

## Music

The members of Porter Davis (Mike Meadows, from left, Dan Barrett and Simon Wallace) decided to move to Texas for quality-of-life reasons.

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June 20, 2007, 5:20PM

# Porterdavis offers blues-infused roots, rhythm and rock

By EILEEN MCCLELLAND  
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When the band porterdavis left Boston for Austin in 2004, its unfinished album immediately reflected the change of locale, lead singer and guitarist Dan Barrett said.

"We finished the album in Texas and redid a few tunes here, and ... the post-Texas songs were so laid-back, slower and groovier. And the Boston version still sounded like we were looking for a parking spot — frantically looking for a parking spot."

The band got its start and its name in Boston.

Although Barrett has often been the target of shouts of "Hey, Porter!" there's no guy in the band named Porter Davis. After studies at Berklee College of Music in Boston, Barrett and percussionist and vocalist Mike Meadows began performing in two Boston subway stops — Porter Square Station and Davis Station.

*Voilà!* The band had a name.

Even in the subway days, they never doubted they'd stick with the music.

"We were both clear in our own right that we were going to do this, so when we met someone else who was as unwavering and had a similar musical sensibility, there was no going back. It was almost odd," Barrett said.

Since then, they've pursued a musical career relentlessly. They were selling out shows at one of Boston's premier listening rooms, the Lizard Lounge, before they decided to move to Austin for quality-of-life reasons.

"Austin fits our values and what we like to do, the type of music we appreciate. Even down to the food and Barton Springs. It was a holistic decision. There was no one thing, but it all made sense."

### RESOURCES

## PORTERDAVIS

- **When:** 8 p.m. Friday, June 22

- **Where:** Anderson Fair, 2007 Grant

- **Tickets:** \$10 at the door or online at [www.andersonfair.com](http://www.andersonfair.com)

Simon Wallace, a vocalist and blues harmonica champion from the United Kingdom, joined them in Austin in 2004. Three-part harmony and down-and-dirty swamp blues ensued. In 2005 porterdavis released *15 Hours Unraveling*, its debut full-length album. It reached No. 10 on Waterloo Records' national sales chart and No. 2 in Texas. The latest release, *porterdavis live at eddie's attic*, recorded at Atlanta venue Eddie's Attic, is highly addictive.

This year, the band was also a finalist for the Kerrville Folk Festival's New Folk award.

The band plays its mix of originals and classics at listening rooms, house concerts and college campuses. In many cases, it's the first blues-infused music the young audiences have encountered.

"Not too long ago we were in Charlotte, N.C., and this dad came up and said, 'My daughter said she liked blues. I never thought I'd hear those words come out of her mouth.'

"I think if you were in college when Led Zeppelin or (Eric) Clapton were coming up, some of the blues traditions would be a little more in your ears," Barrett said. "But not so many bands today are rooted in it — or they are rooted in it but they don't seem to know they are."

Educating fans about musical traditions is one of their goals.

"What would really be a hoot would be to know that we turn some people on to blues music," he said. "And not just blues. Roots music has a very literal and a more figurative meaning to me. When I started listening to (Bob) Dylan, then I wanted to check out the Carter Family and Johnny Cash. When I listened to Eric Clapton, I wanted to check out Buddy Guy and B.B. King and Robert Johnson. I would love to instill that kind of curiosity."

Barrett and Meadows also studied music in Ghana in West Africa. Meadows' choice of percussion instruments and techniques — drawn from Africa and Brazil and filtered through U.S. traditions — can seem exotic and familiar at the same time.

Since drums weren't allowed in Boston subway stations, Meadows had to be creative from the beginning, using anything that sounded like a drum — a tambourine, for example — but didn't really look like one.

"Watching him play is a lot like watching a magician," says John Wilson of YourTexasMusic.com. "You keep thinking that the harder you stare at him the easier it will be to understand how he makes all of those sounds. Dream on. I finally just gave up and concentrated on the sound. It was still magic."

In Africa, porterdavis' founders also adopted the ritual of paying tribute to their musical heroes — Ray Charles, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Elvin Jones, Miles Davis, Townes Van Zandt, Muddy Waters, Little Walter and others — before every show, by toasting to the show and pouring a bit of their beverages on the floor.

It's called a libation ceremony.

"Before you were allowed to study with any particular tribe you had to do a little ceremony where you honored the spirits in the drums and the past teachers. People have thought we are being silly, but we're very earnest about that. If there was a thesis statement to our band, it would be to honor the roots of the musicians who came before you."

In Africa, music is both more and less mystical, he said. "You just live in music there. Everybody's a musician or a dancer. It's not projected onto a few people, it's shared communally. It's really pretty inspiring."

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