

## And the scene is set ... An interview with Hawkeye Herman, Blues in the Schools

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By JONNYE WEBER for AMERICAN BLUES NEWS



Michael "Hawkeye" Herman

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**The place:** The lobby of the DoubleTree Hotel in Memphis, TN.

**The event:** The International Blues Challenge.

**The setting:** A performance by Hawkeye Herman, an award winning guitarist and a Blues in the Schools (BITS) instructor.

**The purpose:** A Blues in the Schools presentation.

People were racing through the lobby of the Doubletree in Memphis, TN. Performers were readying themselves for their evening competitions while many blues fans were eagerly waiting for the evening's competition to begin. As part of the festivities, the Blues Foundation had scheduled a performance to introduce the masses to a Blues in the Schools presentation. That finely honed and tuned product was designed by the award winning Hawkeye Herman. The *Blues in the Schools (BITS)* project is a prominent, ongoing vehicle whose purpose is to "*keeping the blues alive.*"

The elevator door opened. Hawkeye Herman slowly crossed the lobby and strode to the stage...a stool in the

lobby surrounded by many interesting guitars. His demeanor: a man with a purpose; a man on a mission. He sat down and intently tuned his guitar. He suddenly looked up. He slowly smiled. That smile grew as the crowd grew. Immediately, he engaged those standing nearby. His soft melodic voice filled the “makeshift concert hall.” He slowly and methodically began to unfold the purpose of his mission. He promised to take one song through a hundred years of transition, people were slowing their steps. Children began to sit on the floor cross legged listening to his story of how the blues unfolded in America. Soon, the “big kids” were finding seats on the sofas and lounge chairs that were strategically placed in that beautiful lobby. Major performers, who had been weaving their way through the crowd, were soon finding seats. It was an amazing site. Hawkeye Herman was casting his spell. His enthusiasm and his intent were hypnotizing, almost intoxicating. I was breathless, listening to the transformation of that one line from that one song as it meandered through time and adapted to the changes in time: the call and recall of the fields, the sounds of the wagon wheels on their ambling trek from the farms to the growing metropolis of Memphis, the sounds of the trains with their shrill whistles and their clanging wheels as they crossed the country side on their rickety tracks, the sounds of players sharing their newly found musical knowledge from their travels going from town to town, the loud sounds on the street corners of Chicago as the Great American Migration took the players to the North, the sounds of the British Invasion as they stormed our shores, the sounds of the rock and roll era with a “whole lot of shakin’ going on,” and the effects of rockabilly being thrown in. It was a long span of time, one hundred years. It enabled the listeners to visualize the changes as our country went from an agricultural entity to an Industrial giant. The listeners that afternoon were treated to the cultural, logistical and historical significance of each piece of the Blues puzzle. Hawkeye Herman changed up the instruments as he changed up that one line in that one song...showing that those essential and integral changes demanded a musical transformation. The cast of onlookers were mesmerized. The crowd was attentive and receptive to all that Hawkeye Herman shared with him. The applause when he finished his presentation was deafening. Afterwards, while he was talking with his following, the children clamored for a chance to touch the very unique instruments that he had used. Their small fingers glided gingerly over those melodic objects. Hawkeye Herman, the performer/educator, shifted his focus, taking time to speak with each and every one of the young listeners.

### **Why you ask...it is the future of the Blues.**

**After note:** Thank you Hawkeye for that afternoon. My blues experience was personally enriched. It has been a catalyst for the Blues Society of Western PA’s program for Blues in the Schools. An extended outreach program has resulted. PITCH (Putting Instruments in the Children’s Hands) gives financially challenged but musically inclined children instruments.

**The following is what Hawkeye Herman shared in a recent interview:**

**Jonnye:** I saw your presentation in Memphis at the International Blues Challenge in 1998. It was inspirational watching you engage young and old alike. Your presentations are geared to the age levels and abilities of your listeners. I have read that your concept as a “Stranger with a guitar” is a very different approach to capturing your audience and their attention. How did you come about incorporating this persona into your presentations. How do you measure the results with these programs.

**Hawkeye Herman:** I did not have to ‘create’ the concept of my being a “stranger with a guitar” when I go into schools to present my program(s). In every school I go to I AM a “stranger with a guitar,” and as a result, I’m immediately the subject of curiosity for the students and teachers, regardless of the age level I’m to teach. Invariably, the students give me their undivided attention and enthusiasm from the moment I enter the classroom or auditorium. The students have been ‘primed’ by their teachers about my background as a professional musician. The students work/study/learn with their teachers everyday at school, but as a professional musician, I’m a ‘special guest’ with a guitar. The students express their interest and curiosity about my music, my profession, and my background. Because I’m a ‘stranger with a guitar’ and I’m only with the students at their school for a limited time, the students realize my visit/residency is a ‘special event,’ and they are very attentive and curious about my music, my work, and my background. I take advantage of the natural fact that of my being a ‘stranger with a guitar’ because the curiosity about my music and work draws the students in and peaks their interest.

I measure the results of my programs by handing out an evaluation sheet to each of the teachers that asks them to critique my program(s)/residency via specific questions, as well as requesting general input and criticisms from the teachers.

I also request that each student, under the direction and aid of their classroom instructor, send me a ‘thank you’ note in which they can tell me how my program(s) had an impact on them. This is done a few days after I’m at the school. The teachers then collect all of the students’ notes for me, and after the teachers and administrators look over the notes to me from the students, they are all mailed to me in one package. These ‘thank you’ notes not only help measure the results/impact of my program(s), but also serve as an important measure of the level of retention of each of the students. Being able to measure retention is an important aspect for teachers. Also, local press and media coverage of my programs frequently include information about the impact of my program(s) on the students.

Just recently, in mid-May of 2011, I was invited to teach for two days at a middle school in Reno, NV. Here’s the

report on my work from the local press in Reno, NV:

“Hawkeye taught the students the history, progression and culture of blues music, and how it influenced most of today’s modern music including jazz, bluegrass, country music, hip-hop, and rock ‘n’ roll. Accompanied by guitar, and a slide show, Hawkeye’s presentation was pitch perfect.”

“He told the history of the blues in terms that kids today can relate to — like how when a student does a chore, and moans and complains the whole time, the chore seems endless, but when music is added, time goes by more quickly and/or enjoyably. Hawkeye explained that this was the basis behind work/field music with the cotton pickers, railroad workers, and other types of hard labor, and how work songs and field holler, as well as sacred/spiritual music came together to create blues music.”

“The students left the auditorium all singing Hawkeye’s keynote blues instructional song: “The Blues had a baby and they called it Rock and Roll! It makes me feel good from my head down to my toes!”

**J:** You have been playing music since the age of 14, performing since 1968, touring since 1984, and hosting Blues Education programs since 1978. You were presented with the “Keeping the Blues Alive Award” in 1998 for your Blues in the Schools concept. You were on the board of the Blues Foundation for six years and were the key element to formatting a Blues in the Schools program that is used worldwide. Why did you choose to teach the blues and what does it mean to you, the performer and blues enthusiast.

**HH:** I initiated my “Blues In The Schools” programs in 1978, thirty-three years ago. Since that time I have done blues educational programs, assembly performances/concerts, and multi-day in-school residencies in 29 states, 8 foreign nations, in over five hundred schools (all levels, from elementary to college level), to well over 1/2 million students. In 1998, I received the Blues Foundation’s “Keeping the Blues Alive” award for achievement in education.

I began doing my blues educational programs so many years ago as my way to repay the many iconic blues artists who took the time to teach me, personally, how to play the blues, for giving me the skills to make a living throughout my life via blues music, to repay African American culture for this greatest of gifts, and to bring more visibility and recognition to blues music and to those who went before us and contributed so much to its development and influence on American and world cultures.

Students need to be informed that the world didn’t start when they were born. Everything has history and roots in

the past. Blues music is not only a depository for history and cultural/social change, but was very influential in impacting the development of popular music; rock, country, bluegrass, folk, rap/hip-hop, jazz, and even contemporary classical music. Blues music developed from work songs/field hollers and sacred/spiritual music as a result of the experiences of oppression and disenfranchisement of African Americans. Blues music is an original American form that has not only influenced other types of music that came after it, but has also had a deep influence on many aspects of American culture, and even world culture. In my humble opinion, this original American art form, blues music, is the greatest cultural 'gift' of the USA to the world. Blues music is what I refer to as the "watershed of American popular music."

The most valuable things that students get from learning about blues music is how blues music developed from its beginnings within African American culture and experience as an original American art form, an understanding of the history and the impact of blues music on all music that came after the blues, and that blues music remains to be an influential and important art form and means of creative expression in contemporary society.

**J:** You have stated that you want to create awareness of the blues genre of music, its impact on U.S. history and its culture. How do you change your classes to keep the attention of the younger people in times that obviously have different values and perceptions.

**HH:** My programs vary according to the grade level and attention span of the students I'm working with. Regardless of the age group I'm working with I always try to make my presentations fun and informative/educational. For students who are in kindergarten through 3rd grade, I focus on the music and its history and impact on American and world cultures without utilizing too many historical dates and names. From 4th grade and up, through college level, the older the students/greater their attention span, the more I incorporate important dates and names into my presentations.

The latest 'buzz word' in educational circles is "cross curricular studies." The concept of cross curriculum work is to bring in professional artists into schools to teach courses to students that are outside of, but associated to, the discipline of the artist. For example, in the last five years I have been invited to utilize blues music and blues history to teach classes in English/Literacy, history, geography, social studies, science, art, math, band and chorus classes. This cross curricular teaching concept is constantly growing and is very popular with teachers and students, and has done much to increase visibility for blues music and its history and impact on culture, as well as illustrate to students that blues music contains 'lessons in life' that go far beyond just the music itself.

**J:** Your most recent concept, "Teaching the Teachers," is a progression in continuing what you do as an educator.

Do you find that there is a need to convince the players that they need to actively teach the blues.

**HH:** About eight years ago I created an all-day seminar/workshop/master class for teachers and musicians interested in developing their own in-school blues educational programs according to their personal background and skills. I created this program in answer to the need for more 'regional' blues educators all over the world. I have presented this 'Teaching the Teachers' seminar/workshop/master class for the Blues Foundation in Memphis, for seven blues societies in the USA, and for four years at the Blues sur Seine Festival in France. As a result of this program there are now over 200 'new' regional blues educators working in all levels of education in the USA and in Europe.

Not all musicians have the skills necessary to teach, nor do all blues musicians have the desire to do so. I don't try to 'convince' the players that they need to actively teach the blues. I developed my "Teaching the Teachers" program to help facilitate, teach, and encourage those musicians (and teachers) who are interested in sharing their love and interest for the music with others, but lack the teaching experience and skills to do so. I explain to them how they can create their own unique in-school blues educational program(s) according to their individual background and skills, while explaining and exemplifying the basic 'how to's' of being a good teacher, as well as how to develop further skills in teaching.

From my early beginnings as a blues and folk musician as a teenager in the late 1950s, I've always considered myself to be a blues storyteller and songster. I was a theatre and communications major in college. I use those theatrical and communicative skills, along with my music and love of blues and blues history to engage, entertain, and instruct students of all ages. My sister, Professor Ellie Herman, has been the head of the student teaching department for the School of Education at the University of Iowa for almost 20 years. Over the years, she has helped me a great deal in understanding what training and skills are necessary to be successful as a teacher, as well as how to teach other musicians and teachers how to build their own unique and effective blues educational programs.

**J:** Studies have shown that music develops the "right brain creative thinking." How does this help the student cultivate his learning skills during his developmental school years.

**HH:** Studies have shown that the arts, not just music, helps to further develop "right brain creative thinking." These studies have shown that students who take courses in the arts, along with courses in the science and math, do better in the science and math classes than those students who do not take arts courses along with their science and math courses. It takes creative thinking to solve problems. Problem solving is a major aspect of education.

The arts involve students in expanding their creative thinking and ability to solve problems in a creative manner. Science and math problems are more easily approached and solutions are more easily found amongst students (and professionals) who have experience in the arts. Solving problems and creating 'new' solutions and ideas is an important aspect of science and math. The studies show us that courses/classes in the arts exercise and expand the "right brain creative thinking" capabilities of students, regardless of the discipline/curriculum that is their main interest and focus, math, science, or otherwise. Much of education is about the honing the abilities of students to tackle and solve problems of all kinds. Classes/courses in the arts, "right brain creative thinking," have been proven to facilitate and expand the ability for/of students to think creatively/think 'outside the box' in all areas of study. As a result, students who experience arts courses/classes can more readily understand and solve problems, as well as 'push the envelope' of creative thinking toward broader horizons and 'new answers' to 'old questions.'

**J:** With the education cuts and the diminishing arts programs in our U.S. schools, what is your take on the future of the arts in the school systems. Is your program a catalyst to inspire what can transpire from implementing such programs.

**HH:** I believe my in-school blues educational programs are a catalyst to inspire teachers and school administrators to further explore and implement diverse alternative arts programs and arts residencies.

I have little problem in getting my programs sponsored or getting them entered in educational institutions. Even as funding for many school programs and classes have been/are cut, (especially in arts programs), I find that due to the rise in awareness amongst educators/teachers regarding the effectiveness of using 'right brain' creative thinking and training to aid in all sorts of 'problem solving' via classes in the arts, as well as the awareness about the concept of cross curriculum work, have contributed significantly to the current and ongoing willingness of school administrators and teachers to open their doors and classrooms to artists.

Also, another important factor, it is with a great deal of gratitude that I recognize the many blues societies here in the USA and overseas for their dedicated efforts in diligently pursuing corporate, government, and private grant funding in support and sponsorship of blues educational programs. Without such efforts and support of blues societies for programs like my "Blues In The Schools" presentations and residencies there would be far less opportunities for teachers and students to learn about the history of blues music and its influence and impact on American and world cultures.

In my opinion, the recent transition to the 'educational concept' of "No child left behind" and the regular/periodic

'testing' that accompanies this concept must be eliminated. Due to this concept we are teaching students how to pass tests, not how to study, learn, think creatively, problem solve, and be prepared for adult life with the skills necessary to survive, flourish, and prosper in contemporary life and society. Students deserve more from the educational system than is being provided for them today. Students deserve diversity and alternatives in education far beyond what is currently available to them. Young people are the future. We should be providing students with the knowledge and skills that will allow and provide them with the abilities to create a brighter future for themselves and everyone on the planet. That includes raising students' and the general public's awareness and appreciation of the original American art form of the blues, and its impact and influence on culture and contemporary life.

**J:** What are your goals or aspirations for the future as a musician and as an educator that promotes the Blues.

**HH:** Students around the world learn in school about the important contributions of their own culture to world culture. For example, in Spain, all students learn and are proud of the fact that a Spaniard, Miguel de Cervantes, wrote the first Western novel, "Don Quixote," in the early 1600s. In France, all students learn about and are proud of the fact that French impressionist artists made greatly influential contributions and innovations in/to the world of art/painting in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. The original American art form of blues music has had an equal (if not greater, in my opinion) impact and influence on world culture and music. Yet, this important contribution and 'gift' to the world from the USA, with its origins in African American culture, is not taught to our American students. Even most adult Americans are unaware of the history and influence of blues music on our own culture and world culture, let alone instilling a sense of pride in our American culture for this important and ongoing cultural and artistic contribution. The time has come, and is long overdue, for the American people, not just young students, to be made aware of and take pride in the impact, influence, and contributions of this original American art form, the blues, on world culture. These are my goals and aspirations for the future as a musician and as an educator interested in furthering and expanding visibility for the blues worldwide, as well as furthering the understanding of/for the cultural history of the music and its impact, influence, and importance to/on American and World cultures.

**J:** Is there anything else that you would want to share with our readers.

**HH:** I encourage readers to go to the "Blues In The Schools' page at my web site to learn more about "Blues In The Schools" programs, and see these programs in action. Be sure to 'click' on the active video and audio links at the top of the page:



**[http://www.hawkeyeherman.com/blues\\_in\\_the\\_schools.htm](http://www.hawkeyeherman.com/blues_in_the_schools.htm)**

Also, there are many articles that I've written about some of the icons of the blues I met and learned from over the years, as well as articles on blues history:

**<http://www.hawkeyeherman.com/articles.htm>**

In my ongoing efforts to bring more respect and visibility to the blues, for the past three years I have been teaching blues guitar at the biggest and most popular online guitar instructional web site; [www.JamPlay.com](http://www.JamPlay.com). The web site has well over 9,000 subscribers all over the globe. There are over 50 superb guitar instructors in all styles/genres of music. There are over 40 hours of my blues guitar lessons alone, and I have thousands of blues guitar students all over the planet; in Beijing, Paris, Bangkok, Melbourne, Brussels, St. Louis, Beirut, Chicago, Brisbane, Denver, Boston, LA, Berlin, Seattle, Cape Town, Belfast, etc., learning to play blues guitar. As a special gift to readers of Big City Blues magazine, I extend a free week, seven full days, of all access to the web site. There is no spam involved and no obligation to buy anything. It's a gift, and I hope many BCB readers will take advantage of this opportunity. BCB readers can go online to:

**<http://www.JamPlay.com/card>**

**and enter the following password:**

**603F03EBB**

and they will be 'good to go' for one week of free access to everything on the web site, including free blues guitar lessons from myself, Mary Flower, Orville Johnson, Eric Madis, Kenny Blue Ray, and a host of others. This is my way of continuing to 'spread the word' about the blues and to thank readers for supporting the music we love.

Michael "Hawkeye" Herman

<http://www.HawkeyeHerman.com>

**<http://www.youtube.com/profile?user=HawkeyeH>**

**Biography:**

**Michael "Hawkeye" Herman**

With well over 40 years of performing experience, Michael "Hawkeye" Herman personifies the range of possibilities in blues and blues education. His dynamic blues guitar playing and vocal abilities have won him a faithful following and he leads a very active touring schedule of performances at festivals, concerts, school programs and educational workshops throughout North and South America, and in Europe. His original music has been included in video dramas and documentaries and in four hit theatrical productions. His CDs, "Everyday Living," "Blues Alive!," "It's All Blues To Me," and his "Hawkeye Live In Concert" DVD have all been greeted with rave reviews. Hawkeye's journalistic efforts on blues history and his biographies and memoirs on the giants of the blues that he met and learned from have been published in numerous international, national, and regional blues and music-related periodicals. He served on the Board of Directors of the Blues Foundation (Memphis) for six years as Education Committee Chairman. Hawkeye has been bringing blues music and blues history into all levels of schools since 1978 via his "Blues In The Schools" programs. His programs have been presented in over 500 schools, all levels, from elementary through college level) to over 1/2 a million students in 29 states and in 8 foreign nations. In 1998 he was the recipient of the Blues Foundation's "Keeping The Blues Alive" award for achievement in education. In 2000, he received The Barrymore Award, Philadelphia's version of the Tony Award, for best original music in a theatrical production. He served on the Board of Directors of the Blues Foundation (Memphis, TN) for six years. Hawkeye was inducted into the Iowa Blues Hall of fame in 2004. In September of 2005, Hawkeye composed, at the request of the British Broadcasting Company (BBC), "Katrina, Oh Katrina (Hurricane Blues)," detailing the hurricane disaster on the Gulf Coast. The song was aired to over 7 million listeners on BBC Radio news' "Today" program. He is the cofounder of the Rogue Valley Blues Festival, Ashland, OR.