Written by Mike Schulz
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With his 2008 victory in the solo/duo division, and his six-man ensemble's 2011 triumph in the band category, Lionel Young stands as the first double winner in the history of Memphis' International Blues Challenge (IBC). Meanwhile, the reviews that he and his Lionel Young Band have amassed would seem to back up the IBC's choices; *Blues Blast Magazine* wrote that the group "deserve[s] a place on your must-see list," and
American Blues News
called Young himself "an entertainer's entertainer."

Yet even given his awards and plaudits, this Colorado-based musician – one of the genre's few professional *violinists* – understands the importance of daily practice, and not just at the blues elements you might expect.

"Most people play loud and proud all the time," says Young during a recent phone interview. "Especially in the blues. But in any music, just like in any conversation, dynamics play a very important part. You know, when people want you to pay attention to what they're saying, they can either *yell* at you, or they can say something *re-e-eally quiet*. If you say something really quiet, people listen a lot harder.

"And that's one of the things I learned from one of my teachers," he continues, "was how to play *quiet*. His name was Josef Gingold, and he used to play so quiet it would make you hold your breath. It was unbelievable – like the molecules changed in the air. I was all about playing louder and faster, and he made me realize, 'Whoa ... there's this whole 'nother area of slower and quieter.

"I still try to practice that every day in honor of him. I mean, every day you've got to conquer the fingerboard, and you've got to familiarize yourself with the instrument again. *Every day*."

Young – now in his 40s – began the ongoing process of conquering the fingerboard at age six, when the Rochester, New York, youth began private violin lessons at the Eastman School of Music. After his family moved to Pittsburgh, Young continued his classical-music studies through high school, and also became fascinated with an entirely different genre.

"When I got really heavily into blues music," he says, "I just couldn't stop. For a while, I would just go to libraries and research old recordings, and I got hooked. I'd listen to people like 'Blind' Willie Johnson and Louis Armstrong and 'Blind' Willie McTell – just all kinds of stuff. I *loved* that music. It was like a light at the end of the tunnel. I had to go toward it."

Still, Young wasn't necessarily intending to play violin as a career. "I actually wanted to play football," he says with a laugh. "I was trying to get a scholarship to play football at Penn. But unfortunately, playing football my senior year, I got injured, so I was not offered a scholarship.

"But I *was* offered a full scholarship in music at Indiana University," he continues, "so it just seemed like, 'Okay, well, I guess that's what I gotta do.'"

Before long, says Young, he realized music was what he also *wanted* to do. The violinist eventually transferred to Carnegie Mellon University and went on to become a member of the Pittsburgh Opera-Ballet Orchestra and Colorado's National Repertory Orchestra ... and also began to focus less on classical violin than blues violin.

"It used to be much more common in the early days," says Young of blues-violin music. "I'd hear it on these old recordings with people like Charlie Patton and Muddy Waters and early Count Basie. For a while, though, it was phased out of the whole scene."

Regarding his own playing of the blues on violin, Young says, "I try to use all the techniques that are available to classical violin – playing harmonics, bouncing the bow on the string – as well as playing sustained sound. A long, sustained, traditional sound. I also do a lot of what's called in

Italian *pizzicato*, or plucking. Sometimes I hold the violin like a guitar and pick it like that.

“For a while, to get better at doing that, I took lessons from a flamenco guitar player,” he continues. “I never was really good at what he was trying to teach me, but I was able to adapt some of it to the violin playing – some of the natural hand positions – and be able to pick with good dexterity, good rhythm.

“All of the education I had, and all the teachers I had, were never really lost on me. I take them with me in almost everything I do.”

Through his tenure with the National Repertory Orchestra, Young’s proficiency on blues violin got him invited to perform in a blues and bluegrass trio both at the Rep’s summer festival and overseas – at the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, South Korea.

“We actually got the chance to play at the closing ceremony of the Olympics,” he says. “And when I got back home, I was like, ‘You know, I’d like to try and do this [blues] all the time. This is really *fun*.’

“It was a little bit of a chance,” says Young of his decision to pursue a blues-music career. “It was a *lot* of a chance. But I knew it was the way I had to go, sort of like a path you’ve got to take. I thought maybe I’d just try it a couple years and see how it worked out. Little did I know I’d make it to *this* level.”

In Denver, says Young, “I started a blues band called the Last Fair Deal. And we lucked out, because with very, very little experience, we were able to win this ‘Best of Denver’ thing by this magazine called *Westword*. We won best blues band, and I was like, ‘*What?!*’”

He laughs. “We had just sent them, like, a six-song cassette tape. And I knew when that happened – when they named us best blues band – we’d be able to keep busy doing what we were doing in the area. I said, ‘Well, I guess I’m gonna do this for a little longer than I *thought*.’”

Twenty-two years later, Young is still playing the blues in Colorado. But after the Lionel Young Band's win at the IBC this past February, the group is also embarking on its first national and international tours, with summer and autumn stops set for, among other locations, New York, California, Canada, and France.

"I just imagined what my ideal band would be," says Young of the group he formed last June, "and the people in my band are very, very good instrumentalists. A lot of times, people play with their friends. With these people, *some* of them were my friends, but really the main criteria was that they can play, and know how to play in an *ensemble*. And it's easier to play with other people if you're really proficient on your own instrument."

While on tour, the Lionel Young Band will also be promoting its debut CD *On Our Way to Memphis*, which – as the title suggests – was recorded prior to the group's IBC appearance. "We really did it so we could get ready *for* the IBC," says Young, noting that nothing shines light on musical errors better than "a playback of you playing. And it really helped us prepare. I mean, by the time we were done recording the CD, we felt very ready musically.

"And," says the two-time IBC winner, "it seemed to work!"

Asked to perform at the 2008 Mississippi Valley Blues Festival, but unable to attend due to a booking engagement in Italy, Young says, "I'm really grateful for the opportunity to show off this great band at the festival. We wanna touch some of that water – the holy water from the Mississippi." (With a laugh, he says, "That *mud*! We wanna take some of that Mississippi mud with us!") Yet wherever he goes, Young will doubtless bring the spirit of the blues along with him.

"It continues to be very influential," says Young of the blues, "and it's *truthful*, and in its basic form, it's very elemental. It has all the musical components – rhythm, and harmony, and a story, and a message. And it's most definitely a way that people can sort of exorcise their demons, you know? It's not about being sad, but about *talking* about being sad, so you can get over it. The blues really takes the negative energy from something and changes it into something

positive
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