

# Deborah Sings The Blues

She travels the world performing with her guitars and then comes home to her Hampton Roads roots.

About 500 blues fans gather at Virginia Beach's Starfish Pavilion as a cool ocean breeze tempers a warm afternoon. All weekend they have grooved to the sounds of September's annual Blues at the Beach Festival. Now the much-anticipated finale approaches, featuring a hometown gal who hit the big time.

"All right, here's what you've all been waiting for," intones emcee Mark Johnson of Natchel Blues Network, the Norfolk-area blues society who sponsors the festival. "She started locally with us and has blossomed worldwide. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome our own *Debo-rraaaah Cooleman*."

## Whirling Dervish

On cue Deborah bolts from backstage, an unleashed bundle of energy, already wailing on her electric guitar. Backed by the Thrillseekers—her guitar, bass, and drums band—she struts around on 3-inch heels that can't hide her petite stature. She wears a sleeveless T-shirt emblazoned "Women Fly," and fly she does. Her quick fingers scramble over the strings.

She stomps along the lip of the stage, circling back to the microphone



PHOTOGRAPHS: VINCE LUPO



**above:** Blues guitarist Deborah Coleman launched her career at Norfolk-area clubs. **left:** Silhouetted against windswept flags and the Atlantic, Deborah converses with a loyal audience through her instrument.

to belt out lyrics, most of them her own, in a bold, husky voice. At times, hunched over her strings, she appears to be having an intimate conversation with them. Yet the knowing glances she shoots toward the audience clearly invite eavesdropping.

At this particular event she recognizes a lot of familiar faces among the people dancing between the open-air stage and the beach beyond. That's be-

cause even after years of performing all over the country and as far away as Spain, Belgium, and Poland, Deborah steadfastly calls Norfolk home.

"I could live anywhere, I guess," she says later, "but I like it here. This is home, and it always will be."

## Her Road to the Blues

Growing up in a military family, Deborah lived on a variety of Navy

bases before putting down roots and coming of age in Portsmouth. A plastic dime store guitar her father sometimes strummed on the porch hinted at her future. She picked it up at age 8, the first of what's now an impressive collection of much-better Gibson, Fender, Martin, and other guitars.

Following a teenage interest in musical styles ranging from Jimi Hendrix to The Monkees, Deborah formed an all-girl rock band. They practiced Cream and Led Zeppelin tunes at each other's houses for years while she made a living wiring houses as a licensed electrician and then played local clubs.

She discovered the blues when old-time bluesmen Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, and John Lee Hooker performed at a nearby college. "I heard them, and I was hooked," Deborah remembers. "It was like I'd found my roots. From then on, I leaned toward the blues and learned everything I could."

### Keeping Good Company

She has met and in some cases shared stages with many of her heroes, including R.L. Burnside, Bonnie Raitt, B.B. King, Koko Taylor, and Charlie Musselwhite. From those influences she has developed a unique style, whether interpreting the old standard "Stormy Monday" or playing her own songs with names such as "Bad Boy," "Torn in Two," "Soft Place to Fall," and "Goodbye Misery."

Blazing a trail, she played steadily bigger clubs and festivals and recorded nine (to date) live and studio albums. Other successes came in the form of several W.C. Handy Award nominations, positive coverage in music magazines, and endorsement deals with guitar makers.

### Favorite Fishing Holes

Concert tours take her away, but Deborah loves returning to her modest house in suburban Suffolk. "My parents live close, and my daughter,



Onstage, Deborah trades riffs with Hiromasa Suzuki, a longtime member of her band, the Thrillseekers.

Misao, and her 4-year-old, Ricardo, live with me," she says, "so I have a grandson to play with."

Being home helps her songwriting. "On the road it's too crazy to write," she says. "I get my best ideas when I'm just hanging around here. I might finish a song in five minutes or toy with a phrase or a story for years before it feels right, if it ever does."

Meanwhile, she catches fish. "That's another reason I come home to Norfolk," she says with a tomboy grin. "I know all the good fishing holes around here. There are piers and riverbanks along the St. James where I've gone since I was little to hook croaker and spot and flounder. I mostly live on stages and in recording studios and hotel rooms, so it's great to have a real place like this to call home."

JOE RADA

To learn more about Deborah Coleman's music and concerts, visit [www.deborahcoleman.com](http://www.deborahcoleman.com). For more information about the Blues at the Beach Festival (September 16-18 in Virginia Beach), visit [www.natchelblues.org](http://www.natchelblues.org).