

Written by Jeff Ignatius
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Selwyn Birchwood's e-mail signature doesn't note that his band took the top prize in the 2013 International Blues Challenge. It doesn't say that he won the Albert King award as the Memphis event's top guitarist. Instead, it says: "Selwyn Birchwood, MBA."

And, yes, that is a Master of Business Administration degree. Suffice to say that Birchwood – also a singer and songwriter – is not your father's (or grandfather's) bluesman.

"That's always been a big part of my life is the scholastic part of it," he said in a recent phone interview. "My family has always pushed me to do schoolwork and do well in school. ... A lot of

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people say that you don't need school because you're playing music. I looked at it the other way: I think if you're playing music, you need it even more, because if, Lord forbid, gigs dried up and you have to get a job in a pinch, it's a lot easier to get a job if you've got a degree or a graduate degree I always saw it as a challenge as well. I always wanted to see if I could do it."

So he got his undergraduate degree in business marketing, and in December earned his MBA. "I was ... kind of seeing how it can apply to my music," he said.

For example, the Wednesday before we talked, he and his band were in Lincoln, Nebraska, with a gig scheduled for two days later. "Instead of laying around the hotel room, I went and printed up about 60 flyers or so and I went [to the club] and shook hands with everybody and just introduced myself," he said. "I ended up sitting in with the band, so people got to hear me. ... I know the necessity of getting your name out there if you want people to show up. ... It's always a lot different when you're face-to-face with somebody. ...

"A lot of times people will look at me and say, 'Man, you got lucky' to do this or that or the other thing. I don't think a lot of it's luck."

While he's undoubtedly put in his work, *some* good fortune has played a role.

Now in his late 20s (but with a singing voice that sounds like it has a couple extra decades of experience), Birchwood started guitar at age 13, playing things from the radio. Eventually, he discovered Jimi Hendrix: "The first time I heard him, it just sounded so bizarre – some of the sounds that he was getting, some of the chords, and everything he was doing. So I was really curious where he got that from, because it just sounded completely different to me. So when I looked at his bio, he just had nothing but the old-school blues guys as his influences," including Buddy Guy.

Birchwood was 17, and it just so happened that Guy was playing a gig that week at the House of Blues in Orlando. "It just floored me," he recalled. "that kind of emotion and feeling and energy he has in his playing. ... That's what I want to do."

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The next happy accident was meeting Sonny Rhodes. A high-school friend, he said, “would always tell me that his neighbor had a blues band. I thought it was just a bunch of drunk guys in a garage on weekends.”

But the friend gave Birchwood a Sonny Rhodes CD, and he was hooked “pretty much from the first note. ... ‘I don’t know who this is, but you have to introduce me to this person.’”

It took six months for that meeting to happen, but it involved Birchwood playing for Rhodes: “I got about halfway through a song ... and he looked over to his bass player and kinda smiled and looked back at me and didn’t even let me finish the song and just asked if I had a passport,” he said. Within a month, Rhodes took him on the road.

Rhodes encouraged Birchwood to focus on college but would gig with him during breaks. After college, he said, they did more-extensive touring.

Birchwood eventually formed his own band, releasing *FL Boy* in 2011. He’s planning on releasing a new CD, titled *Hoodoo Stew*, early next year. The band originally planned to release the album early this year, but it was delayed in part because of discussions with record labels – and, Birchwood admits, because the money he’d set aside to finish it dried up.

In the past year, he said, “it’s just been kind of tough trying to stay busy and stay booked.” Clubs are cutting back on live music, he said, and that’s made it difficult for an emerging band trying to extend its reach beyond its Florida home.

His band’s International Blues Challenge wins, he said, were especially helpful in combating that. “Just by winning, they get you on about seven festivals throughout the country that are more kinda A-list festivals,” he said. “It was really nice to get some recognition.”