Written by Mike Schulz
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It would be hard to argue that acclaimed trumpet player and bandleader Paul Smoker isn't an ideal local-musician-makes-good choice for the 2011 Mississippi Valley Blues Festival. After all, the 70-year-old was raised in Davenport, performed in numerous Quad Cities nightclubs (starting at the tender age of 14), and earned four degrees from the University of Iowa, including a doctorate in music.

Granted, if you were feeling particularly quarrelsome, you could note that Smoker isn't a blues musician, as he freely admits. But while he and his bandmates – the four-man ensemble the Paul Smoker Notet – will be performing at this year's festival in the annual slot reserved for jazz artists, it's not as though the blues is a genre he's unpracticed in.

"At least two of the pieces that are on the show will be blues," says Smoker of his planned set list. "But I'm coming out and playing my own music, and mostly, it'll be the kind of jazz that I play all over the world."

A founding member of the University of Iowa Jazz Band, the New York resident has spent the past 20 years educating (he currently directs the jazz-studies program at Nazareth College of Rochester), recording jazz CDs (eight of them since 1996), and performing both nationally and internationally, with recent North American bookings including appearances at the Iowa City, Chicago, Vancouver, and Ottawa jazz festivals. Among his many notable reviews, the *Chicago Reader* d
escribed Smoker as "a wonder, offering a style that boasts traditional trumpet virtues – a full but malleable sound along with a powerful, swaggering swing – and an insatiable need for venturesome experimentation."

Yet steeped in the blues or not, Smoker says he's honored to have been asked to return to the

area for this year's festival – "The last time I played Davenport ... wow ... it's probably been at least 15 years ... maybe *longer*, actually ... ." – and believes that the Paul Smoker Notet's jazz leanings won't alienate blues-fest crowds.

"They're incredible musicians," says Smoker of guitarist Steve Salerno, bassist Drew Gress, and drummer Phil Hayes, "so the music is gonna be really good, and hopefully a blues audience will be able to identify with it."

A Muncie, Indiana, native whose family moved to Davenport when he was two, Smoker says that although his mother "played a little piano," his father and siblings weren't music-oriented, and as a young grade-schooler, he had little interest in pursuing music himself. "My mother made me start taking piano lessons when I was six," says Smoker, "and I kind of hated it. In the neighborhood I grew up in, boys didn't play the piano. That's just the way it was."

Smoker, though, says he had a change of heart about music "when I heard Harry James on the radio when I was 10. And that was *it*. I decided that's what I had to do, was play the trumpet."

Within six months of his exposure to James, Smoker's parents bought him his own trumpet, and he spent his first years of practice with the instrument playing along with artists he admired on records and the radio. "When I was a kid," says Smoker, "I listened to Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, Clifford Brown, Clark Terry ... . Conte Candoli I was really into. A swing guy named Harry Edison. They were all players that were active in the '50s, when I was in high school."

Smoker's high-school years, beginning at age 14, were also the period during which he began learning from – and playing with – adult jazz performers in clubs throughout Davenport and Rock Island.

"Nobody ever said anything," says Smoker, with a laugh, when asked how a kid of that age was allowed to perform adults-only venues. "As long as we were on a bandstand, I guess nobody thought to bother us. I mean, once in a while, police would come into the club, raiding it, looking for call girls and dope and stuff. But they never bothered *me*.

"That's really where I learned to play," he continues, "and it's where I learned a lot of the tunes, the standard repertoire that all jazz players play. I don't know if the guys I played with were *prof essionals* – some of them were teachers in the public-school systems in Rock Island and Davenport – and they really didn't know how to *talk* about it too much. But I was playing with guys that were older than me and knew stuff that I *didn't* know, and just listening to them play was an education."

It was an education that the young man chose to continue at the University of Iowa, and Smoker says that his reasoning for pursuing a music-education degree was very simple: "I didn't have to starve."

After a laugh, he adds, "Seriously! You know, I'm this kid in high school, and the counselor's saying, 'Well, what do you want to do for a career?' I said, 'I want to be a jazz musician.' She said, 'You *can't* be a jazz musician. There's no way you can make money doing that.' And the band director told me the same thing. They told me it was too hard for a white guy to make a living in jazz.

"And what did I know?" Smoker continues. "I mean, I didn't know if it was possible or not. And even some of the jazz musicians that had big names went into the studios; people like Conte Candoli and Jack Sheldon and Shelly Manne were playing in movie studios in Hollywood because *they* couldn't make a living as jazz musicians.

"So I figured if I couldn't play it all the time, at least I could *talk* about it, and could kind of spread the gospel of jazz to people by *te aching* it, which was the next best thing."

As Smoker says, even during his university years, "I still played [at night] all the time. *Oh*, yeah. I never stopped." But over an 11-year period, he also earned a bachelor of arts (in 1964), a master of arts (in 1965), a master of fine arts (in 1967), and a doctorate of music arts (in 1974), all with an emphasis on trumpet performance.

He was also, along with students including acclaimed saxophone player David Sanborn, a co-founder of the school's first (official) jazz band, which actually originated *off*-campus because department heads "wouldn't let us play jazz in the music building," says Smoker. "I mean, that was the
devil's
music. It wasn't
real
music.

"So we had to go rent a hotel conference room on Sunday afternoons to rehearse," he continues. "All the guys contributed to the cost of renting the room, and we had to carry the music stands over there, and the whole thing. But we put a concert together at the end of 1965, and the place was packed, and everybody went crazy in the audience, you know? So the head of the music department went to the percussion instructor and said, 'Well, we're not gonna be able to stop this, so we just should take it over.'"

Smoker laughs. "And that's exactly what happened. That's how we got a jazz band. And the thing was: We didn't *care* who started it – we just wanted to play."

From the late '60s to the early '90s, Smoker's professional regimen was composed of both teaching *and* playing. Following his first faculty position at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh in 1968, where he taught trumpet and led brass and jazz ensembles, he went on to instruct music at the University of Iowa, the University of Northern Iowa, and Cedar Rapids' Coe College, teaching at the latter school from 1976 to 1990.

Yet during this period, he was also a member of the Iowa Brass Quintet, led the Paul Smoker Trio, and collaborated with the likes of jazz greats Art Pepper, Frank Rosolino, and Chuck Wayne. Eventually, Smoker found himself so in-demand as a touring musician – particularly at national and international jazz festivals, and at venues on the East Coast – that a change of direction, at last, seemed necessary.

"I was playing in New York a lot," he says. "I was kind of commuting between Iowa and New York about once a month, and sometimes I got my plane ticket paid for but other times I *didn't*, and it just got to be kind of crazy. And while I wanted to get out of teaching full-time, my wife,

Beverly, was teaching part-time at Coe and wanted to get back *into* teaching full-time. So we decided we would start looking for teaching gigs on the East Coast, and whoever got the first gig closest to New York City, that's where we'd go.

"And so she got this job at Nazareth College," Smoker continues, "and we moved to Rochester in 1990. She's still there; she's a full prof. And to this very day, I teach there part-time and I play whenever I can get a gig."

Describing life as a part-time instructor and freelance musician, Smoker says, "I'm really enjoying it. I've got all this time to work on my horn – which is what I wanted to do to *begin* with – and, you know, I get to play my own music. And I'm not forced to make a living from it, so I can really play whatever I want. The last 20 years have been pretty fruitful."

Among his musical endeavors over the past two decades, Smoker has performed with such lauded ensembles as Joint Venture, the Adam Lane Quartet, and the Lou Grassi Po Band, and since 2003, he has been proud to perform with his fellow musicians in the Paul Smoker Notet.

"I thought this was a good chance to get these guys together," Smoker says of his bandmates. "The guys in the current group are people I played with for years in other situations, but never all at the same time. I mean, we're generally scattered all over the place, but once or twice a year, we get together and do some kind of project.

"I'm very lucky in the people I've been allowed to play with. Very, *very* lucky. And I'm glad I'm bringing the guys out from New York and Pennsylvania to do this. I mean, this band can play anything. So, you know," he adds with a laugh, "we can play rhythm and blues when we *want* to."