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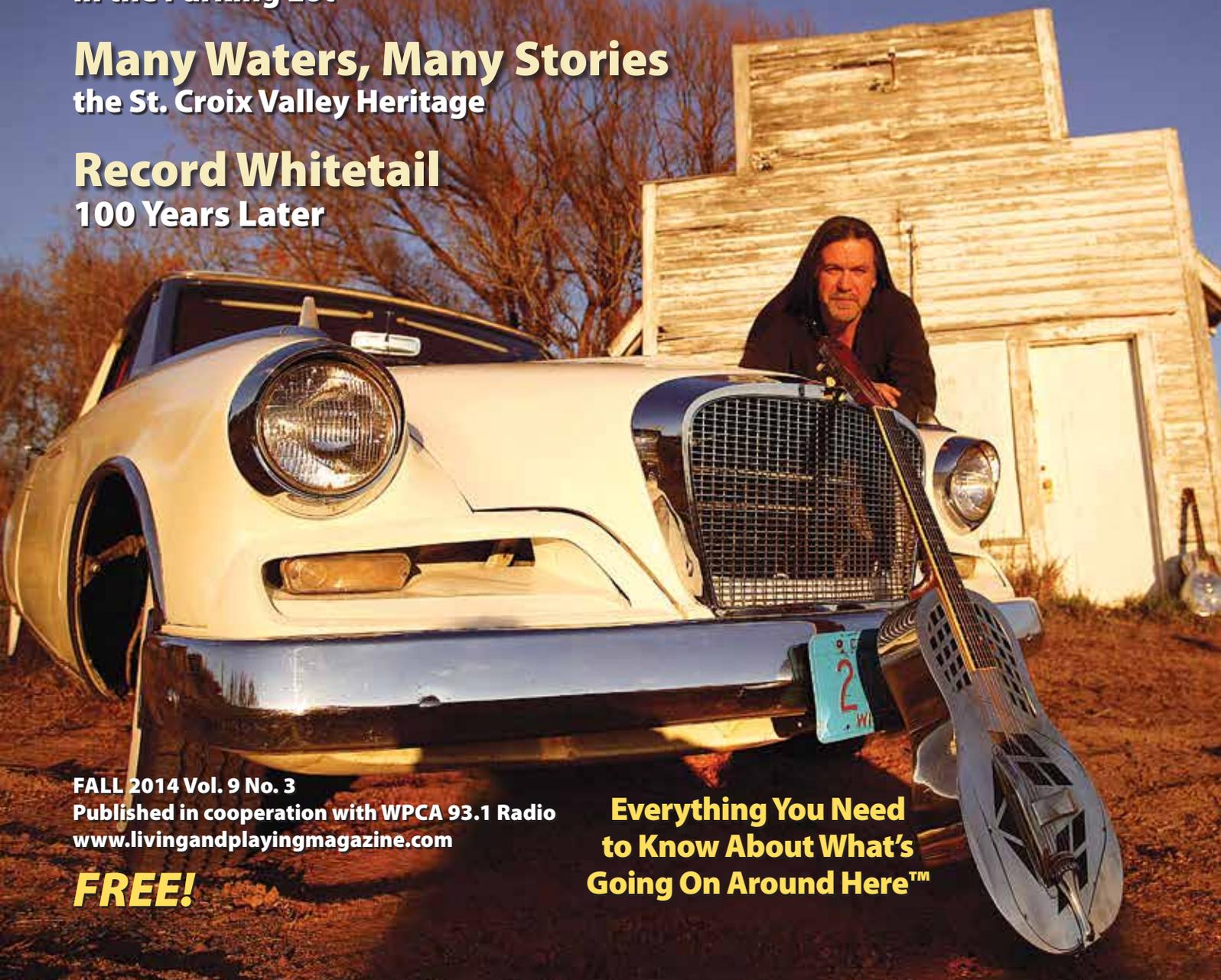


Scorching Blues of Howard Luedtke

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Howard Luedtke and Blue Max play scorching blues that soothe the soul.

Howard's guitar playing is hard, fast and immaculate. He's truly one of those players who lives in harmony with his instrument. That connection only comes with experience and an undying need to share this sound, which runs deep in your soul.

Howard has this because of the 40-plus years playing guitar, both here in western Wisconsin and on the international stage. He is a collector of vintage guitars, though he typi-

cally performs on his Les Paul guitars, which he refers to as his working guitars.

The impressive musical careers of Howard and his wife, Deb, were on my mind as I rode my bicycle to their home through the picturesque county roads outside of Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin.

As I pulled up to their country home, Howard and Deb were outside. I don't think I'm overstating when I say, they are the cutest couple ever. They both have long, flowing hair and carry themselves with a happiness you only see in the best of couples. Their home is not only filled with guitars — all around you see pictures of musicians, models Howard

Blue Max at the 2014 Northwoods Blues Festival in Spooner, Wisconsin. From left: Howard Luedtke, drummer Mike Johnson, Deb Luedtke.

builds, and keepsakes they have collected together to make their house a home.

I sat down with them at their kitchen table and had my list of questions lined up such as, "What is it like playing in this area and getting to sit in with amazing acts?" "What has built this drive in you to play such great music?" and "What venues do you enjoy playing in most?"

When we started to talk, though, Howard had a completely different topic on his mind — the guitar player Travis Wammack.

Howard tells me how, when he was just 11, he and his cousin travelled to the home of a local guitar player who gave him a 45 (the little record with the larger hole) by Wammack called "Scatchy."

Throughout 40 years Howard listened to this record constantly; he even had to buy three separate copies.

Unbeknownst to Howard, Travis Wammack built his own impressive career as a musician, recording from the age of 11

and getting to play with such artists as Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard. He received amazing acclaim and was cited by an amazing cadre of A-list artists as their influence.

"I'd been wondering about him for 50 years. He's been one of my favorite guitar players," Howard says. "I'd ask people about him, and no one had ever heard of him. He was a legend in my mind."

Howard says that about 10 years ago, Deb found Wammack's website and his discography online.

"Deb was on the website right before my birthday," Howard says, "and she said, 'Look here, Travis Wammack has 13 CDs available. Do you want any of them?' I said, 'Yeah! I want all of them!'"

Deb then purchased the CDs, and in the process of buying the discography got in contact with Wammack's bass player. In a series of conversations, Howard and Deb decided to travel down to Alabama to meet Wammack and his band, the Snakeman Band.

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When they met, both men showed just how much they admired each other, and Howard got the chance to sit in with the band many times. Wammack even remarked how listening to Howard's music was like listening to himself.

"Which stands to reason," Howard says, "because he planted that seed in me 50 years ago."

As I think about this, I'm suddenly aware that we haven't talked about my typical local musician interview topics. But then I realize, this story is the story of Howard Luedke and Blue Max. The passion of Howard and the computer and business skills of Deb have made them into the band they are today.

Deb senses that these "article" questions are running around my mind and gently guides the conversation to the story of how they met, fell in love and formed the band.

For about 20 years Howard



Howard and Deb with Travis Wammack in Alabama.

hosted a weekly night called Blues Jams in La Crosse. This was an amazing open mic where Howard invited hundreds of musicians to sit in with him.

It was during this time that Howard and Deb met at a show in Mankato in 1981. Deb was an aspiring musician herself, playing in five bands, the all-female band Damsel among them. It wasn't for six years that the stars alined for their first date. As their relationship blossomed, the band Blue Max grew as well.

"Our band originally consisted of me and whoever else would play with me," Howard

says, "It was the business and booking skills of Deb that really got it going."

Since 1987, Howard and Deb estimate that they have played 2,200 to 2,400 shows in Wisconsin, Minnesota and Europe. To put that in perspective, that's 80 to 90 shows per year for 27 years.

When I ask them their secret, Howard says, "The family that plays together stays together."

Deb interjects, "I always

say, I'm the jack of all trades and Howard is the master of one!"

"Hey," Howard says, his eyes glowing, "I make models too!"

For photos, more information and a performance schedule, visit howardluedtke.com. ★

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