



In the Spot Light...

Rick Smith



It figures that only a bluesman could go from "Moon" to the Valley of the Sun and not miss a beat. So it is with Rick Smith, a familiar face to BSCP jam goers for more than a decade who sometime in or around June will step onto the stages at Champions Bar and Grill and River City Blues and Dart Club for the last time. The prospects of living near his daughter, Alasha, and wallowing knee deep and year round in succulents is taking Rick and his considerable skills and band leadership qualities to Phoenix, Ariz. He can only hope that his jam life in Phoenix will come anywhere close to his experiences in central Pa. "It's been a lot of fun," said Smith, 64, a Penn State grad, avid fly fisherman and voracious reader who in June will retire from a long career as an architect for the Commonwealth. "It's going to be very sad to leave it behind.

"I've already investigated (the blues scene in Phoenix) and I'm already getting the Phoenix Blues Society newsletters. There's a jam there pretty much every night of the week, but they're not like our jam." Like most jam regulars, Smith has performed since high school and has evolved into a bluesman from other genres. Being a product of the 1960s, Smith's was rock and light rock, ranging from the Beatles to Dan Fogelberg. There was a period of heavy jazz before getting hooked on the blues once he discovered the BSCP. "Moon" was his first band. Then there was "The Trip." He didn't elaborate on that one. Currently, he is a key and founding member, along with Gary Rothrock, of "Acoustic Stew," the host band at the monthly acoustic blues jam at River City, and a regular at the annual Treasurer's Picnic, and other gatherings of blues bands, including Ft. Hunter coming this June.

"I'd been a rhythm player all my life. I've only played lead about the last 10 years since being involved with the Blues Society," said Smith, who if called on could also play harmonica, bass guitar or drums. "When I found the Blues Society, I found a home."



What Phoenix gains and BSCP and Acoustic Stew loses is a solid set leader, a walking Rolodex of blues tunes and knowledge. At jams, he famously keeps in his pocket a list of 100 or more songs to choose from, whittled down from several hundred he's learned and rotates through. "I've done hundreds of songs. Some fly and some don't," he says humbly.

"I've seen a lot of guys get up there and play the same four songs every time. I don't want people to know what they're going to hear from me. I don't want to do four songs, I-IV-V, the same tempo and key. My thing is to try and mix it.

"I'm not up there to show anybody how good a lead player I am. I'm up there to put together a solid set to let other people show what they can do. So when I'm at home, I don't any longer spend all my time noodling solos. I'm spending my time searching for new songs I can play at the jam."

Rocky Woodling is one of those who shows what he can do, and what he can do with his harp often brings the house down. He credits Smith for driving him to be better than just good. "I had been practicing the blues harp on my own for only couple years, and I finally decided that one evening soon I'd make the move to contribute to the Thursday night Jams at the 40&8," Woodling said. "I remember asking Rick if he could listen to me play out in the parking lot and if he could give me an honest critique. He wasn't impressed.

"And I laugh about it now because he was letting me know that there was a standard to uphold and I was missing it. I learned from Rick that it was about the song and not how much play time I got."

So thankful was Woodling that he presented to Smith a framed portrait he had painted of him playing the guitar. It hangs in Smith's home today and will soon go west. Should there ever be a BSCP Hall of Fame, maybe it'll make its way back.

