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'Down at The Crossroads' - A Photo Project In The Making

Every Thursday without fail, something comes alive in the heart of Cotteridge - something you might not expect.....

Just off the Pershore Road in the dip between Cotteridge and Kings Norton, stands a music venue called the 'Tower of Song' – an unlikely looking metal clad unit in the shadow of the Toby Carvery. Come Thursday evening, the venue transforms itself into the Crossroads Blues Club – a fast growing hot bed of local and National blues talent.

Formed and hosted by Ken Stratford and John Wormald (of Chickenbone Blues Band fame), the club has gone from strength to strength. It meets every Thursday – a loose collective of players and supporters, all with a common love of 'The Blues'.

Several months back, one of the blues club regulars, photographer Mark Bennett, decided to initiate a photo project documenting the 'goings on' at the club. The aim - live music photography with a 'fly on the wall' documentary approach and a fine art feel; the goal to create a creative body of work that captures the essence of 'The Crossroads' – great live blues music on a local level.

'I'm always on the look out for new photo project ideas', says Bennett. 'This one just fell into my lap really. I've been down there most weeks playing solo acoustic on the open mic sessions and electric on the jam sessions with the odd feature slot every few months. I'm a photographer by day, but my interest been dwindling somewhat as my attentions have turned once again towards music. I've been looking at ways to 'rekindle my photography fire' and move my work more towards music. Once this idea popped up, it just seemed an obvious starting point.'

The photography has all been done very low key and unobtrusively using a hand held, largely available light documentary approach. A small semi-pro digital bridge camera with good optical zoom, waist and high level finder, was a far cry from his usual professional gear, but just the ticket for this particular self-assignment.

'I needed something unobtrusive that I could just sling over my shoulder and not worry about. Especially as one minute I could be shooting, and then the next

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minute playing! I need to be able to just blend in really, and the tilt screen enables me to get great high and low angles without really getting in anyone's way. After a week or two, I have just become part of the furniture.....'

But the photography is a far cry from the casual snapshot.

'It's part 'capturing the moment' – part observation. I shoot lots of frames whenever I'm down there. I do all the obvious 'safe' stuff to make sure I have something 'in the bag', but then go looking for the unusual. It is the quirky angles or compositions, the little cameo observations that sum up the atmosphere and vibe of the place that makes this project so special. As the overall end product is hopefully going to be a book or exhibition the shots all have to work well together on the page (or wall!) to tell a story. I'm looking for a balance of wide shots, action close ups, crowd action, details, and the little one-off cameos that are really all about observation. However apparently mundane the subject, there is always something new to photograph.

'The capturing of this raw material is just the first step. From that I carefully cream off what I feel is the very best from each particular night. These are then worked up in Photoshop – hand-printed in effect as we used to do in the darkroom. I'm nodding in the direction of the old black and white jazz photography of Herman Leonard, William Claxton, Bob Willoughby, Jim Marshall etc but with a subtle contemporary stylistic slant.'

The location stays the same, but the key subjects (the performers), the audience, and the lighting changes weekly. 'That's what I love about it as a self-contained project - no two weeks are the same. As the 'best shots' are constantly being superseded, the final edit will come later, at the culmination of the project. Only then will the full flavour reveal itself – until then it's very much a work in progress.'

Mark will soon be approaching the arts council etc for possible funding to try and get a photo-book/exhibition off the ground. He is also on the lookout for suitable exhibition venues. Any ideas or potential leads are welcomed. Mark can be contacted via mark@markbennett.co.uk.

Hopefully from the enclosed sample photography you can get a taste of 'The Crossroads', Birmingham style! If you like what you see, Thursday September 18th is a special date in the history of the club – it is their first year anniversary and to celebrate, they have a one off special – Perry Foster supported by Abie Budgen.

Tickets for this night are £5 (the club is usually free to all) and are selling fast so if you want to be a part of history in the making get in touch with the club at www.towerofsong.co.uk/blues or via kenstratford@hotmail.com.

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Mark Bennett is sharing the bill with Sam Cornwell on Thursday September 11th.

***Crossroads Blues Club meets every Thursday at 'The Tower of Song',
107 Pershore Road South, Cotteridge, B30 3JX. Open mic followed by one
or two acts (music from 8.45pm).***

**Further information from Ken Stratford
kenstratford@hotmail.com**

**Crossroads Blues Club links:
www.towerofsong.co.uk/blues
www.myspace.com/crossroadsbluesclub**

Photographer's links:

**www.myspace.com/markbennettacoustic
www.markbennett.co.uk
mark@markbennett.co.uk.**

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