

Enduring Nighthawks stay on blues beat

By Dan Sorenson
ARIZONA DAILY STAR

The Nighthawks have been on the road so long that it probably would have killed Keith Richards.

The Washington, D.C., blues band, formed in 1972, hit the road in 1976 and really hasn't had a substantial break in touring since.

The guys slowed down for a year in the mid-1980s when they had a deal with an agency that used them as the backing band for big-name blues artists. But even then, they managed to do 50 shows that year as the Nighthawks, said founder, frontman and master blues harmonica player Mark Wenner.

In those first years they burned up and down Interstate 95, building audiences all along that huge population belt.

"From '76 to '78, that's what we did. Going to Boston for two weeks and going to Atlanta for two weeks and coming home broke," Wenner says.

In 1978 it was Chicago, Denver, Austin and New Orleans," Wenner said during a phone from home, as the band got ready to jump in the van for a two-day blast across the country to start a tour that will bring them to Tucson next week.

Word spread, especially when playing blues meccas Chicago and New Orleans.

Wenner says that when blues legend Muddy Waters called a Chicago club they were playing and reserved a table, the club owner was impressed. Probably even more so after Muddy got up and sat in with the

Nighthawks during their last set.

In Austin, Wenner said, they played for a week straight, double billed with Delbert McClinton, Stevie Ray Vaughan and other big names.

They later branched out to include the West Coast in their territory when they toured opening for Muddy Waters.

They still tour heavily, but they only sporadically make it to the West Coast and the Southwest.

The way Wenner sees it, the band has survived the road and the ups and downs of the music business because it stood out from the growing pack of white-boy blues bands that sprang up after the British Invasion.

Unlike so many blues bands, both local and touring groups, the Nighthawks rock hard. There's no question it's blues they're playing, but the danceable groove on almost every song is irresistible. Wenner's harp works like a horn section when he's not soloing or singing.

The band, which has switched other members over the years, has always had more than one lead singer, Wenner says, which puts an emphasis on harmony that's not heard in most blues bands.

And the Nighthawks don't go on and on with she-done-me-wrong, cry-in-your-beer blues. It's generally joyous, uptempo music that often results in people wanting to dance.

"I'm a deep, deep blues lover," says Wenner, "but you can drive people away with one too many of these

white-boy Stevie Ray duh-dump, duh-dump, duh-dump, da-dump numbers."

The Nighthawks prove something about live roots music that often sets them apart from more faddish forms of music. They keep getting better, and their audience keeps coming back to hear them for that — not for fashion tips, political advice or to be seen.

SPEAKING OF BLUES TRAVELERS ...

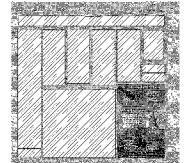
Also in town this week is Blues Traveler, another of the rare bands fronted by a harmonica player.

There were many fans of Wenner and the Nighthawks who heard Blues Traveler when it crossed over onto mainstream radio and probably thought the Nighthawks should have been there.

But Blues Traveler traveled beyond the barriers of the blues to, somehow, cross that line that has always kept most blues artists — black and white — on the fringes of mass popularity.

Blues Traveler has not only had a couple of mainstream radio hits — "Run Around" being the biggest — and frequently turned up on late-night TV, but it already has something of a legacy. An argument can be made that Blues Traveler was one of the first jam bands, with long instrumental solos not heard since the endless guitar wanking of the 1960s and '70s, and predating Dave Matthews and Phish.

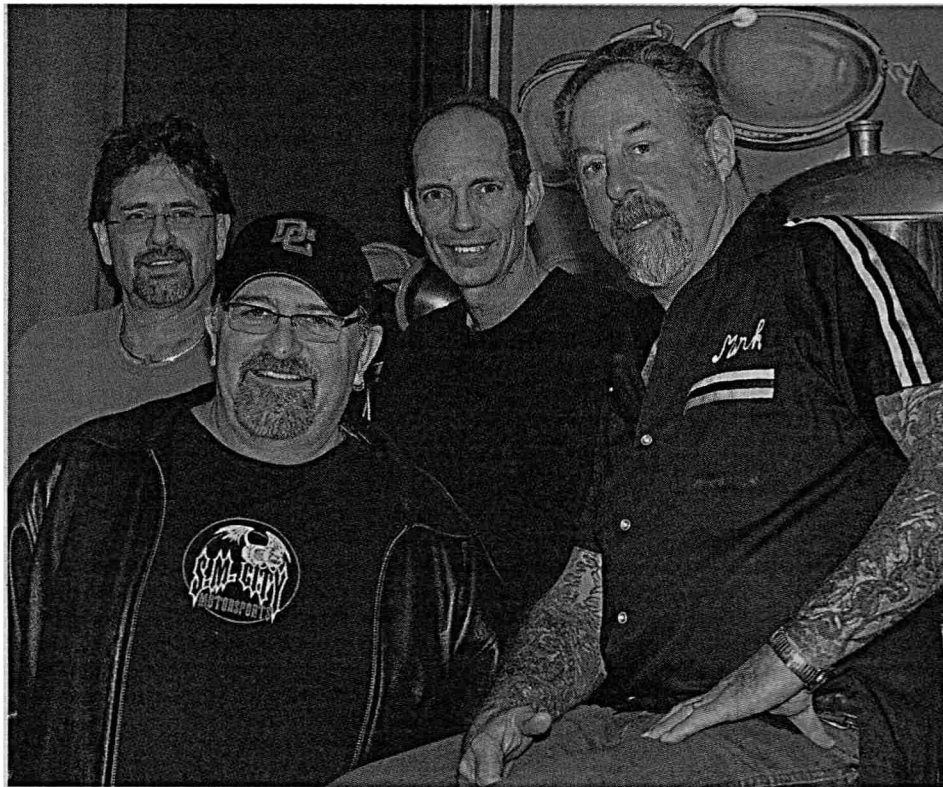
Blues Traveler plays the Rialto Theatre at 8 p.m. Tuesday. Tickets are \$25 in advance, \$27 the day of the



show, and are available at the Rialto box office and through the theater's web site, www.rialtotheatre.com

IF YOU GO

- **What:** The Nighthawks in concert, presented as part of the Rhythm & Roots Concert Series.
- **When:** 8 p.m. Friday.
- **Where:** Plaza Palomino, 2900 N. Swan Road.
- **Tickets:** \$20 in advance, \$23 at the door, available online at rhythmandroots.org, Antigone Books and all Bookmans stores.



MARK PUCCI MEDIA

The Nighthawks like to travel. They hit the road with their blues music in 1976 and didn't look back. They've toured with the legendary Muddy Waters and other big names of the genre.