

Published July 24, 2004

## Fire kills two icons of local music scene

Word spreads quickly among music fans about deaths of Don Shipps, Bill Brown.

By Jeff Arnold and Michael A. Brothers  
News-Leader

What was supposed to be a big show featuring the Titanic Blues Band at the Outland on Friday night turned into a memorial of love and remembrance for Bill Brown and Don Shipps, who were killed that morning in a house fire.

A bass and a guitar rested next to two amplifier stacks. Between them were photos of the musicians from over the years. Flowers lay across the floor, and an open guitar case at the front of the stage was filled with donated dollars.

"This outpouring makes me realize my uncle wasn't just a loving uncle, but a legend here," said Alistair Fannell, Shipps' nephew.

The two local music icons were killed when they failed to escape from a burning duplex on Springfield's east side.

Bassist Shipps, the founder of the Titanic Blues Band, and guitarist Brown — who played with The Misstakes and had only recently joined Shipps' band — died of smoke inhalation, said Greene County Medical Examiner Paul Spence, who conducted autopsies Friday.

As word of the tragedy spread among music lovers, friends and fellow musicians assembled Friday morning outside the duplex where Shipps and Brown lived.

"There wasn't two guys more influential," said Ed Hines, bassist with the Misstakes with Brown. "Two of the finest at their craft."

The blaze, which started shortly after 4 a.m. Friday, took place in the 800 block of South Link Avenue and heavily damaged the duplex, said assistant fire chief Bill Arrington. The medical examiner's findings and fire officials' investigations showed the two had tried to escape the duplex.

The fire started around a chair in the living room and was consistent with fires started by smoking materials, Arrington said.

Officials believe there were no smoke detectors in the unit. "If they would have had a smoke detector, their chances (for survival) are 80 percent better," the assistant fire chief said.

Shipps' band was scheduled to hold a live recording session with producer Lou Whitney Friday at the Outland.

Instead, the night turned into a memorial, a visitation in the heart of Springfield's music scene. Blues played in the background as friends and fans filed across the flower-laden stage, hugging one another and sharing feelings of shock and senselessness.



Gerry Revella (left) and Roger Starnes mourn the loss of friends Bill Brown and Don Shipps outside the duplex where the two died in an early morning fire. Shipps and his Titanic Blues Band, which Brown had recently joined, were to have held a live recording session Friday night.  
Dean Curtis / News-Leader



Natalie Minor and Peggy Russell (right) look over a display of photos of Don Shipps and Bill Brown at the Outland. The two musicians died in a house fire Friday morning.  
Christina Dicken / News-Leader



Bill Brown



Don Shipps

"It makes me feel that Springfield really cared about him," said Margaret Fannell, Shipps' sister.

Those who gathered sought to celebrate the two men's lives, swapping stories of their humor and good nature. The memories brought smiles instead of sobs.

"We lost two brothers today," said Mark "Howie" Denny, of the local band Howie and the Hillcats.

Shipps, a Springfield native, started the Titanic Blues Band in the early 1990s. The group was a fixture on the local music scene and known throughout the Midwest. In the 1970s, he was a member of funk and fusion band Granny's Bathwater, which eventually became the backing band for soul singer Martha Reeves of Martha and the Vandellas.

Brown was a member of the 1980s band The Misstakes, which toured nationally. Brown also had played with the Ozark Mountain Daredevils for the last several years.

Misstakes drummer Gerry Revella headed to the burned duplex as soon as he'd heard. He knew how he'd remember the two: "Extremely talented — more than anybody would ever imagine. Great friends and an incredible passion for music.

"They devoted their lives to music and to their craft."

Visitation for Brown will be from 3 to 8 p.m. Monday at Greenlawn North Funeral Home. Arrangements for Shipps were pending Friday night



Notes and flowers left at a memorial for Don Shipps and Bill Brown, both popular Springfield musicians, at the Outland on Friday night.  
Christina Dicken / News-Leader