

High steppin'

Thaddeus Hogarth, Nicole Nelson, and the Silver Lining Singers do it for Dimock

BY TED DROZDOWSKI

"Steppin' Out" isn't just the title of a Joe Jackson song and an instrumental that Eric Clapton used to play. It's also a party. The biggest in Boston, unless you consider First Night a party. I don't, because it's usually too cold out and First Night doesn't serve booze. First Night is a good time, sure, but not a party.

"Steppin' Out," on the other hand, is an annual event that's packed with music, food, soul, and style. Now in its 16th year, it's become one of the city's peak cultural events and major fundraisers. The beneficiary is the Dimock Community Health Center, which provides care each year to about 40,000 residents of the inner-city neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, and Jamaica Plain from its main campus in Egleston Square and 15 satellite locations.

If that sounds like serious business, well, it is — at least until the two nights and the one morning that "Steppin' Out" kicks in. Then more than 3000 ticketholders show up at the World Trade Center dressed to kill and ready for thrills. The glorified convention hall on the Harbor is divided into rooms named after present-day nightspots like Bob the Chef's and the Western Front and classic now-gone Boston clubs like the Savoy, the Hi Hat, and the Jazz Workshop. And within those spaces there's plenty of good food and an astonishing array of national and local musicians. This year, "Steppin' Out" warms up on Friday (October 31) with a masquerade night of networking and celebration for young professionals. Then on Saturday, it heats up with a wild evening of music: R&B giant Roberta Flack, bluesman James Montgomery, a Motown tribute band, reggae stalwarts the Joint Chiefs, jazz newcomers Kendrick Oliver and the New Life Jazz Orchestra, and many others (visit <http://www.dimock.org/> for the complete line-up). And on Sunday morning, at the Seaport Hotel, a gospel brunch seals the whole deal with a little of the Holy Word, giving hard-partiers a chance to see whether hangovers can really be healed by prayer.

This year, three of the more notable local artists playing "Steppin' Out" — songwriter Thaddeus Hogarth, versatile blues outfit the Nicole Nelson Band, and veteran spiritual group the Silver Lining Gospel Singers — are steppin' out themselves with new releases. Although, like much of "Steppin' Out," these performers have deep roots in African-American culture, they're also an indicator of the event's musical diversity.

Take Hogarth — the former Heavy Metal Horns frontman's third CD, his new *It Might As Well Be Now* (Higher Ground), is a blast of psychedelic soul funk that goes down smart and easy. Its opening "If You Knew" is a prayer for tolerance set to his wah-wah guitar licks and a reggae feel. "I Think It's Gonna Rain" is a vocal showcase; his slightly foggy, relaxed singing and slinky guitar-and-keys arrangement capture a Bill Withers soul-folk vibe. Then there's "Cold Shack Attack," a gritty hunk of dub that demands attention right from its opening blast of harmonica set to a raw groove pumped by drummer Joey Scrima and bassist David Buda, Hogarth's crack rhythm team. Reggae star Sister Carol lends her voice to the song, which is a metaphor for the cruel world we live in. Before Hogarth closes the disc with his expert chromatic-harmonica licks and warm-hearted singing on "Ain't Gonna Miss My Train," with lyrics about aiming for a better future, he hits Sly Stone's "Family Affair" in an overt nod to his musical roots in the early '70s — a time when rock and roll and R&B were often indistinguishable.

"I've been accused of being locked in the '70s, but I don't feel like I am," Hogarth says. The solo work of this veteran local musician, who teaches guitar and songwriting at Berklee College of Music, does, as he admits, draw on his love of harmonic structures from the '70s, but there's a spiritual sensibility coming through his music that makes it timeless. "I'm a spiritual person, but I'm not religious. I feel like I have a message, and if I can touch people, then I've accomplished my artistic endeavor." Wrapping his messages of hope, redemption, and peace in appealing melodies and grooves certainly does the trick.

The musical payoff for Hogarth's fans on *It Might As Well Be Now* is the depth of his guitar playing. On his earlier albums, the sound that's most striking is his chromatic harmonica; it's reminiscent of Stevie Wonder and quite arresting because of Hogarth's command of the instrument and its rarity in contemporary music. But the guitar solo on "I Think It's Gonna Rain" is an excellent example of how restraint and good tone can take a song to higher ground. "I was going for economy and expression on that," he says. And those are the qualities that permeate Hogarth's playing on all 10 of the album's tunes. It's a radical departure from his days with the party-pumping Heavy Metal Horns — softer, more soulful, and enriching.

"Soulful" and "enriching" describe the singing of Nicole Nelson. So do "expressive" and flat-out "beautiful." At 25, she already has a voice for the ages, as the many fans who've made her one of New England's most popular blues and traditional R&B artists know. Nelson arrived on the scene a little more than three years ago and broke through by winning Harpers Ferry's Battle of the Blues Bands. Working with guitarist and co-songwriter Brad Faucher, she's climbed through the pub circuit to headline major New England clubs like Johnny D's, where she'll celebrate the release of her first studio disc (following 2002's self-released *Nicole Nelson Band Live*) on November 15.

"When Nicole played 'Steppin' Out' last year, she'd lost her voice and had maybe a fifth of what she usually has," Faucher recounts. "That left her with a sort of Mavis Staples growl." Even without her soft, round tones and vibrant high end, Nelson and her crew knocked 'em out, so impressing Boston-based promoter Fred Taylor that he asked her to headline Scullers and play his Tanglewood Blues Festival this year. At Tanglewood in August, Nelson killed again. She sold 200 CDs after her set, something that's almost unheard of for an unsigned artist.

On her forthcoming self-released EP, which is called *Nicole Nelson*, she sounds like a natural. "The Other Side of the Tracks" has the command of classic Memphis soul woman Ann Peebles; "Just Let Me Go" echoes the Philly sound of the '70s with its elegant vocal phrasing, its horn-and-percussion arrangements, and Faucher's layers of acoustic and effected guitar. And when she swings, she swings hard, sidestepping clichéd 12-bar structures and shuffles to create her own sound.

But singing like a versatile R&B diva was a leap for Nelson, who met Faucher after she came to Boston to audition for the Broadway musical *Rent*. "Blues is a great way for me to make music that's real — not corny, shallow pop stuff, which my avenues were pointing toward before I met Brad," she explains. "Ashanti and people like that are nowhere near where I want to be as an artist. My ultimate female vocalists are Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, and Whitney Houston — the people I wanted to sound like when I was a little girl. I used to think of blues the way that Ella Fitzgerald or Billie Holiday sang it. Then I heard Big Mabel sing, and she's just wailin' — 'Baby, baby, baby!' I was like, 'Oh my God.' "

"When we began working together, Nicole would sing this nasty blues tune, and it was the most beautiful sound I'd heard," Faucher says. "I said, 'Well, it sounds perfect, but I don't know how down in the alley it is.' "

Getting down in the alley may be what gets Nelson and Faucher to the top. Although they've been offered a deal by one of the country's top blues labels, they've steered their own course, and that's allowed them to define their sound and approach. As they prepare for "Steppin' Out" and the Johnny D's EP-release gig, they're also recording a full-length album. If luck tumbles toward Nelson's talent, her next breakout may be national.

The strains of R&B, blues, salsa, Motown, reggae, and the other pop music played at the "Steppin' Out" Saturday night gala will barely have subsided when workers begin to set up the Seaport Hotel's View Ballroom for Sunday-morning's 11 a.m. gospel brunch. Five artists will perform, including the Silver Lining Gospel Singers, whose four strong female voices are headed for their 24th year together. Recently Jean Hill, Lovestine Eason, Edna Jackson, Leeanna Calvert and their five-piece band headed into the studio to record their first CD, which they'll begin selling at their shows in late November.

Hill describes their sound as traditional gospel, with a lead voice, usually Hill or Eason, singing a preaching melody line and the others in choir-like support. "We really keep the harmonies going," she explains. The singers work up plenty of heat in numbers like "It's a Blessing" and "Walk Where He Walked," extolling the virtues of their faith in Jesus and his teachings. Enough that even non-believers, which must surely include a percentage of the audience that comes to hear them at Dick's Last Resort, can be affected by their passion.

Inspired by the Angelic Gospel Singers, who started singing around Philadelphia in 1944, the Silver Lining vocalists "were originally all members of different church choirs when we decided to form our own gospel singing group," Hill recounts. "What we do is get out and minister in song to people anywhere we can, from churches and senior centers, colleges, weddings, and funerals to places like Dick's." This is their second "Steppin' Out" — an event that Hill finds "just perfect for our ministry, because we reach people who we might not otherwise reach." And reaching people — reaching souls — is what matters most to the Silver Lining Gospel Singers.

"Oh, yes it does," Hill testifies. "We get emotional in some of our songs because we sing about the good of the Lord and his blessings, and sometimes I see people getting emotional along with us. We've had sickness among the members of the group and they've been cured. Our pianist, Faye Hart, wrote a song about how the Lord helped her with her cancer and heart trouble, 'To Be like Jesus,' that will be on the album. So we know that if you believe, and if this music can reach you and help you find your place with Jesus, you can be healed. That's why singing these songs makes us so emotional sometimes."

"Steppin' Out" takes place this weekend, October 31 through November 2, at the World Trade Center, 164 Northern Avenue, and the Seaport Hotel, 1 Seaport Lane; for more information, call (617) 442-8800 extension 1006 or visit <http://www.dimock.org/>. Thaddeus Hogarth's CDs are available at <http://www.thaddeushogarth.com/>, and he'll appear November 28 at Rockafellas, 231 Essex Street in Salem; call (978) 745-2411. Nicole Nelson's discs are available at <http://www.nicolenelsonband.com/>, and she'll appear November 15 at Johnny D's, 17 Holland Street in Somerville's Davis Square; call (617) 776-2004. The Silver Lining Singers play the gospel brunch at Dick's Last Resort, 55 Huntington Avenue, on the fourth Sunday of each month; call (617) 267-8080.

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