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[HOME](#) **cover story** :: **September 14, 2005**

Tumbling down the blue chute

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By JONAS GREENBERG

From one chord change to another, anything with passion and vision moves Vincent Hayes as he leads his two other band members through the corridors of his creative spirit. The Vincent

Hayes Project is a pared down three-piece mercurial blues band, churning with the raw grit of the blues yet nimble enough to follow the most feral of Hayes' spontaneous improvisations.

Born into a musical family, Hayes grew up sitting around campfires, listening to his father singing Bob Dylan songs on the guitar or playing Chuck Berry records in the living room. The Beatles, Marvin Gaye, Bob Marley and John Lee Hooker are just a few of the musicians that would accompany Hayes through his upbringing and into college where he played in various garage bands until he could no longer ignore the original sound of the blues, embedded under everything he heard and played, calling out to him.

So, with a degree in music theory and a host of instruments under his belt (including diatonic harmonica and Japanese shakuhachi flute), Hayes delved into the blues without looking back.

The affable Hayes recalls this daunting decision with humility. "I mean...I'm a white male, 34 years old in 2005," he says. "Some people would say I have no right to play the blues."

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While well aware of the pitfalls, he couldn't help tumbling inevitably down the path. "Music is something I've embraced with such a strong bond throughout my life that I got to a point where I needed to devote my life to it."

Vincent Hayes Project

Saturday, Sept. 17, 6-7 p.m.
River Stage

He was looking for a groove, he says, and the blues was it. "With blues, there was a constant thump that was almost like a trance. The three or four chord changeups were limiting but un-limiting in that they always inspired me to search for some other melody beyond the obvious. That attracted me."

Not that Hayes doesn't have his politics about the blues. A key element for Hayes is the honesty behind a musician's art. "What it depends on first is the sincerity with the story they're telling. I mean, no matter what culture you're looking at, everyone has a kind of ritual music. That's where I'm at with the blues."

Frustrated by the numerous, self-proclaimed blues bands who work an office day job and then go out on the weekends to perform their blues songs about hopping box cars and robbing trains, this multi-instrumentalist is more interested in telling his own personal stories to other people.

"As an artist, I'm trying to tell a sincere story; a story that can reach people in a fundamental way across the board, that's what blues does for me."

For those who have had their fill of raucous blues shuffles, the Vincent Hayes Project brings to the Old Town Blues Festival their own personal blend of blues; a culmination of Hayes' eclectic tastes, expressively cranked out from fierce guitar licks. Combine that with a veteran bassist (Dave "The Butcher" Alves, who Hayes describes as "indispensable") and a guru of groove on drums (Donny Huigley) and you've got an explosive blues experience waiting to be lit.

"This is one of the most solid rhythm sections I've ever found in my life," he says. I've been workin' hard to find 'em and it finally feels right and in the pocket. They're both very dynamic and very conscious of each other without having to be too conscious. For the first time, I'm so confident.

"But you know, the performance speaks for itself. I want the audience to feel something. A successful performance for me would be if even one person came up after the show and said 'Hey, I really felt something.' I'm trying to work towards achieving a balance between entertainer and artist without losing the art. Collective energy —try to feed off it as well as create it."

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