



### **Searching for Roots Discovering Electric Blues in White America**

By Michael Erlewine

In the late 1950s and early 1960s the interest in folk music and its roots in rural America and the European Continent reached a high pitch as thousands of young adults crisscrossed America documenting folksongs and sharing authentic music. Folklore societies sprung up at many major campuses. This was a folk revival, one that has not been repeated since. But old English and Scottish ballads were not the only music discovered during this time. There was another even more indigenous music that needed no revival. In fact this music was very much alive and probably playing somewhere just across town, separated only by a racial curtain: modern city blues. This article is about the heyday of folk music in the late 1950s and early 1960s and something about how white America discovered the blues.

#### **Blues Festivals – A Brief History**

On a warm summer night in August of 1969 a music legacy was born. Several thousand blues lovers gathered in a small athletic field called Fuller Flats near the North Campus of the University of Michigan (a spot along the Huron River in Ann Arbor, Michigan) to witness the first “Ann Arbor Blues Festival.” By the time blues icon Sun House took the stage to close the show it was clear that something magical was happening in this southeast Michigan college town. Few present also knew that music history was being made, for the 1969 Ann Arbor Blues Festival was the first electric blues festival of its kind in North America.

When we look back at the roster of performers at those first two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals, it is hard to imagine that all of this great talent managed to converge at one place and time: blues greats like Bobby ‘Blue’ Bland, Big Joe Turner, Buddy Guy, John Lee Hooker, B.B. King, Albert King, Freddy King, Lightnin’ Hopkins, Howlin’ Wolf, Magic Sam, Muddy Waters, Son House, T-Bone Walker, and Junior Wells, to name a few. And that is just the short list.

#### **How I Happened to Be There**

Before I begin, let me tell you something about why I happen to be writing this and how I got involved with these landmark festivals in the first place. It is simple: those first two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals changed the course of my life forever.

Sometimes I think of myself as similar to the lead character in the movie “Forrest Gump,” always on the edge of history, witnessing, but never quite front and center, never in exactly the right place at the right time. However, when it comes to those first two blues festivals in Ann Arbor, I was there AND then, one-hundred percent. Those festivals were life-altering events for me, a pivotal point in deciding who I was going to be and what I would do in my life. Let me give you a quick idea what I was about back then.

In 1968, when that first blues festival was being organized, I was part of the only blues band in the area. The “Prime Movers Blues Band” first came together in the summer of 1965, the same summer that the Grateful Dead formed in San Francisco. This was a time of real cultural change across the country. I was studying and learning to play Chicago-style blues 24x7. It was my passion.

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We hooked up with the blues festival organizers pretty much by default: we were the only band in the area that knew anything about modern city blues. We had been to Chicago years before and seen all the blues greats live, not to mention: you couldn't keep us out of that festival for the world. This festival was like a dream come true for me, a chance to see my idols, these great blues players up close and right here in my own home town. Who could ask for more?

My brother Dan and I volunteered (we probably forced ourselves on the organizers) and ended up being put in charge of feeding all the performers and making sure they had drinks. Trust me, providing drinks proved to be "key" in gaining access to these players. The opportunity to meet our heroes was way beyond anything we could have imagined on our own.

And to put the icing on the cake, I ended up officially interviewing (on reel-to-reel tape) almost every blues artist and sideman at the festival – dozens of them. Later in my life, the experience of putting all that interview information together led to my becoming something of an archivist of music data in general and I eventually founded and built the All-Music Guide ([allmusic.com](http://allmusic.com)), which today is the largest database of music reviews, bios, tracks, and information on the planet. So you can see what I mean when I say that these festivals were life-changing for me. They gave me direction. Now you know how I fit into all of this, so let's move on.

In this writing, I have two stories to tell. One of course is the importance of those first two Ann Arbor blues festivals, how they came about, who was involved, and the artists that played there – the

music itself. The second story I want to share with you has more to do with my experience of how white America first became aware of electric-city blues music and, as you will see, the two are to some degree interdependent.

### **A Short History of Blues Festivals**

To appreciate the uniqueness of those first Ann Arbor Blues Festivals, some historical context may be helpful. Blues as a genre did not always have festivals. Although some blues was included in many of the early folk festivals, it was almost exclusively of the acoustic "folk-blues" variety, more of an add-on than a featured style at folk festivals like those held in Newport Rhode Island. It was the "folk" in folk-blues that was what most people came to hear, not the blues. The "blues" was just a feeling that the folk-blues held for many of us and was not recognized as the genre it is today, at least by folkies like me. Until the late '60s, modern, electric, citified blues was almost exclusively the province of black Americans, made available on black record labels or served up in hundreds of small clubs and bars across the land. White Americans didn't go there. All that began to change with that first Ann Arbor Blues Festival in 1969, but let's back up just a bit.

### **The Chitlin Circuit**

Chitterlings or "Chitlins" as they are called are the large intestines of pigs that have been specially cleaned, stewed, and then fried. The Chitlin' Circuit as it was called consisted of hundreds of small venues (mostly in the south) where chitlins were served along with plenty of beer and music. These were the places where black musicians travelled to play the blues and where black audiences could congregate in a racially divided country and age. The

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chitlin' circuit also included (on the high-end) some major black theaters like the Apollo Theater in Harlem, the Howard Theater in D.C., the Cotton Club in NYC, the Royal Theater in Baltimore, the Fox Theater in Detroit, the Uptown Theater in Philadelphia, and so on. But for the most part, this kind of blues was played in the hundreds of small bars, clubs, and way-stops along the circuit. Many of the great blues musicians featured at those first Ann Arbor blues festivals knew the chitlin' circuit only too well. For years, these performers had traveled the circuit playing the blues – one-night stands at roadside bars and clubs. To white America, the chitlin' circuit was practically invisible. City blues at that time was black music played in black venues – music for blacks.

### **The Folk Festivals**

By the 1950s, more and more young Americans became interested in their own indigenous music – American folk music. In the later '50s and early '60s, festivals and folklore societies became increasingly popular, in particular on college campuses and among more affluent white Americans. Along with the interest in folk music came the folklore societies. My first experience with these groups was the University of Michigan Folklore Society in Ann Arbor in the early 1960s. And of course there were the folk festivals, of which the one in Newport, Rhode Island is perhaps the most famous, if not the first.

The Newport Folk Festival was established in 1959 by George Wein, the same man who in 1954 established the Newport Jazz Festival. The first Newport Folk Festival was held on July 11-12, 1959 and featured, among other acts, the Kingston Trio, a group that had exploded to national prominence only

the year before. Flanking the Kingston Trio were classic folk singers like Odetta, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, and of course, the ubiquitous Pete Seeger. During a set by the singer/songwriter Bob Gibson at that first 1959 festival, a young Joan Baez made her national debut to a wildly enthusiastic audience of over 13,000 people. The Newport festival is still considered to be the granddaddy of all folk festivals, even though it has been reduced in size in recent years.

The folk scene in the early '60s was very active and organized enough to have a well-established set of venues (coffee houses, church sponsorships, etc.) and routes that stretched across the country and over which performing folk artists traveled, mostly by hitchhiking. By the early 1960s folk enthusiasts everywhere were learning the rudiments of music research, at least to the point of tracing particular songs back through time to their roots or at least trying to. It was axiomatic at that time that the original version of a song was preferable to later versions, almost always enriching the listener's experience and enjoyment of the tune. "Sing Out! Magazine" was one of the main repositories of this research, our musical collective heritage.

It should be remembered that the folk-music revival emerged toward the end of the 1950s and the early 1960s, a time when more and more young people were rejecting the culture of the 1950s (the flattop haircuts and what they felt was a cookie-cutter mentality) and thirsting for something a little more real. It is a simple fact that most of us looked to the folk music tradition as a way of grounding ourselves, a way to somehow get underneath or break through the

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social veneer in which we were raised. Future events cast their shadows and the counterculture revolution that was to come later in the mid-1960s was already emerging.

### **The Folk Scene**

Unlike folk music, whose roots were often in England or Ireland, with blues, to the surprise of most white folk-blues lovers, a trip into the history book was often as easy as venturing into a different part of town, only we didn't know it then. The folk music scene was flourishing on college campuses and what started at Newport in 1959 was echoed in the next few years by startup folk festivals all across America, including the Berkeley and Chicago Folk festivals, both of which debuted in 1961. And, although these folk festivals also featured some blues (country blues), the blues at those festivals was mostly treated as part of the folk genre, and as a sidelight at that.

For example, one could hear Jessie "Lone Cat" Fuller at Hertz Hall (Berkeley, CA) in 1959 and at Newport in 1960. In 1960 Robert Pete Williams performed at Newport. Other festivals in the early 1960s had Lightnin' Hopkins, Mance Lipscomb, and Mississippi John Hurt, Rev. Gary Davis, Sleepy John Estes, Jesse Fuller, and occasionally John Lee Hooker. It is hard for me to imagine John Lee Hooker or Lightnin' Hopkins not getting mainstream attention wherever they played. In 1965, an electrified Bob Dylan, backed by the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, shocked the Newport folk crowd and helped to bring awareness of modern city blues to a mostly white folk crowd. Dylan was booed.

### **The Folk Revival – Looking for Roots**

This folk music revival in the later 1950s and early 1960s was just that, a revival, an attempt to revive a music that most felt was already deeply embedded in the past. The revival started out looking back and, for the most part, stayed that way for many years. We sought to revive and find our future in past songs rather than writing our own songs for the future.

Initially, younger folk artists were just too shy. Emerging players like Bob Dylan, Ramblin' Jack Elliot (and scores of now-unknown players schooled in traditional folk music) were (at first) not focused on writing songs themselves. Their favorite contemporary songwriter was probably Woody Guthrie, but most of the songs they played came from even earlier times, sometimes all the way back to England and Europe. The great majority of folk artists did covers of earlier songs, Dylan included. The goal then was to do them well, to make them live again.

Pivotal artists of the time like Joan Baez and the New Lost City Ramblers were not writing their own songs, but instead re-enacting and re-presenting the finest in traditional folk music. Their technique was flawless, but it was not their own songwriting creativity that was being featured. Groups like the Kingston Trio and the Weavers are perfect examples. The folk music magazine "Sing Out!" is a written testimony to this approach. White America was exploring its roots, but we were looking backward to find what we felt was missing in the present – our living roots. Folk artists as a group had not yet empowered themselves to write for the present, much less for the future. They were too busy trying to make the past live again, reviving their heritage. That's why it is called a revival.

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I was fortunate enough to be part of the early folk scene in the late 1950s and early 1960s. There was a route we all traveled that went from Cambridge, Massachusetts to New York City, to Ann Arbor, to the University of Chicago, to Madison, Wisconsin, to Berkeley, California, and then round back again. For the most part we all hitchhiked or piled into cars that could barely run all the way across this wide country. If I remember right, I believe I hitchhiked the distance from Ann Arbor to New York City some ten times, and hitchhiked to and lived in Venice Beach and North Beach, San Francisco as early as 1960. I even travelled with Bob Dylan for a while, hitchhiking together with my friend Perry Lederman, who even then was a legendary guitar instrumentalist.

The folk route also included side trips to places like Oberlin and Antioch colleges in Ohio, and so on, wherever colleges and universities were. In Ann Arbor, folk artists like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez were frequent visitors, while groups like the New Lost City Ramblers and the Country Gentlemen were pretty much regulars, and Ramblin' Jack Elliot spent a lot of time there. We met mostly in houses or apartments and it seems we spent an inordinate amount of time drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes in the cafeteria of the University of Michigan Student Union. I can recall sitting around the Union with a nervous Bob Dylan who was awaiting the Michigan Daily review of one of his earliest performances in Ann Arbor. He couldn't bear to leave town until the review came out. When he saw that the review was good, Dylan was on his way, hitchhiking out of town.

### **Singers, Not Songwriters**

For the most part, the folk movement at this time was oriented around covering traditional folk tunes. The folk artists' originality was in how well they sang the song and not yet in the writing of contemporary songs. This is not to say that no songs were written; some were. My point is that back then it was all about the "singer" in "singer/songwriter" and not yet so much about the "songwriter." For most of us, that came a bit later.

I can remember well traveling in 1961 with Bob Dylan and stopping at Gerde's Folk City on West 4<sup>th</sup> Street in New York City. Gerde's was "the" happening place back then and the folk star of the moment in that club was a guitar virtuoso named Danny Kalb, who later became part of the group known as the "Blues Project." Dylan was obviously jealous of the attention Kalb was getting (you could hear it in his voice), but it was not just petty jealousy. He honestly could not understand what Kalb had going for him that he didn't. It boggled his mind. I didn't know then that my traveling companion was "The" Bob Dylan, but I am certain he must have. After all, he had something to say.

Remember, all of this was in the early 1960s, well before Haight Ashbury and the hippie scene. Most folkies (like myself) were wanna-be Beatniks, but that train had already left the station. We stood outside conventional society, but we were not so much politically alienated from that society as we were repulsed by it, and fascinated by the world of music, literature, art, and our own little social scene. Things were happening, man! I was 19 years old.

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### **The Folk Blues**

Real folk-blues artists like Elizabeth Cotton and Jessie “Lone Cat” Fuller began to be featured at festivals like the Berkeley Folk Festivals in the late 1950s. Many of them came to Ann Arbor where I lived and we heard them live, songs like “Freight Train” (Cotton) and “San Francisco Bay Blues” (Fuller). To folk enthusiasts like myself, this was still just folk music, but you did get a different feeling when you heard the blues. To me at the time, this just sounded like really good folk music – “really” good. Back then we didn’t know much about the blues, but we sure could feel that music.

While folk enthusiasts heard some blues early on (as mentioned), it was at first mostly only the folk blues, and folk blues were seen as just another form (albeit, with a lot of feeling) of folk music. Later, and only very gradually, more and more country blues began to appear, but usually only southern acoustic blues, not music from the North and nothing at all from the inner cities. There was no awareness of inner-city blues or electrified blues and no interest either. At that time electric-folk music was an oxymoron.

### **Being Part of the Scene**

As a folkie myself, I can remember listening to acoustic folk-blues and really loving it, but I treated it the same way I treated traditional folk music, as something that also needed to be preserved and revived – learned, played, shared – kept alive. It was a natural assumption on our part that we were listening to the vestiges of what had once been a living tradition and we wanted to connect to that past, to revive and relive it. We had no idea that modern electric blues music was not

only “not-dead” but was playing “live” most nights of the week probably only blocks away, separated from us by a racial curtain. We just had no idea. The folk music scene had few blacks in it (other than a handful of performers) and those that were present were usually the older folk-blues artists like Sonny Terry, Odetta, and so on. Their music was perceived by folkies as coming out of the past, not part of the present.

Please don’t get the idea that our exposure to folk music was only at concerts or folk societies. Like most musicians, we played or practiced music all the time, if only to learn the songs and how to play our instruments. We were also exposed to a lot of jazz. In Ann Arbor in the early 1960s, before bars could serve liquor by the glass, everyone met in apartments and houses around town to drink, smoke pot, and play music. This was primarily a jazz scene and young folkies (underage high-school kids like me) were tolerated as long as we kept to the shadows and sat along the far edges of the rooms.

And quite a scene it was. I remember one house on E. Williams Street in Ann Arbor. Protruding horizontally from its second story hung a huge flag with a picture of Thelonious Monk. At nights, especially on weekends, there was impromptu jazz in that house that went on most of the night, with players like Bob James, Bob Detwiler, Ron Brooks, and many others. It was music, music, music plus wine and pot. High school kids like me sat on the floor, squeezed in along the back wall. We didn’t rate any pot, but we used to snort the ashes from joints that others had smoked. That should tell you how desperate we were to be part of the scene!

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### Searchin' for Roots

We experienced jazz along with our folk music, but still not much blues. And the jazz was anything but bluesy jazz; it was more frenetic, like bop. And if it wasn't jazz we heard, then it was classical music played in the background on the stereo. Again: not much blues. This is an important point, because when the mostly-white folk musicians like myself were suddenly exposed to modern (and virile) inner-city blues players like Junior Wells, Magic Sam, and Howlin' Wolf, we were astonished.

As folkies made the gradual transition from studying and researching traditional folk music to also searching out historic country folk blues and then on to discovering modern city blues, all of a sudden things lit up. We got it. Blues was not simply R&B or pop music like you heard on the radio, but music by plain folks – folk music! We could see that blues was the same as folk music, only modern, fresh – alive, well and incredibly potent.

What we had assumed must always be lost in the past, like folk music that depended on our efforts to restore and revive it was, when it came to blues, very much alive and in the present – staring us in the face and more-or-less happy to see us at that. This blues music we were hearing lived in the present and not just in the past. It did not need us to revive it. Our idea of folk music as something to restore and treasure suddenly moved from the past into the present in our minds. We made the connection. Blues didn't need restoration. It was still with us and it was powerful. It was like the movie Jurassic Park; we had found a living dinosaur, folk music that lived in the present! And this music revived us and not vice-versa!

The blues scene in the early 1960s as played out in the small clubs and bars of Chicago, Detroit, and other major industrial cities, while very much still alive, was by then itself on the wane, only we newcomers didn't know that yet. To us, it was way more alive than the standard folk music we knew. Intercity electric blues music was still authentic and strong, but (for the most part) the next generation of younger blacks was already not picking up on it; they were just not interested. Chicago-style city blues was, to younger blacks at that time, old-peoples music, something from the South, a past and history they wanted to get away from rather than embrace. Younger blacks had already skipped ahead to R&B, Motown, and funk. Forget about those old blues.

My band played in a black bar for something like a year or a year and a half, a bar filled with mostly older black folks and a sprinkling of hippie whites who had come to see us. This was in 1967. Right next door was another black bar, where all the younger blacks hung out and where they played only the latest R&B hits. The younger blacks seldom came into our bar and, in general, were embarrassed that their parents and elders were listening to blues played by a racially-mixed band – listening to white boys play the blues. How embarrassing! Interest in the classic Chicago blues was just not there for the younger generation of blacks. They felt that blues was music from an older generation, music for old people.

While within the black community the door was slowly closing on the Chicago blues artists (even the artists knew this), another and much wider door for this music was opening onto white America, an open door that would extend the



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careers for many of these artists and secure their music well into the future.

B.B. King said in Time Magazine in 1971:

“The blacks are more interested in the ‘jumpy’ stuff. The whites want to hear me for what I am.”

### **1965: A Sea Change**

As pointed out, in the early 1960s the folk music revival was one of the main things happening on all the major campuses across America: Cambridge, Ann Arbor, Chicago, Madison, Berkeley, etc. What happened to it?

For one, in the mid-1960s, pop music groups like the Rolling Stones were busy recording covers of blues classics and pointing out the source – the artists who originally wrote and recorded them. White players like me, eager for guidance, hunted down the original blues 45s, which were a revelation to us. I can remember rummaging through bins of old 45s in downtown Chicago and finding just incredible music.

That first “Rolling Stones” album, of the same name, was released in April of 1964. It contained tunes like Jimmy Reed’s “Honest I Do,” “Willie Dixon’s “I Just Want to Make Love to You,” “I’m a King Bee,” plus songs by Chuck Berry and Rufus Thomas.

The Stones second album, also released in 1964, veered away from the blues and contained tunes recorded by Chuck Berry, Wilson Pickett, Dale Hawkins, songs like “Under the Boardwalk.” It also included the blues-R&B tune made famous by Irma Thomas, “Time Is on My Side.” In 1965, the album “Rolling stones, Now!” had the Dixon-Wolf classic “Little Red Rooster.”

From that point onward, the blues content of Rolling Stones albums decreased. In 1965, the album “Out of Our Heads” had no real blues tunes, and neither did their other 1965 album, “December’s Children.” It was those first two albums in 1964, and in particular the first album, that pointed the blues out to many in the white audience. The U.K. was all about authentic blues well before white America ever heard of them.

In the wake of the Beatles and Rolling Stones, late summer and early fall of 1965 saw the emerging dancehall scene in San Francisco and the arrival of bands like the Grateful Dead. This was the beginning of the hippie era, and it’s when my own band, the Prime Movers, formed in Ann Arbor, Michigan. We knew nothing of the Grateful Dead, yet we too arose at the same time and represented a new era in music and lifestyle.

In fact the summer of 1965 was the trigger point for so very much. It marked a change in the folk scene with the advent of groups like the Paul Butterfield Blues Band. If there was a single band that opened up blues to white players, it was the Butterfield Band. That first Butterfield album appeared late in 1965, and it totally kicked ass. The Butterfield band in person was way more powerful than anything they managed to record.

This racially mixed band playing authentic Chicago blues sent a lightning bolt-like signal to all of us who were just waking up to the blues anyway. Their message was that white players could overcome their fear to play black music, including the blues. The Paul Butterfield Blues Band set the standard and set white musicians on notice that anybody

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was free to try to play the blues. We were emboldened to try.

Unlike many areas of folk music, modern city blues at that time was anything but a dead art. While the lineage of most folk music required revival, like trying to trace out the history and line of the music, this was not true of blues. The blues lineage was not only unbroken, but indeed very much alive, both on black record labels and in thousands of bars and clubs across the nation. Perhaps some forms of country blues were endangered, but inner-city blues (at least for the old generation of Blacks) was in full swing. White Americans just knew little or nothing about it. During the later 1960s, all that changed. And last, but not least, many of the modern city blues players were still reasonably young and more than willing to be discovered. They needed the money and appreciated the recognition.

Historians would agree that from the middle to the late '60s, music in general was, to a real extent, fusing. The whole psychedelic era blurred the boundaries of different music genres and emboldened white players to play music of all kinds – black, Indian, Asian, etc. The first extended psychedelic-like guitar solo/jam was Michael Bloomfield and the tune “East-West” on the Butterfield album of the same name in 1966. It was over 13 minutes in length and inspired legions of heavy metal players that followed

### **The American Folk Blues Festival in Europe**

The first large-scale blues festivals, “The American Folk Blues Festivals,” were not really festivals and were never held in America. Established in 1962 and lasting through 1972, these so-called

festivals were in fact tours of Europe by groups of black blues artists thankful to get the work. This is what informed the British blues-oriented groups like the Rolling Stones in the first place. Starting in 1962, at a tour run of three weeks, the American Folk Blues Festival excursions eventually would run up to six weeks. Individual concerts often lasted three to four hours. The tours started up again in 1980 and lasted until 1985.

Europe has always been in love with American black music, especially blues and jazz. Whereas in this country players like Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf found it hard to get a job outside of their home-town bars and the Chitlin’ Circuit, in Europe these players were treated like VIPs and played to rapt audiences. Race was never a real issue on the continent. This is why so many black blues and jazz artists have relocated to Europe. They found jobs that paid well and they were not considered second-class citizens.

Thanks to these touring festivals, Europe heard such blues greats as T-Bone Walker, Memphis Slim, Willie Dixon, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, and John Lee Hooker. In 1963, the list was joined by Muddy Waters, Otis Spann, Victoria Spivey, Big Joe Williams, Lonnie Johnson, and Sonny Boy (II) Williamson. 1964 brought Hubert Sumlin, Lightnin’ Hopkins, Sunnyland Slim, Sleepy John Estes, and Howlin’ Wolf. And in 1965, there was Mississippi Fred McDowell, J.B. Lenoir, Big Walter Horton, Roosevelt Sykes, Buddy Guy, Big Mama Thornton, Doctor Ross, and others.

In a very real sense, Europe was privileged to hear the more modern, electric, city blues well before the general (white) public in America knew

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anything about it. White America for the most part did not even know this music existed until the later Sixties.

### **Memphis Country Blues Festival 1967**

Perhaps the earliest festival in this country dedicated exclusively to blues, albeit the more acoustic folk or country blues, was the “Memphis Country Blues Festival.” Although it was organized in 1966 with the help of the great blues journalist Robert Palmer, the first festival was actually held in 1967. For example, the 1968 festival featured artists like Bukka White, Nathan Beauregard, Joe Callicott, Furry Lewis, and Rev. Robert Wilkins. Again, as the festival title suggests, this was country blues and acoustic artists, not the inner-city electric blues that had not yet been celebrated. That was to happen in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

### **The Ann Arbor Blues Festival: The First of Its Kind**

There is no doubt that the first North American all-out blues festival for modern, electric city blues (in fact all types of blues) was the Ann Arbor Blues Festival held in the fall of 1969. It featured artists like Muddy Waters, Junior Wells, B.B. King, Otis Rush, J.B. Hutto and the Hawks, Howlin’ Wolf, T-Bone Walker, Magic Sam, Freddy King, and dozens of modern-electric blues players as well as traditional blues artists like Son House, Lightnin’ Hopkins, and those in-between like Clifton Chenier, Roosevelt Sykes, and many others.

In the Ann Arbor festivals, the accent was off the folk and country blues and right on modern, big-city, electric blues artists. After all, Ann Arbor is only about a three-hour drive from Chicago. While the Newport Folk Festival sometimes

featured more than folk music, and to a small degree helped blues to segue from folk and country blues to more modern blues, this was not something they actively featured. For many years, electric anything was frowned upon at the Newport festival. It was in Ann Arbor that we find the first all-out presentation of modern electric city blues.

It has been said that those first Ann Arbor blues festivals mark the end of the city-blues era and the beginning of its exploitation. Of course there is some truth to that if we mean that by reaching a wider audience, the music will be more easily embraced and imitated. But in fact the electric city blues by that time was already dying out of its own accord. The younger blacks had turned away. Reaching the larger white audience actually prolonged the music’s decline and extended its life. Today (2008), with most of the original blues giants gone, we may be facing what amounts to reenactment and revival once again – blues as folklore.

There is no record of a blues festival of any similar scope and extent that predates that first Ann Arbor Blues Festival, which was organized in 1968 and held in 1969, much less one that endures to the present day. Actually, the popular Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival, which saw its roots in those first two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals, was suspended in 2007 due to lack of funds. The last festival was in 2006.

### **The Ann Arbor Blues Festival: What it Was**

The Ann Arbor Blues Festival was just that, a festival of blues featuring modern electric city blues -- the first of its kind in North America. Those two festivals helped to mark the discovery of modern blues music and the musicians that

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made that music. It was something more than just black music for white people. It was somewhat of a celebration for the black musicians themselves and the list of great blues artists present, on or off the stage, reads like a “Who’s Who” of blues musicians (of all types) alive at the time. They came from all over to play, of course, but also they came just to be together, to hang out – a real celebration.

Can you imagine? There was my dad, the controller of a small Michigan college sitting on folding chairs with blues great Roosevelt Sykes, the two of them leaning back up against a chain-link fence, swapping stories, and having beers all afternoon. They just liked each other and were having a ball. That’s the way it was all around – one big getting-to-know-one-another party. It was special.

That first Ann Arbor Blues Festival had its inception in the fall of 1968 at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. An on-campus entertainment group had called a meeting with the idea of putting together some kind of musical event loosely based on the blues-rock music that was emerging from Great Britain, groups like the Rolling Stones, John Mayall, and its reflection in this country. The self-appointed chairman of this group was Cary Gordon, a student from the suburbs of Detroit.

However, also present was John Fishel, another student who had just transferred to Michigan from Tulane University. Fishel (who knew no one in town) came across a handbill asking for people interested in being involved in a “blues” festival to attend an initial meeting at the Michigan Student Union. Being new in town, Fishel decided to check it out. At

that time he was already into well into listening to blues.

Fishel:

“I had a growing interest in the black music from my high school days in Cleveland. At the time I had seen as many of the Motown and other acts who came to town as well as a number of acts on the “folk club” circuit including the Paul Butterfield Blues Band and James Cotton, etc. I was listening to many of the country artists who were being rediscovered. I had also spent a summer in Great Britain and seen some of the British bands influenced by the blues like John Mayall, the Stones, Peter Green, etc. I had been attracted to the music and began to collect albums by *their* influences: BB King, Albert King, Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, Otis Rush, John Lee Hooker, and later Junior Wells and Magic Sam.”

Fishel, who was not so much interested in the blues-rock concept but rather in the authentic blues masters themselves, volunteered to be the entertainment co-chair along with another U. of M. Student, Janet Kelenson. Other original members of that core group included Bert Stratton and Fred Braseth (PR chairs), Ron Marabate (technical), and Ken Whipple (business affairs), plus Chris Seltsam, Howard Husok, Rena Selden, Dick Tittsely, Charlie Yoryd, Carol Maxwell, and local DJ Jim Dulzo.

The University of Michigan with some initial reluctance had agreed to be a sponsor without really understanding either the concept or the financial commitment. Later the Canterbury House (sponsored by the Episcopalian Church), an organization that had run a coffee-house/folk club in Ann Arbor for some time, also came on board as a

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sponsor. Something should someday be written about the generosity and foresight of the Canterbury House, which sponsored so much good music in those early years in the Ann Arbor area.

For many young white blues lovers living in the Midwest, like myself, a trip to Chicago where the electric city blues was born was just a part of our general education. I should know. Our band, the Prime Movers Blues Band, made that trek in 1966 and at other times too, with our drummer (a young Iggy Pop) in tow. I was the lead singer and harmonica player, my brother Dan Erlewine played lead guitar, Robert Sheff (aka Blue "Gene" Tyranny) was on keyboards, Jack Dawson (later with Siegel-Schwall Blues Band) played bass, and Jimmy Osterberg (aka Iggy Pop), a young drummer we had found in a frat band.

And like so many students of the blues, the first place we landed was in Bob Koester's "Jazz Record Mart." Koester, who founded Delmark Records (in my opinion the most important electric blues label ever) has probably introduced more blues fans to the real Chicago blues than anyone else on earth. He has my undying gratitude.

It was through Koester's kindness and generosity that we were able to visit many of the seminal blues clubs on Chicago's West and South side, places like Theresa's Lounge, Peppers Lounge, and others, watching artists like Little Walter, Junior Wells, Buddy Guy, Big Walter Horton, and all the blues greats playing live in these small clubs. John Fishel took the same route in 1968, as he notes here:

"By Thanksgiving I was on a roll and decided that I should go to Chicago to deepen my understanding of the

scene and begin to identify artists to sign for the festival. My roommates were going home to Highland Park in the suburbs for the holiday, so I tagged along. Once there, I announced I was going into the Loop to visit the Jazz Record Mart, home of Delmark Records. I took public transportation to Jazz Record Mart, then located at 7 West Grand Street and walked into this very small crowded space.

"There were bins of hundreds of albums (blues, traditional jazz, bebop, etc. all the way to the new music being played by the AACM [Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians] and recorded by Delmark), the covers all wrapped in plastic. The actual records were stored on shelves behind the counter to prevent rip offs. Hundreds of 78's were stacked on the floor for collectors. There were also posters and handbills advertising music playing throughout the city. It was crowded with lots of customers, a number of very hip staff, and Bob Koester.

"Koester was the founder of Delmark Records in St Louis; he later moved to Chicago. The label was in the cellar entered through a trap door in the back. Bob was and is an original and he is the guy whom I credit for helping me to explore the blues and enter a world which I only knew from albums and 45's but had no idea about as lifestyle.

"On that first visit I began to discuss with him the idea of a festival focused on the real blues (if at the time I had a sense of what that meant), his ideas on who might be invited to perform, and perhaps most important for me, I

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asked about visiting some clubs. I heard about artists I never knew existed, guys like Luther Allison, Jimmy Dawkins, Mighty Joe Young, in addition to many legendary figures I didn't know were still alive, like Big Joe Williams, Sleepy John Estes, and Roosevelt Sykes, the Honeydripper. I was hooked!

“The next day, to the horror of my hosts in Highland Park, I announced I was going out to clubs on the South Side. I was back at the Jazz record Mart at closing time and one of the Jazz Record Mart clerks (Jim Brinsfield) took me by the El down to the clubs. I remember going to Peppers at 43<sup>rd</sup> Street and Vicennes (among others) and spending a night listening, watching, and becoming immersed in a lifestyle which would impact the first two festivals in 1969 and 1970. I remember a young Junior Wells and lots of bands who I never heard of, but who shook the place and reflected the connection of the migration from the south to the north in previous decades.

“I spent the next few days ‘living’ at the Jazz Record Mart and talking to Bob Koester. I have (forty years later) three pages of mimeographed (remember that?) notes with dozens of names, addresses, and phone numbers of blues singers and players which Bob gave me. Looking at it today, many became the artists later contracted for the festivals, while others never were included. The sheets have my handwritten notes, names like: Carey Bell, the Myers Brothers with Fred Below, Johnny Young, Robert Pete Williams, Johnny Shines, Otis Spann, St. Louis Jimmy Oden, Matt Murphy, Eddie Taylor,

Little Brother Montgomery, Billy Boy Arnold, Lonnie Johnson, Tampa Red, Bukka White, Hounddog Taylor, Earl Hooker, Fred McDowell and the Howlin’ Wolf. I had hit the Jack pot.”

Jim Dulzo, popular DJ in the Ann Arbor/Detroit area at the time, writes:

“The next thing I remember is that the blues committee decided they wanted to do a kind of like a warm-up or promotional concert for the festival. The idea was that since the festival itself was going to happen in like very late summer or very early in the fall, it would be very difficult to promote the students as they were coming back, so we wanted to do a kind of a warm up concert in the spring, before everybody left town.

“And so we did a show at the Michigan Union Ballroom, with the Luther Allison Trio. And I remember that I MC’d the show, because I was the disk jockey. And I think for me that was a very transforming experience, because although I had really enjoyed seeing the blues in those South-Side bars, there was so much else going on that I don’t think I really locked into it like I did at this concert. That concert really changed me. I think that’s when I really bonded with the blues, but my memory was that Luther was spectacular and this was a whole lot of U. of M. white kids seeing blues for the first time. And I think it really electrified a lot of people. So those are my very early memories of it.”

John Fishel:

“Over the next few months, I began to be a regular visitor in Chicago. I discovered not only the South Side but the West Side as well. One of the

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younger guys I saw play was a then very young Luther Allison. He seemed old to me, but I was only twenty and Luther was probably ten years older. Luther was, as you know, an amazing performer and by early 1969 (as we began to solidify the support from our sponsors to make the Ann Arbor Blues Festival happen) I decided we should bring Luther Allison with Big Mojo on bass and Bob Richey on drums to the Michigan Student Union. We secured the ballroom, the student volunteers put up the handbills, and about 8:30 P.M. they took the stage. The room was maybe a third full. Luther played his first gig in Ann Arbor and an hour later the word of mouth had resulted in a packed house. I think this performance was the beginning of Ann Arbor's love affair with Allison and really launched his successful career. Here was a guy with a few singles, but no album yet, an unknown, but a wonderfully emotional singer and guitarist.

"By March, we had gotten into high gear. The contours of the first festival were underway. Through Bob Koester I met more and more artists and experienced amazing music by artists totally unknown in the white community. I was introduced by Koester to Dick Waterman, who at the time was managing Buddy Guy, Junior Wells, and a number of extraordinary bluesmen from the south, such as: Fred MacDowell, Robert Pete Williams, and Arthur Crudup. I began to make the connections between the enormous diversity in styles of blues and their influence on the blues rock bands playing at the Fillmore Auditorium in San Francisco and other halls around

the country. Waterman was a major influence on my growing interest in country blues and my awareness of how so many blues artists had been ripped off during their careers. He was a very honorable guy in a less than honorable field.

"Between May and July, the show took shape and various artists were contracted. Looking at the copies of the contracts today it is hard to imagine how inexpensive the great blues artists were to book. One contract for the Muddy Waters band shows it cost the festival \$3000 for the evening. Many of the country blues artists were costing between \$250-300.

"In May we began to do the little bit of publicity we could afford. The festival budget was tiny! A press release states the Ann Arbor Blues Festival Committee 'has no desire to become a part of the mammoth blues exploitation and is discriminately choosing its performers. We are interested in presenting a festival in which the artists and the audience will generate a blues mood, avoiding at all costs a teeny-bopper cultist happening.' I think we succeeded. The festival tickets were priced at \$14 for the three days or \$5 per concert. How times have changed."

### **The 1970 Ann Arbor Blues Festival**

The 1969 Ann Arbor Blues Festival captured a moment in time of the blues scene as it was back then. By the 1970 festival, many great players had already passed away, starting with the untimely death of Magic Sam in December of 1969. Magic Sam (along with Luther Allison) had taken that first festival by storm. It was hard to believe we would

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never hear Sam play again. We had only just found him.

Otis Spann was also gone in the spring of 1970. Others who died in the interval between festivals include Lonnie Johnson, Earl Hooker, Slim Harpo, Skip James, and Kokomo Arnold. Already that first festival in 1969 (less than a year before) began to look more and more precious. The 1970 Ann Arbor Blues Festival was dedicated to Otis Spann's memory.

John Fishel writes:

"Shortly after the 1969 festival, Delmark Records recorded and released 'Southside Blues Jam' featuring Buddy Guy and Louis Myers. I remember talking with Otis Spann in the Jazz Record Mart about performing at the 1970 show. I also had the privilege of being at the 'Southside Jam' recording session where Junior Wells sang about an ill Muddy Waters and Howling Wolf.... In Chicago for Spann's funeral, I remember a large crowd at the service and sitting in the back of a Cadillac drinking a toast to Otis Spann with his former colleagues Birmingham Jones and drummer S.P. Leary.

"Visiting Toronto in early 1970, I saw Lonnie Johnson (no longer able to play guitar due to a stroke) sing in his beautiful soulful voice, accompanied lovingly by Buddy Guy. All these losses created an urgency in producing the second festival for 1970. The sponsors remained the University of Michigan and Canterbury House. The cast of volunteers changed. Ken Whipple became (along with me) the co-chair and my friend Mark Platt took on the task of coordinating the

entertainment. Other blues enthusiasts included Marian Krzywowski, Dick Pohrt, Austin Iglehart, Glenn Baron, and Worth Gretter. A new stage was designed. The show was moved to the newly named Otis Spann Memorial Field.

"I traveled with my friends back and forth to Chicago, broadening my knowledge of the blues. We decided that we wanted to move beyond Chicago blues as our primary focus and try to give the audience an even better sense of the entire black blues genre. As I listened to more blues on albums, I tried to find out if the artists were still around and could come to the 2nd Ann Arbor Blues Festival.

"From the West Coast we signed Pee Wee Crayton, Eddie 'Cleanhead' Vincent, and Big Joe Turner. Also from the West Coast came Lowell Fulson. From Houston we brought in Juke Boy Bonner, from rural Texas we signed Mance Lipscomb, and from Louisiana, Robert Pete Williams. Both Lipscomb and Williams were represented by Dick Waterman's Avalon Productions. From Virginia came John Jackson.

"We branched out into a still more modern blues sound with Bobbie Bland and Little Junior Parker. Having heard a cut on an album of harpist Papa George Lightfoot, I was happy to learn that he was still gigging. The festival's success in 1969 resulted in interest in blues artists currently playing and began to spark what, over time, was almost a blues renaissance and growth of the blues festival concept, which today is still going strong."

The first festival created the impetus for the American blues publication "Living



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Blues" joining "Blues Unlimited," a British publication, with Jim O'Neal, Amy Van Singel, and Bruce Iglauer (later of Alligator Records) among others taking the lead, all of them working at Delmark Records and the Jazz Record Mart. Delmark Records, Chris Strachwitz's "Arhoolie" label in Berkley and other specialty labels began to reach a wider audience.

"By late 1969 and early 1970, we were identifying acts from Chicago to be included including Hound Dog Taylor (an original if there ever was one) and the House Rockers (a fantastic 'bar' band), Johnny Young, Sunnyland Slim, Carey Bell, and Buddy Guy. It was a blast traveling back and forth to Chicago and we made many trips on treacherous winter weekends just to see an act. Fortunately the blues scene was still very exciting with dozens of bars, taverns, and clubs.

"I remember some very unusual venues. One night we saw Junior Parker playing in what was a renovated bowling alley. You never knew what could happen. One weekend we traveled to the West Side to see Hound Dog. It was a very funky club on West Roosevelt, with a wild crowd. One of the guys brought his girl friend for a first-time visit to see the real blues. When we got ready to leave, a mean looking guy comes over and says that the girlfriend is not leaving except with him. Fortunately, with a little help from Ted Harvey, Hound Dog's drummer, we safely exited an hour later. Another night, Luther Allison was playing up the street and a group of European blues fans were visiting the club. Suddenly guns were pulled

and all hell broke loose. The French guy sitting next to me seemed to be unaware that something was going on.

"I was fortunate (after graduating in the spring of 1970) to spend the summer preparing for the festival working at the Jazz Record Mart and living in an extra bedroom at Bob and Sue Koester's apartment. It was perfect. Every day I sold blues albums and every night, if I wanted, I could go hear music. Blind Arvella Gray, the street musician, played out front. The Jazz Record Mart was a meeting place for all kinds of musicians including both Jazz and blues.

"People came from all over the world to see and hear the blues. One night there was an official from the still communist Czechoslovakia in town who went out with Bob Koester and his entourage to hear the music. Every Monday there were jam sessions at various venues. It is hard to remember who performed, but literally every working musician in the South or West Side would show up, beginning in the early afternoon and jam until the places closed late at night.

"It remains some of the finest, most soulful experiences of my life. I got to know well most of the musicians. Carey Bell who played the 1970's festival was just starting to break out, and I remember his cousin Royal Johnson (an unknown guitarist who giggered with him) blowing my mind. I brought them to Ann Arbor to play at Canterbury House before the festival and I have some great snapshots of their visit to my crib.

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“Finally the big weekend of the festival came, August 7-9, 1970. We opened as in the previous year with Roosevelt Sykes and closed again with Son House. In between, we had a few returning groups and some new ones. John Lee Hooker came in from Detroit, the extraordinary and articulate Johnny Shines, and Albert King. We were better organized and the crowd was larger. Sadly people decided that paying \$15 for the series was too much and we had lots of gate crashers. Still it was a mellow scene. There were magic moments:

“The second year, our emcee was Paul Oiliver, the British blues scholar and academic expert in African architecture. He brought a more serious tone to the proceeding than Big Bill Hill in the first year, but did a wonderful job reflecting his love of the music.

“Memories of sitting with Fred McDowell, later my house guest, after the festival, Sunnyland Slim, and others listening to stories about Jim Crow and days on the cotton plantations of the South were a sobering experience which made me better understand the blues and its roots

“The festival was again a superb cross section of the music I continue to love. Sadly, the gate crashers created a financial crisis which resulted in the second Ann Arbor Blues Festival being the last until it was resurrected by another group a few years later as the Ann Arbor Blues and Jazz festival. I have a memory of sending out our volunteers with empty cardboard barrels (with a Kentucky Fried Chicken logo on them) to raise a few bucks to cover

the deficit seems incongruous, but maybe not.”

The 1970 Ann Arbor Blues Festival would be the last. A benefit featuring artists Otis Rush, Johnny Winter, Buddy Guy, Luther Allison, and Junior Wells at the University of Michigan Events building was a wonderful show, but could not save the festival. Neither could a benefit show at the University of Wisconsin Blues Society that generated \$1800, but again not enough to save the day.

The 1970 Ann Arbor Blues Festival was well received by the critics including a feature in the New York Times written by music critic John S. Wilson each of the three days. He commended the audience for its patience, receptivity, and the less familiar artists for giving the festival its unique distinct flavor.

A review in Rolling Stone magazine, still a relatively young publication, in September 1970 called the 1970 Ann Arbor Blues Festival almost a perfect success. "Rarely has an audience heard so much great music in a weekend."

John Fishel went on to do a series of small festivals at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Florida with his brother Jim, who also helped on the two Ann Arbor Blues festivals. Jim Fishel was instrumental in turning John Fishel on to various blues artists when he was younger, artists such as Luther Allison, Robert Jr. Lockwood, Houston Stackhouse, and Eddie Bacchus (a great organist from Cleveland). John Fishel later worked with Dick Waterman for a short while when Luther Allison was trying to break out into a larger audience and when Bonnie Raitt was beginning her career. John went on to do social work and today directs a large not-for-profit corporation in Los Angeles.

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### **The End of the Blues Festivals**

The 1970 festival ran into stiff competition from a large (and historic) rock concert being held at the same time in nearby Goose Lake. The Goose Lake Bonanza drew a lot of attendees away from the blues festival, with the result that, when all was said and done, the festival came out in the red, a loss of some \$25,000, which was a lot in those days.

It has been said by way of criticism of the first two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals that they were too esoteric, that the artists were not known by the general public, and so forth. That is of course true, by definition.

At the time of those first two blues festivals, most of these performers were generally unknown to white America. City blues was esoteric, by definition. It hadn't been found by the mainstream yet and that is a major reason why the original Ann Arbor Blues Festival was undertaken in the first place: to bring these artists to general attention, which it did. If not for the insight of festival chairman John Fishel into these (mostly) Chicago artists, we would probably have had a good blues-rock concert that would be quite forgettable by now.

It is true that there was no attempt to include jazz, R&B, or popular headliners in these first festivals and it is true that mainstream artists might have resulted in a larger attendance. It is fair to say that John Fishel and crew were purists. A cross-section of music genres was not envisioned by the festival coordinators (or any of us involved), who were struggling to bring modern-electric city blues to national recognition. It is not that we were scholars or historians, at least not most of us. More than anything else, everyone involved just really

wanted to hear this music live and meet the performers. We just loved the music and felt it deserved a wider audience.

Discovering that these great blues artists were alive and living all around us, but never previously accessed or known, was a revelation at that time. Here was not a dying or antiquated music needing our revival, as was the case with certain styles of folk music. Modern electric blues was very much alive and well in cities across the United States, only separated from white America racially. It just needed some ears.

Removing that racial curtain exposed a vast wealth of music to be experienced and absorbed. What happened in that first blues festival in 1969 was a musical and personal revelation to many of those in attendance, at least to the white members of the audience. It helped to launch a new era of blues discovery and acceptance.

### **The Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festivals**

There was no Ann Arbor Blues Festival in 1971, but a year later the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival was founded by promoter Peter Andrews and blues expert John Sinclair. Although quite similar and wonderful in its own right, the succeeding Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festivals were different in that they widened the scope of the festival to include jazz and R&B, for example Miles Davis and Ray Charles. The emphasis on purely blues was gone. This, coupled with the attrition rate of great blues masters in the subsequent years, made it increasingly difficult to repeat the format of those initial Ann Arbor Blues Festivals in 1969 and 1970 even if we wanted to. The attrition rate alone meant that those first festivals could never be repeated. Here are some details.

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After losing money at the 1970 Ann Arbor Blues Festival, the University of Michigan was cautious about continuing the festival and asked their events director Peter Andrews to look into it. In an interview I did with Andrews, he states: "The University of Michigan administration asked me to look into reviving the Ann Arbor Blues Festival, because everybody saw that it was a great artistic success, which it was."

Andrews wrote in the program for the 1973 Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival:

"In 1971, I was appointed to the position of Events Director for the University of Michigan and asked by the Vice President in charge of student affairs to try to recreate the festival for the coming year. I told them that it would be impossible to have a festival that summer and that they should aim toward 1972. No 1971 festival was held."

John Sinclair and Peter Andrews wrote in the printed program for the 1972 Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival:

"The Blues and Jazz festival was conceived last winter by Rainbow Multi-Media president Peter Andrews as a revival of the original Ann Arbor Blues Festival, which after two incredible years (1969 and 1970) of artistic (but not financial) success was laid to rest by the University of Michigan before a 1971 festival could struggle into life."

And from the same text:

"... careful booking, detailed planning, and superior organization, coupled with the expansion of the festival into contemporary jazz music and a slightly less esoteric line-up of blues artist, would not only insure the success of the 1972

festival, but would also expand upon the musical base laid down by the producers and participants in the earlier blues festivals, which had essentially limited their potential appeal to music lovers by featuring little-known (though musically excellent) blues performers from many different disciplines with the blues idiom."

### **Finances and the Blues Festivals**

Something that has come up again and again over the years for some reason is the statement that those first two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals didn't make money, while their successor, the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival did. The actual records don't support that statement. Here is what a little research turned up.

#### **1969 Ann Arbor Blues Festival**

The 1969 Ann Arbor Blues Festival had a total proposed budget for \$57,200 in revenue and \$52,950 in expenses, giving a profit of \$4,250. In actuality, they received \$63,533 in revenue, had \$63,137.17 in expenses, giving a profit of \$406.04, still a profit and not a loss. This data was taken from the "Financial Report for the Ann Arbor Summer Blues Festival," Summer of 1969, Bentley Historical Collection, UAC VP collection.

#### **1970 Ann Arbor Blues Festival**

"The major problem with the 1970 Blues festival was its tremendous financial failure, leaving a debt of some \$25,000, most of which was attributable to last-minute emergency police and 'security' costs and to over-booking (too many artists at too high prices) and underpricing of festival tickets (four shows for \$10)."

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This was taken from the 1972 Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival program. In fact, most authorities blame the loss on the huge pop festival at Goose Lake, Michigan on the same days. John Fishel confirms the loss as about \$25,000.

### **1972 Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival Financial Report**

Released by the Rainbow Multimedia, after the festival. These figures were preliminary, and miscellaneous bills were still coming in.

Total Revenue \$242,034.62

Expenses \$246,603.94

Loss of \$3,569.32

“We averaged 11,000 persons per show last year for each of five shows. Due to losses in the area of food concessions, our gross revenues fell some \$4,000-\$5,000 short of our final budget....”

This from co-founder Peter Andrews in the program for the 1973 Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival. Source: Bentley Historical Collection, John Sinclair Papers. They ultimately lost perhaps five grand.

### **1973 Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival Financial Report**

According to Peter Andrews, the co-producer of the 1973 festival, he remembers that the 1973 festival just about broke even.

### **1974 Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival in Exile**

In 1974, with a change in city government (more republicans on the city council), Sinclair and Andrews ran into problems getting a festival permit. The festival promoters were denied permission to hold the event in Ann

Arbor and the fate of the festival became a bitterly debated issue in the press and about town. There was nothing to be done about it, so, it was decided to hold a 1974 festival but in exile, at another location. A small college in Windsor, Ontario volunteered a spot and it was decided to hold the 1974 Ann Arbor Blues and Jazz Festival in another country – Canada.

All the standard festival preparations took place, including an extensive car-pool system for busing blues enthusiasts from Michigan to the site in Canada. There was only one problem and it was a big one. They failed to anticipate that the FBI and other law enforcement officials would prevent the thousands of would-be attendees from crossing the border. They just refused to let concert goers from the states of Michigan cross the border, ordering their cars to turn back.

Worse, they refused to allow John Sinclair, who was co-producing the festival, to cross into Canada, forcing him to retreat to a temporary headquarters in the Shelby Hotel in Detroit. No reasons were given at the border for turning the cars back. Cars were searched and any with drugs were confiscated and their occupants arrested. That same was true at the gates in Windsor: anyone found smoking marijuana or carrying it was immediately arrested and taken to jail. The net effect was to ruin the festival, causing over \$100,000 in losses – a financial disaster.

So, in the last analysis no real money was made at any of these festivals, but that first Ann Arbor Blues Festival made a profit of \$406.04, enough perhaps to buy pizza for the staff and volunteers!

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As for me, I continued to interview blues artists as part of the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festivals and to take care of the performers, only now I was using video equipment. After the 1974 fiasco, the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival folded and was not resumed until 1992. In recent years, I served on the board of directors for that organization for a number of years and ended up as the official archivist. The festival closed in 2006 for lack of funds. By then there were blues festivals each year in almost every large Midwestern town. It is the end of an era.

### **The Blues Today**

Today blues continues to be popular across America. What I did not realize so well at the time of those first festivals is that the majority of the performers were not young men and women. The average age of all the main performers for the two festivals (some 47 of them, including the youngest players) was about fifty years of age and a number of them were in their sixties (Mance Liscomb was 74). We are talking about the end of a movement, not the beginning. In 2008, of the main headliner blues artists in those first Ann Arbor Blues Festivals, over 90% of them have passed away. Only some of the youngest artists (then) still remain alive and then only a few of them. They are the grandfathers now.

Of course there are some wonderful younger blues players. But let's not kid ourselves: we still have the form of the blues, but today we probably have more form than substance. Where is the next Howlin' Wolf or Muddy Waters? Players of that caliber have not appeared among the younger players and for a very simple reason: modern city blues, like all things in life, has a beginning, a middle,

and now an end. This is not to say that blues are dead.

### **The Blues**

Everyone gets the blues sometimes. We can all agree on that. But everyone does not get the particular blues that African Americans have had. We can all learn to sing the blues if we have that talent, but the historical blues sung by the black Americans that migrated from the South to Chicago is not open to us just because we all happen to get the blues from time to time.

African-American Chicago blues, like those played at the first two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals, is now a piece of history, a period in time that (as racial exclusion ceases and racial tensions ease) has become a closed book for all of us (black and white together) going forward. We can all sing the blues, just not those blues. Even the racial divide that separated the races is weakening. The election of Barack Obama is certainly a signal that America is becoming multicultural and multiracial, and this country is no longer the exclusive province of white men. The discovery of modern blues on the part of white America did not happen in a vacuum. It came exactly at a time when the whole American culture was in upheaval. We are talking about the heart of the 1960s, from 1965 onward.

As some folk music enthusiasts moved from studying folk music into the blues, there was something in the blues that we really did not know in ourselves. Blues was (at least to me) a call from somewhere deeper than the white audiences knew about, a call that resonated and lured us to dig beneath the social veneer of white America and to see if what we heard out there from the black blues artists was also in here,

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somewhere deep within ourselves. Was there really such a thing as one human voice and condition?

Some have written that white artists were simply feeling guilty, trying to save their own souls. The white musicians I knew were not trying to save their souls as much as trying to reach a level playing field where they believed all humans stand. Sure, we were afraid we might be missing something in the soul department and we just wanted to get down to it. Most of us were not religious in the sense that we were trying to “save” anything.

We were perhaps guilty of ascribing to the blues something outside of our own experience and longing to know what that experience meant. It was not the suffering itself of black history we were seeking, but a taste of the life wisdom that came out of that suffering. We looked up to black artists as mentors and perhaps we *were* questioning our own lack of suffering, the inequality of it all. I don't recall ever meeting a folk or blues artist who was a right-wing John Bircher.

Did white players lack soul? That is a loaded question. I don't believe anyone lacks soul, black or white, but we sure heard something in the blues that resonated with us, something we did not fully understand or know much about in ourselves. Otherwise the blues would not have fascinated us as it did. Perhaps some of us did feel guilty for our lack of suffering and our easy upbringing. In the mid-1960s, the whole culture was being shed like a snake sheds its skin. There was something real and permanent (beyond time) in the blues that spoke out to us, something we wanted to get to know, to understand, and also to find within ourselves. The

blues helped us find that feeling for our self and for others.

What is music anyway? Why do we listen to it? Why do we listen to certain songs over and over? What do we absorb or get out of our favorite tunes? These are all questions that I have pondered.

Obviously blues music contains some kind of information that we somehow can't get enough of and that some of us feel we need, at least important enough to listen again and again to these tunes.

That's what happened to me. As a folkie, I was used to listening carefully to music. When I came across authentic modern blues, I heard something that resonated deep within me and I yearned for more of it. There was something in that music that I needed to understand and to absorb.

In 2006 I heard a young white musician singing a classic blues song. He was singing in full Ebonic dialect and he was sincere about it. I was amazed and almost offended, but he was so innocent about it.

What was he thinking? It took me a while to understand that my over-reaction to this young player was not so much his arrogance, because he was not arrogant; it was something else. This young twenty-something kid was re-enacting the blues, word for word, including the black dialect and this amounted (in my hearing it) to pushing the blues from the present into the past. Chicago city blues is becoming folklore rather than reality – a part of history. And I hated to see it go there.

And time since then has shown this to be true. The Chicago city blues was an era like all other great periods of music and those first two Ann Arbor blues

## Searching for Roots: The Blues

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festivals brought this great music to public attention. Today, almost all of the great players are gone. Time marches on. Those of us who still hear Chicago-style blues alive in clubs or festivals well know that more and more we are subject to re-enactments – “it sounded like this.” The very fact that today musicians try to recreate, to sound like, and to try to get back to what is already gone is telling in itself, as the poem “Memory” by William Butler Yeats so clearly states:

“The mountain grass cannot but  
keep the form,  
Where the mountain hare has lain.”

Michael Erlewine

Michael@Erlewine.net