

Fire chief, band mates ready for national blues contest

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By Clayton Hardiman

CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

None of them is looking to quit his day job.

In a year or two, Vincent Hayes most likely will still be a freelance photographer, lining up shots of wedding-day couples and graduating seniors. Donnie Hugley may still be toiling away in his current work, cleaning out factories and foundries.

And Dave Alves will probably still be occupying the fire chief's office, managing the staff that routinely stands between the citizens of Muskegon Heights and catastrophe. But make no mistake: If the three are still breathing, they'll be making music.

"We play music because we have to play music," said lead vocalist/guitarist Hayes. Mark that down -- their shared passion -- as one of the primary reasons for their impending date with destiny. Come the dog days of late January, the three -- members of a blues ensemble called the Vincent Hayes Project -- will head south for Memphis, Tenn., to compete in the International Blues Challenge, the Blues Foundation's annual search for the world's best unsigned band.

The band already has attracted attention. Their work at Lansing's Old Town Blues Festival prompted a Lansing State Journal review calling them "innovative and all-encompassing."

And performances on WGVU-FM radio drew a similar response. "This is just amazing stuff," said host Storm Roger.

But on Sept. 25, the ante went up. The band walked out of Streeters tavern in Traverse City with a first place in the Mid North Michigan Blues Society's regional competition, qualifying them for the International Blues Challenge.

For some people, that translates to an invitation to stardom. The Blues Challenge has been the launching pad for such luminaries as Zac Harmon, Tommy Castro and Susan Tedeschi. In the blues universe, it's "American Idol," "Talent Search" and "The Apollo Showcase" wrapped in one.

But don't expect bassist Alves, drummer Hugley or guitar/vocalist Hayes to get all garage-band giddy. In a sense, they're already living the dream.

"I always try to remain optimistic," Hayes said, "but I'm also realistic. Blues is not a mainstream market like rock. We do what we do because we love it."

"I would like to see some success, but for right now I see music as therapy," Alves said. "It's a good outlet."

If this were a movie script, it would probably be one of those stories where persistence, talent and integrity pay off with wealth and fame. There would probably be a major recording contract in the offing, with an arena full of cheering fans behind the rolling credits. But this isn't Hollywood. It's real life. And for members of the Hayes Project, that's more than enough.

Not that it's a bull market for blues musicians these days. The arc of popularity for esoteric forms like the blues falls as much as rises, Hayes said.

But if a band is dedicated enough and talented enough, there are chances to tell your story, Hayes said. And the opportunity to tell musical stories was what drew Hayes to the blues in the first place.

At 34, Hayes, a Muskegon native, is the youngster of the group. Nearly two years ago, he teamed with Alves, a 48-year-old Detroit transplant. Later Hugley, born 47 years ago in Columbus, Ohio, came on board.

The individual paths that brought them together tell a fascinating tale. Hugley, who came to Muskegon at age 6, began playing drums when he was 17. "I was sitting there watching 'Soul Train' with my grandmother, and she said, 'They look pretty nice. That's what I want y'all to do,'" he recalled.

As for Alves, he grew up in the shadow of Motown, with music on virtually every street corner. Early on, Alves cut his teeth on bass violin, studying classical music and even attending Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp in northern Muskegon County as a teenager.

"I always had that affection for music. I always wanted to be around it. Whereas a lot of kids were playing baseball, that's just about all I did." In Alves, Hayes recognized a kindred spirit.

Hayes grew up schooled in guitar by his rock music-playing father. The first song he learned to play was Chuck Berry's "Johnny B. Good." Later in college, he began to listen seriously to the likes of bluesmen Muddy Waters and John Lee Hooker.

He became addicted, hitting any jam session he could reach. He recalled hopping a train to Chicago, guitar on his back, to spend a memorable 36 hours at Buddy Guy's Legends club. For five or six years, he played mostly solo. Then he caught Alves playing with Big Daddy Fox, one of the Muskegon area's seminal blues figures.

Alves, who had come to the Muskegon area in 1993, had gone through an uncharacteristic musical silence. His bass guitar languished unused. But one of his neighbors was Fox.

"I used to hear these guys rehearsing," he said. "Then one day I saw him at the store and asked if I could come listen to them. He said, sure."

Alves thought his visit would be strictly that of an observer. But he said Fox discovered he played bass and asked "a couple of leading questions." Suddenly he had been recruited to play.

It was a relationship that lasted for years. "I still work with him," Alves said of Fox. "He's been a big influence for me."

After hearing Alves play, Hayes approached him about playing the blues. At first, Alves wondered if it was a mistake.

"We had a different drummer then, and ... well, I remember thinking, 'Oh, man,' " Alves said.

But eventually Hugley joined the group. Alves and Hugley "had played together a good five or six years with Big Daddy Fox," Hayes said. "That synergy between them was already in place."

"We just have this rapport," Alves said.

The three bring diverse influences to the ensemble. For years Alves, whose father was Jamaican, played in a reggae band, "exploring my roots," he said. He also plays bass at Corinthians Baptist Church.

Hugley also brings a gospel sensibility to the band. He is a 25-year member of the group the Michigan Soul Searchers. And to this day, one of his career high points is a memory of playing with the legendary Pilgrim Jubilees.

"I play drums -- period," he said. "I never wanted to be stuck with just one style. I learned all the different cultures and styles."

For Alves, music is everywhere -- and that includes the fire station.

"It's strange, but there are a lot of musicians on this crew," he said. Two of the other firefighters -- Gary Davis and Billy Walker -- play bass. Do they talk music? Man, that's all we do."

And the challenge of balancing work with playing? Alves said it helps to be able to shift gears mentally -- and to have one's priorities straight. Music is the outlet; firefighting is the career.

"The city's got a lot invested in me," he said, "and I've got a lot invested in the city."

None of that lessens his passion for music, Alves said. "Music is actually a living organism to me. If you start to play, it'll evolve. I think it's all around us. I can hear it in that vibration or that hum over there. I can listen to music anywhere."

And the blues runs over with creative opportunity, Hayes said, speaking with the fervor of a true believer. "Within that seemingly limited structure of three or four chords, there's unlimited room to explore," he said.

Even mistakes become opportunities to improvise," Hayes said.

That's what makes the group members' shared passion so essential, Hayes said. And it's why the outcome of the Blues Challenge -- Jan. 26 through 28 -- won't make or break them, he added.

"We've all got lives we're leading," Hayes said, "and the music is what fuels those lives. None of us expects to be stars for this. We just want an opportunity.

"And if we don't win -- we're just going to keep on playing."