

OZAUKEE PRESS

GRAFTON

Hawkeye's happy to share the blues

Grafton youngsters learn about the history behind the music that gave us rock 'n' roll

"Blues is the roots. Everything else is the fruits."

— Blues musician Willie Dixon

By STEVE OSTERMANN

Ozaukee Press staff

Michael "Hawkeye" Herman had Grafton school kids bouncing in their seats Friday.

In between the boogie beat, he also taught them a few things about the blues — the profound influence it has had on music they listen to every day and the vehicle it offers for expressing their emotions.

Herman, an internationally known musician and educator, conveyed the messages to more than 500 students during his "Blues in Schools" program in the Grafton High auditorium. The audience, made up of mostly kindergarten through fourth-grade students, learned how a guitar works and how it can speak through the hands of a skilled player, who has a heartfelt story to tell.

"Playing a guitar is just like talking, and I've been doing it my whole life," Herman, 60, told the crowd. "It gives you a new way to say things, to tell your story."

Herman's appearance was arranged in conjunction with his participation in "Embrace the Legacy," a Grafton Area Live Arts concert series that debuted Friday night at the North Shore Academy of the Arts. The Iowa native, who now lives in Oregon, has presented his school program throughout the United States since 1980.

In addition to helping kids burn off energy as they hopped in their seats and clapped to boogie-woogie chords, Herman told them how popular folk songs such as "I've Been Working on the Railroad" and "Pick a Bale of Cotton" are really stories about the arduous lives of rail-line laborers and field hands.

Such tales — which underscore the pain, frustration, fear and hope of the hard-working, often oppressed people — lie at the heart of the blues.

"You think these are kids' songs, but it's about adults who sang them while they worked hard under the hot sun," Herman said. "They found that that music made their work go faster and easier."

"You can do that, too," he told the students, "when you have work to do."

Herman also showed kids how guitar chords played in slow blues tempo were speeded up in the 1950s to create rock 'n' roll.

After World War II, "when life got faster, they decided to make the music faster," Herman said as he launched into a crowd-pleasing sing-along: "The blues



BLUES PERFORMER Michael "Hawkeye" Herman shared lessons in music and history with youngsters from Grafton schools on Friday, Sept. 30, at Kennedy Elementary School.

Photo by Sam Arendt

had a baby, and they called it rock 'n' roll. It makes me feel good from my head down to my toes."

Those lines, Herman told the kids, will be a great response when they go home and their parents ask them what they learned in school.

Herman's hourlong program, which was followed by a blues workshop for fourth-graders at Kennedy School, drew praise from students, parents and educators alike.

Scott Oftedahl, Kennedy School principal, said Herman's appearance introduced students to historically important American music and showed them how relevant it remains today.

"We're very fortunate to have him come here," Oftedahl said.

To connect with elementary-age students, Herman said, musical history should be taught without preaching or trying to fill their minds with names, dates and places. Instead, a guitar, a few chords and a true-to-life tune can make lasting impressions.

"I don't know anybody who doesn't like music, so that becomes the way for me to reach them," said Herman, who in 1998 was given the Keeping the Blues Alive Award for achievement in

education by the Blues Foundation in Memphis.

"Whatever kind of music people enjoy, all of it comes from the blues or has been influenced by it."

Herman has performed at blues and folk festivals and in concerts throughout North America and Europe for more than 40 years. But he reached perhaps his largest audience to date last month when he composed and performed "Katrina, Oh Katrina (Hurricane Blues)," a song detailing the Gulf Coast disaster, at the request of the British Broadcasting Corp. The tune was heard by more than 7 million listeners on a BBC radio news program.

The lyrics and much of the music for the song came to him, Herman said, while he was taking a daily bicycle ride near his home.

"The first thing I thought of was that Katrina is such a beautiful name, but it had such disastrous impact on peoples' lives," he said. "She had such a beautiful, deadly name. I knew that would become the hook for the song."

Herman grew up listening to blues, got his first guitar at age 14 and, in his early 20s, learned at the feet of blues greats such as Son House, Brownie

McGhee, Bukka White and Lightnin' Hopkins. He decided to make his first visit to Grafton after being contacted by Angela Mack, a music teacher at North Shore Academy of the Arts.

The chance to come to Grafton — where Paramount Records blues legends such as House, Charley Patton and Skip James performed at the Wisconsin Chair Co. factory studio in the late 1920s and early '30s — excited Herman, as did the efforts of Mack and other blues enthusiasts to acknowledge the community's rich musical heritage.

In addition to the "Embrace the Legacy" concert series, other Paramount-related projects being planned in the village include a summer blues festival, downtown restaurant and park history displays.

"Grafton and Paramount Records are responsible for much of the American blues music that came out of that period," he said. "You have a great chance here to show people what this history is and why it's so important. It's not only important for students to learn, it's important for the community to realize what they have."

"You have a sleeping giant, and it's finally starting to wake up."