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The Planetary Blues Band Hoping To Conquer This Planet With New Album, 'Once Upon A Time In The South Loop'

(Photos by Lexi Schaefer)

Like most rock bands worth their salt, The Planetary Blues Band got their start playing, and being influenced by, the Blues. The band was born in 1999 in their mother's basement, where they spent countless hours learning entire albums by Chicago Blues greats like Magic Sam, Buddy Guy, Junior Wells, and Son Seals. From there, over the course of the past ten + years, Planetary has held onto those roots while expanding outward into various other corners of the musical universe.



All Access Magazine recently interviewed this talented "Band of Brothers" (Martin Schaefer-Murray, guitar-vocals; Michael Schaefer-Murray, guitar-vocals; Bobby Schaefer-Murray, bass; also Nick Evans, drums) about their upcoming album release, the very cool Chicago music scene and much more.

AAM: Please introduce The Planetary Blues Band to our readers?

“ *Martin: The Planetary Blues Band was formed by my brothers and I in 1999. Michael is our primary guitar player and backing vocalist, Bobby is our bass player, and I am our lead vocalist and also play guitar. We grew up in Valparaiso Indiana, our mother's home town, but we spent a considerable amount of time in the city of Chicago, where our father lived and worked. Planetary Blues has had multiple drummers over the years. Our drummer, Nick Evans, now in his second stint with the band, has finally brought stability to this role.*

AAM: What music genre(s) would you describe as your band's sound – i.e., blues, rock, jam band, etc.?

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Martin: Planetary began strictly as a Chicago Blues band. We began by dissecting and learning some of our favorite Blues material, and from this we built our early repertoire. In the early years, we played a ton of Buddy Guy, Son Seals, Junior Wells, Albert King and Muddy Waters covers in addition to songs by Magic Sam, Luther Allison, Otis Rush, and other post-World War 2 Chicago Blues guitarists. Our early work was very Blues guitar-centric. After gaining a solid footing in the Blues, we began to explore other musical interests. I began writing songs, and when this happened, I found myself thinking more about the song writers I had grown up loving; Lennon and McCartney, Bob Dylan, and Bob Marley. Our music was also very influenced by Jimi Hendrix. After a while we had amassed quite a large repertoire of cover material; in addition to our Blues material, we covered quite a bit of Bob Marley, Dylan, Grateful Dead, and classic R&B by the likes of Johnny Taylor, Bobby Womack, Al Green, and the Meters. We realized early on that we had quite a bit in common with the Grateful Dead; a Planetary set, much like the Dead's, would include Blues, covers of old Folk tunes and songs from the public domain, and other unique covers sprinkled in with our own material. We could very well be described as a Blues-based Jam band, but with an edginess and seriousness that separates us from typical "jam bands." We have embraced an ethos that we believe harkens back to the early days of the Rolling Stones at the Crawdaddy Club, and the Chicago Chess records sound. We of course love Led Zeppelin too, and no one should be surprised to hear us rip into some Little Richard, Chuck Berry, or Gene Vincent. Our sound and ethos is very much old school; a celebration of Rock N' Roll, Blues, and American Music. Jazz is not something we shy away from either, and we love the classic Blue Note recordings.

AAM: It appears you've developed a strong ally in Buddy Guy's Legends (Editor's Note: famous Chicago blues nightclub, founded by legendary blues guitarist, Buddy Guy). How did that happen?

“ *Michael: Growing up as huge Buddy Guy fans, my brothers and I have always understood the importance of taking advantage of the fact that Buddy Guy's Legends is so close to our home town. Bobby and I were at the Monday jam night a few years ago, and I knew we had to start networking. As I scanned the room, I spotted the man running the sound-board, and thought to myself, “perfect person to share music with.” I introduced myself to him and gave him a CD of original material. Four weeks after that he introduced us around and spoke very highly of the CD. About a month later, as I was looking at the laminated photos at the bar, I saw a picture of Buddy jamming with the “sound guy”, who was playing guitar, and I see it says, “Buddy with his son Greg”. I was in a state of shock, and immediately humbled to realize that our new friend was none other than Buddy's oldest son. Not long after that, Greg got us our first gig at Legends, and we've been playing there ever since. Barely 10 years ago, we would never have guessed that this would be the story of how we got our first gig there. We're forever honored and grateful for this!*

AAM: The Planetary Blues Band is an “all in the family” affair, with three brothers playing together. How has that worked out?

“ *Bobby: Being a band of brothers is a blessing, and I think I can speak for all of us when I say that it's something that none of us will ever take for granted. Of course, like all brothers, we've had our share of lively (to put it politely haha) disagreements, but as brothers, we have an inseparable bond, and an instinctive chemistry that is un-paralleled. Whatever happens, in the end, like they say in the old Rat Pack song “Me And My Shadow”, we still “stick together like glue”.*

AAM: You've also got a new album coming out soon. Talk about it.

“ *Martin: After years of experimentation in a search for our sound, we decided to keep it simple, and write with the Blues as our focus. The idea for this album, and the albums to come, is to explore the Blues genre as fully and concisely as possible. I lament that much of what is considered Blues is limited to a very narrow interpretation of the form, and conversely, that much of what truly is Blues is overlooked as belonging to some other genre. Today, Blues has been very much pigeonholed into a few basic templates that render the form more of a novelty than a thriving art form. For example, much of what one hears at a Blues club is more akin to seventies Rhythm and Blues, and one is more likely to hear a song by Bill Withers than Sonny Boy Williamson. We have a deep and broad interpretation of Blues music, and we recognize that Jazz players play blues, country singers write blues, and Bluegrass songs are more blues than most bluegrass fans believe. For this record, I wanted to really display the country roots of the Blues, and for this purpose I chose three very old songs and gave them new arrangements. The three covers are by Memphis Minnie, the Reverend Robert Wilkins, and Blind Lemon Jefferson. It is the old Blues that we feel really gave Rock N Rock its edge and starting point. Most of the riff rock comes from the really old Blues, which is far less rigid and more creative than the electric guitar-centric lump da lumps and slow blues one typically considers Blues these days. I wrote many songs for the record, but narrowed my original compositions down to six that I felt offered a broad range of stylistic interpretations of the Blues form. I wrote songs that reminded me of Chess records, songs that evoke Bob Dylan's Blues and the Allman Brothers, and I even wrote one with Jack White in mind, a song inspired by an old Geeshie Wiley song. In the end, the album is a celebration of Blues as it arrived in Chicago. The record is called "Once Upon A Time In the South Loop" in honor of Buddy Guy's club, Legends, and especially in honor of Chess records. A big goal of ours is to bring attention to Chicago's past as one of the epicenters and breeding grounds for Rock N' Roll. Too few people know the significance of Chicago in the birth of Rock N Roll.*

AAM: What's the Chicago live music scene like, compared to some of the other cities and towns you've played in?

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Martin: Like other big cities, nothing comes easy in Chicago for a band looking to build a following. In small college towns, a band can expect to book a gig at a venue with a regular clientele, where a crowd of rowdy young people can be expected. This is quite different from booking a gig at a music venue in the big city, where the bands are expected to bring their own crowd if they wish to have a successful gig. This makes it very tough for young, established bands that are pushing their own original material. A typical start for a band doing their own material would be a Wednesday or Tuesday night gig at a venue with maybe three other bands. If a band brings a certain quota of patrons to the club, usually more than once, the club will offer a Thursday, and from there a weekend slot. This works well for bands that have a limited amount of songs in their repertoire, and for bands that are well connected with other bands in the city. Most often, these showcase style shows are disappointing in the sense that it is very hard for a band to generate a following. When four bands are on a bill, not only do the different styles of bands often clash, but each band's following will only stick around to hear the band they are there to see. Planetary has done many of the showcase type shows all over the city of Chicago, but we have a unique platform so to speak. Planetary can play for hours on end; we can do a four hour show, and we can be diverse and dynamic as far as the material. Our foundation in the blues gives us the opportunity to play for an international audience at a place like Buddy Guy's Legends. Being the kind of band we are, we face fewer limitations as far as booking and building an audience; the Blues has been very good to us. It just really helps for a band to know their niche, and this is likely where most bands run into difficulties;



you have to know what audience you are trying to reach in order to build one. As for other towns and cities we've played in, we really enjoy Colorado in general. The Denver area is full of well-educated and culturally minded people. I could play any given tune at a venue in Indiana or Michigan, and many or most would not know what the songs are; In Colorado, the very same song might have a room full of people singing along with it. Unfortunately, the area we are from is mostly full of casual listeners who don't care to hear anything unless it is familiar, in other words, something they were fed on pop radio when they were younger. I can't count how many times we have been playing a set of old blues, songs the Stones covered, and someone has walked up and requested a Stones song! I tell them, "What do you think we are doing, these are the tunes that made the Stones!" We have been fortunate in the sense that we connect the dots for people, and those that are blues naïve tend to get into what we do anyway, as they have no preconceived notion of what we are doing and it sounds to them like we are merely playing some alternative, yet familiar form of high energy rock nroll.

AAM: What is the The Planetary Blues Band's long-term plan for conquest and domination of the music scene?

“ *Martin: I cannot divulge any classified information haha! We have been through so much; we really have paid our dues. It is now time for fine tuning our product. This year we will be very much focused on pushing our new album, getting more radio play, and gigging as much as possible. Legends is a very sacred and special place for us, and I can't begin to emphasize how much this connection and platform means. Unlike other venues, Legends connects us to an international audience, not to mention the many members of the Rock N Roll Hall Of Fame who regularly visit the club. Legends is a place where we can generate a buzz that goes straight up to our rock 'n' roll heroes. Much of what we are planning we are doing with the help and advice of our manager JP. JP has worked with many bands in many facets including Wilco, The Frey, Liz Phair, and many, many more. The plan is to work, write songs, and pay tribute where it is due. We know the blues scene and we know our unique selling points; this took some time and work. A plan is in place. Any goal without a plan is a wish, and we have big goals, let's leave it at that.*

(The Planetary Blues Band are in concert at The Slippery Noodle in Indianapolis on Thursday, May 9; and at world-famous Buddy Guys Legends in Chicago on Wednesday, May 15).

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