

THE BLUE NOTE TURNS 30

Richard King creates harmony through musical relationships

By Jeremy Essig

In 1982, Richard King booked a little-known band with a randomly chosen acronym to play at The Blue Note. Both the nightclub and the band, which had just recorded its first album, were 2 years old at the time.

Following an appearance in support of their album *Chronic Town*, Michael Stipe and the other members of R.E.M. were about to leave Columbia when King's partner Phil Costello noticed they were about to lose a tire on their van, recalled Kevin Walsh — a longtime friend of both King and Costello.

When it came time to pay them, Costello provided extra money to purchase a new tire for the band, which would go on to become one of the most famous in rock and roll history.

"I can't see myself at 30," Stipe sang on "Little America," the band's commentary on touring. On July 30, The Blue Note will do just that — turn 30 — and will celebrate the milestone with a concert featuring Snoop Dogg and Ice Cube on Ninth Street outside the concert hall.

How is King able to bring hip-hop royalty to Columbia? He does it the same way he was able to book country kings such as Johnny Cash, blues legends such as Buddy Guy and Koko Taylor and rockers from Chuck Berry to Megadeth.

The key, Walsh said, is King's ability to build relationships in the music industry, as he illustrated by purchasing up-and-coming band R.E.M. the necessary equipment to continue touring. The trait helps him bring in performers that similar clubs couldn't get.

Although the venue will celebrate its birthday with a famous lineup, The Blue Note made its bones bringing Columbia acts that had not yet broken into the public consciousness.

"We weren't very mainstream at all," King said of The Blue Note's early bookings.

In the club's early days, King and Costello spent hours at local record stores and discovered new bands by trading music back and forth with Walsh, King's friend from Pennsylvania who came for a visit and ended up working at Streetside Records for 25 years.

King, who also was just planning to visit Columbia while on his way to California, excelled at becoming friends with both the band members who came through The Blue Note and the managers and agents who represented them. King's focus might have come from his experiences growing up around Democratic ward politics as a youth in Pennsylvania, Walsh said: "Relationships existed wherever you went."

King managed to bring some of the most influential bands of the '80s' and early '90s' underground scene to Columbia, including The Replacements, The Pixies and the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

King said he keeps a ceiling tile signed by the Chili Peppers on display in his office. The band came through The Blue Note during a notorious tour in which they would wear nothing more than tube socks during parts of the show.

The performance "scared the [crap] out of me," King said due to the raucous nature of the performance and the fact that the club did not have security measures such as barricades around the stage at the time.

The Blue Note, though known for building up bands, also holds a notorious place in alternative music history as the spot where an influential band self-destructed.

Minnesota's Husker Du, touring in support of 1987's *Warehouse: Songs and Stories*, played their final show at The Blue Note. Drummer Grant Hart performed after missing the sound check and then disappeared.

"There was something weird going on; I could feel it the whole day," King said.

Although the history of The Blue Note is filled with countless examples of bands the club featured before they hit it big, King said he has also passed on artists that would eventually become stars. The most noticeable example involves Missouri native Sheryl Crow.

While attending the University of Missouri in the early 1980s, Crow sent The Blue Note a demo tape of her band, a cassette Costello listened to and then promptly threw across the office.

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"We had the too-cool-for-school attitude at the time," King said, adding that Crow's band was not the type they would have booked during that period.

Years later, when booking Crow at the Hearnes Center, King said he discussed the demo tape with the Grammy Award winner.

Upon meeting King, Crow told him she was a friend of Costello, now a manager in Los Angeles. The discussion then turned to Crow's desire to play The Blue Note.

"I said it was Phil's fault," King said laughing, adding that Crow told him Costello put the blame

on him. "I said, 'No, it was definitely (Costello).'"

Although The Blue Note might have missed out on Crow, King played an integral role in the development of another regional band — Uncle Tupelo from Belleville, Ill.

Uncle Tupelo, whose members would go on to form the more widely known Wilco and Son Volt, played the club almost once a month in the early '90s, said Tracy Lane who worked at The Blue Note back then.

They were "another one of those Richard made happen," Lane said.

King said he remembers an agent find him and inquiring about Uncle Tupelo recommended, with great enthusiasm, agent sign on with the band.

His investment in the young musicians repaid. Both Wilco and Son Volt have King's loyalty with their own by continuing in his venue when they were playing in much larger halls in other cities.

"To this day, I still consider (Tweedy of Wilco), Jay (of Son Volt) and John Stills (Wilco) friends," King said.

Although friendly with the bigger names in music, King said he doesn't see his job any different from how it was when the venue opened.

"Our job is still developing," he said. "Anything we can do to help a band is good."

King said one of the best parts of his job is finding new bands. He became visibly excited talking about the new generation of less-known bands coming through the club, including The Horses, the Local Natives and Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeros.

Although he has delegated the most booking responsibilities to others in recent years, King said The Blue Note also tries to help young musicians when possible.

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Richard King has expanded his reach beyond The Blue Note to bring live music to Columbia. King is a co-founder and booker for the annual Roots 'N Blues 'N BBQ Festival, which during the past three years has brought artists such as Taj Mahal and Buddy Guy to Columbia. He also created Summerfest, an annual music series held on Ninth Street that this year kicked off with Willie Nelson and will feature the Old 97's among others, and the Blue Moon series at Forest Rose Park next to MoJo's, another live music venue King owns.