

While his guitar gently weeps



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The three-time winner of the Blues Music Award for Guitar Player of the Year performs only a few times a month.

Bluesman Ronnie Earl & the Broadcasters visit The Kate Jan. 14

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OLD SAYBROOK » They say the blues is the language that expresses human suffering better than any other, but it's also about healing, about going on.

That pretty well describes the journey traveled by Ronnie Earl, the peerless blues guitarist who's bringing his chops to The Kate at 8 p.m., Saturday, Jan. 14.

Consider that the man dubbed by blues legend BB King "one of the most serious blues guitarists you can find today" didn't pick up the guitar until he caught a Muddy Waters gig in Boston in the early 1970s. At the time he was a college student studying special education at Boston University.

Something about the music spoke to him. "I was too nervous to talk with Muddy, but he played for six nights and I went every night," said the 63-year-old in an email interview.



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The epiphany led to his discovery of the music of BB King; hours upon hours of practice to "musically catch up with the world," he has said; and two pilgrimages on a Greyhound bus to Chicago, where the Queens native sat at the feet of the

blues masters.

Soon he was backing up Otis Rush and harmonica wizard Big Walter Horton, and collaborating with the likes of Stevie Ray Vaughan, Eric Clapton and, having overcome his initial awe, Muddy Waters.

"I had just started and it seemed like I was placed directly into the belly of the blues," said the man known as Mr. Earl.

Little did he know. Even as his national profile was rising during an eight-year stint as part of the prominent ensemble Roomful of Blues, the demands of regular album releases and a grueling touring schedule left him addicted to alcohol and cocaine.

His music changed when he got clean. "My playing before was OK,

but it didn't have much color," he said. "It was ego driven. I thought I was a 'big thing' but I was really struggling. Once I became sober, I got closer to the sunshine of the spirit."

Evidently so. By 1997, he was sharing the stage of the prestigious Montreux Jazz Festival with BB King—one among over 200 gigs he played worldwide through the early 1990s with the Broadcasters, the band he formed in 1987. He had also issued a string of acclaimed releases.

Still, despite winning a W.C. Handy Award as Best Blues Instrumentalist in 1997 and signing with Verve, a major label, he was souring on the pressure to move units of his albums, leading him to leave Verve, disband the Broadcasters, and take

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Dr. Earl, as he is known, has been called "one of the most serious blues guitarists you can find today."

Earl

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a break from live performance.

Around that time, he suffered his first bout with manic depressive illness.

"It stopped me dead in my tracks," he has said. "It made it difficult for me to work for a long time. But I came through it. I came through it by staying true to myself and the blues."

For Earl, it's no longer about dazzling an audience with his guitar prowess or showmanship. "You don't have to play a lot of notes to get a beautiful feeling," he has said. "But every note has to mean something."

By all indications, they do. In reviewing "Maxwell Street," Earl's 2016 tribute to his friend and former Broadcaster David Maxwell, music critic Jim Hynes described his playing as "a study in economy, yet electrifying enough to make the

hairs on your neck stand on end."

Nor is it about the money; these days, the three-time winner of the Blues Music Award for Guitar Player of the Year performs only a few times a month. Or, for that matter, boosting sales by putting well-known names on his records. For the former associate professor of guitar at the Berklee College of Music, it's more important to include younger musicians, just as the older masters did for him.

"It's all about passing it along and keeping it going," he said.

Neither is it about fancy equipment. "Music comes from the soul," he has said. He has four old Stratocasters, one of which he got at a pawn shop in Houston for \$150, and another named Mahalia; he uses "whichever is clean and the strings aren't rusted, and I buy whatever strings are on sale," he said.

As "Maxwell Street," eloquently demonstrates, not much is lost as a result. The searing heartache and mournful intensity he draws from his guitar are at once an homage to his close friend and bandmate, and another way, as he's put it, "to use music to heal suffering."

Sounds like the language of the blues. Ronnie Earl