



THIS *TRADE WIND* BLOWS THE BLUES AWAY

Most people try to dodge the blues. But Robert Whitall goes out on the road looking for them. Of course, we're not talking about those mopey moods that are a downer—we're talking about the music that makes people get down.

By Tom Bentley

Whitall captures their rhythms in his Big City Rhythm & Blues Magazine, by featuring his blues-festival odysseys in his "On the Road" column. Making the music-festival circuit could be a complication of hotel bookings, thrown-together meals and unexpected schedule changes, but Whitall has an easy answer: he and his wife make their way in a 1970 Airstream Trade Wind, which makes hitting the road for the blues a lot less blue.

"We've got the advantage of sleeping or taking a break anytime, almost anywhere, and it's especially convenient when suddenly encountering big storms to pull over and stop for the night. I also like being off the grid, and find complete relaxation and inspiration for the magazine or other projects. Those are much more frequent and clearly formed when being one with 'Almost Home,' the name we've given our Airstream," says Whitall.

The Trade Wind has been an integral part of Whitall's music love and magazine production for five years, but his infatuation with the blues goes way back. "Upon moving to Detroit in 1963, I experienced the largest musical revolution with Motown, Aretha, Jackie Wilson, Bob Seger, Mitch Ryder, George Clinton and all the Ann Arbor music scene had to offer. I fell into the blues like so many others, with the British invasion. The Animals, The Rolling Stones and The Yardbirds led me to our musical treasure," he says.

He started Big City Rhythm and Blues Magazine in 1995. Music made his marriage as well: he wed Shirley Mae Owens, a radio deejay and promoter from Detroit in 1999. Since those days, their work with the magazine has taken them all over the country, from Chicago to New York City to Mississippi, and all the way to California. The road-trip features of the magazine report on the different musical themes and undercurrents of the regions they visit. Their journeys are now the source of a live webcast as well, where they stream live interviews, music and on-the-road reports.

The couple uses the Airstream as their mobile hotel and production center for stretches up to a month at a time, usually spending a chunk of that time at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival in April. The trailer is also their road home for long weekends on the festival circuit all over the eastern parts of the country, plus jaunts to Iowa, Illinois, Arkansas, Mississippi and Michigan.

"Almost Home" is home to production phases of the magazine as well, since it's the setting for a lot of the magazine writing, and their work on their bi-annual CD sampler. The magazine comes out six times a year, and the couple is either in production, or traveling to the festivals, and promoting, previewing and reviewing musical events and musicians year-round. "Almost Home" makes their busy lives a bit simpler.

With the new axles, plumbing and air conditioning installed at the Airstream factory last year, adding to the custom Mississippi oak wood floors and its "turquoise sparkle" upholstery, the rig is a comfortable setting for the making of words or music.

Despite 30 years of festival-going, Whitall's enthusiasms haven't dimmed: "We love New Orleans, during the festival and also during the Mardi Gras. And the Philadelphia Folk Festival, which allows our Airstream to be part of the event.




The distinguished guitars of Detroit: Johnnie Bassett, Evan Perri, magazine publisher Robert Whitall, Johnny Powers, Paul Brady, and Doug Deming pose with the Big City Rhythm & Blues Airstream. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Shirley Mae Owens and Robert Whitall travel year-round to music festivals in the Airstream, which was given to them as a gift.

At Glen Lake, Michigan we camp behind the Foothills Motel & Café, where it is a short stroll in the morning to get the best Eggs Benedict on the planet to begin the day. Then, hiking beautiful scenic dunes and swimming in the best water off the Sleeping Bear Dunes coast! Also at the Bayou Segnette across the Mississippi from New Orleans—music, food and off the grid!”

We've got the advantage of sleeping or taking a break anytime, almost anywhere, and it's especially convenient when suddenly encountering big storms to pull over and stop for the night.

Amazingly, the Trade Wind was given to them as a gift, courtesy of Marty Spaulding of the 411 Club in Kalamazoo, Michigan, who told Whitall and Shirley Mae, “This is for you guys, for all you do for the Blues!” The trailer had been used backstage at the Kalamazoo Blues Festival, where it was an interview venue for blues greats such as Muddy Waters and Junior Wells.

The Airstream is still making connections: “If the great Magic Slim sees our Airstream, he hurries over as if he had hidden something in the trailer and he can't find it. He looks like a squirrel looking for his buried acorn. Also the blues ghosts are pretty awesome too—our guitar picking and singing sounds better in the Airstream!” says Whitall.

You can see the online version of Big City Rhythm and Blues magazine at www.bigcitybluesmag.com. Their online webcast streams from www.UDetroit.com on Mondays at 8 p.m. Eastern. 

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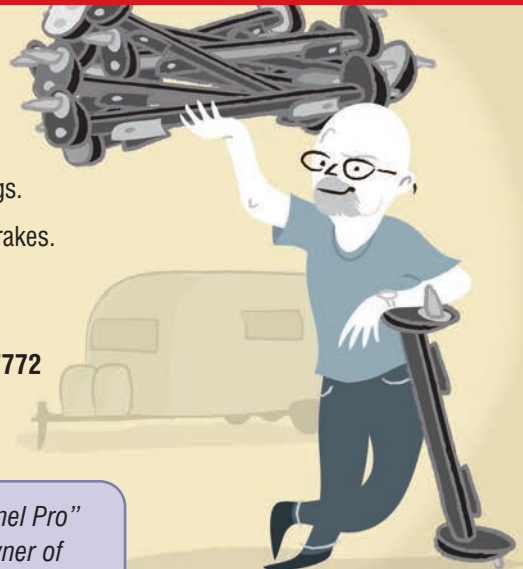
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