

## Seattle

# Isaac Scott, Big Time Blues Man

BY BRUCE RANSOM

A fixture on the Seattle blues scene since the mid-1970s, Isaac Scott died 12 years ago on November 1, 2001. With searing guitar work reminiscent of his mentor, Albert Collins, Isaac cut a wide musical swath on stage, even after forced into a wheelchair. Listed in the Guinness Who's Who of Blues, Isaac packed virtually every club he played.

Noted for his two hour-plus sets, an Isaac song might stretch to 30 or 45 minutes. Sometimes he'd be 10 minutes into a song before he'd sing the first verse. But with a deft mastery of dynamics, he'd weave an enticing, riveting path. While Isaac was known to wear out backup musicians—especially drummers—few in the audience exited mid-song.

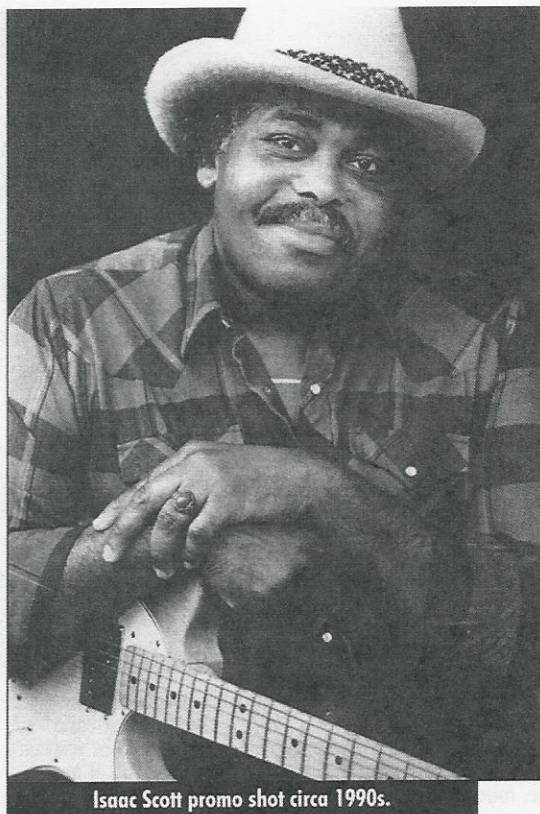
I've heard Isaac's playing described as Hendrix influenced. While there were hints of Hendrix (did you ever hear him play "Voodoo Child"?), the overriding impressions were of Albert Collins. Isaac may have relied more on a drawn out sustain, but Albert's hard, biting attack predominated.

In the music business for nearly 40 years, Isaac has five recordings of his own to his credit, as well as appearances on two other compilations, plus a handful of bootlegs I've run across. He was comfortable putting his blues stamp onto just about anything from the Beatles "Help" to the Ventures "Walk Don't Run."

The Scott family moved to the West Coast in 1943, settling in Portland, Oregon in housing provided by father Isaac Scott Jr.'s employer, the Southern Pacific Railroad. Though often cited as born in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, Isaac Scott III was actually born across the Columbia River from Portland in Vancouver, Washington on June 11, 1945. When his dad's co-workers asked young Isaac what he wanted to be when he grew up, he replied, "A blues man!" While still a young boy, his mother took him back to Arkansas to visit relatives, where Isaac got his first exposure to juke joints and southern music.

His mother, Samella, had an extensive record collection of mostly 78's which she and Isaac would listen to for long hours. Isaac's father was also a preacher, and Isaac's first musical influences were listening to, and then singing with, the choir in his father's church. There Isaac was also exposed to traveling gospel groups, including the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi when he was 10 years old.

Isaac's mother bought him his first guitar



Isaac Scott promo shot circa 1990s.

Photo courtesy of Isaac Scott

when he was nine, a cheap secondhand Hawaiian thing Isaac said she paid \$3 for, and Isaac started learning songs by ear. His first real guitar was a 1958 Silvertone ordered from Sears. Isaac traded and changed guitars at a rapid pace thereafter.

But his life wasn't all music and church. Isaac's mother was sick when he was young, and he stayed home from school a lot to take care of her. She died of a heart attack when Isaac was 11.

At 18 Isaac was working as a cook in a Portland restaurant. He bought a gun when he started working the swing shift. An older bully who'd just gotten out of prison frequented the restaurant. He would pick on people, and one night he beat up Isaac. Isaac ran down to his locker where his gun was, and the guy followed and lunged for him. Isaac said he shot him six times. The guy lived but was paralyzed. It was ruled self-defense, but the incident affected Isaac deeply.

One of Isaac's early band mates was Norman Sylvester, who still plays in the Portland area. It was at Portland's Cotton Club that he and Isaac first heard the greats: B.B. King, James Cotton, Ike & Tina Turner, Bobby Blue Bland, James Brown, and others. In 1965 Isaac joined a traveling evangelist's gospel group. The band members were housed and fed by congregations wherever they went, had very few expenses, and since the guy would pass the hat three times during the service they were all paid well. But after the sermon the evangelist would frequently wind up taking a woman with him to his room. Isaac couldn't reconcile the man's actions with his preaching, so he eventually quit.

Soon after Isaac was asked to join the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi when they lost their guitar player while in Portland. Isaac toured the country with the Blind Boys, and claimed that they were not saints, but knew how to party and curse. They also knew exactly how far to step in each direction on stage, executing intricate coordinated dance movements and sleight of hand.

Isaac moved to Seattle in the mid-1970's and joined the Tom McFarland Band, first as a piano player, but soon switching to guitar. Isaac met the "Master of the Telecaster" Albert Collins in 1969 at the Gold Bar Rock Festival near Monroe, Washington. Ike and Tina Turner, Canned Heat, and Guitar Shorty also played. But Isaac immediately imprinted on Albert's biting attack and unusual tuning. He asked Albert about his tuning, the two quickly became good friends, and Isaac soon decided to embrace the blues full time. In the late 70's Isaac would play after hours clubs in Pioneer Square, frequently joined by Albert, Robert Cray, and other touring musicians passing through town.

Albert Collins taught Isaac his minor tuning, where the 4th and 5th (D and A) strings are tuned up one step (to E and B). Albert then tuned the guitar up an additional half step, from Em to Fm. Isaac didn't always use Albert's minor tuning, but liked to give it a go every once in a while. But Isaac learned Albert's method of using his fingers to pick and pull and pop the strings, and was forever pick-less thereafter. Isaac's playing soon became grounded in this hard, Collins-like attack. I've seen him break three strings in a set. He'd just keep playing on the strings that were left, the audience rarely detecting any difference.

Collins was a character. "Albert always carried a big folding knife, and he knew how to use it," Isaac would tell me, following up with examples to back it up. "Pretty handy with a tire iron, too."

Isaac's LPs and CDs have been well received in Europe. I was in a used record store in Amsterdam a few years back and saw more of them than I see in Seattle. During his early European tours Albert noticed Isaac's popularity and tried to talk him into touring with him over there. Albert also invited Isaac to play on his "Ice Pickin'" album, but arrangements didn't work out for either of those opportunities.

Isaac was a fixture in Seattle's Pioneer Square. From the late 1970s into the 1990s he owned the Square. Few who heard him forgot the show. He lent a much needed credibility to the Seattle blues scene that spawned innumerable good, mostly white, blues musicians and bands.

I've never seen anyone play as many different guitars as Isaac did. He would change guitars constantly. They weren't just stored in the back room; they were gone, sold or traded, never to return. Over the years that I knew him, on average Isaac probably had a different guitar every month. He was always trading guitars, or changing pickups or necks until the original configuration was unrecognizable. Seattle was peppered with ex-Isaac Scott guitars. I've got three of them, all different, and all hard to play for anyone but him.

For example, in the 1970's Isaac bought a Telecaster with humbuckers from J.B. Hutto. J.B. sold it to him cheap because it had a bad neck. Isaac fixed it and played it at the San Francisco Blues Festival in 1978, where Louisiana Red heard it and begged Isaac to sell it to him. He traded Isaac a Les Paul and cash for it.

The "Isaac sound" was distinctive. Not realizing that the sound was more Isaac's than the guitar's, there was always a market for his guitars. More than anybody I've known, Isaac could get a good sound out of just about anything. He never played expensive guitars—he never had the money. I don't think I ever saw him play one that cost more than a few hundred dollars, and some of the guitars he played were just junk. Like the 1959 Silvertone (Danelectro) he had for about a



Isaac Scott at the 2001 Vancouver Wine and Jazz Festival

Photo/John Lunderback

week, or the short scale Strat copy guitar that he played for awhile. He looked like a giant with the 3/4 size Strat resting on his chest.

The list of musicians Isaac played with reads like a who's who of the blues, gospel, country and a few other forms. He's traded licks with the likes of Roy Clark and Freddie King, Bo Diddley and Chet Atkins. While living in San Francisco for a time he was in Charlie Musselwhite's band, and played with L.V. Parr after L.V. left Albert King's band and moved to Seattle.

Isaac lamented to me several times how he feared that the blues was dying out. He didn't have that "the blues will live forever" outlook at all. He was most disappointed that there were very few young blacks embracing the blues.

"It's their music, their heritage," he'd say. While there were innumerable white blues wannabes picking it up, there were very few young blacks interested in the blues. Isaac even offered blues guitar workshops in the hopes that blacks would catch on. But most of his students were white, and very few of them stuck with it.

Of course Isaac was glad that whites liked the blues. Like many other black players Isaac recognized the irony that if it weren't for white people embracing the blues, it would have all but died out long before. But few whites could claim as close a cultural tie to the blues as blacks could.

"The blues is an integral part of black culture," he told me.

Isaac frowned and I could tell he was worried that I'd take what he had said the wrong way. Searching for an explanation that would register with this middle class white guy sitting in his living room, he sighed and patiently explained it to me this way.

"Lookit .....", he said, "It's as if I claimed polka music was part of my cultural heritage. I might like polka music; I might even play polka music good. But I could never claim polka music as a part of my heritage!" At times, in his own way, Isaac could be damned eloquent.

As the complications from diabetes took their toll, Isaac's deteriorating health dealt him a series of setbacks. Diagnosed in 1987 with the disease that his father had also had, in 1994 Isaac had the toes on his right foot amputated. In July 1996 half of Isaac's right foot went, and in 1997 they removed his left foot. Isaac still hobbled around,

but then in 1998 his right leg was amputated below the knee. The right leg was a tough one. Isaac needed a wheelchair to get around after that. To get to gigs band members would carry him and the wheelchair down the front steps of his house. But he kept a regular schedule of gigs, and continued to play to overflowing crowds.

Isaac's job was always the blues, full time. He never had a day gig when I knew him. But he was always near-destitute. When his girl friend lost her job in the late-1990s they lost the house. Isaac's band and friends pitched in and paid for several months in a motel on Aurora Ave. N., or he and his wheelchair would have been out on the street.

Isaac's studio recordings were great, but for my money, Isaac was at his best live in front of a crowd. His three songs on "Live at the Roadhouse" give you a taste, but see if you can find a bootleg of one of his later live recordings from a club in Pioneer Square. There's a few of them floating around, and I don't think he'd mind.

Isaac had an uncanny—almost *idiot savant*—ability to play the blues. Mark Dalton, Isaac's long time friend and bass player said, "Isaac stands out for his absolute commitment to the (blues), and his willingness to illuminate the darkest corners of the soul for the enlightenment of us all."

At Isaac's funeral his friend Monte Price told the story of the first time he took his young son to hear Isaac play. The boy watched intently, trying to resolve what he was hearing. When Isaac stopped, the son asked his dad "How does he do that? Is it magic?" Monte hesitated a moment, then said the only thing that made sense.

"Yes, son, that is magic."

In 1991 Isaac Scott was inducted into the Washington Blues Society's Hall of Fame, and in 2000 received their Lifetime Achievement Award.

I was fortunate to play with Isaac the last few years of his life. It was the second-most fun I ever had. Norm Bellas, Phil Bowden, Charlene Grant and I played Isaac's last gig in 2001 at the Vancouver Wine and Jazz Festival. Two months later I got a call from Phil that Isaac was back in the hospital. At first I figured it was just another routine stay; he'd had lots of them before. But Phil told me no, I'd better hurry. I drove to the hospital just in time to say goodbye, Isaac unconscious and on life support, before he died a few hours later. It was an honor to have known the guy.

Isaac was at times a force to be reckoned with but with his friends he was a funny guy. On his last CD, *Posthumous Blues Live*, listen to him tell stories of Albert Collins and others back in the day.

**Isaac's discography includes the following:**

- Isaac Scott Blues Band*  
(Red Lightnin Records, RL 0023, 1978)
- Big Time Blues Man*  
(First American Records, MIM 9054, 1982)
- High Class Woman*  
(Shakira Productions, 1997)
- Listen to the Blues*  
(Shakira Productions, 2000)
- Posthumous Blues Live*  
(Hotel Motel Records, 2002)

**Isaac also appears on two compilations:**

- San Francisco Blues Festival 1978*,  
(Solid Smoke, LP 1978)
- Live at the Jolly Roger Road House*,  
(Criminal Records, CR-CD02, LP 1985)