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QUALITIES OF LIFE SCENE

What fun it is to fly and sing

Holiday travel miseries now departing, thanks to musicians hired to make a connection with fliers

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Normally, when people are tapping their feet at an airport, it's a sign of impatience or aggravation.

But on the day before Thanksgiving in Terminal 1 at O'Hare International Airport, it was because the rhythms of the Andre Howard Band had gotten to them.

Oh, sure, you can usually find plenty of music at O'Hare from the sax players and guitarists playing for loose change in the corridors near the parking lots. But the "Holiday Delights" program is a whole schedule of events to make the airport a little more homey around the holidays and let travelers know about Chicago's cultural offerings, said Wendy Abrams, spokeswoman for the city's Department of Aviation.

"Nearly 58 percent of travelers that pass through O'Hare Airport are connecting passengers and may never have the opportunity to experience the diverse cultures and rich communities the City of Chicago has to offer," she said.

Travelers will get an eclectic mixture of musicians making spirits bright--and flight delays more bearable--throughout December, including barbershop quartets, choirs, carolers and a "Nutcracker" performance as well as blues and jazz bands.

Blues at Gate B6

Relana Gomez, a junior mechanical engineering major at the Illinois Institute of Technology, had been expecting a silent night, or at least a boring afternoon, at the airport because her CD player recently broke. Instead, she enjoyed a meal and some quality musicianship at a nearby table as she awaited a flight to visit her father and grandparents on Long Island.

"I didn't think I was going to be able to listen to music and then I heard this," she said, gesturing to the small stage where Howard held court. "My gate's right here. This is perfect."

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Although anything might be better than the syrupy schlock that's sometimes piped into airports and shopping malls, travelers were treated to a Chicago all-star blues band. Bass player and singer Howard is normally part of guitarist Lonnie Brooks' band. And, when they're not helping Howard build up his solo career on the side, guitarist Shun Kikuta, drummer Ricky Nelson and keyboardist Stanley Banks are backing musicians for legendary blues belter Koko Taylor.

The white-and-gray floor tiles near Gate B6 may not have been the Checkerboard Lounge, but Howard made good use of the freedom to roam. He taxied out from behind the microphone to encourage audience participation and peeked around a speaker to admire drummer Nelson's takeoff on a solo.

A brand-new fan

Many passengers stopped; some snapped pictures. The Behrstock family simply sat down on the floor of the concourse to take in a set, and it wasn't just because David Behrstock is a music instructor and theater director back home in Boxborough, Mass. His son, Ian, at 2 1/2, sat transfixed before the band.

"He loves guitars, so we had to stop," David said.

Unlike many travelers, who were either waiting to board or had some time to kill between flights, Chicago was the Behrstocks' destination and they would eventually head up to Wilmette to visit relatives. But young Ian was in no rush to leave the airport and insisted on a front-and-center seat.

"I think he's become a blues fan today," said his mom, Ellie, an arts therapist. "He loves music. He makes cardboard guitars and we all play on them."

David Behrstock, who helps musicians learn to focus while they perform, was especially impressed with Kikuta's guitar work.

"He's very released, very open to the music. In laypersons' terms, he's in the zone."

Howard mixed blues standards with funk favorites like Stevie Wonder's "Superstition" and the R&B classic "Mustang Sally."

"If they stop--all right!--it must be grabbing their attention," said Howard, lounging at a nearby table between sets. "They're so busy here with the holidays. Everybody's got so much to do, they've got so many other things on their mind."

Grabbing just a sliver of that attention span can be daunting, said Mike Adams, a screenwriter from Vancouver, B.C., who was waiting for a connecting flight that would take him to Florida to visit his wife, who is working as a costume set supervisor for the new "Miami Vice" film.

"I've got three hours to kill," he said, hanging out by a bank of pay phones. "The restaurants aren't very appealing, but this was. It's got to be tough for them to play in this kind of environment, but at the same time they're breaking new ground here. I think for the few minutes that people do stop by and get to watch them, they're really getting a treat."

The bluesmen said they weren't bothered by a less-than-captive audience.

"It's a good time, good exposure," said Howard, who has gigs coming up at the venerable Kingston Mines blues club in Chicago and on a Majestic cruise. "That's more or less what it is--exposure and practice and getting the guys together, getting it tighter."

A bluesman's holiday

Blues stars Brooks and Taylor often take some time off during the winter months, which gives Howard a chance to test his wings as a bandleader. For what it's worth, he and the band got a rave review from Adams.

"They say it's easy to play the blues, but it's very, very difficult to play the blues well. I think these guys are doing a pretty good job in a very tough circumstance, so my hat's off to them."

Howard played from 2 to 5 p.m., as did bands in Terminals 2, 3 and 5 and at Midway Airport.

"I think it's great," said Heather Strickland of Grand Rapids, Mich., whose son Riley, 6, got autographs from the band members. "It beats sitting here listening to canned music and eating canned food on the busiest day of the year, so I appreciate it.

"So often the airport is shrink-wrapped--and this is actually real Chicago being brought to the airport."

John Varga, a rheumatologist at Northwestern Memorial Hospital headed to a family gathering in Philadelphia, came back for two helpings of blues from Howard's band with his son Andrew, 11. Wife Julie, an ER doc at Illinois Masonic, set down her purse so she could clap along.

"They should do this every day," John said.

John Varga was one of the most spirited participants in the singalong on "Sweet Home Chicago" that Howard orchestrated, a rousing version that elicited smiles even from passersby hurrying to other gates.

Though she was a bit pressed for time as well, Rochester, N.Y., ballet teacher Kathryn Schroeder paused for a couple of songs on her way to a connecting flight to Omaha.

"We had to wait on the runway for about 15 minutes and people were [angry]," she said. "I don't know if they'll have time to listen, but it's a nice thing to be welcomed by."

Musicians will perform in various terminals at O'Hare and Midway airports on Dec. 13, 14, 15, 22 and 23. Santa appears at the airports on Dec. 16.

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