

Johnny Mack program nothing but the blues

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Marlene Taylor/Special to the News Sentinel

John McCormack on the air as Johnny Mack, WDVX-FM's Friday night blues man.

To say that Johnny Mack's got the blues may be the understatement of the year. Johnny Mack (a.k.a., John McCormack) hosts Knoxville's WDVX weekly program Johnny Mack's Friday Night Blues Attack!, and each program is a crash course in American-born blues music.

"I couldn't have asked for anybody else to do this show," says WDVX General Manager and Program Director Tony Lawson. "John has so much knowledge and is so passionate about the blues. He receives phone calls and e-mails from all over the world."

The alias Johnny Mack is befitting for McCormack. After all, real bluesmen nearly always have a nickname like Professor Longhair (Henry Byrd), Muddy Waters (McKinley Morganfield), or Howlin' Wolf (Chester Burnett).

The six-hour show is aptly named because it ignites both the air and the cyberspace of the World Wide Web, broad-siding listeners with the rarest, rawest and most riveting blues the deejay can find. It runs from 9 p.m. to 3 a.m.

Matt Morelock, host and producer of the popular Blue Plate Special, feels the same. "Johnny's program provides the broadest selection of blues imaginable, from the earliest known blues recordings to contemporary and futuristic ...and all points in between."

A native of blues-rich St.Louis, Mo, McCormack was introduced to the blues at an early age. But as the typical teen, he was drawn to rock.

"I literally listened to a transistor radio under the covers at night. Like a lot of Boomers, I came to the blues second hand, by way of the British groups-the Rolling Stones, the Yardbirds, and others."

Traveling miles to see a performer, McCormack found he could meet and mingle with many of the blues artists. Since hosting the show, he began recording WDVX station IDs and now has a collection of hundreds.

That's why during any given show one might hear "This is Little Milton for Johnny Mack's Friday Night Blues Attack! on WDVX in Knoxville, Tennessee."

With his seven- to eight-thousand CDs, McCormack could do an entire show on just harmonica, acoustic guitar, women's, Chicago or New Orleans blues. A six-hour show on just harmonica?

"I can take it, but I don't think the audience can. I could do at least a half-hour of kazoo!" he laughs.

And he gets requests for such focused genres.

"I've had people who told me I have no use for drums. Seriously."

Clinton resident David Anderson tunes in every week. "I was a blues fan all my life but didn't know it until I found Johnny Mack's Blues Attack!" he says.

McCormack keeps up with the artists and often dedicates a section of his show to a particular performer because of a birthday, an illness, or recent death. Many of the great blues artists of the last century have passed on or are in their 80s and 90s, but McCormack knows the value of their legacies.

"The biggest compliment I got about the show was from a soldier in Iraq. He had to pay for some reason to listen to the show. It actually cost him and he didn't mind a bit. He was there every Friday night. It tore me up. I couldn't handle it."