



OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
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CONTACT:

Mayor's Press Office

312.744.3334

press@cityofchicago.org

Mayor Emanuel Interviews Blues Artist Toronzo Cannon on Chicago Stories Podcast

On this week's episode, Mayor Emanuel celebrated the one-year anniversary of [Chicago Stories](#) with CTA Driving, world-touring blues artist Toronzo Cannon. They talked about everything from writing songs on his route, the difference between West Side and South Side blues, how he balances his passion with the rest of his life, and much more. (He even played a few songs for good measure.)

Toronzo's story with the blues began while he was growing up in his grandparents' home on the South Side. "It was blues in the house, but it wasn't a genre for me," Toronzo said. "It was 'ok, my grandparents listen to this music.'"

As Toronzo said, his "full-circle" moment with the blues didn't happen until he was in his 20s when he began performing music himself—making him a late-comer to most musicians—and started playing blues jams around the city.

"Every jam you go to in Chicago is like a blues jam, basically," Toronzo said.

After a few years in a reggae band and as a side-man to other blues acts, Tornzo struck out on his own with his own group, The Cannonball Express.

Toronzo's passion for the blues isn't just driven by his own playing, but for its seminal impact on American popular music.

"I always look at the Grammy's and these other award shows, American Music Awards, and say they would not be there if it wasn't for the blues," Toronzo said. "No one would be on that stage. It'd be crickets."

As Toronzo told Mayor Emanuel, he also finds a responsibility in being a Chicago blues man, but that doesn't mean he's resting on the genre's laurels. Thanks in part to his own unique musical background and personal story, Toronzo works to find what best for what matters most to the song: it's story.

"In my storytelling I need extra chords," Toronzo said. "I can't do it in three chords like the old-timers used to do it...the story needs to shine a little better."

Many of those stories are drawn from the every day life he witnesses on his bus route.

121 NORTH LASALLE STREET, ROOM 507, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60602

“I’ll have pieces of paper and at red lights if I come up with an idea,” Toronzo said. “Or if I hear a conversation on the bus that’s interesting, I’ll try to elaborate on it.”

Toronzo is lucky enough to be able to balance his full-borne passion with his day job and family life. It’s the kind of stuff most people can only dream of.

“You gotta to do what you gotta do to do what you wanna do,” Toronzo said. “I don’t want to just be a bus driver and you come home from sitting in traffic all day, people cursing at you, people cutting you off in traffic, and go home and not touch my guitar. I don’t want to be that guy.”

Right now, Toronzo’s gearing up to go on tour—first to the East Coast, then Southern Europe. After that, it’s on to the new album, which he hoping to release in November on Alligator Records.

Be sure to listen to the full episode as Toronzo and Mayor Emanuel talk about his regulars, his favorite venues, his blues idols, how he fights writer’s block and a memorable night in Armenia.

And don’t forget to check out the Chicago Blues Festival this weekend in Millennium Park, the largest free blues festival in the world, covering three nights on four stages.

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