



Photo: Dennis Andersen



Watson in the studio at Berkley Sound

Photo: Dennis Andersen



Watson with Will Edwards & Bart Mendoza

And I came up to them and I was playing. I was kind of put off by them. I was doing all this funny stuff. And a lady comes up and says, 'They're deaf.' In another instance, 'this lady comes, trying to dance and act all sexy and I'm trying to play. [She says] 'give me your hand' and I go to shake it and I started moving it back and forth and then she got mad and grabbed me by the hair and started pulling me," he laughed at the memory.

Watson's first recording was a series of demos with the Bluescasters, with his first solo album released in 1998. His most recent album is 2009's *Lucky Seven*, not coincidentally his seventh disc as he includes the number of issue with each album title, *Numero Cinco!* "What influenced me to do that? Led Zeppelin," he laughed. He picks the first album as his favorite. "That was the album that was so cool to me; then they started getting weirder and weirder, but every album was number two, number three. People start-

ed naming them by number, even though by the time they got to their fourth record, it wasn't called *Led Zeppelin 4*, but people just called it that. I just get a kick out of it."

The next disc will be called appropriately enough, *Secret 8* and is already in the process of recording, with an eye toward a late 2011 release. "I don't like to take a lot of time and spend a lot of money making these records," Watson said. "I know it sounds self-deprecating, but I didn't feel that I was good enough to be putting out records and spending thousands of dollars, because I wasn't going to make the money back. I was just going to have them under my bed and it might take two years to sell them, maybe eight years [laughs]. So I just like to do these fast; I'm not really picky. If you listen to some of them, someone with a trained ear might think 'oh that sounds terrible,' but they're pretty easy going." That said, *Lucky Seven* is the complete opposite of that sort of production.

"It was like my *Apocalypse Now* sort of record; it cost a lot of money, it took a lot of time. I had all these guys - Junior Watson, James Harman in the control room, Thomas Yearsley's whole studio, Nathan James, Johnny Yaiu. I had this big cast. By the end of it, I was like, that took a lot of time and money! I was a Nathan James' house and he was getting ready to go out on tour; he had a whole band there, a trio. They were there and we started recording. We recorded a whole record in one sitting, one take to Pro Tools and Nathan's like, 'Yeah I can mix that later today.' So I thought let's just make a record! I wanted to do another 'fasty,' get it out of my system, and start something new [laughs]."

*"I wanted to make it so funny that even the most uptight guy would crack a smile. Because it's fun, I like to get people laughing."*

-Billy Watson

In addition to his own projects, Watson is also part of the Blues in Schools programs, sponsored by Blues Lovers United of San Diego. He enjoys the interaction with young potential music fans, but admits it can be frustrating work. "Certain schools take it more seriously than others and there is no funding. It's like a broken record, 'there's no funding'," he mused. Working with youngsters also has its challenges. "You can't get too deep with it, because as soon as you start talking, if you start getting windy, they start going to sleep or horsing around; they're just kids you know?" Similarly, Watson also works with Candy Kane on her United by Music Tour. "We go and play with special needs kids and we get them on stage. It's a long process, but it started in Holland. In our music, we're trying to teach them about where it came from, so that they can look at it themselves and then come up with their own thing." Watson will be heading to France with Candye Kane for a six-week tour that opens on May 29.

Although he enjoys touring as a sideman, he's not enthusiastic about touring under his own name. "It's not really a touring type thing. Driving around in a van in the United States to come home with a couple of hundred dollars is not something I really look forward to." That said, a European tour is possible with offers from Finland and Spain.

He considers that audiences in Europe are more receptive to the blues. "Most of them are," he said. "They're at least civil," he joked. "Here, they've just seen it all, they're done. They're just to cool. The cell phone phenomenon [for example], that just blows my mind, the complete rudeness of the people here. It's sad."

He notes that there has been a slight resurgence in blues based music in recent years. "People are tired of the pop scene, tired of being told what's cool; they want to hear real musicians playing real instruments," he said. He cites Karl Cabbage, Anna Troy, and the Red Fox Tails among his favorite young musicians.

If it seems like Watson is enthusiastic about educating future generations of musicians about the blues. He said, "You're right. I don't think people care about history anymore and they don't learn from it. Society is riddled with that. For example, Carlsbad has a B17 [plane] that lands there every year. And the kids get forced to go to it in a Boys Scout troop or something for a field trip. The kids go in it and there's an old guy there who was a belly gunner standing there and he could tell them all about about 18 or 20 missions he went on before he was shot down and nearly killed. [Meanwhile] the kids are just running around the thing like it's a big jungle gym. They don't care. They don't even know what that plane did. That's just an example. [But] take that and magnify it and it goes across the board. You could punch that in on politics, the way we fight wars, the way we treat our society."

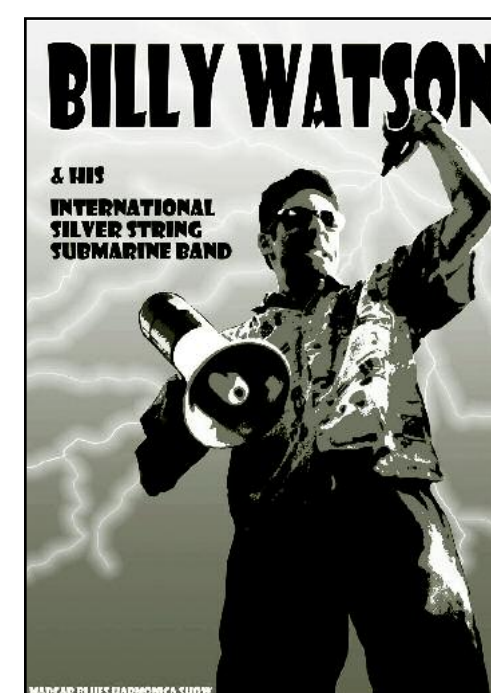
Watson is more than happy with his life as a musician, though he notes that support for the arts in a city the size of San Diego should be more prevalent among the public. "There's a lot of talent in San Diego," he opined. "But, you know? With the millions of people that live here, they should be supporting art and music much better. I always kid around and like to say that if you don't support art and music in your neighborhood, it won't be long before it looks like Temecula [laughs]."

While Watson plans to continue making music, he's realistic about the possibilities out there. "If you're going to be a full-time musician, you're rarely going to get to the point where you are living high on the hog or comfortable. You're not ever going to be that way unless you have a sponsor or somebody to help you," he said. Where does he see himself in ten years? "Probably living in another trailer," he laughed. "Maybe something double wide." Reflecting on the labor-of-love aspect of the arts, Watson is clear. "You can't be materialistic and be a musician or an artist. If it happens and you do make it to a point, it would be like winning the lottery."

While he occasionally misses the East Coast, Watson is more than happy with his life in San Diego. "There's nothing like the light on the West Coast and in Southern California when that sun's going down over the kelp beds off Swami's and that whole area when you drive down the coast highway," Watson reflected. "There's nothing like it in the world." He notes his world travels have confirmed his love of the area. "When I go out of town for long periods of time, it's kind of crazy [but] even though you're in Europe and everyone's treating you great, you miss the conveniences of the United States," Watson commented. "[As] a joke I used to say to the guys, 'don't worry, we'll be stuck in the 805/5 merge in no time,'" he laughed.

See Billy Watson live - March 3, 7pm, with Robin Henkel, at the Cellar, 1256 Avenida Del Mar, San Clemente; and on March 11, 8pm, with his International Silver String Submarine Band, at Book Works/Pannikin, Flower Hill in Del Mar. For more information please visit: www.billywatson.com.

THE MANY FACES OF BILLY WATSON



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