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Don't Call Him No Ambulance

By Avery Gregurich

S elwyn Birchwood's hands are full.

Right now, minutes before he takes the stage at Lefty's, it's not his fever red Gibson guitar or even a microphone he's holding, but rather a Florida variation of bluesman John Lee Hooker's song, "One Bourbon, One Scotch, One Beer": a coffee mug of Corona, a tumbler of dark liquor, and a bottle of water.

This sequence of drinks has surely become a staple of Birchwood's daily routine: the first two to take the stage and produce the blues, and the last to drive the van on afterwards. Over the last few months, the van hasn't stayed idling for long.

"We've been traveling like crazy," he says from the road prior to the show. "We've been gone for three weeks, home for four days. Gone for two weeks, home for three days. Been like that since April," he says.

"We've been in 11 countries since April," he adds, after counting.

By June of 2014, *Don't Call No Ambulance* (Alligator) was released. The record, Selwyn's third album overall and first for a major label, earned a Blues Music Award for "Best New Artist Album" this year, and the quartet have been on the road in support of it ever since.

Hence the Europe shows, playing for crowds that he says respond to the blues a little differently.

"It's a little bit different because of the language barrier," he says. "They're really very attentive and a little quieter just because the only way you can communicate is musically. They're really listening to what you're doing."

Tonight, in Des Moines, Iowa, he plays for over three hours. Selwyn and his band tear through Birchwood's original songs with a few homages to the lineage of the blues. There's a Howlin' Wolf vocal impression, and Elmore James and Muddy Waters guitar imitations. But Selwyn Birchwood's music is all his own in a genre based upon derivatives, a consistently fresh mix of swamp stompers to all-out rockers in a style best categorized as Florida Blues.

Like all great bluesmen, he's a showman. And he's young, just 30 years old, a tenderfoot in blues years. At 6'3 with a several inch afro, his physical frame demands attention. At one point, Selwyn wanders off stage and into the crowd barefoot, soloing all the while. He steps behind the bar and he only stops playing when the bartender pours him a particularly deep shot.

In moments such as this, it's easy to forget that the business of the blues is no pleasure cruise – luckily Selwyn is a master. Actually though: Selwyn has a MBA from the University of Tampa. He earned the degree in his off months from touring with blues legend Sonny Rhodes, a man historically slighted by the music business.

"I did all that work so I could have that signature," he jokes. "But it's the music business, so if you aren't into it, then someone else can take advantage of you and it's not a good thing. History can show examples of that."

Whatever it is that draws Selwyn to blues music is the same thing that draws his bandmates to him. They are all older; two could easily be his father. But on stage, they show little sign of years of playing and touring. He's quick to point to them as his biggest educators and mentors.

"I play with a bunch of musicians who really know their stuff, and I learn from them every day. I bother them all the time," he says. "It's different with my generation growing up, the type of music that was around compared to their generation's. I just happened to latch on to the music of their generation and identify with that a lot more, so I'm trying to be fed as much music as I can and just immerse myself in it."

When asked if he teaches them anything about his generation's music, he laughs.

"I don't know if they want to learn anything about the nineties."