

**RON THOMPSON  
MCGRATH'S PUB  
FEBRUARY 6, 2005**

**EVERY DAY I HAVE THE BLUES**

Dropped into the Local, McGrath's Pub, which squats a few blocks down the *boreen*, inconspicuous and unassuming with its music bill done up in magic marker on butcher block paper hung over a sawhorse. Was there to hear Ron Thompson play a solo gig without his Resistors band.



The house was thin and even the notable Patrick, the owner, was not to be seen for a good half hour into the set.

Here in this humble-appearing locale, with no introduction, the old bluesman from Oaktown sat down and calmly launched into his set and played no differently, not two meters from the front cafeteria-style seats, than if he were playing Carnegie Hall. Which he has done.

For Patrick is no ordinary Proprietor and McGrath's Pub is no ordinary bar. And even the ordinary bar in the Bay Area can suddenly host extraordinary luminaries.

Ron Thompson has recorded and performed with legends like Big Mama Thornton, John Lee Hooker, Sonny Rhodes, Luther Tucker, Jimmy McCracklin, Carla Thomas, Percy Mayfield, Etta James, B.B. King, Jimmy Reed, Fleetwood Mac, Chris Isaak, Carlos Santana, Bonnie Raitt, Elvin Bishop, Huey Lewis and others.

Now that is quite a list and here was the man performing on the Island in a no-name Irish pub.

Thompson is one of those local gems of the Bay Area we sometimes want to keep under our hats for fear we shall not experience them again in the same way when the word gets out. He walked up to the mike area -- there is no raised stage at McGraths -- took off his coat, leaving on his porkpie hat and simply started to play with concentration amid the bar noise.

Starting out low-key, Thompson played a simple Martin acoustic dreadnought "over the air" into a mic, choosing to begin with spare Robert Johnson and Leadbelly tunes. Taking up a semi-hollowbody f-hole archtop Fender he ramped up into more complex arrangements of 30's tunes by Son

House, Jimmy Reed, Robert Johnson again, and others. His version of Johnson's "Traveling Riverside Blues", was typically tasty as well as truncated, for Thompson never devoted more than three minutes per song as his pace accelerated like a freight train set to blow out the stops and break all the records for getting into Chicago an hour ahead of schedule.

During his second set, he shifted to his creme-colored solid-body Fender Strat to blaze through "Boom Boom" by John Lee Hooker and several other "modern" blues artists as well as a few songs he has written by himself and in collaboration with others. During "Boom Boom", Thompson had worked himself into some kind of trance long previously and he pounded both of his feet as he ripped through the old classic, putting a stop to the inane bar chat and noise from the back with sheer energy.

Unbelievably, his third set continued to ramp up the energy, pulling rapt people from the bar stools to the hard cafeteria seats to watch a real master do his stuff. The pauses between songs virtually disappeared as he went through virtually every major and minor song in the standard blues repertoire, adding complexity and sophistication with each new song until his fingers were dancing up and down the fretboard with incredible speed and his slide moving with pin-sharp precision with not a hint of string rattle.

When playing solo, he used a plastic thumbpick, and no other assistance on the attack, which results in heavy dependence upon basic 4/4 backbeat and R&B shuffle to provide fill. Most of the arrangements he did relied heavily upon

Buddy Holly style rock rhythm. By starting with simple beats, he is able to introduce embellishments with significant effect.

When it came to the last song, he stood up, said, "That's it," then put on his coat and began disassembling his gear with no roadie help whatsoever. Everyone was so astonished they forgot to clap for a moment, even though by that time he had captivated the entire bar, including those who had come purely for the purpose of getting laid.

Talked with Patrick afterwards, who mentioned that he had an interest in becoming more active on the Island in bringing in music. Patrick has organized a fundraiser for the City schools in the past and this year he will again be organizing an event with Rosenblum Cellars to raise funds for Music in the Schools, all the more important an endeavor now that so many programs are being cut in this time of increasing fiscal austerity.

The Pub, converted from an old sailor's dive, is attracting more and more attention as musicians learn about the locale. At the moment, McGrath's is known as the host for the largest bluegrass jam in the country and on any given night one might hear the national fiddle champion meet with the national fingerpicker champion for a little impromptu. We've heard it and we were there.

Anyone who wants to check out the schedule and events taking place at McGrath's, can go to [www.mcgrathspub.com](http://www.mcgrathspub.com).