

# Joanna Connor cOmes home



Playing whatever the funk she wants

By (het Williamson

**Q**ickThink of the most famous musician to come out of Worcester in the last 50 years. You could name a big band full of jazz cats such as Jaki Byard, Don Fagerquist and Barbara Carroll. Off the top of your head, you'd most likely name Duke Levine. But he is largely a player with only regional following.

You could name a deep bench full of rock 'n' rollers such as those who supported Joe Cocker — namely, Cliff Goodwin, Mitch Chakour and John Riley.

Let's see ... Ken Pino spent six years with Johnny Copeland. Marc Barnicle, Craig McIntyre and Michael O'Connell are touring with Shirley Lewis.

Remember Orpheus? And Jamie Brockett ...

What about Joanna Connor? She grew up in Worcester. Who is she? She is a blues diva who, in storybook fashion, caught a Greyhound to Chicago — to the blues mecca of the universe — to study with the masters. She did. That was almost a decade ago. Since then she has toured the world, has three albums under her own name with a fourth one on the way. Her latest, in fact, is *Living on the Road*. She's even entered in the recent edition of the *Big Book of Blues*, a biographical encyclopedia published by Penguin Books: "Joanna Connor is a singer and guitarist known for her searing slide work. Like Rory Block, Sue Foley and Bonnie Raitt, Connor has given contemporary blues guitar a refreshing female slant."

A fiery young player who calls herself Jalapeno Mama, Connor has become a guitar god on the blues-rock circuit.

"Goddess. Guitar goddess," she laughed, correcting my sexist remark. "My playing is getting better. You know, it is just from doing it so much and listening. It's from playing with good musicians."

"You know, I've been messing around for a while now," Connor said, speaking by phone from her home in Evanston, Ill., just outside of Chicago. "It has been getting a lot of notice, especially the slide playing. That's why we did the live album too. We really featured the guitar playing. It is more a performance album rather than a song album per se."

It's always a homecoming of sorts when she returns to Worcester. The Joanna Connor Band, featuring guitarist Tony Palmer, bassist Stan Mixon and drummer Larry Ortega play Saturday, Nov. 19, at Gilrein's, 802 Main St.

Connor was born in Brooklyn on Aug. 31, 1962. Her family moved to Worcester when she was 4. Her mother listened to blues. The records of Billie Holiday, Taj Mahal and Jimi Hendrix were played around the house and young Joanna was born hearing the music. She started playing guitar at the age of 7. Many remember her gigging around town with Al Arsenault and Ronnie Sloan while still in her teens. She could also be heard spinning discs at

radio station WCUW, 91.3 FM, as host for the show *Blues Hit Bigtown*.

Connor turned professional at the age of 19, forming the Pino/Connor band with guitarist Ken Pino. A band that once featured bass ace Wolf Ginandes and drummer Kennard Johnson, who recorded extensively with James Cotton. The band was a mainstay at Ralph's and Gilrein's and worked all over New England. In

That same year, while organizing the first edition of her own band, Connor was hired by saxophonist A.C. Reed, who took Connor out on tour. Her reputation blossomed still further when she smoked at a benefit concert for blues queen Koko Taylor.

Two years later Connor officially arrived with the Blind Pig release of her debut, *Believe It*. The album was awarded



1983, Connor was named "Best R&B Vocalist of the Year" in the *Worcester Magazine* readers poll. The following year she left for Chicago.

Almost immediately Connor got swept up in the Windy City's active blues scene. She got to jam with musicians she had idolized all her life—Buddy Guy, Otis Rush and James Cotton. Her first gig was with the late great slide guitarist Johnny Littlejohn. In 1985 she joined Dion Payton and his popular 43rd St. Band. The band is featured on the Alligator compilation *New Bluebloods*, and critics hailed her performance at the 1987 Chicago Blues Festival.

critical acclaim internationally. Today the Joanna Connor Band is a fixture on the blues circuit around the world.

"This year was probably our busiest year ever," Connor said. "We were on the road from like January to October just nonstop. We went to Europe three times in that period. My son traveled with us all summer. He's 7. He loved it. He plays drums and he played with us every night"

Connor's second album *Fight* was smacked with a sophomore jinx. Critics wavered. And the cool reception left her cold.

"I think the record was too commercial," she admitted. "The songs that I

wrote actually had a lot of soul and rock and funk and some people don't like that. It was a crossover for blues audiences. I think that's what it was. Blind Pig is primarily a label that targets a pretty heavy blues audience.

"I think it slowed my writing up a bit. We did get some good reviews from *Billboard*. *Playboy* gave us a great review. And *Guitar World*. So we had some really good reviews. But it was either people loved the record or they hated it. There was no in between. It was hard for me because I wrote so much of it. And it was really a more personal record.

"I have to please myself first. I can't — I'm not going to do an album and just play blues because that's what is expected of me. I have to be honest with myself. I don't want to ever go into a studio and play it safe for people who are more traditional-minded than myself."

*Fight* was produced by Jim Gaines, a Grammy Award winner with such artists as Stevie Ray Vaughan, Santana and Steve Miller. He was so impressed by Joanna's talent that he worked on her latest and is producing her fourth. The new release *Living on the Road* was recorded live in 1993 from a performance at the Franz Club in Berlin. Her vocal heroes — Etta James, Ann Peebles and Aretha Franklin — shout out and her guitar heroes — Luther Allison, Buddy Guy and Jeff Beck — ring out. Especially the gods and goddesses: Bonnie Raitt, Ry Cooder, Lowell George and Johnny Winter. All the ghosts show up.

"The live album is all new stuff, nothing from other albums," Connor said. "I didn't feel like my career was old enough to do something like that. Basically, some of the songs we had been doing, and some of the songs we learned for the record."

The album features three originals and seven covers, ranging from roadhouse rockers like Delbert McClinton's "My Baby's Loving" and Johnny Copeland's "Boogie Woogie Nighthawk" to songs from the woman's perspective such as "Good Woman Gone Bad," "Wildfire Woman" and her own "Jalapeno Mama." She also sings her heart out on "At the Dark End of the Street." Her band has been with her for a couple of years now, and it sounds like it.

"This band sounds like a real band," Connor said in agreement. "We all get along and everybody is really cooperative and willing to try new things and take criticism or contribute ideas. You know, we are on the road so much that it is real important to like each other. And we do. I have no problem with them about me being a woman. Some men really have a hard time dealing with that. They don't. So it is like a little family."

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Joanna Connor