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Article published May 2, 2008

Liz Melendez touches fans with her earthy blues

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To some people, such an encounter might seem like an example of oddball behavior that tends to go hand-in-hand with too much beer.

To blues woman Liz Melendez, however, it's a poignant moment out of hundreds she's had over the years, and it happened in downtown Maryville at Brackins Blues Bar. It was a moment of communication between artist and fan, an unspoken exchange of sounds that touch the soul.

"There was this biker couple, and they came in with their do-rags and their leathers on, and they were just so into the music," Melendez recalled to The Daily Times this week. "They were dancing all night long and just really loving life. After the show, she came up to me and said, 'I've been listening to you all night long, and it's great and I think you rock. I want you to come outside and check something out.'

"So I went outside with her, and she went up to this beautiful, \$40,000 Harley, and she said, 'Now, I want you to hear what I love.' And she was just so excited, because she had been listening to me share my music, and here she was wanting to share something of her life, something that spoke to her heart and pleased her. And she got on and started it up, and man -- it was a beautiful-sounding Harley, too."

As long as she's been in the business, you'd think a performer like Melendez would roll her eyes and adopt a cynical view of such overt displays of enthusiasm. But it speaks to her own artistic soul, her connection to the music she loves and the people who love to hear her make it, that she's still able to be touched by such a display.

Born and raised in New Mexico, Melendez moved to Atlanta in the late 1990s, where she honed her prowess as a guitarist, vocalist, songwriter and performer. She's compared to a lot of ace axe-slingers, but one name that continually pops up is that of the late Stevie Ray Vaughan -- so much so that every couple of months, she puts on a full Stevie Ray tribute show.

She's performed with everyone from E.G. Kight to Chris Duarte, and she has two albums to her name -- 2001's "Mercy," and the darker-themed "Sweet Southern Soul," released a few years later. That record was influenced by the death of her father -- one of her biggest supporters and the man who taught her to play guitar -- as well as the globe-changing events of Sept. 11.

Growing up, she relied heavily on her father's support and wisdom -- he started her out learning rock and blues standards, assuring her that it would one day make sense. It did when she discovered the blues-based rock of Zeppelin and Sabbath, the Latin rock of Santana and the music of Stevie Ray Vaughan, whose Southern-soaked blues would change everything for her.

His death hit her hard, but her next album -- which she's writing at a feverish pace to complete -- is leaning in the other direction, she said.

"I feel like a lot of really good things are happening, and I feel really positive," she said. "I feel like my

message on the next record is going to come more from that point. I feel better and healthier in so many ways, and I hope this album will reflect that. The strength of my playing is better than it's ever been, and I have a clarity, a focus, that's been a divine gift for me, and I'm excited to see what comes of that."

She's also signed a development deal with King Mojo Records, which picked up and distributed "SDLqSweet Southern Soul" and is urging her to complete a new album. Having that kind of backing and demand, she said, keeps her creative fires burning.

"It'll still have that '70s blues-rock feel and that Southern rock feel, but it'll probably be a little more Latin-influenced than the last one," she said of her next effort. "That's been kind of exciting."

In the meantime, she's been touring non-stop and working with other artists like Big Shanty, a label mate who blends hip-hop, rock and blues together and has drawn in guests like Melendez and Col. Bruce Hampton from the Aquarium Rescue Unit.

It's always good, though, to come back to familiar territory like Brackins, where the unexpected little exchanges between artist and fan keep her love of music as passionate as ever.

"Brackins is exactly the kind of place I like to play -- it's a nice mix of people, and they're there for the music," she said. "The bar is all about music, and that's really kind of cool for those of us who like people to come out and hear what we do."
