

Chuck and Traci Ross

Tampa Bay Blues Festival Promoters Who Never Backtrack from their Dedication to the Experience

By Guy Powell

Since its creation in 1995, the promoters of The Tampa Bay Blues Festival, Chuck and Traci Ross, have turned their passion into one of the pre-eminent blues experiences in the world. Having settled the schedule to always occurring on the second weekend of April, when Florida is having some of its most favorable weather, this 3-day extravaganza features not only the best blues talent available – but also provides culinary excellence within its grounds and hotel excellence just beyond its gates. Let's just say this isn't a 'come hang in the mud and listen to a local bar band while eating lousy, overpriced food truck swill' experience – this is more like a vacation within a vacation, because a trip to Tampa Bay and its surrounding area in April is a worthwhile adventure unto itself. Throw in The Tampa Bay Blues Festival and I can't find enough superlatives to pile on.

And as if putting on an internationally-acclaimed blues fest isn't enough, Chuck also sings and plays harmonica in a band he co-founded in 1980 – The Backtrack Blues Band – who many readers may recognize from their coverage within this magazine's pages and inclusion on our CD samplers (one year even winning 'Song of the Year').

Knowing that there is strength in numbers, Chuck is happy to share responsibilities with a partner. With his band it is his North Carolina college buddy and Backtrack co-founder, Little Johnny Walter, who remains a constant to this day ("We've been playing original blues music together for 45 years! We're probably the longest continuously running blues band in the state."). With his original dive into music promotion, it was the opening of a nightclub, The Ringside Café, with a partner who handled the food side of things and once the Ringside was KO'd, Chuck founded The Tampa Bay Blues Festival. Not long after the festival's creation, yet another partnership was forged when Chuck married Traci, who jumped aboard with fresh ideas and a helping hand – making this a husband-and-wife collaboration ever since.

As I was soon to find out, Traci is not looking for the spotlight, happy to play a supporting yet integral role 'behind the scenes' – seeing to it that all is well on the talent side of the operation. Says Chuck, "She has become the 'talent rep' – artist hospitality, artist relations, ensuring that the artists are well taken care of before, during and after their time at the festival. We pride ourselves on pampering the musicians – because, as a touring musician myself, I know how tiring it can be and how much you miss the comforts of home – like good food. So, ensuring the artist's comfort is important and Traci excels in that responsibility."

Traci Ross (TR): "We consider artist hospitality to be very important. When musicians arrive in Vinoy Waterfront Park, we want them to feel like they've arrived in a tropical paradise. All bands have luxury RVs, with lots of food options, which include gourmet sandwiches, home-baked desserts, Florida-style BBQ and hot, catered dinners with filets, salmon, fresh vegetables, salads and bread. Then there's always plenty of good wine, beer, and liquor options as well. We try to

create a 5-star dining experience in the beautiful park. And we are especially grateful when our musician friends appreciate the efforts and tell everyone how wonderfully they were treated!"

I caught up with Chuck and Traci one evening as they were recuperating from their Jazz Fest attendance – which saw Traci nursing a bit of a bug, causing her to defer most of the talking to Chuck as she tended to her health (let's face it – I've been known to make the healthy feel ill, so she only joined in sporadically when she felt well enough to speak).

Chuck was born in Ithaca, NY, but when his family moved to North Carolina they traded those generational New York roots and accents for the more moderate weather and drawls of the southeast. Attending UNC, Chuck became a lawyer – specializing in mediation, which provided a diverse experience from which to develop an understanding of many different aspects of people's lives – from family matters to real estate and business. If two people have an issue worthy of a lawsuit, there is a judge who may order that the parties try a mediation lawyer first, to save themselves time and expense while alleviating the courts of unnecessary caseloads.

A child of rock and roll, Chuck early on realized it was the bluesier side of rock that attracted him, like Grateful Dead, Creedence and Canned Heat. At about 18 he heard 'Bummer Road' by Sonny Boy Williamson and that's where the 'real' blues attached itself to Chuck's soul: "I had never heard harmonica played like that before," says Chuck – and the rest is history! Soon he had accumulated every Chess and Vanguard record he could lay his hands on. "By 19 I was almost exclusively listening to blues – and fortunately, throughout my career I've had the honor of seeing, playing with or sharing the bill with so many of my blues heroes. The one person I regret never seeing live was Little Walter. He is truly my musical hero."

Continues Chuck: "Before I heard Sonny Boy, I wasn't *playing* harmonica - I was *playing with it*! Around North Carolina I was in bands playing progressive country-type of music. When I was ready to play blues, I couldn't really find people into it – but when Little Johnny Walter moved from Chapel Hill to Florida – that's when Backtrack was formed."

What caused you to move to Florida?

Chuck Ross (CR): "My parents pushed me out of the nest after college – and I wanted nice weather, so Florida was a natural landing spot for me. Tampa/St. Petersburg is one of the most beautiful areas to live – and I came to find that musically, it was very supportive of the blues! Both my law career and music thrived here."

A law career and a band, each unto themselves would be enough for most people...

CR: "I had a career, but I needed an outlet to express myself musically. I wanted to write music, not just cover others. We do a lot of original music and I write most of the songs. Then I opened a nightclub in St. Petersburg called The Ringside Café, where I performed a lot – but I also booked a lot of acts as well – folks like Billy Preston, Delbert McClinton, Gatemouth Brown, Johnny 'Clyde' Copeland, Dave Mason... And similar to how I book the festival – I book bands I like and fortunately my taste translates well to what people will come to see in a live setting."

I heard Ringside Café had really good food – are you a cook?

CR: “No, I had a partner, Linda Bernard, who was the chef – she handled the food, and I handled the music. Having a club that has both good music and good food isn’t that common. I eventually sold the business – the nightclub business is a 24/7 commitment, and between Backtrack and my law practice, it was time to remove myself from it. The rose was off the bloom after so many years. – I needed to step away from that weight on my shoulders.”

Running a festival once a year and running a music club all year long requires a similar skillset.

CR: “Absolutely. Logistics is a big factor – the availability of the artists - who will be where and when – is a major factor. As a matter of fact, we just ended 2025’s festival and I’ve basically already booked next year’s lineup.”

I imagine at this point, with the great reputation you have built, the festival’s notoriety causes bands to plan their tours around Tampa, so they know they’ll be in your area.

CR: “It’s not just the bands – we like to have the audience know when to plan to be here – we have many international and non-Floridian attendees – so the sooner they know about next year’s festival, that allows for better travel and accommodation planning on their part. We strive to bring in the best food – a variety of cuisines across maybe 40 different food vendors – each as good as the next! When you’re here for 3 days you can eat at a different vendor for every meal and never regret your choice. We have so many vendors vying for spots with us that I must turn many down. So, we have the luxury of competition – I can choose from the best of the best.”

I’m embarrassed to say I’ve never attended your festival – but of course am hyper-aware of it because of Junior and Sugar’s involvement. And I’ve heard from others how great the sound is.

CR: “There is more to a festival than the location and the lineup - we spare no expense with the PA and lighting – some festivals will cut corners and that doesn’t serve the audience or the bands well. We really missed Junior this year – what a special man, a great character who advocated for the blues and was very supportive of both the festival and my band.”

I’ve also heard wonderful things about your VIP experience.

CR: “That was one of the first things Traci brought up. Corporate sponsorship died out and we needed to find a way to pay the bills, so the VIP program was a creative way to bring in revenue while providing an upgrade for those guests who choose to participate.”

How did you meet Traci?

CR: “I was having lunch at my Ringside Café one day and in walked two of the most beautiful women I’d ever seen. I don’t know what came over me, but I uncharacteristically went over and introduced myself – the two women were Traci and her younger sister, Jennifer. It was like love at first sight for me – and I never could forget her. We did date a little, but she always was in relationships and ultimately got married – and I figured I missed my chance. Then at the 1997 Tampa Bay Blues Festival she saw me and told me she was now single – and she invited me to the opera - and even though that is not really my music of choice, I mean I’m a blues guy, I wasn’t going to lose her again! One of the first things that made me know she was special is that Traci loves the same type of music as I. Her first time at my place I had on a Lucky Peterson

record – as soon as she walked in, she said, ‘Lucky Peterson, I have that record.’ I knew she was the woman of my dreams!”

Where’d you grow up, Traci?

TR: “I was born in Los Angeles. I loved the area and spending time at our uncle’s ranch and vineyard in Simi Valley. That’s where I learned to care for horses and ride. My Dad had a job opportunity with a Florida bank, so we moved to St. Petersburg for my high school years. I grew up around the ocean, so the fabulous beaches of St Petersburg were a comfort to me. Now Chuck and I also spend time in the Caribbean, on St. John, US Virgin Islands.”

With Backtrack I see the latest release is on Mike Zito’s Gulf Coast Records.

CR: “Yes – I think we’ll stick with that label for future recordings. Mike and I are pretty good friends. I haven’t met his partner Guy Hale as yet, but if he’s with Mike he must be a good guy.”

Give me the band lineup.

CR: “My partner in crime for all these years on rhythm guitar is Little Johnny Walter, on lead guitar and vocals is Kid Royal, a really authentic Texas-style bluesman, me as my alter ego Sonny Charles on harmonica and vocals, John Bencomo on drums and a former New Yorker on bass, Steve Vitale. A talented group of guys, we get along great with each other both on and off the stage – and that’s always an important factor for a band to have longevity – especially touring bands.”

Will Traci hit the road with you?

CR: “If it’s a gig that affords us an opportunity to have fun outside of the gig itself, Traci may come along. But if it’s just traveling to a gig, playing and heading back or straight to another gig – she’ll hold down the fort at home. Travel is often the least fun aspect of the music business.”

Chuck, Traci – is there anything you’d like to say in closing?

TR: “We’re always looking forward to the next year, and to working with our dedicated hospitality and production staff. It’s a big TBBF blues family reunion which we hope will continue for years to come!”

CR: “Guy, 2026 will be our 30th Anniversary. You haven’t attended this festival yet, so I encourage you to book early and make it down for this one! People who have already attended know what a special experience Tampa Bay Blues Festival is and will continue to come year after year for the music, food and overall vibe – a more beautiful backdrop for a festival may not exist anywhere in the world, and here we have it within an easy trip from anywhere in the U.S. – with many travelling to us from around the globe. People keep coming back without much prompting from us! Well, they don’t need prompting as long as we continue to deliver on our end – and next year will be no different; while I’m still awaiting a few confirmations, a few I can mention are Taj Mahal and The Phantom Blues Band, Kenny Wayne Shepherd, Jimmy Vaughan, Los Lobos, Toronzo Cannon, GA20 with Charlie Musselwhite, Samantha Fish, Tommy Castro, Tab Benoit, Nikki Hill, Darrell Nulisch, Jackie Venson... Our festival is a little more user friendly than

most – and the VIP experience is really great for folks who want the extra creature comforts. We look forward to seeing you all April 10-12, 2026, in beautiful Tampa/St. Pete, Florida!”

TampaBayBluesFest.com

BacktrackBluesBand.com