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Cray's taking blues stylings right next door to Paramount



Robert Cray of “Smoking Gun” and “The Forecast (Calls for Pain)” fame now has his original bass player back in the fold.

By [David Maurer](#)

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The hands on the clock pointed to high noon when the telephone rang.

Robert Cray, world-renowned guitarist and five-time Grammy winner, was right on time. The bluesman's old-school punctuality was refreshing, but no more so than the unassuming genuineness conveyed in his mellow voice.

It's a voice with soulful depth, able to elevate great songs to classic status like “Phone Booth” and “Right Next Door (Because of Me).” Entertainers as varied as Eric Clapton, Tina Turner, Bonnie Raitt and Diana Ross have lavished Cray with praise.

The man who is given credit for spearheading the “blues revival” in the 1980s has seemingly managed to keep the accolades from going to his head. Perhaps his choice of genre helps.

“I like the emotions that come out of the music,” Cray said of the blues. “I like the honesty in the stories about people's personal lives. To me, that's a place I like to be.”

At 8 p.m. Saturday the Robert Cray Band will go to that place via the stage of the Paramount Theater. The quartet is on tour in support of its most recent album, “This Time.”

The title refers to a song on the CD, as well as recent personnel changes in the band. In a sense Cray went back in order to move forward by reuniting with bassist Richard Cousins, one of the founding members of the band.

Jim Pugh plays organ and piano and Tony Braunagel is on drums. Opening for the band is local blues guitarist and singer Eli Cook, who paid the same courtesy to B.B. King when he performed at the Paramount in 2007.

Reconnecting with Cousins has delighted Cray no end. Best friends, they studied the blues together during their formative years and collaborated on the Grammy-winning albums “Strong Persuader” and “Don’t Be Afraid of the Dark.”

“I first met Richard in 1969 at a jam session in Washington state, where we both lived,” Cray said. “Our families were both military and we remained friends.

“We got a place together in 1972, and in ’74 we left Washington and moved to Eugene, Oregon, where we started the band. We made the changes in the band back in November, and rehearsed in December and January to get back on the road.

“We also started bringing in material for the new record, which has some really good blues on it and some soulful things as well. Everybody contributed to the songs on this new record, so it’s a new band with its own material.”

Perhaps as a nod to his old-school roots and to sound purists like Cray, the new record is also available in vinyl. Like many people, Cray has reluctantly accepted continuously changing, and some feel inferior, musical delivery systems.

“I was talking with my wife the other day, and she told me one of the babysitters who came over had never seen a CD before,” Cray said. “Imagine that.

“I bought a lot of CDs when they started coming out, but I still have a lot of vinyl and tons of cassettes.”

Cray, born Aug. 1, 1953, first ventured into music as a youngster via piano lessons. When the Beatles began changing the face of rock music, he changed instruments.

“The Beatles hit, and there was all this excitement,” Cray recalled. “The instrument was the guitar, so everybody in my neighborhood got a guitar, and I followed suit.

“My first guitar was a Harmony Sovereign. Now, I mostly play a Fender Stratocaster. I like the sound, and it’s a good workhorse.”

Cray had been playing guitar for a few years when his father, an Army quartermaster, was stationed at Fort Eustis. When Cray reached the eighth grade he decided it was time to start a band.

“Some friends of mine who I went to school with [in Newport News] started a little band we called the One Way Street,” Cray said. “One of our first gigs was playing a go-go bar in Norfolk.

“The girls were in go-go cages and all that. I don’t know how we got to play there, but it was a lot of fun.

“I wasn’t the singer at that time, but I always had the dream of doing this. I think all the little boys who played guitar had those kind of dreams.

“When I first started I wanted to be a Beatle. Then there were times when I wanted to be Jimi Hendrix or Albert Collins.”

Little boys with new guitars can now dream of one day being able to play like Robert Cray. Few will likely reach that mark, but the guitarist said that's not the point.

"The most important thing is to have fun with it," Cray said of the guitar. "People beat themselves up trying to play it. If you beat yourself up, you will always be frustrated. Remember it's an ongoing process.

"Everybody is at all different levels, and nobody is really a master. All of us are practitioners of the guitar. The whole thing is playing and having fun.

"With this ensemble, we're on the stage as a team. We're listening to one another, and we're just trying to weave in and out of one another's pockets and just make it a good time."

The Robert Cray Band is performing at the Paramount Theater at 8 p.m. Saturday. Eli Cook is opening.

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