

“Paperboy” Delivers

by Joshua Valocchi

At first glance, Eli “Paperboy” Reed appears to be a clean-cut kid from Boston with a penchant for sharp suits, pocket squares and wingtips. He looks like the kind of guy who regularly bore the brunt of hipster haranguing during the Five Spot’s autumn years. When he takes the stage, however, the voice that filters through the vintage ribbon microphone and drenches the dance floor with soul-stirring sincerity tells a story that belies Reed’s baby-faced appearance. At the tender age of 24, Reed finds himself perched upon the precipice of greatness in a genre that was, until recently, circling music’s proverbial drain.

Along with his ace support crew, the True Loves, Reed traffics in classic soul and R&B with authority, aplomb and – perhaps most importantly – authenticity. Navigating a path that approximates the one most recently traveled by Sharon Jones and the Dap-Kings, Reed and the True Loves take great pains to recreate every aspect associated with soul’s golden age of the 1960s. From eschewing computer-aided recording processes for simpler (but somewhat scratchier) analogue tape mixes, to the use of vintage equipment – on stage as well as in the studio – Reed is a stickler for detail who stops at nothing to capture the gritty plasma of music and emotion that once oozed from every groove of so many highly coveted Stax-issued vinyls.

Undoubtedly, the comparisons between Reed’s True Loves and Jones’ Dap-Kings stretch well beyond recording techniques and equipment preferences – and with good reason. Although nearly 30 years his senior, Jones is arguably Reed’s closest contemporary in terms of style, range and unflinching commitment to preserving every last modicum of authenticity – whether on stage or on wax. Just like Jones and her inimitable Dap-Kings, Reed and the True Loves leave it all on the floor when they perform, and manage to look damn good while doing it. Sporting old school suits, hats and assorted vintage duds that only serve to bolster their bona fide status, Reed

and Co. stay true to form, firming their footholds near the top of soul’s prestigious pecking order.

When Reed and his True Loves roll into M Room Thursday night, they’re sure to tear the roof off the sucka. What’s more, that roof doesn’t stand a chance against anything this band chooses to drop. While Reed’s ripping into a funkastic classic with the ferocity of a young James Brown, the True Loves keep the low end tied down, laying rare grooves under Reed’s surprisingly strong vocals. Embodying the essence of a skillfully polished bandleader, Reed exploits his ability to shift gears on a dime, swinging from searing soul screeches to soft, sultry crooning, as his support staff skips, saunters and sprints alongside the “Paperboy” in lock-step formation.

While the concept of a 24-year-old New Englander who is a walking encyclopedia of the histories of the Delta blues, southern-fried funk and ‘60s soul may be somewhat disconcerting, Reed’s case bears it out as a wholly fathomable premise. Although he was born in the outskirts of Boston and continues to call Beantown home today, Reed has traveled far and wide throughout these United States in his relatively short stint as a mouth-breather. When he was 18, Reed tore up stakes and high-tailed it from Massachusetts to Clarksdale, Mississippi, where he began playing pick-up sets with legendary Delta drummer Sam Carr. Carr, a frequent player in several of Big Jack Johnson’s dirty blues outfits, set Reed on a path that led him to delve deeper into the blues – and its origins – than the average white teenager. In fact, it was while playing with Carr and several of his highly skilled but mostly unrecognized bluesmen that Reed was tagged with his nickname. Apparently, the scallycap that Reed insisted on wearing almost every time he played reminded his chronologically gifted bandmates of the typical headwear of choice among old-fashioned newsboys. After ribbing him with taunts of “Paperboy!” enough, the name stuck like a phonograph needle in a warped groove. In fact, at this point, Reed was still going by his true surname, Husock, but



Above: Reed’s quiet cool keeps the True Loves in check. /Photo: Bob Perachio Below: Extra! Extra! Paperboy croons like a Rat Pack protégé. /Photo: Nicole Tammaro

soon adopted the now-familiar Reed because “it sounded more racially ambiguous.”

Although a name change may seem to be a somewhat drastic measure – especially with the intention of creating racial confusion – in Reed’s case, it’s actually fairly logical. As a young white boy battling for standing in a genre dominated by older African-Americans, Reed faces a steep uphill battle. However, armed with a versatile voice capable of rivaling (Clarksdale, Mississippi, native) Sam Cooke’s heavenly lilt while also giving Otis Redding’s more-dirt-than-gravel pipes a good fight, Reed is sitting pretty atop a heap of young pretenders (paging Amy Winehouse ...) and is poised to take the crown outright any day now. Make no mistake, Eli “Paperboy” Reed and the True Loves are no flash in the pan. They are the real deal and they won’t be denied. Don’t lurch on this gift of a local appearance. It may very well be the last time these boys play in front of a crowd that doesn’t number in the thousands.

Lest it go unnoticed – nay, unmentioned – Thursday is Valentine’s Day, after all. It’s almost inconceivable that a more appropriate musical act than Eli “Paperboy” Reed and the oh-so-serendipitously dubbed True



Loves could grace our fair hamlet with sweet songs swollen with sexed-up strings and scrumptious sax solos. In spite of our city’s strangely unwavering tendency toward embracing an impenetrable air of defeatism, this show stands strong as unimpeachable evidence that, at least once in a blue moon, the stars align in the 215 and everything is just right in our little corner of the universe.

Even Reed is feelin’ a touch of Brotherly Love. “I’m all about love songs,” Reed says. “The best songs in the world are boy/girl songs; everyone can relate to them.” •

Eli “Paperboy” Reed and the True Loves; DJ Kyle of Intensified! and Ten Commandments - Thursday, February 14, 9p.m. \$10. Manhattan Room, 15 W. Girard Ave. 215.739.5577. www.the.manhattanroom.com