



Irene Popa

The Winner of the 2022 Tulsa Blues Challenge Primed for IBC in Memphis
When blues diva Irene Popa won the 17th Annual Solo/Duo Blues Challenge September 8th, which was sponsored by the Blues Society of Tulsa and hosted by Maggie's Music Box, it just didn't happen overnight. At age 25, she had been preparing for this moment from the time she could barely walk.

Music has always been in her blood. She has been singing since she was a year old. When Irene was 3 years old she got her first instrument, a toy guitar from a grocery store and got her music juices really flowing. Her mother saw the potential talent and had her learning piano two years later. At age 12, Irene got her first real guitar and the rest is history!
Then, around age 15 the native Tulsan first heard that distinctive harp playing on Neil Young's Heart of Gold. Upon hearing this, she headed over to Firey Bros. music store, bought a harp, went back home where it took her all of 20 minutes to learn Heart of Gold with her Mississippi saxophone (harmonica).

Another significant event occurred when Irene was living near Ed's Hurricane Lounge while she was attending Rogers High School. "I would busk up and down Route 66 with my guitar and harp. I heard music coming from the bar. It was a Saturday and I just stood outside of Ed's and listened to them play. I thought, man I've got to get in there somehow," Irene recalled. She was 16 at the time. Irene then learned that she could have gone in and played, if she had the proper documentation from the state and an adult guardian with her, but her parents didn't want her in the bars. So, one day, she found her Mother's ID. "I was thinking she really looks young for her age and we look a lot alike. So I took it and I started hitting all the jams with Mom's ID...." Three months before she turned 21, a local bar discovered that she was really underage and blasted her all over social media, so Irene laid low until her birthday.

In 2015 Irene competed in the Blues Society of Tulsa's Solo/Duo competition, without ever having played a gig. Since then she has been a part of the competition a couple of times with a local band. All of it proved to contribute to her growth in capturing the 2022 Solo/Duo challenge involving four other acts.

Her winning set list for the challenge consisted of original material. She started with Mississippi Style. It was inspired by harmonica player Deak Harp (James Cotton, Johnny Winter, Grateful Dead) who she hung out with at the annual SPAH (Society for the Preservation and Advancement of the Harmonica) convention in Tulsa last summer.

The lyrics for Irene's next song, Born Cryin', goes "I was born cryin', don't tell me I ain't got the blues." As with all the songs, they were shortened to fit into the 15 minute performance at the Challenge.

Piedmont Pickin' followed as an instrumental in a Robert Johnson style. After the competition that evening Irene met with a master of the Piedmont style blues, her friend, 2009 IBC winner Little Joe McLerran, who was in the audience to support her.

Joe invited her and a friend of her's over to his place where they played music for hours. Joe is mentoring Irene in her preparation for the International Blues Challenge January 24 - 28, 2023 in Memphis. For 8 years, and 4 different BST competitions , Irene has been dreaming of going to Memphis . "When I first heard about the competition, I thought man I'd love to do that," she said. Well, her time has arrived.

Irene's fourth song at the Tulsa challenge was Full Grown Woman, a 12-bar blues tune she wrote "that just came off the top of my head." She wrapped up her set with a reprise of Mississippi Style.

Irene names many influences in her young career, and among the first was Sonny Terry and Brownie McGee, along with Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf. She also recalls meeting some of Tulsa's finest. One was the late Rocky Frisco who was playing at a local club, the old Dirty Knuckle. Rocky told her, "You can come back here and play that harmonica anytime you want."

Another memorable occasion in her young days came when she was dining at Yokozuna Restaurant and saw a flier for the harmonica summit. "That's where I got to meet Jimmy Markham and heard him playing harmonica. It just blew me away. I had never heard anything like that", she said.

A few years ago when Buddy Guy performed at the then Brady Theater (now the Tulsa Theater), Irene was invited by Buddy to play on stage. Through that she would soon be gracing the stage at Buddy Guy's Legends in Chicago.

It takes a new generation to keep the Blues alive, and Irene Popa is fulfilling that role. We wish her the best as she represents Tulsa and Northeast Oklahoma in Memphis come this January.

--Billy Austin Martin