

Written by Mike Schulz

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As a fledgling musician growing up in Detroit, Rich DelGrosso admits to being heavily influenced by such artists as Jimi Hendrix and Cream. So, of all possible instruments, what led the young, rock-oriented DelGrosso to embrace the *mandolin*?

"I'm Italian," he says with a laugh. "End of story."

Actually, it's just the *beginning* of the story.

In a phone interview, the Los Angeles-based musician/writer/educator - who is making his third appearance at the Mississippi Valley Blues Festival, and was nominated for a 2006 Blues Music Award in the catchall "Other" Best Instrumentalist category - admits that he "sort of came through the rock 'n' roll portal," playing guitar "since I was 11 or 12." He quickly became a blues fan as well "by listening to Muddy Waters and the roots," but it wasn't until his final year of high

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school, while on a family vacation in Italy, that DelGrosso discovered the beauty of the mandolin, the musical instrument that would eventually shape his career.

"It's the tone of the instrument," DelGrosso says. "It just sounded so bright and strong and, of course, expressive. The mandolin sounds great with piano and guitar. It's another voice - a nice counterbalance to the other instruments - and it works really well in that it has such a *different* voice."

Thinking "you know, *that* could be fun ... ," DelGrosso returned from Italy with a mandolin in hand, and although he didn't yet know how to *play* the instrument, he began teaching himself how to read music for mandolin by playing "old-timey" songs. (In instrumental music, DelGrosso notes with a laugh, "everybody starts out with fiddle tunes.")

Yet during his musical experimentation, DelGrosso didn't realize that his passion for the mandolin and his passion for the blues could, one day, make for an excellent match. "I was heavy into blues," he says, "but I didn't think of playing *mandolin* blues until a friend of mine mentioned the name of Johnny Young." Young was a famed blues mandolin player out of Chicago, and although he passed away (in 1974) before DelGrosso had the chance to see him perform live, his work made a lasting impression on the youth from Detroit.

"I picked up his record," DelGrosso says, "and I said, 'That's *it*. *That's* the stuff I wanna do.' And then I started doin' research on all of the *other* people that used to play mandolin in the blues, and there are actually a whole bunch."

In fact, two of this bunch - James "Yank" Rachell and Howard "Louie Blueie" Armstrong - became not only influences on DelGrosso but mentors as well. After beginning his professional music career playing the "folk scene" in Michigan, he contacted legendary blues performer Rachell in Indianapolis, and "had the great fortune" to play several gigs with him. "He played in a totally different style than anyone else," DelGrosso says.

And blues mandolin performer Armstrong - who, like DelGrosso, lived in Detroit - also became a friend and frequent collaborator. "I learned so much from him," says DelGrosso. "He was the last of the black string-band performers from that '30s generation, and he was steeped in all

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kinds of music. He could play anything on any instrument."

Throughout the 30-plus years of his musical career, the influence of both Rachell and Armstrong - and that of Johnny Young - has been felt in DelGrosso's club and festival appearances. But DelGrosso has honored their influence not only through his music, but through his words - in addition to his stage performances, DelGrosso has been able to write about his mentors (and many, many others) for such publications as *Living Blues*, *Mandolin World News*, *Mandolin Magazine*, *Footsteps*, and *Blues Revue*, for which he writes a weekly guitar column and has served as an associate editor since 1996.

Clearly, DelGrosso relishes the opportunity to share his love of the blues, and the musician found the perfect outlet for his passion when he spent 10 years coordinating the Augusta Heritage Arts Workshop in Elkins, West Virginia, which involves between 120 and 200 students annually. "It's a week-long program," he says, "designed to be all blues, taught on guitar, mandolin, fiddle, piano, bass, vocals ... the whole gamut. It was, and still is, a tremendous program, not only for the students, but for the faculty.

"There we are for a week, jamming all night" He laughs. "The only downside is the recovery period after it's over." So it takes another week to recover? "As we all got older, it sure took a whole lot longer than *that*. I used to go to the Maryland shore when that was over and just sit on the beach and stare at the water for three days. I couldn't *move*."

Though the long nights in Elkins took their toll, DelGrosso is certainly no stranger to the world of education. "I've been teaching school for thirty-two, -three years," he says, and is currently educating middle-schoolers at a private school in Los Angeles. But don't expect your L.A.-based nieces and nephews to sign up for DelGrosso's middle-school mandolin course.

"I'm teaching science," he says. "When I was in college, back in Detroit, I was a bio major, and my parents - good Italian-American parents - wanted me to be a doctor. And I just said, 'You know, Mom, I just cannot do that kind of stuff. I don't want to be cuttin' people and sewin' 'em up and that kind of stuff.' But I was certainly interested - and still am - in science. I'm, I guess, what people call a Renaissance man."

Blues Fest 2006: Renaissance Man(dolin) -- Rich DelGrosso, Friday, 6:30 p.m., Tent Stage

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Indeed. DelGrosso reveals that he's also interested in drawing, and the arts, and in between his concert appearances, writing duties, and *teaching* duties, he even found time to record his first CD last year -

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, which DelGrosso

says "covers just about all the bases of things that I do." If that's possible.

"It's a varied life," he deadpans. "I never get bored, let me tell ya. Hopefully, I can retire soon and, you know, I'll be even busier *then*."