

## Interview with the Bel Airs

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Brothers Dick and David Pruitt put a little band together in 1981 and called it the BelAirs. This was back in the day that Dickson abided by the 24-hour liquor law, the alley behind the bars was not a pretty sight, and the BelAirs were playing at places like the Swinging Door, The Library and the Landing Strip. We weren't quite old enough to get in those places back then, so we hadn't heard the BelAirs until recently, when they played at Chester's in July – and were so taken aback



by the incredible musicianship of this band that we hunted them down for an interview when they came back in September. From Columbia, Missouri, the BelAirs – Dick on bass, David on guitar, and drummer Michael Cherry – play "lots of different kinds of blues – jumpin' blues, swingin' blues, rockin' blues, jazzy blues and even surfin' blues." They look cool, sound great and have amazing stage presence – if they don't make you say "wow" then nothing will.

*David Pruitt, guitarist, Michael Cherry, drummer & Dick Pruitt, bassist and lead vocals.*

**AAT:** You guys really draw a big crowd when you play here, even though you hadn't played here in a few years. Are they most of the fans you saw back in the 80s?

**Dick:** There's a whole new generation down here. There were a lot of kids here last night and we really like to see that.

**AAT:** A lot has changed in Fayetteville since the early 80s.

**Dick:** It looks a lot different now. We played here a lot from '81 until 1990, when David and his family moved to San Diego. People thought we broke up then, but we never broke up. I would fly out to San Diego for 10 days to two weeks, or David would fly to Columbia and we'd do gigs there. So we were still playing on a part-time basis, about a week out of every month.

**David:** That's when I really got to hate flying. When we moved back in 1995, we went back to full time.

**AAT:** Then why don't you come to Fayetteville more often? Audiences would really like that.

**Dick:** We'd really like to do that, too.

**David:** We really like Fayetteville. It's very unique, and has a consistently strong club scene. There aren't any discos around here, are there?

**AAT:** Just a couple.

**David:** That's a sign of a good live music scene. In Lawrence or Columbia or Springfield, for example, you're lucky if there are one or two good bands playing a night. Here you'll have five or six.

**Dick:** For example, where we live, in Columbia, there's a concert hall that holds 900 people. It would be a great live music venue, but on Wednesday and Saturday nights they have "dance party" DJ night. It's crazy.

**David:** When we play here (in Fayetteville) it's always been at Chester's. Margie (Waggoner, Chester's owner) knew us from before so we kind of gravitated there.

**Dick:** Margie and Bue are great people. The last time we played at Chester's, we got to the one song where I put down my bass and sing, and it's just drums and guitar playing.

**David:** I guess Bue thought we needed a little help, because he ran up there and while Dick was singing, strapped on the bass and tried to help out. By the time he got up there, figured out what key we were in and everything, the song was over.

**Dick:** But that's a pretty cool bar owner, who'll run up and throw on a bass when he thinks you need some help.

**AAT:** Where else do you play?

**David:** We play a lot in the Midwest – Wisconsin, Indiana – and the East Coast. Every Spring we go to the Virgin Islands for a couple of weeks, and we go to Europe.

**Dick:** We have a friend who lives in France, so we go over there once or twice a year. We're going to Paris, France, and maybe Belgium, in December.

**AAT:** What kind of reception do you get in France with American blues?

**Dick:** They like American music. There are a lot of blues musicians there; the local performers come out to hear you play and invite you over for cheese and wine.

**David:** The food's good.

**Dick:** We like clubs, we try not to do too many weddings. We were in Martha's Vineyard once and did a gig, and got hired for several weddings in one week from people who had never heard of us before. One day, we got done with one wedding and had to move on to the next one.

**AAT:** You mean they had no idea if you were going to sing Colour My World or what?

**Dick:** Exactly. And we're talking nice weddings, with the big tents and hundreds of people. So we just start playing and people were like, "cool."

**David:** We had grandmas out there dancing.

**Dick:** We're really eclectic, but what we do best is keep the groove accessible. I mean, there's no way people will have heard the songs we play before. We don't play Mustang Sally. But we try to orchestrate it to where it sounds familiar to them.

**AAT:** That's one of the things I really noticed about your playing. Even when you're playing a fast song, you seem laid back. It's all under control.

**David:** We like to play in the pocket, keep it relaxed.

**Dick:** When we grew up, we were listening to Mom and Dad's swing, big band, jazz and blues on the stereo. This was a big influence on us that I think younger musicians didn't get. If a band is doing a blues shuffle number and starts sounding clunky, they're not swinging – they've bypassed the swing aspect of it.

**David:** The key is the drummer. It took a long time to find Michael.

**AAT:** He is awesome. Where did you find him?

**Dick:** In San Diego.

**David:** I was freelancing out in San Diego whenever Dick and I weren't playing with the BelAirs. Michael was doing the same thing. I always knew when I showed up and Michael was the drummer the gig was gonna be happening. With other drummers I wasn't so sure.

**Dick:** He played with us when we'd get together out there, and when David was getting ready to move back we told Michael about this laid back little town called Columbia, Missouri, and he went for it. He grew up in the Midwest, so that's one of the reasons he knows how to relax.

**AAT:** And now you have a CD out?

**David:** This is our third CD – or second really, the first one was never released on CD. We have one LP on vinyl that was recorded in 1984 – Need Me A Car on Blind Pig Records. Dangerous Curves was recorded on CD in 1989.

**Dick:** "HooDoo Party" came out in May this year. It features Johnny Johnson on piano on about half the songs. Johnny is about 75 years old and plays with us whenever we go to St. Louis.

**AAT:** Where did you get the name "HooDoo Party?"

**Dick:** It's a song from New Orleans that Tabby Thomas wrote.

**AAT:** Is the CD mostly covers?

**Dick:** About half and half. David does most of the writing on the originals.

**David:** They're about half blues and a couple sound like....I don't know how to describe....

**Dick:** Americana.

**David:** There's a lot of New Orleans-style stuff.

**AAT:** What do you see for The BelAirs in the future?

**David:** Write new songs, play lots of gigs, see new places. I love my job.

**Dick:** We're a small group, we can work when and where we want. Lots of touring bands burn themselves out travelling all the time.

**David:** We just want to keep the situation where we're really digging what we're doing.

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