

**“RAISES THE ROOF!**

LATCH ON TO A TICKET, IT'S A SURE CURE FOR THE BLUES!  
—The New York Times

**IT AIN'T  
NOTHIN'  
BUT THE  
BLUES**



**"HIGH SPIRITS & MARVELOUS VOICES!**

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**“RICH AND ROUSING! LATCH ON TO A  
TICKET, IT'S A SURE CURE FOR THE BLUES!**

More than a musical feast, it is a potent blend of visual eloquence and historical sweep that engages the eye and touches the heart, while its songs soothe the ear, work mischief on the funny bone and always raise the spirits.

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THE NEW YORK TIMES, TUESDAY, APRIL 27, 1999

THEATER REVIEW

## *They Call It the Blues, but They Sure Look Like They're Having a Ball*

*"It Ain't Nothin' but the Blues," which opened for a limited run at the New Victory Theater in Times Square on March 26, has reopened at the Vivian Beaumont Theater in Lincoln Center. Following are excerpts from Lawrence Van Gelder's review, published on April 1.*

Looking for a sure cure for the blues? Just latch on to a ticket for "It Ain't Nothin' but the Blues."

Now that title bears some parsing because this rich, evocative, rousing show, with some 50 musical numbers ranging from African chants and spirituals to Delta and Chicago blues, with plenty of stops along the dusty roads, river banks, broken country hearts and juke joints in between, is more than a musical feast.

Besides its cornucopia of splendidly interpreted song, "It Ain't Nothin' but the Blues" is a potent blend of visual eloquence and historical sweep that engages the eye and touches the heart while its songs soothe the

ear, occasionally work mischief on the funny bone and always raise the spirits.

As the splendid cast assembled by the much-praised Crossroads Theater Company of New Brunswick, N.J., applies its individual and collective vocal, musical and acting talents to songs like "I've Been Living With the Blues," "Blues Man" and "St. Louis Blues," photographs projected onto screens behind the performers brim with history.

Here are sketches of slave auctions and pictures of thirsty women working the fields with their little children nearby, a black man dangling from a lyncher's noose, rural poverty, country churches, the great blues man Robert Johnson and changing fashions in clothes and entertainment, as well as the economic, social and cultural upheaval surrounding the great black migration from the South to Chicago.

"It Ain't Nothin' but the Blues" is based on an idea by Ron Taylor,

who wrote it with Randal Myler, its director, and Lita Gaithers, Charles Bevel and Dan Wheetman.

Mr. Taylor, Mr. Bevel and Mr. Wheetman, with Gretha Boston, Carter Calvert, Eloise Laws and Gregory Porter, constitute the powerhouse lineup of singers who step up, step out and put over one number after another. Depending on the song, they can be heartbreakers, heartbroken, sexpots or absolute rascals. And after intermission, when they trade their simple attire, rustic airs and simple instruments for shapely gowns and stylish suits, each seems good-naturedly determined to outdo another as they make their way with the backing of an enhanced band through pieces like "I'm Your Hoochie-Coochie Man," the sly, slinky, humorous "Crawlin' King Snake," "Walkin' After Midnight," the bitter "Strange Fruit" and "Let the Good Times Roll."

By this time the band is making the floor vibrate, and the cast and audience are raising the roof.

Theater Review



# 'Blues' a real pick-me-up

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"Ain't Nothin' but the Blues" arrives like a cool, scented breeze off the Mississippi after the pumped up turgidities of "The Civil War" and the dumbed down stupidities of "The Gershwins' Fascinating Rhythm." In "Blues," seven radiant performers take us on the musical journey with emotional energy and communal electricity.

The first songs heard are African songs, the music of a free people. In bondage was born the blues, and there were two main blues streams - secular and religious, sex and God. Ron Taylor, a large and genial African-American singer (the show is his idea), mentions he was raised on Jimmy Reed, whose "Blues Man" he sings - "Don't need no mojo; I got this wang dang thing'll conquer *you*."



**Donald Lyons**

Skinny white banjoist Dan Wheetman assures us that "there's blues" in bluegrass and hillbilly, too. Fellow Caucasian Carter Calvert joins Wheetman to prove it in "Blue Ridge Mountains" and "'T for Texas."

Gregory Porter and Charles Bevel ask "Who broke the lock to the henhouse door?" as the gals imitate happy chickens. This looks a mite demeaning, but right away the three women seize the stage and inform us that "the blues is when a woman loves a no-good man," and the audience explodes in affirmation.

The sensational Eloise Laws sings "My Man Rocks Me (With One Steady Roll)." Sitting off to the side, Taylor chimes in with "Now we're cookin' in a big pot."

"Blues" artfully imitates the informality and spontaneity of a concert or a jam session, but in fact it is a carefully structured and disciplined work - a collaboration between director Randal Myler and writers Bevel, Taylor, Wheetman and Lita Gaithers.

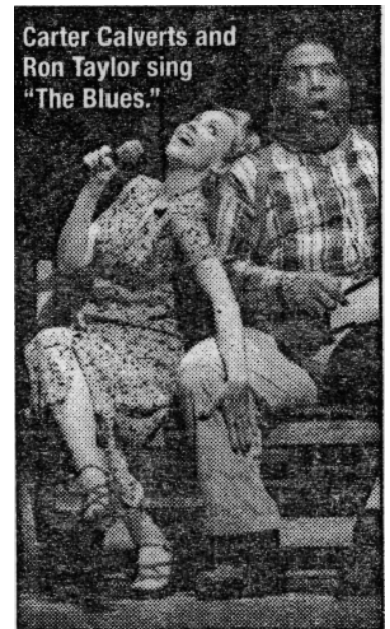
The men wear suspenders and baggy pants and the women flowered cotton dresses in the first act. But when they return after the

interval, the women have sexy, chanteuse-y gowns and the men flashy suits and hats. Why?

Because we're moved up, along with the blues, to the "sweet home" and "good times" of Chicago. The performance styles reflect a new confidence, a bolder, sassier, audience-teasing presentation. Now the incarnation of a Northern woman, Laws stops the show with "Someone Else is Steppin' In." Taylor reflects the new urban dazzle in "Hoochie Coochie Man." Porter has wicked fun with "Crawlin' King Snake." And Calvert finds the bluesy soul of the Patsy Cline hit "Walking after Midnight."

When Bevel teases Wheetman into "funking up" the song "Good Night, Irene," we glimpse an almost utopian racial friendliness; the blues are black, definitely, but whites are welcome family members. But just before the end, we're sharply reminded of some very unfriendly old realities, as Boston. sings Billie Holliday's "Strange Fruit," about a Mississippi with "blood on the leaves" of its trees.

After some musically uninteresting hymns of liberation, "Blues" returns to its hope that "the good times roll." A show like this can actually make you hopeful about life.





# Sizzling revue rings true to the blues

## **It Ain't Nothin' but the Blues**

**Where:** Vivian  
Beaumont Theater, 150  
W. 65th St., New York

**When:** When: 8 p.m.  
Tuesdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m.  
Wednesdays and  
Saturdays, 3 p.m. Sundays

**How Much:** \$35, \$50,  
\$60; \$19 student. Call (212)  
239-6200

**By Michael Sommers**  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

NEW YORK - "We're  
cookin' in a big pot,"  
declares one of the seven  
terrific performers who  
serve up a sizzling, cross-  
cultural menu of American  
music in "It Ain't Nothin'  
but the Blues."

These varyingly famous,  
obscure, funky, sorrowful,  
funny, shattering and always  
life affirming songs are ever  
a pleasure to experience in  
this fine new musical revue.

Critics across the land have  
already applauded this red-  
hot bundle of blues-driven  
show-stoppers as it blazed  
across several regional stages  
- including Crossroads  
Theatre Company in New  
Brunswick, N.J., last fall -  
along its path to Broadway.

Opening last night at the  
Vivian Beaumont Theater in  
Lincoln Center, "It Ain't  
Nothin' but the Blues" is a  
ceaselessly entertaining  
show.

Unlike the makers of "The  
Gershwins' Fascinating  
Rhythm," Sunday's fiasco at  
the Longacre, the five  
people who put "Blues"  
together have a smart and  
sure grasp of their material.  
They take more than 40

present them with  
spellbinding feeling and  
expertise.

Director Randal Myler's  
staging is straight-to-the-  
essentials, putting no  
pretentious concepts on the  
material and always  
encouraging his ensemble to  
perform numbers with  
authenticity and fire.

The trim concert setting,  
complete with a sweet-and-



**From left, Carter Calvert, Gretha Boston and Eloise Laws in "It Ain't Nothin' but the Blues."**

evocative songs in a variety  
of blues-rooted modes,  
from slave chants to "St.  
Louis Blues" to "Let the  
Good Times Roll," and

hot band performing  
onstage with the cast, is  
visually enhanced by large-  
scale projections of people  
and places having to do with

these tunes. The Mississippi's turbid waters, jam-packed Chicago nightclubs, bare sharecropper acres, slaveship diagrams, brownstone stoops, revival meetings, rent parties, black faces, white faces, legendary faces - each and every one of them bound by their roots in the blues.

Tangy narration is kept to a minimum as the performers trace the music's evolution. The revue makes a few geographical stops along the way, perhaps most notably in the Delta for a tribute to

Sometimes the details are factual, but more often the words simply convey musical feelings. "The blues is a woman in love with a low-down sneakin' man," notes Eloise Laws before elegantly grinding through "My Man Rocks Me." "I took my first bath in muddy waters," remarks soulful Ron Taylor as he blasts across a fierce "Blues Man."

Similar peaks in this two-hour, 10-minute powerhouse of American song are too numerous to mention, but among them, Gretha Boston's stark and

After "Midnight" are especially memorable moments. "Mississippi" Charles Bevel and Dan Wheetman add their flavorful vocal twangs and instrumental expertise to the music-making.

Dressed in country clothes for the first half, the performers change into snazzier attire for the latter part of the show, which is beefed up with additional musicians to lend greater clout to the music. Don Darnutzer's lighting provides warm visual atmosphere, and Donald McKayle's simple but effective choreography looks to be a natural physical expression of the songs.

A welcome arrival on the theater scene after a disheartening string of musical duds, "It Ain't Nothin' but the Blues" succeeds with a winning audience right up to heaven. Black or mix of authentic performance styles white, young or old. you can't help and true-blue material that rocks an but love the "Blues."



**Boston joins Ron Taylor in a duet.**

1930s blues king Robert Johnson and South Side Chicago for some 1940s partying to "Wang Dang Doodle."

haunting rendition of "Strange Fruit," Gregory Porter's sexy slither through "Crawlin' King Snake" and Carter Calvert's Patsy Cline-like invocation of "Walking



From left, Carter Calvert, Gretha Boston and Eloise Laws in "It Ain't Nothin' But the Blues" at the Vivian Beaumont.

## 'Blues' delivers at end of Broadway's season

### It Ain't Nothin' But the Blues

(Musical revue. Vivian Beaumont Theater; 1,105 seats; \$65 top)

An Eric Krebs. Jonathan Reinis, Lawrence Horowitz, Anita Waxman, Elizabeth Williams, CTM Prods. and Anne Squadron presentation, in association with Lincoln Center Theater, of the Crossroads Theater Co./San Diego Repertory Theater/Alabama Shakespeare Festival production of a musical revue in two acts by Charles Bevel, Lita Gaithers, Randal Myler, Ron Taylor and Dan Wheatman, based on an original idea by Taylor. Directed by Myler. Musical director, Wheatman. Set. Robin Sanford Roberts, lighting, Don Darnutzer: sound, Edward Costa: production stage manager, Doug Hosney; movement, Donald McKayle. Opened April 26, 1999. Reviewed April 24. Running time: 2 HOURS.

With: "Mississippi" Charles Bevel, Gretha Boston, Carter Culvert, Eloise Laws, Gregory Porter, Ron Taylor, Dan Wheatman.

**A**t the tail end of a Broadway musical season to leave you singing the blues, along comes a surprise contender, "It Ain't Nothin' But the Blues," that, joy of joys, gives rise to far happier feelings. It's not a traditional book musical, and it won't snare the tourists looking for shiny, expensive-looking diversions, but this pleasingly unpretentious revue has soul and spirit to spare. In the hands of a fiercely gifted set of singers with deep affection for the songs they're performing, it adds up to two hours of pure musical pleasure.

The show's long road to Broadway began with Mints at the three regional theaters that originally co-produced it: the Crossroads Theater Co. in New

Jersey, the San Diego Repertory Theater and the Alabama Shakespeare Festival. These three theaters and New 42nd Street Inc. backed its initial Gotham run at the New Victory Theater, where it was picked up for an open-ended run at the Vivian Beaumont by a host of commercial producers. With canny marketing and strong reviews, it could (and should) become the sleeper hit of the musical season. A cast album ought to be recorded tomorrow and put on sale in the lobby: this is the rare show whose music you want to hear again as soon as you leave it.

The show is a sort of Blues 101, a sung history of the musical genre that traces it from its roots in African chants through its refinement in the American South and on to the various ancillary genres it influenced. As the show itself relates in



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some fairly light-handed historical narration, the blues has had a pronounced influence in shaping the country's musical culture: from Branson, Mo., to Motown to the Apollo Theater to Broadway, there are few popular musical genres that haven't been touched by the stirring soul of a sound that was born of pain but finds expression in joyful release.

Three of the show's seven principal performers - "Mississippi" Charles Bevel, Ron Taylor and Dan Wheatman - are also its authors (along with Lita Gaithers and Randal Myler, who also directs). This lends a personal touch that helps to humanize an occasionally (and after four years of development, probably unavoidably) slick, prefab feeling that is of course at odds with the down-home nature of the music.

But if the revue's smoothness sometimes threatens to slide into monotony, it may be because it often seems to be all highlights. A pair of communal chants provide a haunting opening that tellingly indicates the blues' roots in Africa. They blend into a medley that introduces the singers, who all share the stage, sitting in simple wooden chairs and giving attentive support and the occasional hit of back talk to their fellow performers when they're not at the mike.

Although it's electronically amplified, the show boasts a subtle, sharp sound mix; kudos to musical director Wheatman, vocal director Gaithers and sound designer Edward Cosla.

The energy ebbs and flows between the deeply mournful, plaintive sounds that are the soul of the music and the raucous, irreverent rhythms that express its rebellious spirit. The singers blast their way through both varieties with similar energy but pleasingly distinct styles.

Bevel has an easygoing wit and a rough-edged, bourbon-flavored voice that suits Robert Johnson's "Cross Road Blues" well. Gregory Porter is the show's smooth-talking, sweet-singing purveyor of the blues at their bawdiest, on Johnson's "Come on in My Kitchen" and the almost

embarrassingly lewd "Crawlin' Snake King" in act two.

But Taylor, large of voice, charisma and not incidentally girth, has his own ribald charm, and isn't afraid to flaunt it on "I'm Your Hoochie Coochie Man." He's equally commanding plumbing the depths of Roy Hawkins and Rick Darnell's "The Thrill Is Gone."



Gretha Boston and Ron Taylor in "It Ain't Nothin' But the Blues"



The women are hardly overshadowed. Eloise Laws is a diva to her fingertips -- literally: She splays them

with menacing glee as she growls out Screamin' Jay Hawkins' "I Put a Spell on You," and gets the females in the house rollicking on a classic no-good-man number "Someone Else Is Steppin' In."

Although Carter Calvert and Wheatman, the show's musical director and co-author, have the seeming handicap of being white, they make the best of it. Wheatman's mean guitar-picking supports the singers throughout and Calvert comes into her own in the uptown second act, as the scope widens to include various genres influenced by the blues. Her "Fever" is smooth and torrid and she does a striking job on the Patsy Cline standard "Crazy," perfectly sung in Cline's memorable style.

But the contributions of Tony winner Gretha Boston ("Show Boat") are perhaps most memorable of all. Her lustrous, classically trained voice is an absolute marvel, whether it's kicking off the gospel finale of the first act with a rousing "I Know I've Been Changed" or rolling out what may be the quintessential song of the genre, "St. Louis Blues." The high-toned piano arrangement of the Billie Holiday standard "Strange Fruit" may not be to everyone's taste, but Boston's spellbinding singing of it is perfection, a commodity that has been rare indeed in this largely misbegotten musical season.

# BLUES MAN

Ron Taylor's dream comes true as *Ain't Nothin' but the Blues* makes it to Broadway - and picks up four Tony nominations.

BY ROBERT SANDLA

They stride on in near-darkness, chanting words from some ancient African song - rhythmic, mysterious, commanding. They look like country folk, the three women in floral print dresses, the four men in overalls and work clothes with suspenders. When they don't sing *a cappella*, they accompany themselves on instruments that look homemade. In the background, projected images flash by: scenes of plantation life, a diagram of how slave ships jammed in their human cargo, a drawing of a slave auction.

It's an unexpected start for a Broadway revue with the sassy title of *It Ain't Nothin' but the Blues*. And it's just the kind of surprise co-creator Ron Taylor has in mind. The show, which opened at the Vivian Beaumont Theater on April 26, takes audiences back to the very roots of the blues and proceeds chronologically, from farms to small towns to big cities, from folk music to gospel spirituals to Delta blues to Chicago shouting to jazz tunes. Along the way, we glimpse historic photos of poor sharecroppers, chain gangs, dancers cutting loose in some roadside honky-tonk, people snatching what joy they can in crowded urban clubs. The performers cover similar ground.



Gretha Boston roars through "St. Louis Blues," then distills Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" into exquisite agony. Eloise Laws purrs "I Put a Spell on You" in a way that makes wives nervous while husbands get all worked up. An affable guitarist named Dan Wheatman puts a rollicking spin on the folk standard "Good Night, Irene." Carter Calvert insinuates her way through Patsy Cline's "Walking After Midnight," and Taylor presides over "Let the Good Times Roll" like a Mardi

Gras king. "Mississippi" Charles Bevel is as blue as it's possible to be and still stand up in "Walking Blues." Gregory Porter croons Donny Hathaway's "Someday We'll All be Free" with inspirational fervor. It's a rich, embracing vision, all in the name of the blues.

"People have this conception that blues is just one kind of music. Blues is what you feel after you hear the music," says Taylor. "The blues have

all these different styles. All this music came out of people working in the fields, singing because it made the day go faster. The music came out of a lot of pain. Nobody knows who named the blues. No one person created it. You might not even know what the words mean, but the heartfelt emotion of a song is the blues. The song itself, what

you feel about the song, what you say in the song, makes the blues. It can be up, it can be sex, it can be down, it can make you jump up. That's what the blues is - a feeling."

If might take a village to raise a child, but it took a ton of people to bring this show to life, entirely separate from the songwriters - among them W C. Handy, Robert L. Johnson, John Lee Hooker, John Lomax - whose works we hear. *It Ain't Nothing but the Blues* was





written by Bevel, Lita Gaithers, Randal Myler, Dan Wheatman, and Taylor; Myler directed, and Wheatman is musical director. That's another, perhaps unintended surprise, considering that the script consists of brief narration outlining historical currents between songs. Slides and projections tell us where we are and when. The whole thing revolves around Taylor: He's one of the co-writers, one of its powerhouse performers, and a producing associate. The whole shebang is "based on an original idea of Ron Taylor."

For the past 25 years, Taylor has been a performer. Broadway credits include *The Wiz*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Eubie*, and *The Three Musketeers*. Since he moved to Los Angeles in 1988, he points out proudly, he's racked up 16 films and 35 TV shows. Fans of *The Simpsons* know him as the voice of Lisa's sax mentor, and Trekkies know him as a Klingon restaurateur who serves up bowls of slimy bugs. He's more recognizable, however, from *Trading Places*, *A Rage in Harlem*, *E.R.*, *Matlock*, *Family Matters*, and *NYPD Blue*. Taylor made history as the stentorian voice of Audrey II ("Feed me, Seymour!") in the original *Little Shop of Horrors*. Somehow, the man made that plant scary and hilarious. In person, he's got a gargantuan laugh and a sweet style.

Taylor had the idea for *It Ain't Nothin' but the Blues* in 1987, when he was playing bluesman Rufus "TeeTot" Payne for director Randal Myler in *Lost Highway*, about country music great Hank Williams, Sr. "Rufus taught Hank about singing," Taylor recalls. "He told Hank that if you are going to sing, you've got to feel what you're singing. Doing that show, I realized that so many musicians say they got their inspiration from black musicians. I wanted to do a piece that honored guys like Muddy Waters and Willie Dixon."

The show started out in 1994 as a 45-minute revue performed at high schools. It just kept growing. "We had dialogue, different songs, more songs, original songs by Mississippi and Dan and me," Taylor says. "At one time, the show was almost three hours long. But we never missed a standing ovation." Taylor and company did lots of research. "Danny [Wheatman] and I are both music historians. We have hundreds - thousands - of tapes. We went to the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian. We found one of the songs in the show on a tape of actual women's prison songs from the 1930s."

*It Ain't Nothin' but the Blues* was originally produced at the Denver Center Theater Company. In something near its current form, the show began a regional tour last August at the San Diego Repertory Theatre, moving to the Crossroads Theatre in New Jersey, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, and the New Victory Theatre on 42nd Street. Crossroads artistic director Riccardo Kahn told Taylor that if the show got to the East Coast, he would make sure something happened. "And when we got to Crossroads, [producer] Eric Krebs said that he'd get our show on Broadway. They both promised me that. And here we are."

The show has made the kind of journey that might deserve its own upbeat blues tune: endless touring around the country, and then - wham - it's on Broadway, with Tony nominations for Taylor and Gretha Boston's performances, Best Book, and Best Musical.

"A month or two ago, we were working for \$400 a week," Taylor points out. "People were worried about rent, having a hard time on the road away from lovers and family. I have a wife and son in L.A. I told them to just hang on until we get to New York. Possibly we'll get somebody to see the show. And the cast stuck with me. We

all

sacrificed a lot. I remember everybody feeding each other. I'd make big pots of chili and gumbo and everybody'd get some. Carter would cook up a big pot of something for everyone.

"So now we've gone from the New Victory children's theater to Broadway to Tony Award nominations. You can't expect anything like that. This is my 25th year in the business, and I've had a great career. It's been a good run for me. But I've learned not to expect anything. Just do your work. Good things come to you if you're righteous. And I am so proud of the people in the show. I can't say enough good things about them."

Taylor feels that there's something fateful about *It Ain't Nothin' but the Blues*. "A week before we began previews in Denver, we wanted a song that said we were at the harvest, celebrating the new growth. We couldn't find anything. One of the singers then with the show remembered a melody from an old African song. He didn't know the words, so we learned it phonetically, without knowing what we were saying or if we were saying anything at all. Randy [Myler] found a professor from Nigeria at Colorado State and we sang it for him. Well, he laughed and said, 'You aren't really singing words. But the melody I know.' He took my drum and started singing all the words. But we still had a dilemma: We could be singing about pigs or something. What is the song about? He said, 'Oh, it's a song about the new harvest.' The girls started tearing up immediately. We asked him, 'how could this happen?' He said, 'You know, your show is anointed. You're telling history. And anyone who tells history won't have to worry about a thing.' "

**ROBERT SANDLA writes frequently about the arts. InTheater May 24, 1999**