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Sallie Bengtson

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Combining three decades of business acumen with her passion and love for music, Sallie Bengtson has become a much needed force in the world of the Blues. Forming Nola Blue Records in 2014 with her first release, *Journey* by Benny Turner (brother of Freddie King), Bengtson's path was forever forged. In the ensuing years, Nola Blues' catalog has grown to 15 albums that include releases from Blues legacy artists, Cash McCall and Frank Bey.

Never one to rest on her laurels, in 2020, Sallie founded Blue Heart Records in partnership with Betsie Brown of Blind Raccoon Publicity. The label has released 30+ albums that include such artists as Teresa James & The Rhythm Tramps, Rick Vito, Arlen Roth, Peter Veteska & Blues Train, The Texas Horns, Grainne Duffy, Vaneese Thomas, Chris Beard and Lil' Red & The Rooster among others.

With this kind of quality output, it was time to talk to the lady behind the curtain. Ladies and gentlemen, please allow me to introduce you to, Ms. Sallie Bengtson...

METRONOME: How did you develop a love for music?

My whole family is musical. My parents both have Masters degrees in sacred music. They were church organists. My brother has his Doctorate in Musical Arts and he teaches Theater & Dance at the University of Michigan. I come from a family of classical musicians.

METRONOME: Did you ever play an instrument when you were younger?

I did. I took years and years of piano lessons. I also played the flute in the junior high and high school band. I have all the classical training as well.

METRONOME: Did you play concerts as a pianist?

No. I did stuff at school, and with the band. I would sometimes play for the chorus concerts, but nothing performance wise. It was just a part of my life.

METRONOME: Did you go to college for music?

No. My family owned a business and I went to work for the family. That guided my studying in business management in college. I needed as much training and education as I could get because I thought, someday this probably will be mine.

That's how I ultimately discovered the Blues. It was with people that I worked with. Once I turned 21, one of my co-workers said, "Why don't you come out and listen to some Blues." One of our employees played in a

Blues band at night. Being the typical person that doesn't know what that is, I thought, Well, that sounds depressing (laughs).

The first night I heard it, I said, Wow what is this? It started from there.

METRONOME: When you got out of college, did you stay in the family business or move on to something else?

I stayed at my family's business until we sold it.

METRONOME: Were you still discovering blues artists along the way?

Yes, but what actually happened - and this is the ultimate irony - we had a Blues Festival in our town, and I went. That particular show, Kenny Neal and Tinsley Ellis were performing along with some others artists. Those were the two though that really grabbed me that night. I was like, Wow, this is amazing.

I got into their music and then started diving in to what's the history behind that and who wrote the songs? I came to find out that one of Tinsley Ellis's major influences was Freddie King. He was another one. When I found Freddie King, he just blew me away. Then I met Freddie's brother, Benny Turner.

METRONOME: Benny Turner was the first act you signed to Nola Blues Records. How did you meet him?

I met Benny through a friend who actually works for me now. She does graphic design and websites. Her name is Debra Clark. She and I met through music. We would see each other at festivals and shows. We were both big New Orleans people too.

Debra said, "Hey, I've got a CD. You've got to hear this. It's Freddie King's brother and he lives in New Orleans." That CD

she mentioned was Benny's first. It was called Blue and Not So Blue. He put it out himself. He had a good market for it with all the tourists that came in and out of New Orleans. It was a good product, but was never officially released.

Benny was the band leader for Marva Wright for 20 years. They called her the "Blues Queen of New Orleans." One night they were in town to play a festival in Philadelphia, so Debra said, "Let's go see them." She had met Benny previously in New Orleans. That started up a friendship. Anytime I would go to New Orleans, I would look Benny up and see where he was playing. I started to hear these amazing stories of what he had lived through and experienced and thought, Wow. We were friends for years before the whole business side of things started.

METRONOME: Were you still working for the family business?

When the family business got sold, I went on to do some other work. My background is in human resources and benefits management. It's important, but it's dry. It's not like what I'm doing now.

METRONOME: How many years did you work for other companies?

It was a good 15 to 16 years of various jobs. Then I got married and had my son. I was a stay at home mom for a bit. I actually started a business from going to "Mommy and Me" classes with my son. It was a franchise called Gymboree. I had an entrepreneurial spirit and I loved kids, so I thought, This is something I can do. It was super cool, but unfortunately it wasn't meant to last due to a bunch of issues and probably one of the most significant ones... my marriage fell apart.

That was the time I thought, I need to take a pause here and regroup. However, through the worst of times can come the best. Rebirth and emergence. I already had a corporation in place from the franchise business and I had some confidence. I thought, I can do this.

I had been telling Benny for years, You need to write a book, you need to write a book, but he didn't know how to go about it. That's how my label started, with a book.

METRONOME: I thought it was with recorded music?

In my personal life, I had some time and space to really dig into something. I asked Benny, What would you think if I tried to work on a book for you? He said, Sure. Nobody else has offered. Go for it.

Once I got involved in that book project, I found out that he had a music project that



Bobby Christina and Sallie Bengtson

was well under way, but had stalled because it ran out of funding. I thought, We need to finish your CD so you can get some gigs and have a place to sell your book. That's how my first album came out. It came out before the book because the book was an enormous task. The CD came out sort of by accident, because the real focus was the book.

METRONOME: So owning and running a record label was never in your plans?

No. It just happened. It was what was meant to be. I found it totally by accident (laughs).

METRONOME: During that period were you still going out and listening to the Blues?

Yes. Absolutely. Although my Blues-ing took a pause when I became a Mom, but for years I was always in New Orleans when I could get down there and would travel a couple of hours to get to a show in Jersey or New York. I was a die hard.

METRONOME: Does your son play music?

He started with piano lessons, but he didn't like to practice. Then, as he got older, he decided he wanted to play the drums. He took lessons, but didn't have a lot of stick-to-it-iveness. Now, I have a good back line. I have a piano, and a good drum set (laughs).

METRONOME: When you published Benny's book, was your company called Nola Blue at the time?

Yes, it was.

METRONOME: You're celebrating a decade in the music business with Nola Blue. How did you meet some of the artists that you ended up signing to the label?

It was a combination of things. Different circumstances for different people. I put out two or three albums for Benny before I thought, I wonder if this is the direction I should go in. My initial intention was to get the book out, get the CD out and then re-release his first album, Blue and Not So Blue, because that album never really went out to radio.

I'm Benny's manager and I've been developing his career, but the reality is, he was 75 years old when we released Journey. He'll be 85 this year. He's the coolest, youngest 85-year old I know, but I got to the point where I thought, I have to branch out here. I thought, who else is out there? I found there are a lot of people out there that would benefit.

From there it was mostly people who were recommended to me. One would lead to another, and people would talk. As I look over everyone that I have worked with, I think there's only one or two I might have approached. The rest happened naturally in conversation or meeting people or people were sent to me.

METRONOME: Cash McCall and Frank Bey were some of your early signings. How did you meet them?

They weren't with me long enough, but

they were so special [Editor's note- Cash McCall died April 20, 2019 and Frank Bey passed away June 7, 2020]. Frank came to me through Betsie Brown at Blind Raccoon Publicity. I met and hired Betsie for Benny's second album that I put out, My Brother's Blues. She knew that my passion was for the heritage artists that had been in this their whole life. That's how I met Frank's management and got to know Frank. Plus, Tom Hambridge produced Frank's, Back In Business album. So Tom probably sent them to Betsie and Betsie sent them to me. Betsie was right in the middle of it because she's done a lot of work for Tom.

METRONOME: Was that your first introduction to Betsie?

Yes, through Benny's second album in 2017.

METRONOME: How did you meet Cash McCall?

Cash came through Benny. Benny knew Cash back in the late 1950s in Chicago on the gospel scene. We got word that Cash was sick. He had cancer. Benny had reconnected with Cash and started talking to him. We were working on another album for Benny at the time and he said, "I need to put this on the shelf for right now. I need to do something with Cash. Cash needs this. He needs something positive."

It ended up being the best medicine. Cash would go to chemo and then come into the studio because he was so happy. It

was one of the most beautiful experiences that I've had, watching the two of them in the studio together. They talked about their history in Chicago and went back and did all those songs. That's why it's called Going Back Home.

METRONOME: How did you meet John Nemeth?

John was a referral to me through friends here in Pennsylvania. We originally had the Pocono Blues Festival, then it became the Pennsylvania Blues Festival. Michael Cloeren who produced those festivals is still very active and is a huge Blues fan. I was introduced to John by the woman that does Michael's publicity work. She told John, You really should talk to Sallie.

So I brought Benny with me. Benny and John knew each other from New Orleans. Benny talked to John and said, You really should work with Sallie. She's not like everyone else. You should do this. That all came about during Covid believe it or not when we put out John's first album, Stronger Than Strong, in October of 2020. That's how I met him.

METRONOME: You started another record label with Betsie Brown called Blue Heart Records. How did that come about?

Once we started working together on different projects, I realized, she gets the job done. She's hard-working, dedicated, and smart. She really knows her stuff. I talked to her and said, What if we combined our

strengths.

I couldn't keep doing this many label deals with Nola Blue. It was overwhelming. I had to figure out a smarter way to do it. I thought, What if I made Nola Blue just focus on the heritage artists and expand out into contemporary blues with Blue Heart Records?

Anybody these days can be an independent artist and release their own music, but if you're not in it all the time and you're not up on what's available, there's no way to mastermind the music the way you can with a real label. We thought it was a good thing for a bunch of different reasons. That's how that came about.

METRONOME: Have you or Nola Blue won any awards?

I have a Josie Award from Nashville. They named me "Record Label of The Year" in 2020.

METRONOME: Do you have any cool projects in the works now?

Yes. Bobby Christina and I are working together. We're putting out a Matt "Guitar" Murphy album in June. Bobby had done a bunch of shows with him and said to Matt, "Hey, it's been a really long time since you put out an album. What would you think if I took you in the studio and we worked together and put a new album out? Matt was excited. So they got together and had their first session. Everything went well. Then Bobby set up a second session. He was going to go back to Florida and they were going to finish things up, but Matt passed away before the second session. This album will have the last three recordings of Matt.

Then Bobby started reaching out to musicians who were friends of Murphy, played with him, or were otherwise influenced by him. There are 72 musicians represented on the record that we're calling, True Blues Brother: The Legacy of Matt "Guitar" Murphy. It's a 23-song double album that includes Matt's final three studio recordings, a new song written and performed by Tom Hambridge, and the work of Murphy's friends Joe Beard and Billy Boy Arnold in the studio together for the first time. Other artists include Doyle Bramhall II, Fran Christina & The Original Roomful of Blues, Steve Cropper, Bill Kirchen, Chuck Leavell, Bob Margolin, Christine Ohlman, Jerry Portnoy, Duke Robillard, Kenny "Blues Boss" Wayne, Toni Lynn Washington and more. It's one heck of a project.

METRONOME: What do you do for your artists that have made you so successful?

At the very heart of it, I try to be honest and realistic with everyone about what I can and can't do. I don't make big promises. When I tell an artist, we pay the royalties quarterly, well, guess what, they get their royalties quarterly. There's no excuses, there's no confusion, I do what I say, and I say what I do. I care.

-- Brian M. Owens



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