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When Blues Music Award winner Bobby Rush takes the stage at this year's Mississippi Valley Blues Festival, he'll be doing so in a concert set titled "The Double Rush Revue," so named because, as he says, "I've got one part of the show I'm doing with the band, and the next part I'm gonna strip down – just me and my guitar."

It won't be the first time the 76-year-old blues artist has stripped down for a gig.

In one of the many entertaining stories he shares during our recent phone interview, the Mississippi-based Rush recalls the time ("in 1954 ... or '55 ... it could've been '56 ... ") that he was hired for an open-ended engagement at a Rock Island venue called the Havana Club, a job secured for him by his friend Ike Turner. One of the caveats, though, was that Rush had to find a comedian to open his shows, and he did – and promptly lost him, when the man pulled out of the gig the day before Rush's first performance.

"I thought, 'Oh God, what am I gonna do?'" says Rush. "But I knew I could tell a few jokes. So I went and bought me some overalls, and put an old floppy hat on – like a guy laying on the street, you know? Like a homeless guy. And at the show, I came out with a cigar in my mouth,

and a bottle of wine in my pocket, and a mustache glued on my face, and I called myself The Tramp. And I just told jokes and was funny.

"And *then*," he continues, "I would say, 'Ladies and gentlemen, now it's time for showtime, so let's get together and give Bobby-y-y *Rush* a hand!' And I would step behind the curtain, smack the mustache off, smack the overalls off, 'cause they were just over my dress clothes, unsnap my clown shoes, get my dress shoes on, and come back on-stage in two, three seconds – 10 seconds at most. And then I'd do my thing."

Rush says that for six weeks, his boss (known as Fat Daddy), like Rush's audiences, "didn't know I was the same guy" as his Tramp alter-ego. "But finally Fat Daddy called me and said, 'Listen, man, come to my office.' And I just know I'm fired. I get there and he said, 'You know what? You've been bullshitting me for a long time. I should fire you.' And then he laughed. '*Heh heh heh heh* ... .' And he said, 'But I'm not. Because you're *good* . Just don't let the people know what you're doing. Keep doing a good job, boy.'

"And the next night he brought his family down to see me," says Rush. "And he gave me a *raise* of eight dollars."

It's hard not to see Rush's story as an analogy for his career as a whole: Do what you want to, do what you *need* to, try to stay one step ahead ... and the acclaim and money will follow.

Long before his 2012 Blues Music Award for for *Show You a Good Time*, his 2000 Grammy nomination for *Hoochie Man* , and his engagements at Carnegie Hall, the Kennedy Center, and festivals throughout Europe and Japan, Rush says he was a dutiful preacher's son in Louisiana who came to the blues because "my daddy never told me *not* to.

“At the time when I came up,” says Rush, “this was the *devil’s* music. And it may have *been* the devil’s music. But my daddy never expressed that to me, and he was the guy who taught me how to play the guitar, and the first guy who really taught me to sing the blues. So that was a green light for me to do what I do today.”

At age seven, Rush received his first guitar as a gift from his cousin, and says, “I knew then, at seven years old, exactly what I wanted to be. There wasn’t any guessing. But I didn’t know you could make *money* doing this.” He laughs. “I remember thinking, ‘You mean I can make money for something I would do for *free*?’”

Rush says that his first paid gig, and his first donning of an on-stage disguise, came after his family moved to Arkansas in the late 1940s, when the teenaged Rush – serving as guitarist for a blues ensemble that featured slide-guitar sensation Elmore James – was too young to enter the club his band was hired to play.

“I wanted a mustache,” he says, “but I didn’t have anything to *paint* my mustache with. But we had these big matches. And if you struck the match and let it burn for just a second and blew it out, you’d get smut on the end of it. So that was my marker. I used about four or five matches, lit ’em, let ’em go out, and had smut on my lip.” (He laughs and says, “I guess, deep down inside, everyone knew I was young. But I could play guitar, and these guys probably knew my father, and they probably said, ‘That young boy needs to make a dollar – let him on in.’”)

No disguises were necessary, however, when Rush hit the Chicago blues scene after his family’s 1953 relocation to Illinois – though a few pairs of sensible shoes likely were. Calling it “the best thing to happen to me financially, and the worst thing that happened to my career,” Rush’s schedule found him working a day job and, in the evenings, playing guitar and singing at numerous Chicago nightspots – occasionally, as many as five in one evening.

“Man, I was getting rich,” says Rush. “Because I was making 20, 25 dollars ... sometimes 35 dollars a night. That was more money than *any* guy was making in Chicago. I’d go to one place at 8:30, do two songs with this one band, and then at my break I’d go to another place and do two, three songs with another band ... . I was just backward and forward. That’s how I’d do it, man.”

Yet the relentless travel came with a price. “It hurt my career because I got spoiled making that money,” Rush says, “and so I didn’t travel much. I was only known locally. If you’re cutting records, you gotta travel. But you aren’t making that much money traveling. Even if you’re making $10 a night, that’s only 30 a week working Friday, Saturday, Sunday. And I was making $35 a *night*. Back in the early ’50s? One hundred twenty dollars a week? Come *on*, man!”

It wasn’t until 1970 that he was finally able to enjoy money *and* national recognition, when his self-penned single “Chicken Heads” hit
Billboard
’s R&B chart and became Rush’s first gold record. He remembers the record’s producers being apparently unaware of the song’s rather blatant sexual innuendo, but he laughs when recounting that one of them was even more blind to the single’s flip side.

“He said, ‘We need a B side,’” says Rush. “I said, ‘I got a B side. It’s called “Mary Jane.”’ And he said, ‘Oh yeah, I had a girl named Mary Jane that did me wrong, too!’ So I knew I found me some suckers here, man. They don’t know what I’m talking about when I say ‘Mary Jane.’ I’m talking about reefer. Getting high. And this guy thinks I’m taking about a woman, you know? So I sing, ‘I got high last night / I got high but didn’t go home / I said Mary Jane, Mary Jane / Can’t you see what you’re doin’?’ And he said, ‘Yeah! My woman did me like that, too!’”

The success of “Chicken Heads,” says Rush, “opened the doors” for his career, and eventually led to his moving to Mississippi, where the blues artist still resides.

“After the record came out,” he says, “most of my work was in the South. I was in Chicago, but there wasn’t that much work for me in Chicago anymore, so I was driving to Mississippi, Arkansas, Alabama, Louisiana, Texas ... . I’d leave on a Thursday and come back the next Wednesday, and then leave again ... . It was just too much work.

“So I said, ‘Let me find a place in the South where I could centrally locate.’ And I looked on the map and found Jackson, Mississippi, and that was, to me, the center of the South. That meant I could get musicians out of all these states nearby, and I could get work all around, and that’s what I needed.”

The move, he says, paid off. Not only were Rush’s commutes made easier, but over the next

several decades, he wound up signing with several blues and R&B labels, founded his own label (Deep Rush) in 2003, released some two dozen albums, and was even profiled on the "The Road to Memphis" segment of producer Martin Scorsese's acclaimed PBS documentary series *The Blues*. ("I was sorry I didn't get to meet Scorsese on a personal basis," says Rush. "But I sent him a couple notes thanking him for what he did for my career, and for the movie – he did so much for the people in our industry.")

"I've crossed over with a white audience," says Rush of his current fame. "But I never crossed out the black audience, and that's what I want people to know. I'm a black blues singer who is proud to be who I am, but it's not a 'black' or 'white' issue with me. I'm a musician, I'm a blues singer, I'm a stand-up comedian, and I want to please everybody I can – and the ones I can't, I certainly *try*. They don't have to like me, but if they say, 'Well, *damn*, he's good ... ,' that's good enough for me."

As for the enjoyment he still gets from performing in front of a live crowd, Rush laughs and says, "It's like making love, man. Maybe you can't do it often, but whenever you do it, it's fun."