

Bands embrace sounds of soul

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They're drawn to music's raw, no-frills groove

By Steve Morse, Globe Staff | February 4, 2005

Jordan Valentine was seeking a danceable sound with "popping grooves," as she put it. The 28-year-old Somerville resident found it in classic soul music. It may predate her generation, but as Valentine says: "People are looking for something different – and this is it for me."

Indeed, a soul revival is starting to boom again. Valentine's band – called the World's Greatest Sinners – has been flooring crowds with its sassy romp through nuggets by Ray Charles and Bobby "Blue" Bland, along with lesser-known but no less exciting dips into Erma Franklin's "I Don't Want No Mama's Boy" and Cookie Jackson's "I Got to Know."

"There's a toughness and a rawness to soul music that I love," says Valentine. "I grew up on Motown and my mother was a huge soul fan. It is just honest, no-frills music." Valentine delivers it that way, belting out the likes of Charles's "Mess Around" and Johnny Taylor's "Testify" and fronting a horn-stoked band that is having as much fun as she is.

Soul music has been given a boost by the Charles biopic, "Ray," and his Grammy-nominated "Genius Loves Company" album. But several new Boston acts – from the World's Greatest Sinners to the Soul Band and Eli "Paperboy" Reed – say they're not trying to capitalize on any trend.

"It's just paying respect to a Southern soul tradition that has been lost," says Brad Hallen, bassist for the Soul Band, which performs a Memphis-steeped set every Tuesday at Glenn's in Newburyport. "And if Wilson Pickett or Howard Tate comes to town, we want to be the people who back them up."

The Soul Band, which features two Roomful of Blues members in Hallen (who also toured with Susan Tedeschi) and saxophonist Mark Earley, started doing a blues night at Glenn's last year, but "then we learned a bunch of soul tunes and we switched over to a soul night." Their repertoire now exceeds 60 tunes by such onetime giants as Pickett, Otis Redding, Eddie Floyd, James Carr, and Sam & Dave. And their singer, Tim Pike, a New Hampshire native, has a stunning ability to recreate the heyday of Memphis's Stax/Volt label sound.

The Soul Band includes guitarist Monster Mike Welch, who notes, "None of the music is complicated. The songs tend to be very direct and to the point. They tell a story and they don't overstate things like a lot of today's music." Adds Hallen: "We're also looking back to acts like the Grease Band, Mad Dogs & Englishmen, and Edgar Winter's White Trash Band. They modeled everything on Southern soul."

This past Tuesday at the Lizard Lounge, the Sinners played one of the most joyous sets in memory. "I never stop feeling good about this music. It's all about romance and dancing and having a good time," says Valentine, who also performs in the local rock group Valhalla Kittens. The Sinners' next big local gig is at the Overdraught Pub on St. Patrick's Day, March 17.

Opening for the Sinners was Reed, 21, who starts a Tuesday residency at Zuzu! next week. Reed grew up in Brookline and is an encyclopedia of soul music. He was first exposed to it by his dad, Howard. After high school, he learned more about it from Sam Carr, who is Robert Nighthawk's son.

Reed is ahead of the game because one-third of his set is original material. "I want to play this music for kids my age in the punk bars," says Reed, a former paperboy for the Globe. "A lot of kids I grew up with are in basements listening to hardcore. But I want them to listen to this and get caught up in the feeling of it just as I have."