

## Snooky & Us

In the winter of 1988, guitarist Teddy Leonard contacted Cash Wall and I asking if we'd like to join him backing up Snooky Pryor at The Pine Tree, a Toronto blues bar. Although he would eventually become a full member of The Kendall Wall Band, Teddy was a sub for our regular guitarist at the time. He'd played with Snooky as a member of the Morgan Davis Band. They'd backed Mr. Pryor at the same venue a year earlier. This time around Morgan wasn't available and Teddy, no longer in that group received the bandleader call. His reasoning for hiring Cash and I as the rhythm section was that he knew we would understand how to play Snooky Pryor's deep, traditional blues.

I'd first heard Snooky Pryor's music back in the early 70's. James Hartley and I were invited to blues listening sessions at Ed Brake's apartment on a regular basis. Eddy B as he's known in the blues community was an avid record collector and blues historian. These gatherings were workshops and history lessons in blues. The tuition fee was a six pack of beer and some good reefer. We'd sit back while Eddy but together a play list for the evening of obscure and hard to find music from a collections of 78's and 45's. This was how I became aware of many great artists that weren't on the radar of most blues enthusiasts and record companies of the day. Snooky Pryor's tune, Judgment Day popped up at one of these sessions and later on a mixed tape given to me by Eddy. It was the B side of a Vee-Jay 78, the A side was Someone To Love Me. Judgment Day became and still is one of my all time favorite blues songs.

Snooky Pryor had been part of Willie Dixon's Allstar Blues Revue in the early 70's and I'd caught that show at the El Mocambo. As a bass player I was more focused on Willie but do remember Snooky being featured on a number or two during the evening.

Jumping back to the Pine Tree gig, I was thrilled to not only be able to play with a blues legend but also to be able to actually play Judgment Day with the star who'd recorded it in 1956. Someone To Love Me was also in the set list. Meeting Snooky was a great experience. He was a happy, good-natured guy who made us feel comfortable immediately. Backing him was easy and a lot of fun. Teddy and I lived in the same neighborhood so he would pick me up first and then drive to Snooky's hotel to provide him with his gig transportation. We were able to spend time with him before and after the show each night and really get to know him. He liked to reminisce about his days with Floyd Jones, Moody Jones and Homesick James. We willingly soaked up all the great stories.

This was inspiring. He made playing his music joyful. Snooky had a small recording device that he used to record every show. Between sets I'd find him in the dressing room listening to the recording from the previous night. He was quick to let us know how happy he was with the way we were backing him up. That made our job even easier and boosted our confidence.

The Pine Tree was a funky old tavern located in Toronto's West Queen West entertainment area. It was a real blues bar, nothing but the blues and a great place to play. The area in the basement that was used for a dressing room hadn't been cleaned in months. It smelled of stale beer, rotting food, full ashtrays and dampness brought on by frequent flooding. Snooky didn't care, he loved the hang between shows, listening to his tapes and regaling us with his music history. The under side of the Pine Tree stage was the home to a family of rats and every night when we'd kick off the first song three or four of them would run out onto the small dance floor, scurry around for a few seconds and run straight into the table area where the audience was sitting. It was a full house every night and the audience was focused on Snooky and the band so they didn't notice the rats. It happened at the beginning of every show and I couldn't believe that no one in the club ever caught sight of the rat pack. On the first night during a break Teddy said, "Snooky, did you see the rats", his answer was "I thought they were panthers". The rats were a large, well-fed, big city breed.

Working with Snooky Pryor at The Pine Tree was a high point of my career. I didn't want it to end. He was a great musician and a wonderful person to be around. I know he appreciated the respect we showed him and the way we honored his music by playing it right. Cash, Teddy and I had high hopes of playing with him again. He told us that when he came back to play in Toronto he would make sure that his contract stated that the three of us would be his band. This was very encouraging and we looked forward to the next time.

Unfortunately our reunion would not come to be at least not right away. The Pine Tree closed and other venues in the area were not booking Snooky Pryor. I decided to take matters in to my own hands. The Kendall Wall Band was becoming a respected and established part of the Toronto blues community of the day. Our Saturday afternoon matinees at The Black Swan had become very successful. Our special guest line up included all the top Canadian blues performers with the first class touring artists that were playing at Albert's Hall. I used that leverage to start making calls.

I began booking gigs for Snooky Pryor & The Kendall Wall Band. The short tours would start with a weekend in Kitchener Ontario at Pop The Gator followed by a week in Toronto at Albert's Hall in the old Brunswick House. During the Toronto week, Snooky would guest at The Black Swan on Saturday afternoon. It was an amazing time and something that benefited all of us. KWB would open each show with a few tunes before bringing on the star. Jeff Baker was KWB's harmonica player and originally we thought that that he'd lay out during Snooky's part of the night. That was not going to happen, Mr. Pryor loved the way Jeff played and insisted that he stay on stage. Some of the double harp things they did were over the top. They also shared a love of carpentry. One night during one of our Albert's Hall gigs I went into the dressing and found the two of them down on their knees on the floor discussing the pros and cons of a particular connecting joint on a wooden bench seat in the room. A priceless moment.

Our relationship with Snooky lasted for a number of years with return dates at Albert's Hall and Pop The Gator along with engagements at Blues & Cues and The Southern Comfort Blues Festival. One memorable night happened at Pop The Gator when his old friends Mel Brown and Luther Tucker sat in with us. Snooky was in his glory that night surrounded by the young band he was mentoring and two of his long time friends in the blues.

During the period that The Kendall Wall Band was fortunate to be in the presence of the great Snooky Pryor he released a number of recordings on the Blind Pig and Antone's record labels. We would do our best to recreate that music. My last engagement with him was at The Silver Dollar Room in the mid 90's. The Kendall Wall Band had run its course but at that time I had a band called Cool Deal featuring Tyler Yarema piano, Mike Carson guitar and Bob Vespaziani drums. That was the back up band for my final show with Snooky Pryor. He was talking about his desire to retire. He was in his late 70's and although his career was enjoying a great second act it was time for him to slow down. He didn't retire right away and there were a few more records but he did cut back on touring the world.

My association with Snooky Pryor spread over seven years. During that time I booked the gigs, arranged his air and ground travel, made sure he stayed in good hotels and took care of his immigration work visas. I was fortunate to be able to learn from him and play his deep blues. It was a very positive period of my life and career.

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*"Being able to meet Snooky Pryor, share his positive approach to life and play his deep blues was an extremely important part of my journey in the world of music."*

Gary Kendall