

Lifestyle

Ashlander: 'Hawkeye' Herman

By Angela Howe-Decker
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Michael "Hawkeye" Herman is a blues man with a golden reputation and a heart to match. The award-winning musician and composer is also a dedicated teacher who shares his love of music and blues history with students from preschool to college through the Blues in the Schools program he founded nearly 30 years ago.

Because of his work, Herman received the "Keeping the Blues Alive" Award for achievement in education from the Blues Foundation in Memphis. Herman is proud of his work and says teaching is a way to give back to those who helped him.

"I love spending time in the classroom with children, and I had a desire to repay the many African-American blues artists who had freely taught me the music and skills that gave me a career in the arts and music," he said.

The 66-year-old Iowa native took the name "Hawkeye" to declare his roots in the Heartland. He has lived in Ashland since 1999, when he came to work with the Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

Herman said he fell in love with the area almost instantly. "My wife and I became completely enamored with Ashland and the Rogue Valley; we knew we wanted to stay here," he said.

Herman emphasizes that he does not perform often in the valley because "I really love living here and working elsewhere."

Herman juggles a busy schedule writing, traveling and teaching online music classes but took time to talk with the Daily Tidings about the joys of the blues.

DT: When did you first become interested in music?

MH: When I was a kid I listened to radio stations from all over the country. This was my early introduction to blues music via late-night radio, and I fell in love with the sounds of blues musicians like Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf.

At age 12, I had saved up enough money from my newspaper route, \$17, to buy my first guitar. After college, I moved to the San Francisco Bay Area. I was fortunate to have been able to meet and learn from many of the iconic figures in blues who performed in

the area: Son House, Brownie McGhee, Bukka White, Lightnin' Hopkins, T-Bone Walker, Charles Brown, Cool Papa Sadler and others. My first real blues gig was opening for John Lee Hooker in 1970 at St. Mary's College.

DT: Who are your musical influences?

MH: I'm influenced by and enjoy almost every kind of music I hear. I find myself utilizing aspects of music from many sources when I'm writing, composing and performing, not just blues. However, for me, it all comes back home to the blues music that is in my heart and that so influenced me at an early age.

DT: What is a favorite aspect of your work?

MH: One of my favorite aspects of being a musician is the creative process of self-expression. Whether I'm trying to learn and adapt something I've heard, or composing my own music, and/or writing lyrics, exploring and finding the message that I'm seeking to express is at the same time challenging and most gratifying.

DT: What do you find challenging?

MH: Probably the biggest challenge for me is composing music and writing songs for theatrical productions and creating soundtrack for film and video documentaries and dramas.

In 2005, I was asked by BBC-TV in London to compose a blues song that documented the disaster of Hurricane Katrina. I was given a total of three days to write and record the song. I managed to meet the deadline and the song was played on the BBC's most popular news program, "BBC Today."

DT: How do you feel about the business aspect of being a musician?

MH: I learned early on that art is a business in America. A lot of great artists starve because they refuse to take on the business of their art. I know if I want to be independent I have to take charge of the business myself. I market myself, I promote my art.

DT: Do you find it difficult to balance your time between your work and other interests?

MH: For over 25 years I toured and performed all over North America. I was traveling on the blues highway more than I was at home. Being away from home for so long was not easy. Nowadays, as a respected senior citizen of the blues world, I get to travel even further afield, but I rarely am on tour for more than a week at a time.

DT: Talk about the Blues in the Schools program.

MH: In 1978, my older sister asked if I'd be interested in playing my music for her daughter's third-grade elementary school class. I accepted the invitation and I found that the students loved the music and were very enthusiastic about my sharing its history and impact on American culture with them. The success of this first in-school teaching and performing experience gave me the idea of creating my Blues In The Schools

programs. As of today, I have done educational assemblies and classes for over a half-million students in over 500 schools, from elementary school through the college level, in 28 states and eight foreign countries.

DT: Who inspires you?

MH: I have been with my wife and life partner, Willitte, for almost 42 years. I cherish her love, intelligence, good counsel, support, strength, encouragement, faith, humor, grace, artistic and domestic talents, and her always positive spiritual attitude. She has been my angel and my rock through thick and thin. She has been the greatest influence and contributor to my life.

DT: What is your advice to young musicians?

MH: Perseverance is most important. In order for you to be discovered by others, you must first discover yourself and work tirelessly toward your goals. Never stop trying to improve and expand your work. There is room for everyone in the world of the arts as long as you are true to yourself, your work and your beliefs.

DT: Do you have any upcoming projects?

MH: I hope to release at least one or two new albums in the year ahead. I'm working on a project for Sirius/XM satellite radio station, "Bluesville," that is a daily program that will possibly be called, "Hawkeye's Blues Almanac." Also, for the past three years, I have been teaching blues guitar online at JamPlay.com. I'm always doing something. You never retire in the blues.

Angela Howe-Decker is a freelance writer living in Ashland. Reach her at decker4@gmail.com.



Michael "Hawkeye" Herman plays one of his guitars in a room of his Talent house reserved for guitars and concert memorabilia.
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