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'Two wonderful beacons have gone out'

Bluesman and rock 'n' roller are remembered for their passion for great music and their love of life.

By Michael A. Brothers
News-Leader

The only thing more powerful than the music Bill Brown and Don Shippo played were their personalities and love for others.

Throughout Springfield's music community, friends and fans shared remembrances of the two music legends, who died Friday in an early morning house fire in Springfield. Many struggled to fathom the loss of two men known for their talent and impact beyond notes and lyrics.

"In the music community here in Springfield, we've lost two incredibly talented, lovable people," said Gerry Revella, drummer with the Misstakes, a band he founded with guitarist Brown when the two were teenagers in 1978. "We consider them certainly family. ... It's kind of tough to stomach."

Shippo, 51, was widely considered the city's top blues musician and bass player. His Titanic Blues Band has been a fixture on the local scene and throughout the Midwest for more than a decade. Brown, 44, had been a member of the Ozark Mountain Daredevils for the past 15 years and had recently joined Shippo's band.

"They'll be missed," said local bluesman Clarence Brewer, who had played with both men and counted them as best friends. "Two wonderful beacons have gone out."

The Bluesman

The deaths were the second big blow to the blues community this summer, after longtime Blues Society of the Ozarks president Charles Pearl died in June. Pearl's family asked Shippo to perform at the memorial service last weekend because of Pearl's friendship with Shippo and affection for his music, BSO member Monte Lorts said.

Although Shippo had a late gig at Lake of the Ozarks the evening before the service, he drove back to Springfield for the 10 a.m. service, said harmonica player Clay Goldstein, friend and former member of the Titanic Blues Band.

"It's important for him to be there when he's called," Goldstein said. "I've never heard Don say no."

Shippo and Brown, along with band members B.J. Rossi and Dave Painter, often donated their time for charity concerts. The band kicked off the Phelps Helps summer concert series all three years of its existence.

Musicians are asked to perform for free, but donations from the crowd are given to the charity of the bands' choice, said organizer John Gregory, another longtime friend of Shippo.



Don Shippo (foreground) plays with his Titanic Blues Band at their regular Harlow's gig. Harlow's owner Julie Cozart says she can't bear to think of finding another band to pencil in and replace them. Shippo and Titanic guitarist Bill Brown died in a house fire on Friday.
News-Leader File Photo



Guitarist Bill Brown will be remembered for his sense of humor as well as his talent. He toured nationally with the Misstakes in the 1980s, opening concerts.
News-Leader File Photo



Don Shippo founded the Titanic Blues Band in 1991. He was an icon for many on the Springfield music scene.
News-Leader File Photo



Bill Brown (second from left) first found musical success

"They always chose the Family Violence Center," Gregory said. "There was never any hesitation (to donate time)."

The group performed at the annual Juneteenth Celebration of Life and Freedom, and Shipps often played guitar at St. Joseph Catholic Church on North Campbell Avenue, where he was a lifelong member.

After graduating from high school in 1970, Shipps chose to pursue music instead of his other passion — baseball — despite an invitation to work out with the Kansas City Royals' baseball academy.

"He was a damn good pitcher," recalled Gregory, who played against Shipps in their youth. "He didn't want you to hit him, that's for sure."

But the young musician chose funk instead of fastballs, joining the local fusion band Granny's Bathwater. That group is often described by Springfield music insiders as one of the most talented ever to come out of the city.

That talent didn't go unnoticed, as soul singer Martha Reeves (of Martha and the Vandellas fame) hired Granny's Bathwater as her backing band. By age 20, Shipps was playing before tens of thousands of people at Madison Square Garden with Reeves.

Granny's Bathwater broke up in 1978, still reeling from the loss of leader Mike Bunge in a car accident in 1975.

Shipps returned to Springfield, and after years as a sideman, he formed his own group under the moniker Don Shipps and the Titanic Blues Band in 1991. The group fused blues with New Orleans-style second-line grooves and featured top talent despite a shifting lineup.

His influence was felt on and off the stage.

"I never took a bass lesson from him, but I learned how to play bass by watching him," said Matt Netzer, bassist with Honky Tonk Chateau and manager at the Outland. "A lot of other people could probably say that, too."

Shipps was also a promoter of racial harmony. Gregory says he worked for that goal through quiet example and opening dialogues. Along with his trademark bowler hat, he was often seen wearing a T-shirt with large print reading "No Black, No White, Just Blues."

Singer-songwriter Mark Bilyeu recalled his last conversation with Shipps was about the common ground between soul and country music.

"That's the impression I always have of Don," Bilyeu said. "He was a uniter in that sense. He looked for common bonds between people instead of concentrating on differences."

The Rocker

with the Misstakes.
News-Leader File Photo



Bill Brown joined the Ozark Mountain Daredevils for one gig, and stayed for about 15 years. "He wasn't afraid to push the outer envelope," said John Dillon.
News-Leader File Photo



Don Shipps not only was as a great musician, but also worked for racial unity. He often wore to performances a T-shirt that said "No Black, No White, Just Blues."
News-Leader File Photo

Bill Brown

Brown, 44, was a well-known force as a guitarist. Before his time in the Titanic Blues Band, he was a member of the Misstakes and the Ozark Mountain Daredevils.

- Brown co-founded the Misstakes as a teenager in 1978.
- Along with singer Steve Clingan, drummer Gerry Revella and bassist Kevin Breshears (Ed Hines is the current bassist), Brown and the Misstakes gained a national reputation.
- The group helped define what Billboard magazine once dubbed "The Springfield Sound" in the early 1980s.
- The Misstakes released the album "National Pastime" in 1981 and "Shelter From the Storm" four years later. The band opened for Culture Club, the Eurythmics, Cyndi Lauper and U2.
- Brown filled in on guitar for the Ozark Mountain Daredevils 15 years ago with no preparation time. A quick study, he remained with the band until his death.
- He joined the Titanic Blues Band about a year and a half ago.

Don Shipps

Shipps, 51, was widely considered the city's best bass player and top blues artist. He was a Springfield native and founder of the Titanic Blues Band.

Growing up in Springfield, Revella said, he and his childhood pal Brown were greatly influenced by local bands, including Fools Face and Granny's Bathwater.

- His first instrument was the accordion, which he learned to play at age 9 while a student at St. Joseph Elementary School.

They formed the Misstakes in the late 1970s, when just out of high school, with singer Steve Clingan and bassist Kevin Breshears. The band released an album in 1981 and gained national prominence. It opened for big-name acts such as U2 and the Eurythmics and was an integral part of what Billboard magazine once called the "Springfield Sound" of the '80s.

- He taught himself guitar and by age 13 he was playing bass. At 15, he was working sessions with Ozarks recording pioneer Si Siman.

Brown was always wearing a smile on the road, lightening the mood during long hours of travel, Revella said.

- After graduating from high school in 1970, he was invited to the Kansas City Royals' baseball academy.

"He'll always be remembered as being the one with an incredible sense of humor," Revella said. "He always made you laugh. Bill was the driving force in the band, and he was always at the center of attention. He was certainly the most gifted of any of us."

- He joined funk and fusion band Granny's Bathwater instead of pursuing baseball. The group eventually became the backing band for Martha Reeves of Martha and the Vandellas.

- After years as a sideman, Shipps formed the Titanic Blues Band in 1991. The group toured the Midwest, playing festivals and the club circuit.

- He was awarded the first Ozarks Blues Achievement Award by the Blues Society of the Ozarks in 2001.

Brown not only had chops, but he was versatile, fellow musicians said. Primarily a rock 'n' roll guitarist, he could easily play just about any style he cared to.

A few years after the Misstakes broke up in the mid-'80s, Brown was recruited by the Ozark Mountain Daredevils. In dire need of a guitarist for a gig in Canada, the group heard Brown was a quick study, original Daredevils member John Dillon remembered.

"We didn't have time to rehearse," Dillon said. "We just gave Bill an approximate song list, gave him a couple of records and said, 'See ya on the plane.'"

Brown nailed the gig and remained with the Daredevils for some 15 years, until his death.

"He really understood the possibilities of the instrument, and he wasn't afraid to push the outer envelope," said Dillon, also a guitarist.

Said Brewer, who learned guitar technique from Brown: "Bill Brown was a genius."

Brown's rock chops provided an added edge to the Titanic Blues Band's sound. His long blond hair often flailed about during solos.

In recent years, the Misstakes had gotten back together to play an occasional reunion gig.

"We were talking about that today," Revella said. "About how that's kind of been taken away from us, and how that's one of the few things we look forward to musically every six months."

Fans and musicians alike will miss the sound of Shipps and Brown on stage, said Julie Cozart, owner of Harlow's, one of the Titanic Blues Band's regular haunts.

"My God, they sounded better every time they played," she said. "And musicians in town who weren't playing somewhere else — they would always come in and play."

Cozart had the band booked through the end of the year. She said she doesn't know if she will have the heart to pencil in another group in those slots.

"It leaves an awful big void," she said. "There's not going to be any two like them again."

Brewer agreed: Artists of their talent and friends of their caliber aren't easy to find. "They come around every now and then, and they're very, very rare," he said.

He prefers to remember the men on stage doing what they loved, sharing their talent and spirit with the fans, through the blues.

"I think there's some comfort in knowing that they brought happiness to the human condition," Brewer said.