

## A Blues Discoverer's Journey and Saga

Reporting from Memphis where we met one member of the International Blues Challenge jury, a talented artist of international fame. And above all one that stands close to the blues roots. His teachers and mentors were nobody more than the likes of famous T.Bone Walker, Muddy Waters and Son House in person. Beyond the musical aspect of the blues and various styles to be tackled, Michael is an open book on the greatest blues icons history. A bit of Blues philosophy and a career that started more than 50 years ago, warming for John Lee Hooker and following him all over the United States. An Interview rich in insights and underlying messages about what the Blues really is....

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**Blues Magazine** : Hi Michael, the IBC finale just achieved and results are told. Blues is raging up all over the town and its spirit is going well. How are you today ?

**Michael Hawkeye Hermann** : I'm fine. Coming to Memphis always means a lot in the life of a bluesman. Even more when it's for the IBC. Here I have an opportunity to meet old friends, have a good time together, and socialize with new ones. We are one great family, the Blues family.

**BM** : Let's start with a key issue : how did you meet the Blues ?

**MHH** : I was raised along the Mississippi River. When I was young, I worked as a paperboy to get some dollars. One day, because I'd been a good boy and done a good job, I've been offered a transistor radio.... It was in 1956, I was eleven. At that time, transistor radios were high technology. No stereo, no headphones, just a little low-power mono speaker. The size of that radio was that of a pack of cigarettes. I brought it at home. I was very proud of it. It took a short time to me to discover that I could pick up stations from almost everywhere, in America, Canada, Mexico,... but only by night, with little disturbance. At night, while using my speaker very low to be sure that my parents couldn't hear it, I used to try to recognize from where programs were broadcasted. *That's New York, this one is Toronto, and that one Los Angeles.* On night, I bumped into Memphis broadcasting, a Blues program. I'll never forget the first song I heard, "*Killing Floor*" by Howlin' Wolf. The lamp was turned off, I did my best to keep it quiet, but I couldn't prevent to jump out of my bed and dance. When the song was over I dropped to my bed. I sweated and my heart was beating out of my chest. I kept the radio under my pillow and told to myself : *uh, what is that ?* The following nights I kept listening to this program and soon discovered Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, and... the Blues ! At night I could pick up broadcast from Chicago, New Orleans, Memphis and Texas. Almost all of them played the Blues ! Two or three nights later I thought : I need a guitar ! I've already learned to play some chords with a ukulele but I knew nothing about guitar technic and even less about the Blues. I saved my paperboy money. I paid my first guitar 17 \$. Because I knew a little about ukulele, I removed the two lower strings. During two years I played with only four strings. When I was 12 or 13, my hand muscles were strong enough to add the missing strings. I was up for the Blues !

I did my first paid performances when I was 15. I played acoustic music, Folk and Blues. To be fair, I learned all styles of music, from Jazz to Folk. But the Blues meant a lot to me. It was like a mission to me to play the Blues. At that time there was no vinyl. I had to visit the back of specialized stores to find some 78 rpm. That's the way I started a collection of recorded Blues

music, Big Bill Broonzy, Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, 10, 15 or 20 cents for a record. Josh White, Leadbelly, all those old Blues 78 rpm released during those years.

The first LPs appeared 3 or 4 years later. Vinyl was all new. It required a record player. The first album I bought me with 49 cents was "*Three Of A Kind*". It was a compile with Leadbelly, Josh White and Big Bill Broonzy I listened to it over and over again. Big Bill Broonzy's recordings have always impressed me. How can he sound like a whole orchestra just with 6 strings and his voice ? And when I heard him in person, filling all the space of the concert hall while playing solo, it was a major inspiration for me. I was thinking : *all those sounds coming out a single guitar, I must study that !* Then I dug, I practiced, and I listened to more blues artists. I progressed slowly, at my own pace. I became able to play and, when entering high school, I've already played for people, alone, in a trio, in the streets, at school or for some events. Playing in bars, I earned enough to eat and get some beer and wine. Then I became aware that studies, university, that was not for me. In 1968 I decided I'm gonna be a professional musician. School's out for me. I didn't know how to do it, but I wanted to play music, that's all. I was 23. Back then, in 68, it was the time of San Francisco, flowers in your hair and hippy age. There were two places with lively blues scenes : Chicago, of course, and San Francisco. People was abuzz with San Francisco, everybody wanted to be there. I sold my record collection and I left for San Francisco. I got 19\$ in my pocket, a sleeping bag, my guitar and a small suitcase. I left hoping to enter the Blues scene. Once there, I started playing in the streets for some coins, I was a busker. Then I met some local musicians. That kind of solo artist that knew how to manage playing piano, guitar, bass and vocal all together. It was that kind of musician that inspired me and I needed to get with. I played small clubs and bars... In 1970, I opened up for John Lee Hooker. It was the first real blues show I played in San Francisco. John Lee was quite fair with me, we lived in the same district. Then there was a big Blues festival at the Berkeley California University. Imagine, all the Blues luminaries were alive at that time. Today people are looking to old black & white photos of those artists who played at this festival. I saw Son House, Bukka White, Lightnin' Hopkins and Mance Lipscomb sharing the stage. It was wonderful. 2.000 people standing there and only 15 allowed to sit on the stage to attend the show, 6 feet close to the musicians, and I was part of them. I couldn't take my eyes off Son House's playing, I was magnetized by Lightnin' Hopkins charisma. There was no security men as it is today. At the end of the show, we joined the musicians backstage. Bukka White was there with his guitar, drinking some Brandy while playing it.

I sat next to him, we talked, and I observed him while he played, just like we are now. He played slide and that night I accumulated all that I could. It was a very important moment in my own guitar mastering. Over the years, I had similar experiences at that Festival with Big Mama Thornton, T-Bone Walker, Johnny Shines, or Brownie McGhee.... who lived about half a mile from where I did. He was handicapped, so I used to lend him a hand to go shopping. I carried his bags up to his home weekly. Once the bags dropped in the kitchen, he took his guitar and taught me how to play the way he did. Brownie McGhee influenced my playing a lot. If I should have to tell you all the Blues musicians I met, you wouldn't believe me. And by this time I wasn't aware of what was happening to me. I thought everybody could have the same experience. It's only later that I took stock of how important it had been for my own pathway, and how lucky I'd been. When people told me : *but you saw Bukka White, you knew Son House !* I replied *that's right*, but in fact, when I stood by those musicians I only thought about the guitar, the Blues, and what I could share with them.

Then I became a music teacher, I taught guitar. I became aware that I had to pass what I learned directly from the masters. Finally I became a key player of the San Francisco scene, playing in various bands, duo or just solo, 6 to 7 nights a week. I was now a real bluesman as a result of being in touch with the first generation of American bluesmen. Another thing was that the pianist Charles Brown, one of the few musicians who is both Blues Hall of Fame and Rock Hall of Fame recipient, was a neighbor of mine in Berkeley, CA. He took me under his wing and, even being a pianist, he constantly invited me to back him on guitar. He taught me a lot about the Blues and the mastering of live performance. He was one of the creators of the West Coast Blues, a prominent member of the US post-war Blues. He took me on tour and gave me the opportunity to record with him. Then he encouraged me to play my own way, alone, in the States and possibly all over the world. By myself I didn't dare to believe that my music could be effective. But when a big star you admire and is inspiring, fosters doing it and tells you you should travel around the world to display your music, you just think why not? I took his wise advice.

**BM** : when did you decide it was important for you to pass what you have learned to next generations ?

**MHH** : In the mid 70's I decided to make a living from my music. Things were going well with all my time dedicated to live performances. Then I wondered about playing/performing the Blues music being or not being the only thing I should be doing with my life. Passing on this knowledge and culture is definitely also essential as mastering my Blues. Then, during 3 or 4 years, I organized myself to play a couple of nights during the week and teach by day. There were two reasons. The first one was to ensure some teaching being always possible to do, whatever it could happen. It would be a security, and in the field of music. The second reason was that no musician I learned of never asked me anything for that, except maybe a glass of Brandy or Bourbon. Many of them shared everything they knew about the Blues and its culture freely. They passed it directly on to the next generation of young musicians, of all races as part of the Blues legacy. Then it was my turn to do so, even more because pioneers started to pass away.

The first time I presented a program in schools dedicated to the Blues and its culture was in 1978. Starting there, I played music by night and was Blues teacher in schools by day. I always considered it was my responsibility to do so, as it was for every bluesman or blueswoman. That's the core of keeping the blues alive.

**BM** : What do you think about the youngest generations ? Do you believe they know that, one way or another, every music we listen to now is connected with the Blues legacy ?

**MHH** : this question isn't an easy one... all I can say is that to be here today, in Memphis for the IBC, with all those young musicians around, coming from from the USA and from all over the world, from France, Croatia, Italy, Philippines, Madagascar or Japan, it does show that the Blues has never been so healthy ! And still I'm only speaking of people who know what the Blues is, musicians and fans. So many love it without naming it !

This being said, in terms of popular culture, the guitar is no more the pop music instrument of choice. This guitar, by itself, remains the most popular instrument almost everywhere. But guitar players or harp players are no more those hit makers. No, now it's Beyonce, Jay-Z and beat boxes. Instrument and guitar sales have collapsed because big stars, pop stars don't play guitar anymore. Johnny cash, Bruce Springsteen or The Who, and everybody until rap and drum

machine rise, played instruments. The very economy on which the Blues blossomed, the society as it was, they referred naturally to the use of such instruments. Today, everything is different. Watching YouTube, or some music program on tv, you can't see anybody playing an instrument. And sometimes they don't need to know about singing, electronic does it for them. They are rapper, singer or dancer, but they are not musicians. That's why one can't say that the Blues has trouble with that. The Blues is made and played by people t who 'carry the torch' of this style of music.

There is an interesting paradox : when turning on the tv, nobody plays the blues anymore and nobody plays the guitar, as well. Such a culture is missing from the media landscape. And yet, the Blues is stronger than ever. I think moreover that the Blues has a great future ahead of it. I'm a judge for the IBC in Memphis for 20 years now. I even think I'm the longest serving judge at this event, by age perhaps, but also by seniority in the the history of the event. My first time being a judge of the talent was in 1998? The event was lasting one afternoon, with just 12 bands. Most of them were from the mid-south of the USA. 20 years later, the IBC is a five day event, there are 80 solo/duo and 80 bands, mostly selected through a pre-screening process in their own country after local presets. Blues have develop in a gigantic and unpredictable way during the 20 last years. Then I don't think it's necessary to focus on the keeping the blues alive thing anymore, as long as there are such gatherings of fans as France Blues, European Blues Union, the International Blues Society, many blues societies and support all over the world that treasure and nurture the Blues in their region. The Blues got a very bright future.

Regarding changes, blues has developed considerably in terms of expectation of the youngest generations. Stevie Ray Vaughan provided a tremendous influence on the Blues. Actually, lots of musicians, fans and people discovered the blues thanks to his work. You know what it is said : *the Blues had a baby and they call it rock'n'roll*. But now, following what SRV has done, there is this Rock infused Blues. The image of this music has evolved from *Blues pure Blues* to some *Rock edged Blues*. There are even Blues Rock, Rock Blues, Hard Blues categories. You see what it means : before, there was the Blues, country blues and then also urban blues, that's it. Nowadays, for everyone, Blues always get an integrated component. It was Chicago Blues that promoted the emergence of instrumental choruses and techniques, then this infusion of Rock became the usual color for up to date Blues. For everybody, Blues without a Rock'n'Roll feel is no more consumable music.

Let me tell you some wise words from an old man : it's all right that the Blues has evolved this way. It's a good thing that one doesn't try only to replicate what was done in 1925, that couldn't make sense today. However, we must not lose track of our roots. As you could understand it, I'm not a Rock fan using Blues tools to express myself. Why not Blues Rock, as long as the dominant Blues flavor is not lost in the musical expressiveness, soulfulness, and technique skills. And as long as the Blues color remains and can touch new generations and new audiences, I'm OK with that.

Some people, old ones like me, are much more categorical. Anything stepping outside the 12 bar format, with too much distortion or all kind of 'weird effects,' is automatically dismissed. They are called, sorry for it, *Blues Nazis*. If it doesn't sound like when Muddy Waters still lived in Mississippi then it's just to feed to pigs. I don't think like that at all. No matter the style, whether it is Jazz, Blues, or Rock or Electro. All styles of music must develop, be open to novelty and mix with cultures. Even so, it's doesn't mean that we must like/enjoy everything, but that this is good for the music world, and that's what matters.

**BM** : Does teaching the Blues is just a matter of guitar technical and vocal mastering, or is it important to integrate historical, maybe philosophical components about the Blues ?

**MHH** : Of course. One can't tackle blues technical and musical aspects out of historical and cultural dimensions. Actually I teach technics and music theory. But I teach some different courses about musical aspect, how to create or to enrich the content of one's music, vocally and technically. Here we are typically on totally different approaches whether it is present Blues Rock or the *old* Blues.

Regarding the *old* Blues, within US black cultures, the instrument - guitar, banjo or harp - has always been considered the vehicle of the story told.

To go further, I must make reference to afro american culture. United States became a world economic power partly due to slavery. How does a new country, as the USA, could became such a world power within such a short time, and repelled England during War of Independence, then built such a big country that it is ? How ? On the backs of the slaves. The English were involved in the slave trade in America. They brought slaves here from Africa while this business was forbidden in their own country at the time. Then, one of the most important things people don't know, is that the construction of the United States, all their beautiful buildings, the White House, Washington, all those were built for free ! White people just paid for material and leading the work, but the labor, that work in itself, were done by slaves. Thus, contrary to France, England, and what happened in Europe where work was paid and slavery forbidden, slaves were free labour that contributed to make the USA one of the leading world powers. How did the United States manage to be built, to win wars and to become so powerful within such a short time ? Because they didn't have to pay builders work, cotton pickers, and didn't have to pay them clothing, and so on. Ok, the reason why I tell you about that, is because slaves were oppressed. They were kept illiterate and, above all, they were as less educated as possible. We must add that in Africa, culturally, there were no, or very few, written languages. In Africa culture, stories and songs were transmitted by the *Griots*, the local bards. Except in North Africa and Egypt, culture was spread only through oral transmission. Storytellers within every tribe were key actors for culture and knowledge.

Now, to update the reasoning, in the USA, there is no written, photographical or musical record of what was afro american culture from the time slaves were shipped to this land until long after their emancipation. And this is just because they were not educated. They were kept ignorant and illiterate in order to control them, to use them easily and, thus, to keep them dependent on their african culture they were ripped from, to that oral tradition culture for keeping knowledge, beliefs and stories through words and music. Anthropologists who have dug into Blues form and history all agree. They get back in Africa and found rhythm roots that base the Blues. But the academic 12 bar form, the famous 12 bar Blues, with its poetical AAB lyrics is absolutely afro american. There is no trace of such a form in musical history before slaves were shipped to America and their progeny was later recorded. Their need to use some traditional instrument in order to tell their stories and feed their oral tradition, as they used to do in their african culture, has developed through a new poetical and lyrical forms that happened to become the Blues as we know it now. Hence the importance of oral culture and music for afro american culture legacy. And the most intellectual answer I can give you is that, although they were kept illiterate, oppressed and disenfranchised, the proof of this unique legacy of this afro american heritage, it's the Blues. If you want to know how or where blacks worked, what they ate, how they dressed, where they lived, who they loved and what was their story, all is in their music, because they were kept illiterate, without benefit of any education and without being able to

share their culture through any other form. Later, after the Civil War, with slavery abolition, there were still hardship of course, but some were able to pursue an education. That's when their culture started to develop through new forms. Artists, poets, then teachers of all kinds started to emerge. This allowed their heritage to spread and this music to be shared out of their community. You must be aware of that if you want to share this music that is the Blues. All this history and culture, they are the essence from which the blues is born. All are integral to the Blues.

**BM** : Is it difficult to reconcile such a theoretical aspect with the musical one on a guitar when you are teaching ?

**MHH** : when I lead guitar workshops, and I tell that I will show some Son House or Bukka white's technique, there are always one or two raising hands and I'm asked : *but you have met Son House and T-Bone Walker ?* I say *yes, I knew them and we were friends*. Then some students ask me for more information. My answer is that I would be happy to tell them about Son House, Mance Lipscomb, Muddy Waters or Lightnin' Hopkins, but that, right now, we must focus on the guitar and the music. To fully understand why that, I was born on January 11th, 1945. I'm 73 this year. Most of the musicians who built the legacy we are talking about now were still there and alive when I was young. It was an incredible opportunity I met them. I could tell you some stories with Bukka White, anecdotes about Son House. It must require a complete interview to be dedicated to. These days young people that are moved by this music look at old pictures of those heroes and only make a guesses about of their reality. That's what matters too with Keeping the Blues spirit Alive, it's spreading as much as possible such ideas, such values, such a story and legacy, while passing its music.

**BM** : What music are you listening to now ? Do you think that the new generations of Blues musicians are well in the colors of the Blues as Muddy Waters and B.B. King were ?

**MHH** : I still listen to Big Bill Broonzy Robert Johnson, T-Bone Walker, Brownie McGhee, Charles Brown and Lightnin' Hopkins. I'm such an assiduous student of those masters. It's just as if I never have enough. Every listening I discover something new. I write articles for Blues reviews, I contribute with full chapters in books about Blues history, and I still listen to this music recorded between 1920s and late 1970s. Buddy Guy, Albert King, Freddy King, Albert Collins, I listen to the whole spectrum the Blues offered during all those years. But because of my age, actually, I don't listen, or a very few, to the Blues played now by young musicians. Rock drenched Blues doesn't speak much to me. Every young musician interested in the Blues experiences such a problem, the same now as when I was young, learning to be patient and mature in their music : the Blues is about life, happy things, sad things, every life aspects. I could take a guitar and sing something about grilled ribs. I could sing you a song about a new suit... But the Blues; it is life. When Albert Collins sings *What's Real ?*, it's all about human feelings that are integral to the life. You will not hear any Blues song that is saying *Ouh Baby Baby Baby Ouh* (Michael is caricaturing Justin Bieber). Even when sung on a Blues pattern, there is no story to tell, nothing about what is happening in this life, about what is causing such a feeling and can explain it. The Blues can be happy or sad, as long it is about the facts of life, genuine ones. My thought is that the youngest generations of musicians are aware of it, but they are facing another difficulty, one I have faced myself. When I was young, I didn't pay attention to that I was looking like. Tell me honestly, who would listen to a young non experienced and not

presentable guy singing about life being such a hardship ? Not someone being 26 or 30, and not someone more experienced. Everybody would think : *but what does that one know about life ? He's speaking about things he didn't even experience !* Then I think that it is really hard for any Blues musician to be accepted by previous generations. There is some kind of statement validation to obtain from experienced people. You must have gray hair and a few lines in your face for people to take you seriously when you're singing about that kind of subject. Wise and curious musicians are required, committed to this music style over the years, with some endlessly tested experience regarding writing and subject matter, so that the audience actually appreciates some maturity in addressing the music. Of course, there is always young geniuses coming from Lord knows where who, in one fell swoop, maturely carry the Blues with a great feeling. I'm thinking of Johnny Lang for example, or that kind of musicians who are 30 to 40 years old and that could sound as if they are 70 ! But they are few. The real difficulty comes from the way any artist would make, living his life as it needs to be and being able to deliver something real and rich of experience. Young musicians carrying their Blues with their own genuineness are on the right track.

**BM** : what would be Big Bill Broonzy or Son House's words to encourage people to take an interest in Blues music ?

**MHH** : (*silence while thinking about*) Be yourself ! I often ended up with a guitar, sitting next to Blues artists. All of them, in their one way, told me the same thing I'll tell you now : look at me, here is how I do it. But you can't be me. Then take it in your mind, carry it in your heart, and let it pull out your own way. Don't try to mimic me, be yourself. And yet, when you are a young artist, that's what happens, copying. For instance, a young painter studying in art school attends master classes with masters they want to develop the style of. The first week the master chooses Mona Lisa and students replicate Mona Lisa. The second week, the teacher chooses Guernica, and the students replicate Guernica in order to master technical approach, color choice, perspective and style. Then when they get out of school, no one's coming to ask them to replicate Mona Lisa. It's time to cope with technique and experience they got. How did Da Vinci use his brush effect ? How did Lightnin' Hopkins use his thumb picking ? It's time to use all that to express yourself and do your own Mona Lisa. It was that type of time I spent with Lightnin' Hopkins. I had several opportunities to sit next to him backstage, to look at him playing, to ask him questions. He choose some songs to play. He told me : *look at that* and he played. Sometimes, for a hard part, he told me : look out, pay attention, you will not be able to play that the way I do. He didn't mean I'll never be able play that, he just told me *that's how it is done but you can't play it like I do. You will never be Picasso, his painting is achieved, his own work is already done.* Lightnin' Hopkins has done his work too, it's useless to do it again. But one can look at the masters to discover how they handle it, to try to master their technique with their help, and then use all of that to create one's own style with one's own personality.

Some people spend their time trying to duplicate, as close as possible, what has already been done. There must be that kind of people. I can reproduce Robert Johnson or Brownie McGhee in a very subtle manner, but the main lesson here - and I offer it to you the same way masters offered it to me previously for free - is : learn from masters, come near what they produced, master techniques and integrate the reasons that urged them to develop such a style, but since it is about being yourself and expressing yourself, don't replicate, use this knowing and those techniques in order to express and be yourself.

And this links up with what I told you about afro american culture legacy : following generations of artists have continued and respected this legacy and its authenticity. Albert King, Freddy King or B.B. King just told us about their life, their story. I think about this B.B. King's song, *5 Long Years*, where he is talking about the 7 children he got with this woman, and then he says : *and now she wanna giv'em back*. I really dig this song, but this is not one I would allow myself to sing. It's not me, it's not my story. And it just so happens that it is a problem for a lot of musicians who appreciate B.B.'s guitar work on this successful song and enjoy playing it. But their interpretation lacks the experience of what it is all about. It's neither them nor their genuineness that are expressed in such a case. It still the same with Robert Johnson singing *I'm gonna beat my woman until I'm satisfied*. I won't sing this way, it doesn't correspond to me. I can play the same technique, same arrangement, same riffs, but as long as it is the story told I must sing about who is *Hawkeye* and tell my own story. This is wherein the Blues truth resides. Men and women's hearts will be broken, things will happen in their lives, good or bad. Somehow, whether it is in 1920 or 2018, the way to tell all of this can be quite the same, as they can be totally different. And that's what the Blues is all about. It's men and women's stories that are told. The core of those stories. Then, my advice is : *here's how to do it, but do it by being yourself*.

**BM** : Blues is also sharing music on stage, sharing its stories on an equal footing with musicians you appreciate. Do you have some best memory of stage sharing to tell us, and what made it so special ?

MHH : You know, I feel I'm lucky, or even blessed, for the opportunity I had to share the stage with so many great Bluesmen (sigh of joy) ... But I'll tell you a story you can't hear nowhere else. I played with the *King of the Oakland Blues* in California. I'd become a close friend with him during 13 or 14 years of making music in his band. His name was Haskell *Cool Papa Sadler*, *Cool Papa Sadler*, an afro american guy who was a superb guitarist, a great showman, the *King of Oakland Blues*. He was older than me and he had lived the times when segregation was very strong and racism even more hard it is now. At the time I entered high school it was the beginning of the struggle for Civil Rights in the United States and things started to change. But he lived through segregation, with white men's restrooms and black men's restrooms, forbidden seats in buses and violent everyday racism. When I started to back him I organized a small tour just around my home place in Iowa, along the Mississippi River during summer. It was not the hardest segregated Southern place but an upstream area, between Minneapolis and Chicago. We were scheduled in a big Midwest Blues Festival. *Cool Papa* was a groove-master, an incredible musician and a second to none showman. It was a unique opportunity to be on stage with him every night, and to open up the doors to that kind of big shows to us. But something special happened. Security members were all northern white body builder guys... and all of them were *Cool Papa* fans. They loved him because he played a song entitled *Take It Out My Britches*, a sexual content one, with lyrics being both explicit and implicit. Like young people almost everywhere at that time, they had never been exposed to such sexual cultural contents. *Cool Papa* wrote his own songs, he always arranged his titles to be funny and lightweight. Such a cool way made young people love him. Security guys were supposed to be spread on the various stages of the festival. But that night they all gathered to attend our show, and stood in front of us, faking guarding the stage and flexing their muscles. At that time, you can be sure our music couldn't be played on radio, and they knew that very well. The only opportunity to hear such a music was live shows. They were all goin' crazy, patrons and security



members alike felt in love with *Cool Papa's* style. We played a great set and that same night there was a party in a small local club, for festival musicians to meet and jam. The place was crammed, people shoulder to shoulder, attending the jam led by a famous bluesman, the name I will not mention. *Cool Papa* was a friend of his. I suggested to *Cool Papa* that we sit, relax, and just watch what is going on in the club, telling him this guy on stage is very good and I like to listen his show. Then *Papa* told me : *Ok, let's take our time to catch his show. But you know how that will end up, there will be a time when we will be called to join on stage and jam. But by then let's enjoy it !*

Not even 10 minutes later, the young guys of the security staff I told you about, with their red t-shirts with the white lettered security mark on, they all had seen *Cool Papa* and his band sitting at the back. And while this famous Bluesman was playing on stage, security men and then the whole attendance were chanting : *Cool Papa ! Cool Papa ! Cool Papa !* The Bluesman on the stage tried to play louder, then the patrons yelled louder till the guy broke a string while trying to push the limits. *Cool Papa*, the bass player, the drummer, and myself we were sitting and drinking a beer. Something incredible just happened then. The security staff guys came to us, lifted us right from the ground and carried us through the crowd to the stage. I still have no idea about how they manage to do it but they even brought our instruments and put them in our hands. I was completely mortified ! I felt so bad, it embarrassed me so much because of such a great artist we had no reason to be disrespectful to. *Cool Papa* was feeling the same as I, but there was nothing we could do. This musician just broke a string and we had been put on this stage for the show to go on. That's the moment when the story becomes interesting, and very big on symbolism since it was goin' to break the code regarding racism and intolerance of the day. We started playing and, from the first notes, people went crazy, they danced and clapped their hands. A brass section joined us on stage, a renowned guitarist, whose name was Jim Schwall joined. Tinsley Ellis appeared and joined us with his guitar, as well. It was a big band now and the audience went nuts enjoying the music. The audience was going wild. Everybody enjoyed it. And I could see *Cool Papa* ... he was cool, still so cool, sitting on his stool, eyes closed, playing a superb chorus. Then I realized that something was moving very slowly through the crowd, spacing people apart before it was tightened again. It was something I couldn't distinguish. Was it somebody crawling ? What was it that made people spread apart and then come back together ? A few minutes later I saw someone climbing slowly on the stage and then crawling and kneeled down to *Cool Papa*, without looking up, with a very humble face down against the ground, just as he was down before some king or a God. Kneeling before *Cool Papa*, still lying prone on the floor in front of *Cool Papa*, he took off his t-shirt and held it above his head as for showing he wanted to polish up the king's shoes. *Cool Papa* was still playing his solo with his eyes shut. Then I discreetly moved towards him, just nudging slightly for him to open his eyes and see this guy, bare-chested, at his feet, that wanted to make his shoes shined. While still playing, *Cool Papa* then moved his foot forward. The guy hastened to polish the shoe with his t-shirt. When it was done, he crawled back to catch up with the crowd, slipping through the room the same way he first reached the stage, slowly slithering on the floor on his stomach to the back of the room. It was one of the most incredible and memorable things I ever saw. And it was the same for *Cool Papa*. That's why I told you about the beginning of his history : never would *Cool Papa* have imagined that one day, a white guy would come crawling on his stomach up to him in such a way and prostate himself while shining *Cool Papa's* shoes. You know *Cool Papa* called me "son", all the musicians, we were a family. From deep in my heart, I know that if he had been told 20 years earlier *one day a white guy was gonna shine your shoes with his shirt*, he would have say, in his big deep voice *oh no, not ever. That kind of thing will never*

*happen in America ! Are you aware of the importance of such an event in a Bluesman's life ? I could have chosen any other stage sharing past incidents and some famous Blues characters memoir to tell you about. But this one, due to its social scope, to its music being universal message, is special. Talking about it the day after, we all agreed that it was a scene striking with authenticity. The whole thing fitted well with that crazy night, and after thinking about it, it was a kind of like the first time James Brown threw his cape on the ground and Bobby Bird put it back on his shoulders, triggering audience jubilation, and that before it became a regular predictable, but still dramatic, routine in Brown's show. This couldn't have been thought and prepared. It's an example of american culture changes during those years too. Even if there is a long way to go yet toward ending racism ... everywhere.*

*(off the record, we shared about Trump, and how much Hawkeye is sad and aghast because a part of his american fellow citizen support such a stupid and dangerous fanatic. But those memories are important by their social and symbolic overtone)*

**BM** : Thank you so much for your answers, I wish you good luck with your work. And the next time you'll told us about some greats.

**MHH** : I thank you, and I'm very grateful to your magazine that put forward the Blues, and not only through stage playing artists. Thank you for looking into every aspect of this music and to make it alive you own way. And just thank you for having spend a little time with me.