

Guitarist has world on a string

By NATE DOW

MUSIC

Something about the blues attracts teen guitar phenoms.

Kenny Wayne Shepherd, Joe Bonamassa, Jonny Lang and Lexington's own Monster Mike Welch are but a few of the prodigies drawn to the blues guitar's gritty power.

Like those before him, Luke Mulholland surprises audiences with his prowess on the strings. Unlike the others, the 19-year-old Toronto native cannot trace his

development to a single act or influence. He's not sure how a homemade album, produced at age 13, led him to where he is now: studying at Berklee and opening for such acts as the Fabulous Thunderbirds, Blue Oyster Cult and, on Sunday at the Paradise, Pat McGee and Ernie Halter.

"I don't know what sparked it, really," Mulholland said of his musical inclinations. "My dad got me a classical guitar when I was 10. Then I had an electric guitar that I picked up when I was around 12 and it just began to click."

His skills gained him a small following and modest gigs in his hometown, but it was an "American Idol"-like instance of providence at 16 that vaulted him beyond novelty act.

"There was a contest on the radio (in 2005) where you'd enter an original song," Mulholland said at Smoken' Joe's Blues & BBQ in Brighton last week as he waited to play a guest spot with the Gumbo Kings. "My manager in Toronto entered this song of mine called 'Baby Stay With Me.' Next thing I know, I get a call from the radio station saying, 'Hey, you're opening for Bon Jovi Friday.' I said, 'Sure. Twenty-thousand people. OK.'"

Two days later, he was onstage at the Air Canada Centre, the Toronto equiva-

lent of TD Banknorth Garden, playing the Jimi Hendrix-inspired rock blues that has become his trademark.

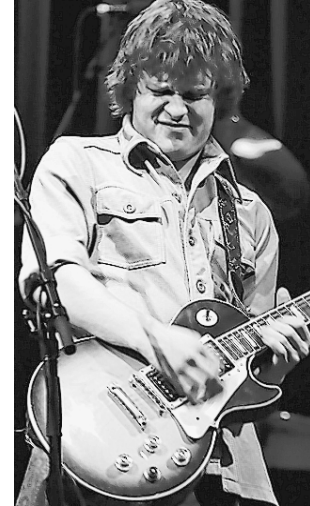
"I was nervous right up until I hit the first note," Mulholland said with a grin. "And then I was like, Oh, this feels right. I'm supposed to be playing music. We played eight songs for, like, a half-hour. All originals except for ending with (Hendrix's) 'Red House.' The crowd loved it."

His instant notoriety soon led Mulholland to enlist more management help and a Los Angeles public relations firm, moves that would lessen the need for financial assistance and guidance from his doctor father and writer mother. But rock stardom was not a priority. Berklee beckoned.

"There's no one who knows it all — not even Stevie Ray (Vaughan)," said Mulholland, who's a sophomore majoring in songwriting. "Berklee not only seemed like a good idea, but turned out to be a good idea. I've never been happier or more inspired. Berklee has done wonders for me. It's the best choice I ever made. Plus, I fell in love with Boston."

Now living in Mission Hill, this son of the Great White North has even traded in his Maple Leafs loyalty for a Bruins sweater. But he has an admission that might surprise his fellow Canadians, including his dad, a former skater who almost made it into the National Hockey League.

"I'm actually a bigger Red Sox fan now," he said. "I wasn't into baseball until I came to Boston. I saw them win the World Series last year. They're a great team."



STAFF PHOTO BY MATT STONE

MULHOLLAND DRIVE: Luke Mulholland performs at Showcase Live in Foxboro.

Not such a surprise, really. Mulholland knows a phenomenon when he sees one. — natedow@bostonherald.com

Luke Mulholland, opening for Pat McGee and Ernie Halter at the Paradise, Sunday, 18-plus. Tickets: \$15; 617-562-8800.