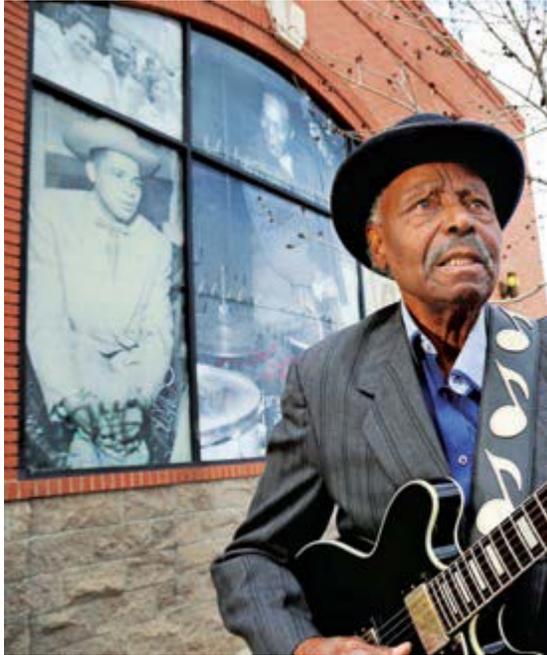


“Nothing but the truth” for Denver’s own Bluesman Willie Houston

86-year-old shares bill with youth at Five Points Jazz Festival May 18

By Laurie Dunklee



The blues are true; it must be true for me to write about it,” says Delta blues musician Willie Houston, one of the last authentic Delta players and a Denver resident since the 1940s.

Houston will bring his dapper style and Southern wit to the 10th annual Five Points Jazz Festival on May 18, 11am to 8pm at 27th and Welton streets. The free event will feature 20 bands on six stages.

“The festival is new each year, with different bands and other entertainment for all ages,” said Niece Washington, special event coordinator for the city of Denver, which sponsors the festival. She expects 17,500 people to attend this year.

Several young bands will put their stamp on the jazz tradition. Included in this year’s lineup are the Denver School of the Arts Jazz Band, the Five Points Heritage Band and the Colorado Conservatory for the Jazz Arts. The wide variety of jazz genres includes violinist Katie Glassman and Snapshot, a country swing band. The

Absolute Family hip-hop group will bring their high-energy show as well.

“We have a new youth stage with break dancing, swing and salsa lessons,” Washington said. “All these styles came out of jazz roots. So the youth come for what they know and they get to hear some jazz too.”

The Five Points neighborhood, once known as the Harlem of the West, thrived as a jazz scene from the 1920s to the 1950s. It was home to more than 50 bars and clubs, where the great jazz musicians such as Billie Holiday, Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, Nat King Cole, Count Basie, Dizzy Gillespie and others performed.

One of the clubs was the Casino Ballroom (now Cervantes), where Willie Houston performed in the '50s.

“Everybody was coming down,” he said. “It was great.”

Houston’s musical roots were far from the glamour and laughter of the Denver clubs. Growing up in the farm town of Grand Cane, La., Houston learned to play music by banging on a metal wash-tub and syrup bucket, or playing on a sugar cane quill. “You do that kind of a thing where I come from,” said Houston. His family sharecropped a cotton plantation in the rich-soiled Louisiana Delta. “By age 8, I was cultivatin’ with a mule,” he said. “I did get kicked but I’m glad it wasn’t in the head!”

Locals would stop by and offer young Houston change to play a Jew’s harp, a plucked instrument held between the teeth. “I loved music from the beginning,” he said.

Houston left Louisiana in 1944, when he was 17 1/2, and went to Joplin, Mo. He got a guitar and paid a local musician in beer for lessons. He learned the rich history and importance of blues music.

“Blues songs came about for a reason,” Houston said. “It came from the slaves in the cotton fields, singing messages to each other so the master wouldn’t know. When they sang ‘Meet me Diana by the big oak tree,’ it meant someone was running away. So the songs were about stuff that was actually happening.

“That’s why I love it—’cause the blues are true.”

Likewise, Houston’s own songs come from his personal experiences, mostly inspired by his years on the cotton plantation. His song *Sally Mae* was inspired by a girl from his youth.

“Sally Mae was my little girl,” he said. “We grew up together. She was a runaway and she and I became lovers. But then she left for another plantation.”

The Delta blues guitar style was made popular by such players as Muddy Waters and B.B. King. Houston’s authentic style and longevity have made him the elder statesman of the Colorado blues scene.

He came to Denver in 1946 and did a stint in the Army from 1951–53. “My feet got tar on ’em and I stuck here,” he said.

Playing in Five Points, Houston heard Count Basie, Duke Ellington, James Brown and Chuck Berry. He spent a memorable evening with well-known bandleader Louis Jordan and blues singer Charles Brown.



Willie Houston, aka Bluesman, will perform at this month’s Five Points Jazz Festival. He is pictured singing in Five Points—the mural behind him features notable people from when Five Points was in its heyday as a jazz destination.



The Bluesman acknowledges an old friend who walks by during the photo shoot.

“Charles Brown did a few things he shouldn’t have done and Louis sat there and drank and told us about it,” Houston laughed. “You know how it is in music; people do things they aren’t supposed to.”

Keeping himself employed as a blues musician was not an easy road for Houston. “Rock ’n’ roll came in and put me out of business,” he said. “There were not a lot of blues clubs around but I was trying to get ’em all to listen to it. But my friends told me to keep going, so I did.”

Houston played wherever he could, including the American Legion and Elks halls, parties and weddings. “I didn’t get recognized ’til way later,” he said. “But I’d have played if nobody but me was listening. I love the music world. I’ve been playing this music 60 years and I haven’t give up yet.”

“Way later” turned out to be 2001, when a fan helped produce Houston’s self-titled CD. A DVD about his life and times, *Junk, Blues and Collard Greens*, was produced in 2006. He finished a soon-to-be-released live CD several months ago, and is writing new songs for another studio recording.

“People ask me, ‘When do you plan on retiring?’” he said. “I tell ’em, ‘When I can’t say nothin’.”

Houston’s CDs and DVD are available on his website, williehouston.com.