## Life Sweet at 16 for 'Monster' Blues Player !

Despite his youth, Mike Welch is a music-scene veteran with a debut album.

By JAMES E. FOWLER TIMES STAFF WRITER

n the cover of his debut album, 16-year-old blues guitarist "Monster" Mike Welch stands with his Fender Stratocaster held rakishly at his hip and smiles the sly smile of a person who wants to share a secret.

Welch, who's playing at B.B. King's on Monday, is currently on tour promoting his album, "These Blues Are Mine." Welch has said that he wanted his first album to be a cocky and confident endeavor, and it seems that he's gotten his wish.

The album is a pleasant ride with Monster Mike exclusively behind the wheel. Although it covers some fairly familiar territory, the young man travels the major thoroughfares and side streets of the 12-bar form like a chauffeur many years his senior. And he's not shy about it. The CD features 12 original songs by Welch. Where does a kid who's still wet behind his guitar strap learn to play and sing like that?

"I've been playing guitar for nine or 10 years now," Welch says. "I'm just learning how to express myself."

Despite his youth, Welch is a veteran of the Boston blues scene. By the time he was 11, he was sitting in on Beantown blues jams. In 1992, when he was 13, Welch played at the opening of the Cambridge House of Blues and shared the stage with Dan Aykroyd, Junior Wells, Joe Walsh and Paul

Shaffer.

According to legend and a record company press release, upon hearing this man/child work his magic, Aykroyd christened the teenager "Monster" Mike.

On the telephone, Welch proved to be as adept at talking as he is at playing. What does he like about

"I don't know if my age has any connection with my liking this—it's the emotional directness of the music," says Welch. "It's also the 'Listen to me, I'm the most important thing in the room' quality."

But unlike many young people his age, Welch knows the blues is a long road.

"We achieved something with



Blues guitarist Mike Welch, shown on the cover of his new CD, said he wanted his first album to be a cocky, confident endeavor.

the first record," he says. "But it's still just steps in the process.

"I want to learn to do with my one note [of music] what Muddy Waters could do with his."

■ Monster Mike Welch plays Monday night at B.B. King's Blues Club, Universal CityWalk. \$6 cover. Call (818) 622-5464.

Singing the Blues: Preston Smith is sometimes called a consummate blues singer. Smith does sing the blues, but he's quick to note that his music is not restricted to the 12-bar form.

"It's blues, but it's crossover, too," says Smith, who's playing Sundays during the month of August at Jax.

Indeed, Smith is the kind of blues man who, along with Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker and Jimi Hendrix, lists jazz great Louis Armstrong as a major influence.

"His [Armstrong's] phrasing as a singer, he's one of the most important players of American music," Smith says. "His voice is just so smooth, but it conveys a lot of emotion as well."

Smith is the kind of blues man who will sometimes scat sing a trumpet solo during his rendition of "When You Wish Upon a Star," from Disney's "Pinocchio."

And some of the songs Smith writes wouldn't be classified as blues either.

His original song "Black & White" was a hit record for country music artist Rosanne Cash. And his own recording of his song "Oh, I Love You So," with its distinctive calypso feel, was included on the soundtrack of the Tom Cruise film "Cocktail."

Smith's first album, "Preston Smith," was released on Curb-Capitol Records, and he is currently shopping a new CD, tentatively titled "Feel," to the major labels.

He has appeared on Johnny Carson's "Tonight Show," "Star Search" and numerous other television and radio shows. And he's been on stage with artists as varied as John Mayall, the Red Hot Chilis Peppers, Dwight Yoakam and Eddie Van Halen.

With a little of this and a little of that, Smith works the room with his guitar, harmonica, his side men—drummer Rick Shlosser and bassist Tony Ruiz—and whatever else is close by or catches his fancy.

"Man does not live by blues alone," Smith is quick to say.

Preston Smith and the Blue Crocodiles play Sundays in August, at Jax, 339 N. Brand Blvd., Glendard Call (818) 500-1604.