



"I'm writing a book in an attempt to put what I've learned from almost half a century of interviewing musicians from all fields. I feel very comfortable talking to Hawkeye Herman because not only has he been doing the same thing for about the same length of time, but he's also a musician whose played with icons. Plus he has an almost photographic memory to boot. Here's my interview with a very special guy up now with photos on Blues Blast, a website with a lot of information about blues."

- Don Wilcock / Blues Journalist - 4/21/16

Chasing The Blues Legacy

by Don Wilcock

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As a child Michael Hawkeye Herman would carve out the center of a book to hide his transistor radio so he could listen to the local radio stations in school. At night that same radio would become his gateway to American music from Memphis to Chicago, New York to New Orleans."

"I'd be sitting in the dark with my transistor radio. Then, I figured out how to put a little wire on it to extend the antenna. That was a high tech thing. Then, it had a single earplug, not headphones, and I was cruising the dial, and came across Howlin' Wolf doing "Killing Floor." I was supposed to be in bed. It was 10:30 at night, and I was dancing around the room and fell back on the bed when the song was over, sweating and saying to myself, 'What was that? Holy crimany. I gotta figure that out. What was that?'"

He was 13 years old in 1958 living in Davenport, Iowa, on the Mississippi River. There were still steam boats and river boats doing excursions with bands. He already loved music. At age 5 he would come to breakfast at 7:30 in the morning. "The radio was always already on because at 8 o'clock was the news and the farm reports, and you don't want to miss that because in the Midwest even though you might not be a farmer, you were concerned about the prices of corn and soy beans and hog bellies, and all that kind of stuff because if the farmer does good, everybody does good.

"So the radio was already on, and I would come down to breakfast, and at 7:30 the Sons of the Pioneers came on. At 7:45 Hank Williams came on. That was the first blues music I actually heard, and I was already attuned to the music. I didn't know I was going to be a musician, but I had an inclination towards it, and my dad would be reading the newspaper. My sisters would be teasing each other, and my mom was making breakfast, and I'd be listening to the radio."

Hank Williams may have whetted Hawkeye's appetite for the blues with "Move It On Over," but it was that first taste of Howlin' Wolf moaning at midnight across the ethers on a transistor radio the size of a pack of cigarettes that changed Hawkeye's view of the world.

"At 13 I saved up my money, and I bought a \$17 Stella pawnshop guitar. I had already been playing swing music on the ukulele when I was 10 or 11 year old because that was all that they had in the books. If you went to buy a ukulele book in the early 1950s, all the ukulele books had only tunes like "Deep Purple" and Honeysuckle Rose" and stuff like that, and I didn't know you could learn songs that were only two to three chords. So when I was nine, 10 or 11 years old I was learning whatever was in those books. And they were jazz and swing tunes from the big band era."

In high school nobody was listening to blues in Iowa in 1960. "I was in a folk group in high school called Peter, Paul and Zelda. And our trio would play for service groups like Rotary Clubs and Lions Clubs and stuff like that because folk music was part of pop music at that time. We played assemblies for other high schools, and there would be 2000, 2500 people in the audience. I didn't think anything about that. I thought, 'Oh, this is what we do.'"

The dye was cast by the time he dropped out of the University of Iowa and set out for San Francisco at 23 with \$100 in his pocket, a sleeping bag, a gym bag with a couple of changes of clothes, and a guitar on his back.

"I always wanted to be an old blues guy. So, now I tell people to be careful what you wish for because now I'm 71 and I have been considered an old blues guy for a long time."

Known as the Midwest's blues ambassador, today Hawkeye performs on guitar around the world and does blues in the schools programs for students of all ages. A scholar and a walking encyclopedia of American musical culture, he contributes his historical articles and personal memoirs to many publications. What makes him particularly fascinating is that his anecdotes come from personal experience. He has a memory for details and tells stories as if he were narrating a Martin Scorsese film. Case in point, his experience at the 1968 Berkeley Blues Festival.

"It was at a seminar at the Berkeley Blues Festival, and Furry Lewis was sitting in front of John Jackson and me in the back of the room. John and his wife were in front of me. You're not supposed to drink on college campuses. At the reception there was this woman who had a bottle of whisky in her purse, and anybody that was in the know could walk up to her with their drink, and she would spike their drink for them. She would take the bottle out of her purse, and pour a shot or more of liquor into your punch.

"So, anybody who wanted to get a little juiced in the middle of the afternoon at the festival could do that if they knew that she had the bottle. So we go into the seminar, and we sit down. John and his wife are sitting next to me, and Furry sitting in front of us, and next to Furry is sitting a woman who has a big black purse under her chair, and Furry Lewis every once in a while reaches under her chair. He reaches under her chair and is grabbing at her purse because he thinks that's the same woman that has the whiskey, ok?

"John and his wife and I are seeing this. Furry is trying to act normal, but he was a squirrely little guy with a wooden leg, and he's sitting on his chair, and he's leaning way over to the right, and he's fooling around under her chair trying to grab her purse, and she doesn't see anything, but John, his wife and I know what's going on 'cause we'd been offered the alcohol, but this wasn't that woman.

"This is going on for about 30 minutes until finally Furry leans waaaaaaay over to the right and reaches down into her purse, and he's got his hand in her purse without looking. He's still looking straight ahead. He's trying to find that bottle, and the woman looks down. She doesn't know who Furry Lewis is. He's just a member of the public for all she knew. He could have been a professor at the university – this older white woman – and she sees this old wooden leg black guy next to her with his hand in her purse under her chair.

"She reaches under the chair and grabs her purse. Furry sits straight up because his hand has just been pulled out of the purse. She stands up and she snaps her purse closed, and smacks Furry over the head with her purse with such percussion that the entire room heard the snap sound. She stormed out of the room, and everyone else in the room who was sitting in front of us turns around to look, and all they see is Furry Lewis rubbing the top of his head and an older white woman storming out of the room.

"John Jackson, his wife and I are almost on the floor. We're the only ones in the room that know what happened. So that became a bond between John and I. Almost every time we got together. John would say, 'Remember that time Furry Lewis got smacked in the head?'"

Living in San Francisco put Hawkeye where the action was. No longer was his link to the blues world an antenna hooked to a transistor radio. He lived five blocks from U.C. Berkeley and three blocks from Charles Brown. He used to help Brownie McGee with his groceries in exchange for free guitar lessons. "We'd put his groceries away in the cupboard, and then he'd take out the guitar and play for me, and we'd play the guitar together. A lot of what I do is based on Brownie."

Hawkeye's first gig playing blues guitar was opening for John Lee Hooker. And John Jackson became his pen pal for 30 years.

"John was a wonderful guy and a fine player and is one of the few people I know who could render the music of Blind Blake a lot like Blind Blake in a very relaxed way. He was a Civil War expert. I mean he was a grave digger in Rappahannock County in Virginia, and so he knew about all the military battle sites and because he was a grave digger he knew where relics were. Somebody else said about him that he

took the same care with digging graves that he did playing the guitar. He was the first guy I saw play slide guitar with an open pocket knife holding the blade with the sharp end up between his pinky and third finger and using the handle to play slide.”

If Howlin’ Wolf first possessed Hawkeye, it was Son House who closed the deal on Hawkeye’s musical focal point. “He was possessed internally unlike Wolf. Wolf was aware of the audience the whole time as a performer, but once Son House started to play, the audience didn’t matter anymore. He was not aware of the audience. He was in church.

“The audience disappeared, and he just went into the music and didn’t come back out of it till the time was done, and then he’d settle back and say a few words to the audience before he introduced another tune. Sometimes he could launch off into a dissertation preaching and had been a minister, but when he played, he was totally focused and possessed with the music, and his eyes would frequently roll back in his head. It didn’t matter whether there was an audience or not. His music is not easy to replicate. It’s not sophisticated. It’s just that every bit of energy and vibration in his body is going through the music.”

“Replicate” is the key word in Hawkeye’s view of blues. In his world, one never does a song the same way twice. It must come from the heart, and the beat of your heart is different each time you play. He learned that lesson from Haskell ‘Cool Papa’ Saddler with whom he played for 14 years. He recalls his first gig with the local San Francisco musician.

“In our first gig I made a set list and taped it to the microphone. When he came on the stage to play, he walked up to the microphone and looked at the piece of paper hanging from the microphone stand. He crumpled it up and threw it on the floor. I said, ‘Pop, that was a set list,’ and he looked at me like I was crazy. He said, ‘We don’t need no set list,’ and I said, ‘Well, what are we gonna do?’ And he said, ‘We’re gonna play the blues!’

“I played with him for 14 years. Whether we were playing before 20 people or 2000, he never had a set list.”

Too many people think blues is all about legacy and history. While that’s true, you gotta be there in the moment to make it real. Hawkeye likes to say that if Leonardo Da Vince painted the Mona Lisa a second time, it wouldn’t look the same. That’s true of a live blues performance.

“There’s a tendency for folks to try and learn the music they hear on the record and play it like it is. What they don’t realize is that blues music is a moment to moment life, and that applies to the songs and even if you listen to somebody like Robert Johnson, and you see if there’s two takes, the first take is different than the second take.

“You play how you feel at that moment and even though you might be doing the same song you did last night or two hours ago, it comes out from you the way you feel at this moment. One of the biggest lessons I learned that a lot of my fellow musicians don’t like about playing is because I learned from the older blues guys that if you make a set list two hours before the gig that doesn’t mean that you’re gonna feel like you did two hours ago.

“The music is alive, and so even though you might have done this song an hour ago or yesterday, it’s gonna come out of you today, at this moment the way you’re feeling it right now. You might change the key. It might be slower. It might be faster. Intellectuals have a tendency to want to replicate that exact moment in time that they heard on the record, and if they went to see the artist themselves play, whether it was Mance Lipscomb, John Jackson or anybody, there are differences and variations according to the way that person feels at that moment. We’re all growing spiritually and intellectually as we move through life, and so that growth is reflected in our art and from moment to moment.”

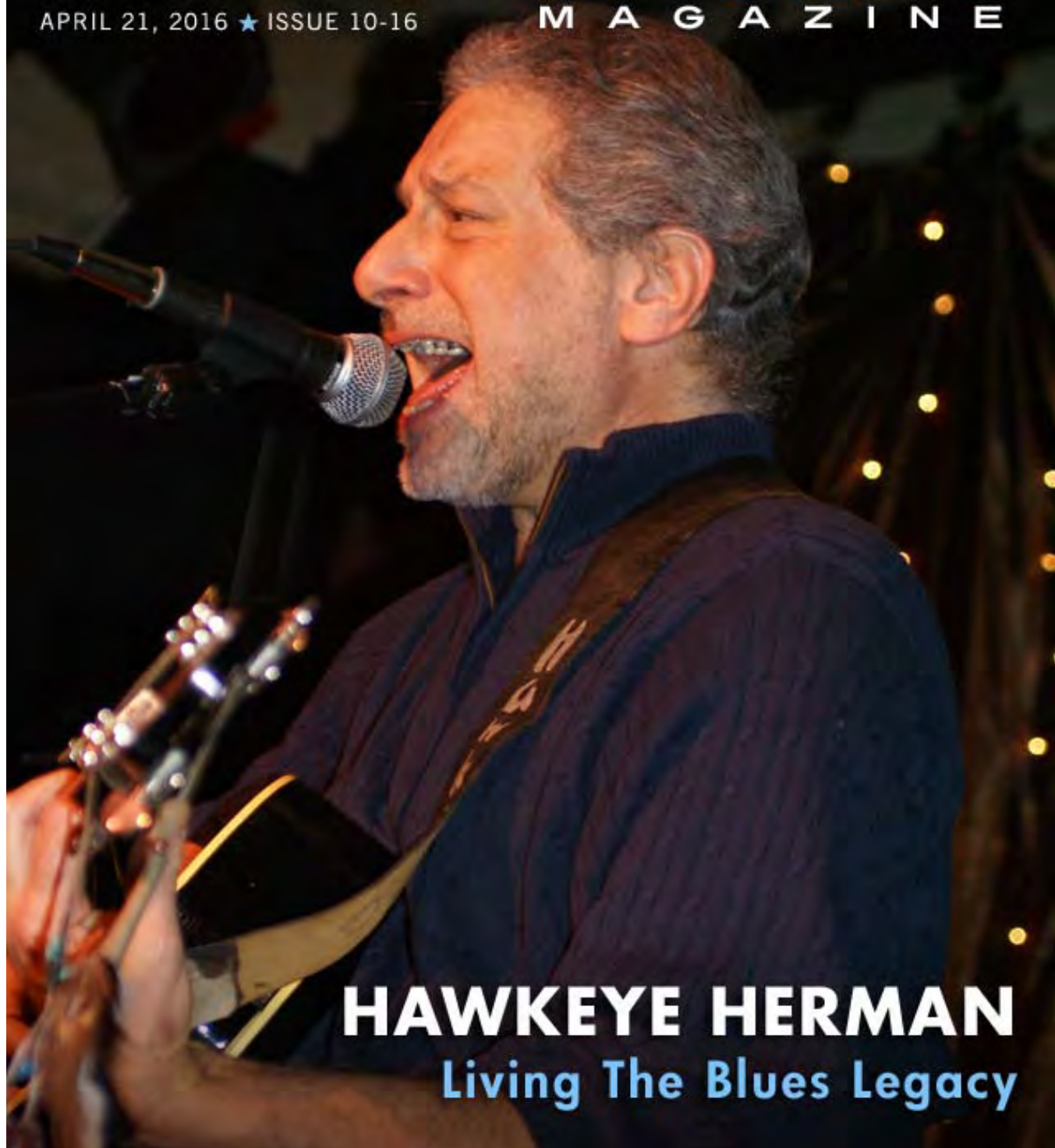
Visit Hawkeye's website at: www.hawkeyeherman.com

Interviewer Don Wilcock has been writing about blues for nearly half a century. He wrote Damn Right I've Got The Blues, the biography that helped Buddy Guy jumpstart his career in 1991. He's interviewed more than 5000 Blues artists and edited several music magazines including King Biscuit Time.

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HAWKEYE HERMAN
Living The Blues Legacy

