

local beat

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By ANDRIA LISLE

"It was a dark and stormy night." So says roots-rocker **Ben Vaughn** when recalling his first visit to Memphis some 17 years ago. "There was a wicked rainstorm, and only seven people came to our show at the **Antenna** club," Vaughn remembers. "I'd met **Tav Falco** in New York, and he told me that if I was going to Memphis, I'd better send a copy of my record to **WEVL**. So when we got to town, I called the station from a pay phone. They said, 'C'mon by, and we'll put you on the air.'"

At the time, WEVL was just 10 years old. The station was located in a small house on Rayner Street, just south of Midtown. "It was the coolest place," Vaughn raves. "They were playing so much great music. We couldn't believe what we were hearing."

Program director **Judy Dorsey** was one of the crew who met Vaughn that night. "I'd gotten a copy of *The Many Moods of Ben Vaughn* in the mail," Dorsey says, "and I remember that when I pulled it out of the mailer, something about the cover really struck me. I listened to the record immediately, and I was blown away. I didn't even know who this guy was, but I loved him."

"A few months later, I got a call from Ben asking if he could come by. **Paul Williams** was on the air at the time [the longest-running volunteer at the station, Williams has been a deejay since 1976], and he was playing a Barbarian Records single with **Jim Dickinson** on it. Ben walked in, and he knew just who it was!"

When Vaughn pulled out of town the next day, he kept the radio tuned to 89.9 FM until the signal faded. "It was cool to find a radio station that had so much pride in its own music," he says. "They've always celebrated Memphis music history."

Vaughn's been a supporter of WEVL ever since. "We were thrilled to have a musician of his caliber knock on our door," Dorsey says. "He did a benefit for us back in '87, and, of course, he's been back to Memphis several more times over the years. This March, I got an e-mail from Ben saying, 'Hey, I want to do a WEVL benefit.' We jumped at the chance. He picked the month, and here we are."

Describing his style as "simplistic, stripped-down American music," Vaughn says that "Memphis was one of the first cities to get what I do. People here really understand where I'm coming from. Memphis is so eccentric. You've got stars like Otis, Rufus, and Elvis, but there's also a crazy side that intrigues me."

Vaughn returned to Memphis in 1990 to produce **Charlie Feathers'** last album, recorded at **Sam Phillips Recording Studio** for Elektra's American Explorers series. "Charlie made a man out of me as a producer," Vaughn recalls. "I had to fight for my life, otherwise he was gonna kill me. He was a beautiful guy but very delusional. His perception of what was going on was completely different from everyone else's, and it was a fight from beginning to end."

Meanwhile, Vaughn's career as a Hollywood music director was taking off. The creators of ***Third Rock from the Sun*** approached Vaughn about a pilot they were working on. "They needed a hit song from the '70s to open their new show," he recalls. "They listened to Alice Cooper's 'Eighteen' and Cheap Trick's 'Surrender' but neither song worked. I started thinking about the premise of the show -- kids who are too young to drive, bored, with a lot of time on their hands. I realized that **Big Star's 'In the Street'** was the perfect song about teenage boredom." As Vaughn recalls, the powers-that-be "went nuts," and now millions of TV viewers have picked up on Big Star via ***That '70s Show***.

"I'm counting the days until I get to Memphis," Vaughn says. "I always wanted to be someone like Chuck Berry and have a different band in every city, but I'm too particular about my arrangements and I could never relinquish that much control. Memphis is the only place I've tried it," he says, reeling off the names of his sidemen -- bassist **Scott Bomar**, saxman **Jim Spake**, and drummer **Paul Buchignani** -- with pride. "I just travel with one guitar. I borrow an amp, and I'm ready to go."

Singer/songwriter **Dan Montgomery**, an old crony of Vaughn's, will also be performing at the WEVL benefit, along with **The Reigning Sound** and **Vending Machine**. Interestingly enough, Montgomery was Vaughn's road manager for that first fortuitous Memphis visit. "I remember hanging up a flier for that show and watching it blow down the street," Montgomery says with a chuckle. Since he relocated to the Bluff City from the East Coast last year, he's logged more than 100 gigs of his own, most of them at **Murphy's** and **Kudzu's**.

"I like the people and the opportunities here, and I love the pace of things," Montgomery effuses. "It still kinda shocks me to see Jim Dickinson walk into Otherlands and be able to talk with him about Chris Ethridge's bass-playing. You meet a lot of legends here who are just regular guys."

The **WEVL Benefit Concert** is Saturday, June 7th, at 9:30 p.m. at the **Hi-Tone Cafe**. Admission is \$10.

You can e-mail Local Beat at localbeat@memphsflyer.com.

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