



Seth Jacobson / Contributed photo

The legendary band, Roomful of Blues, will swing The Kate this Friday.

BEFORE ELVIS

Zoot suits and packed ballrooms

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Roomful of Blues swings into The Kate, on Friday

By Lisa Reisman

OLD SAYBROOK — It's been said that anyone diagnosed with podomorphobia — the fear of tapping one's feet — should avoid exposure to the string-bending, rip-snorting, horn-heavy grooves of A Roomful of Blues.

Specifically, steer clear of The Kate on Friday, May 11.

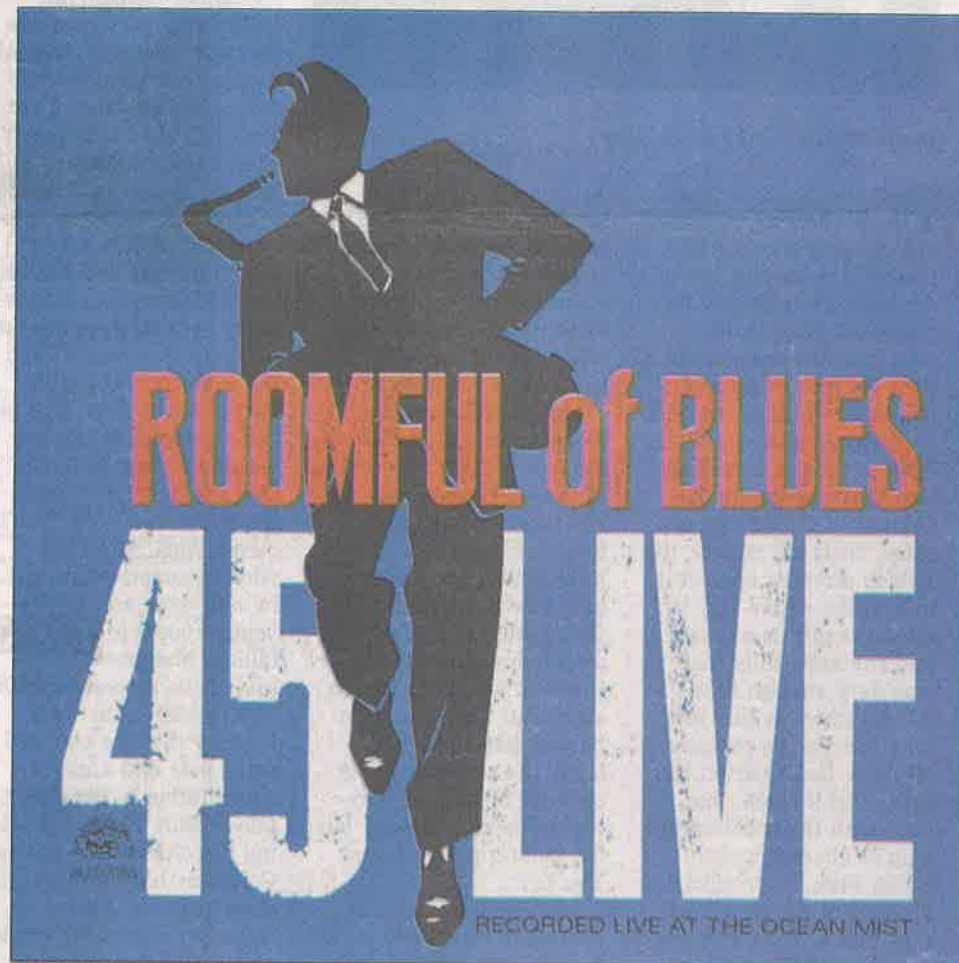
Long before Elvis, there were the swinging horns and jump rhythms of the Big Band era. The aim: to get people moving on dance floors.

That's where A Roomful of Blues comes in.

The Rhode Island-based band got their start in 1967 with guitarist Duke Robillard and pianist Al Copley swiveling from straight Chicago blues to the swing, jump, and boogie-woogie music of the 1940s and 1950s. Soon they added a horn section.

Since then, the group that the legendary Count Basie called "the hottest blues band I've ever heard" has been infusing new life and raucous fun into the famous and obscure 78s and 45s of the horn-powered golden era of post-World War II.

With a sound right out of a time of zoot suits and packed ballrooms on a Saturday night, it's also remained a vital link to musical styles that otherwise are in danger of disappearing from the mod-



Latest album cover

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ern blues scene," as Mark Thompson put it in the Chicago Blues Guide.

"We're never going to be a hair band or a rock band," bandleader and guitarist Chris Vachon said by phone from Wakefield, R.I. "We do blues, Kansas City, New Orleans, Chicago. We do it with a Big Band sound. That hasn't really changed over the years."

What has changed is Roomful's lineup. Since its inception, more than 50 musicians have passed through the eight-to-10-member ensemble, including guitarist Ronnie

Earl, vocalist Lou Ann Barton, and harpist Sugar Ray Norcia.

"It happens," said Vachon, who joined the band in 1990. "Guys have other things they want to do or they don't want to be on the road all the time. We don't really do auditions. Between all of us, we'll know someone we can try out."

Not that it seems to matter. "It just keeps going and going," said Vachon, who's endowed with "a delightfully greasy sense of rhythm," according to Guitar Player. "Guys come and go, and it

never seems to slow down."

And not just in the popularity of their live shows. Over the years, the band has performed coast to coast and abroad, from Russia to Portugal to Lebanon. It's earned five Grammy nominations and seven Blues Music Awards, with the prestigious DownBeat International Critics Poll selecting them twice as Best Blues Band. They've gigged with stars ranging from bluesmen B.B. King, Otis Rush and Stevie Ray Vaughan to rockers Eric Clapton and Carlos Santana.

One reason for that sustained success, perhaps: there's no frontman. Rather, it's a stage full of all-stars that "consistently have one eye on the dance floor and the other on each other, for those inspired moments when they can solo, improvise, and let fly," as music critic Pete Feenstra wrote.

Among them are lead guitarist Vachon and Rich Lataille, a constant since 1970, who "can evoke either the fat-toned, honking sax of the glory days of early rock or the cool elegance of big band swing jazz," according to DownBeat magazine.

There's also Phil Pemberton on vocals, with his multi-octave range and a voice, as the Boston Globe put it, that "can ache with tenderness and rattle the rafters with its power." There's also Rusty Scott, with his driving piano solos and howling organ riffs. And the infectious energy of Carl Gerhard's trumpet.

"We have a show that goes from one song to another without a lot of talking," Vachon said, when asked what to expect on Friday night. "It's all about getting people moving in their seats."

Podomorphobiacs, beware.

A Roomful of Blues appears at the Katharine Hepburn Cultural Arts Center at 8 p.m. on Friday, May 11 at 300 Main St., Old Saybrook. For tickets and information, visit www.katharinehepburntheater.org or call 877-503-1286.

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