

Root down

Colin Ross

Is there another musical genre that has lost its

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way as badly as the blues? There's a scene in the 2001 film *Ghost World* that about sums it up: The main characters have gone to a bar to watch an old blues guy play some nice, Mississippi John Hurt-style fingerpicking guitar, and most of the other bar patrons are ignoring him. Then the headlining act,

"The first album I ever bought in my life was a record of Renaissance lute music," he says. "All my friends were buying Beatles records—well, the smart ones were buying Beatles records. The others were buying Herman's Hermits. And I was buying Renaissance music. I still have it ... it's a great record."

In addition to his interesting record collection, Ross also has a collection of unusual musical instruments, many of which he uses for performances. One oddity in his collection is the banjomer, a lap dulcimer-banjo hybrid. He also has a lovely-sounding 1936 National resophonic guitar. Resophonic guitars are now closely associated with bluegrass music and the Dobro brand, but in the days before electric amplification, they were also popular with jazz and blues musicians.

But Ross's primary instrument is the piano. He's been playing piano since he was a child and has performed in nearly every conceivable setting—from the lobbies of luxury hotels and casinos to bars, clubs, elementary schools and old folks' homes. In addition to the upcoming performance of his "Evolution of the Blues" show at the Brewery Arts Center, Ross regularly performs at the Third Street Bar and plays Sunday afternoon acoustic sets at Wild River Grille.

Ross currently has three CDs for sale: one of solo piano improvisations, an album of piano blues, and third with the Colin Ross Band, the group that will be appearing for the "Evolution" show. In addition to Ross, the current line-up of the band includes drummer Bryan Jenkins, bassist Jerry Spikula, and vocalist and guitarist Mig O'Hara. Ross plays piano and guitar with the band.

While he plays a diverse array of gigs, it's clear that the "Evolution" show is a personal labor of love.

"I love music that's on the cusp between jazz and blues," he says. A lot of his music—both the standards and the originals—hits the sweet spot between classic jazz and traditional blues, with the rhythmic structure of the blues but the harmonic complexity of jazz chord progressions.

"There's plenty of fertile ground within these idioms," he says. "It's not a Chautauqua performance. It's not a historical reproduction. Nobody's going to be in costume. ... I approach this music as a living, breathing thing, not something under glass." □



Colin Ross tickling the ivories on his home piano.

"Blues Hammer," a pack of frat boys, comes out and plays some loud, offensive crap, and everybody in the house goes nuts. It's a scene that's all too common and all too embarrassing in real life. I blame Stevie Ray Vaughn.

The "Blues Hammer" sound is a grotesque mockery of traditional American music and is an all too common sound in the bars of Northern Nevada. So I always tread lightly when approaching bands that claim to play the blues.

Colin Ross, a local music veteran, has a new show, a wide-ranging set called the "Evolution of the Blues," a title that veers dangerously close to Blues Hammer territory.

But after a few minutes of talking with him, I breathed a sigh of relief. This is a man with taste, knowledge and experience. He says his working definition of the blues runs covers everybody from Duke Ellington to Muddy Waters. Half the repertoire of Evolution of the Blues consists of material written by composers of this era, like Count Basie, Robert Johnson and Bessie Smith. The other half is originals written by Ross and deeply informed by this American roots music.

"I'm influenced by this stuff, I'm not trying to copy it," says Ross.

But his originals fit in well with the vintage classics.

"It happens naturally by my taste," he says. He has always had eclectic, deep-digging taste.

The Colin Ross Band will perform the "Evolution of the Blues" at the Brewery arts Center, 449 W. King St., Carson City, on Saturday, Jan. 31, 7:30 p.m. \$18 general; \$15 students, seniors, BAC members. All ages. For more information, call 883-4154 or visit colinrossmusic.com.