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"Devil At The Confluence"

New book by Kevin Belford called a "comprehensive, sweeping and panoramic history of the blues in St. Louis."

by Kendra Henry

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Kevin Belford takes the St. Louis blues very seriously -- and he's not referring to hockey.

In his new book, "Devil at the Confluence: The Pre-War Blues Music of St. Louis," Belford, a Kirkwood native, chronicles and celebrates the untold history of the founding musicians of the St. Louis blues movement.

For Belford, what originally began as a desire to paint a portrait series on blues artists ultimately turned into a 15-year historical inquiry into local blues music. He combed through census material and other public records to piece together a musical profile of more than 50 St. Louis-based recording artists from the 1920s and 1930s.

Upon finding a paper trail on an artist, Belford took up the sometimes arduous task of locating the person for an interview. Missing or inaccurate records often led to dead-ends. Still, he was able to interview several of the musicians face-to-face--an experience that often thrilled both him and the storyteller.

Belford said his research dispels the myth that blues music singularly originated in the Delta and shows that the Gateway to the West was more than just a stopover for musicians traveling up the Mississippi.

"St. Louis was the confluence of everything - art, ideas and technology," he said. "And that's the same for the music."

In terms of the number of blues albums recorded and sold during the Great Depression, several St. Louis musicians outpaced their counterparts in the Delta and in Chicago.

"St. Louis deserves a lot more credit, and the facts show that," Belford said.

He declined to focus his writing, or his interview answers, on one musician over another because he wanted to highlight the group as a whole.



Author and Illustrator Kevin Belford said he moved forward on his book after researching blues artists for a series of paintings he did for The St. Louis Blues Legends project. "I didn't try to answer the question of 'Where were the blues born?' Instead, I wanted to answer the question 'What blues were born in St. Louis?' Belford says in his book. photo by Ursula Ruhl (click for larger version)

"My book is almost simply an encyclopedia of sorts," Belford said. Along with an abundance of historical information, the book also features illustrations by Belford and a compact disc of artist recordings produced by Delmark Records. By presenting an interactive experience, Belford hoped to lighten up the fact-heavy pages.

"Too many books are dry, scientific studies of music," Belford said.

An artist by trade, Belford studied at the Kansas City Art Institute. He has served as a freelance illustrator for local publications such as the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, St. Louis Magazine and the Riverfront Times.

His love for art and his self-professed rabid curiosity originally fed his desire to write "Devil at the Confluence." The deeper Belford delved into his research the stronger he desired to cement the place of St. Louis in the blues history of the United States.

"Teach it in schools," he said. "Put it in libraries and save this archive of information so that students now who want to go into music aren't told you have to go somewhere else to make it." Belford rattled off a list of well-known musicians, from Wilco to Chuck Berry to Nelly, who emerged from the St. Louis music scene, and he urged young people to stay in St. Louis to make their mark on music history.

While Belford speaks tenderly about his beloved blues music in St. Louis, don't expect the same misty-eyed sentiments about modern-day reincarnations of old blues clubs.

"It was like Disneyland with booze," Belford said of a club he once visited in Chicago. "It was an expensively furnished tourist trap."

For those searching for a good venue for blues music in St. Louis, Belford suggested visiting the Blues City Deli or BB's Jazz Blues and Soups. His book is available now at both places and was released nationwide on Oct. 1.

Belford seemed content to take the reins as a local historian but insisted that others must do their part to keep the Blues legacy of St. Louis alive. For him, books play a crucial role in the preservation of that legacy.

Up next for Belford is a children's book on the life of tennis star, Arthur Ashe. Also in the works is a book following the legacy of three songs from the turn of the century -- "Stagger Lee", "Duncan and Brady" and "Frankie and Johnny"--written about St. Louis incidents but popularized elsewhere.

Without giving anything away, Belford shared the meaning behind the title "Devil at the Confluence."

"The book starts a new myth," Belford said. "One where the devil came to the confluence and made a deal with St. Louis."

If Belford gets his way, the devil won't be moving up that muddy river anytime soon.

Belford's next appearance will be at The Argonne Gallery at the downtown Kirkwood Fall Festival from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., Saturday, Oct. 10.

Published by Virginia Publishing, "Devil At The Confluence" is available at most all area book stores.

