

# Retire? Siegel having career year

BY JEFF JOHNSON

Blues

**C**orky Siegel's year would represent a prolific career for most other musicians.

The harmonica player, vocalist and composer is fresh off a tour with the Chicago Blues Reunion and a top-of-the-blues-charts live album, "Buried Alive in the Blues," but the music never stops. That band of brothers-in-blues who were weaned on the classic Chicago sound of Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf in the 1960s is just one of three major endeavors for Siegel.

Saturday night his longtime group, the Siegel-Schwally Blues Band, celebrates the release of its new Alligator album, "Flash Forward," with a show at FitzGerald's in Berwyn. Siegel-Schwally is also on a Nov. 19 double bill with label mate and blues queen Koko Taylor at the Center for Performing Arts at Governors State University in University Park.

Finally, Siegel is continuing his groundbreaking and critically acclaimed effort to wed classical music with the blues through Corky Siegel's Chamber Blues. The ensemble released "Corky Siegel's Traveling Chamber Blues Show!" in January, and performs somewhat regularly before audiences who are constantly astonished that the two seemingly disparate musical styles can blend so seamlessly. The next Chicago area appearance of Chamber Blues is slated for Oct. 22 at Elgin Community College.

As his 62nd birthday approaches next month, Siegel can't quite believe that he finds himself in the thick of so many projects.

"I was planning on retiring on another level from the industry—moving away from any interest

whatever in the concept of promotion," he says. "I wanted to lay back and just do the performances as they come up and focus entirely on the juice. Then all of a sudden all this stuff started happening and I was obligated to Alligator and all these other people."

The wish to step back does not apply to the music, he emphasizes. Even as a young musician, he says, "I never thought I'd ever have a moment in my living life when I wouldn't be making music."

On tour with the Chicago Blues Reunion, vocalist-guitarist Nick Gravenites joked that the band could use a full-time nurse. Despite the advancing age of most members (Siegel is at the younger end of the spectrum), the tour went off without a hitch, and the group expects to hit the road again soon, Siegel says.

It should come as no surprise that the Blues Reunion was so warmly received. It's a greatest-hits revue, with the band's six all-star players—Siegel, Gravenites, Tracy Nelson, Harvey Mandel, Barry Goldberg and Sam Lay—doing the songs for which they're best known. Ironically, Siegel says the reason the Blues Reunion works so well musically is because of the contributions of the group's two unsung heroes, guitarist Gary Mallaber and bassist Rick Reed.

But the buzz that's being generated by the first new album of Siegel-Schwally material in 30 years could not have been antici-

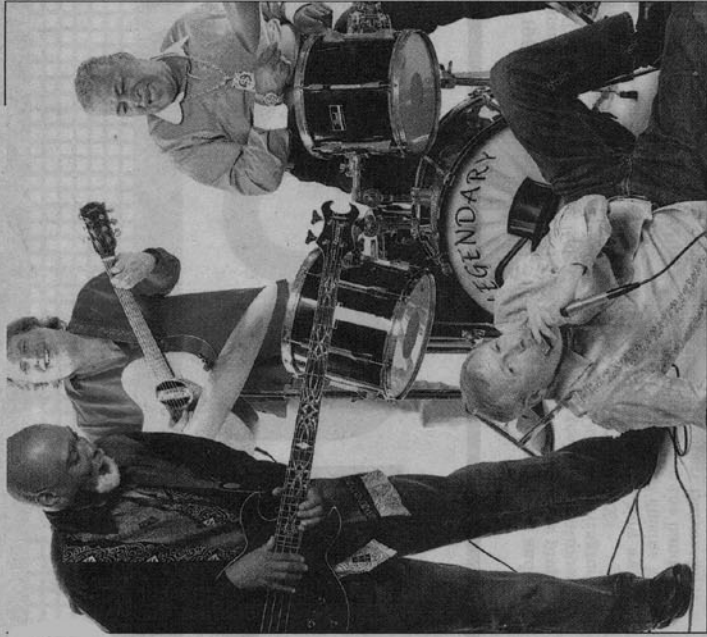
## SIEGEL-SCHWALL BAND CD RELEASE SHOW

- ◆ 9 p.m. Saturday
- ◆ FitzGerald's, 6615 W. Roosevelt, Berwyn
- ◆ Tickets, \$20
- ◆ (708) 788-2118

pated. The Chicago-based band once had limited appeal to hardcore blues fans, who considered Siegel-Schwally too pop-oriented or lightweight in its heyday. But while the band's trademark catchy novelty songs remain on "Flash Forward," the return of genre-defining blues shuffle drummer Lay, who played with Siegel-Schwally in its early days, has transformed the group into a blues machine in the tradition of the Chicago legends.

"My main focus was really to get the flavor of Sam's drums," Siegel says. "There's no one else in the world who plays like him."

Siegel, guitarist Jim Schwally and bassist Rollo Radford all contribute compositions to "Flash Forward," and Siegel encouraged Lay to try his hand at songwriting. "Sam said he never wrote anything before," Siegel says. "I told him, 'I'll help you. We can collaborate.' He'd write something and send it to me, and I write back with some comments.



**The Siegel-Schwally Band** — Corky Siegel (front), Rollo Radford (from left), Jim Schwally and Sam Lay — plays Saturday at FitzGerald's to celebrate the release of its new album "Flash Forward."

He'd ignore my comments and then finish the song. Within the next couple of days he wrote eight songs, and within two weeks he wrote 13 songs."

While Siegel is thrilled with his recent blues projects, it's his blues-classical hybrid that sets him apart from other artists. The winner of a prestigious Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Meet the Composer Composition Award in the late '90s, Siegel speaks with passion and paternal pride when he discusses Chamber Blues.

"There are a couple of things about Chamber Blues that people might not be aware of," he says. "One is just the concept of spreading the blues. The so-

called 'blues police' don't realize how this is helping to spread the word. We're doing a great service to the blues community, whether people know it or not.

"The other thing that Chamber Blues is doing is changing the whole idea of what people think music is. After concerts, people will come up and say, 'Here's blues and here's classical, and how can that work together? It's impossible.' But it really does work together. People become more open."