



"As you get older it is harder to have heroes but it is sort of necessary.." Hemingway

My first guitar was given to me by my uncle Bob when I was seven years old. It was a Stella six-string acoustic with a blonde finish. For some reason it had the name BILL stenciled on the front... My guess is that uncle Bob did some horse-tradin' with a guy named Bill... You could get this type of guitar for about \$25 at a pawnshop in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Back in the pre-war days some of the best blues ever played was with Stella guitars... Leadbelly and Blind Willie Mctell both played a Stella 12-string... Charley Patton played a Stella, Doc Watson started on one and even Kurt Cobain used one for a recording... It's a lot harder to find these old guitars now because they've been snatched up up by guitar collectors. Back then uncle Bob was my hero...

Uncle Bob showed me a boogie-woogie lick in the open E position on his guitar when the family got together for a Sunday dinner at my grandparents house and I was off in the corner by myself playin' that lick over and over. Next dinner at grandma's house Bob showed me the basic chords of C,G,D and soon after that he taught me E,A and the tricky B7 chord. At home my mom helped me learn a couple of songs in her spare time.

My mom had learned to play piano from one of her aunts and she had grown up learning all the songs that her family members played on guitars and fiddles and she



also learned all the favorites that were more piano oriented... She really kicked it when she played "Bumble Boogie" and that was everybody's favorite. She tore it up...

My mom always talked about her grandpa's fiddle playing and I always wished I could have heard him play... His name was Samuel Spencer and he was a family legend... Sam grew up near White Mills, Kentucky and he served in Kentucky's First Volunteers during the Spanish-American War. He came up to Illinois after being in the army but unfortunately he died the year before I was born...



Geneva Maxine Wilson [my mother] on piano and her grandfather Sam Spencer on fiddle

My mom [she went by Maxine] played by ear and she had also had learned a few chords on guitar when she was young and could figure out the chords to most anything she heard. The first song she ever taught me on guitar was "For Me And My Gal" followed by "Your Cheatin' Heart".

Next uncle Bob showed me an A-minor chord which was the same fingering as E chord but on different strings and then he showed me the most well known basic bluegrass lick from the G chord starting on the low E string. Two songs stick out in my mind that uncle Bob showed me when I was about eight years old... "Abilene" and



"Folsom Prison Blues"... "Folsom" had that neat 'bendy' lick on the low E string and uncle Bob played the rhythm guitar part really smooth and strong and picked licks in between the strums with his thumb. Uncle Bob was a big hefty ham & beans and fried chicken & mashed potatoes eatin' kinda guy like his dad and all my uncles on that side of the family... Big ole boys... Bob's guitar hands were strong and his thumb had a heckuva callous on it and those guitar licks came across and hit you right in the gut.

In the next couple of years I had that guitar in my hands quite a bit and I knew uncle Bob was proud of me for learnin' guitar and I was progressing steadily cause I had started learning as much I could from records. I was into baseball and school sports but when I broke my arm doing gymnastics I had a lot of time to kill one summer and I could still play guitar with the cast on my arm so I practiced and practiced and ended up with some real callouses on my fingertips. Every new song had some lick or melody that I would learn and it was fun to show uncle Bob what new stuff I had learned and it was much better than the type of learning that we were forced to do in school. I did like school because of friends and sports and I know it's good to know history and math etc but at that age I didn't care about parliamentary procedure or the chemical symbols for hydrogen or who won the War of 1812. If we had a classes like 'Blues Music History' or 'the History of American Music 101' I would have been a model student.

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Uncle Bob was still in his late teens and I was nine or ten and we hung out in the garage and he smoked a lot and tried to get me to try a cigarette but I never ever liked cigarettes cause both my parents smoked in the house when I was growing up and that seemed to be the case for most kids that I knew and I didn't really know how much I hated it till I moved out of the house after graduating from high school. One of my favorite lyrics from John Lennon is "I curse Sir Walter Raleigh.. he was such a stupid get"... [for y'all who didn't study much history, Raleigh brought tobacco to England from America in colonial times].

Uncle Bob was into Elvis so he greased his hair back like Elvis and rolled up his cigarette pack in the sleeve of his white t-shirt like Marlon Brando or James Dean and Bob wasn't married yet so he pretty much did whatever the heck he wanted to do. I was his oldest nephew so I guess I was like a little brother he could tease and he liked to do things to show me that he wasn't afraid of nuthin'. At that point he still lived with



grandma & grandpa and they had moved out to a farm in central Illinois. We'd drive around on those tar & gravel country roads out where they lived and there were no cops out there so he'd drive like a freakin' maniac.

On those rural routes there are these tiny bridges that are paved over a big drainage pipe and uncle Bob used those little bridges like a ramp that stunt drivers use when they're jumping over things and we'd be going 70 or 80 mph and we'd hit those little bridges and we were temporarily airborne and it scared the shit outa me... We didn't even wear seat belts! Uncle Bob's other crazy stunt was to haul ass through the country when the corn was high and not slow down at intersections that didn't have stop signs and he honked the car horn non-stop and hoped that anybody coming the other way would hear us... It's a wonder that we survived...

"destroy your idols" John Fahey

Everybody in the family had uncle Bob pegged as a pedal-to-the-metal personality. and he was the youngest and most spoiled of seven kids and even though he eventually got married and had three kids of his own he never truly settled down. In his adult years he always had some outlaw activity on the side whether it was movin' moonshine or pot deals or his 'abandoned car' restoration business and he roughly lived by Jack London's credo "I'd rather be ashes than dust". That was why it was so damn much fun to hang around with him... We continued keepin' our 'hands in' with regular guitar pickin' sessions and family style hootenannies...





Now uncle Bob is up in hillbilly heaven or wherever the party is... He was a big influence in my early days of being a guitar picker. It was partly his version of 'mentoring' that pointed me in the direction of being a long-haired musician and partly it was in my bloodline. It's questionable as to whether intelligence or talent are passed down genetically or whether it's the environment that is the main factor in learning but all I know is that there was a lot of music being played by both sides of my family for several generations and uncle Bob and my mother were the links to one side of our family's musical past.

When I was in my early twenties I played mostly in blues-rock or funk and R&B bands and was primarily playing electric guitar on gigs and only played a little bit of acoustic stuff... I had a jumbo body Harmony Sovereign six-string acoustic as my main acoustic to play at home. I had left that old Stella guitar somewhere far behind and for a while I thought I'd lost it... About twenty years later when I was in my forties I was visiting my dad when he was moving to a smaller house cause my brother and sisters had grown up and moved out of his house... He said he had a little surprise for me and he got my old guitar out of the closet. He said it had been up in the attic untouched for about thirty years or so... He had saved that Stella guitar for me and man was I happy about that!

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There's a telling photograph passed down from my great-great-great grandparents to my grandma [on my mom's side] who gave a rough copy of it to me. It shows my great-great-great grandfather Nathaniel Harrington holding a cello with a bow in his





hand and seated to his right is my great-great-great grandmother Quinteria [who was part native American] and the various other family members, one with a banjo, one with a fiddle and two with guitars. This was before recording devices were invented so I'll never get to hear them but I know down in my bones that some of their music is present in me, it's in my blood. I've been a musician by trade my whole life so I'm carrying on a family tradition and I've still got that Stella guitar that uncle Bob gave me way back in 1958...



Nathaniel and Quinteria Harrington & Family

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## how i came to be a writer

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"You don't write because you want to say something, you write because you have something to say."

F. Scott Fitzgerald



Becoming a writer was a long roundabout process for me. Most of my previous writing [besides a lot of letters] was informal and erratic. As a teenager the first thing I remember writing was an essay about the Beatles' bootleg recording of the *White Album* for a social studies class current events report in high school. It was the first time I chose the subject matter and it was fun and didn't feel like schoolwork cause it was about the Fab Four.... For me and my friends who started our first band in grade-school, the mop-tops were the greatest band of all time. This was between 1964 and 1970 and sparks were flying everywhere in the world of music and John, Paul, George and Ringo had conquered the world. Other Brits like the Rolling Stones, the Animals and Cream had also invaded the USA. We had our own rock music giants like Jimi Hendrix, Santana, the Doors, the Byrds, Bob Dylan and others who were hugely influential. It truly was a golden age for young fans of rock & roll & blues & folk-rock.

I had figured out that I wasn't an olympic champion athlete and I knew I didn't want to join the military or wasn't interested in becoming part of the academic swarm that was part of "the establishment"... I was all up in a phase of teenage rebellion and the lads from Liverpool were my biggest heroes so naturally I spent most of my energy on guitars and girls and motorcycles and the latest music and the coolest thing besides having long hair and being in a band was having an air-force style leather jacket that zipped up in the front with a Russian-brown bear faux-fur collar. It all came to a head in my last year of high school and I had a choice... I could be on the wrestling team and cut my hair or I could keep my long hair and my "rebel" status.... well, the long hair and the guitars and the girls won out....



Next thing you know I began writing a song or two for the bands I played in and on the side I wrote a few bits of short stories but I didn't submit them to anyone and I didn't even tell anyone that I had written any prose stuff. Theses first very rough drafts stayed in boxes in the attic in notebooks along with some poems and other scribblings and ideas for future writings. I always thought I would take up word writing again if the music thing ever cooled down. As it turned out I had enough vocal and guitar chops to be able to make a



meager living as a musician and stuck it out for the long haul. I didn't care about living a life of luxury [and still don't]. In those days being a poor musician and suffering for your art was a badge of honor.

"Luxury just isn't that interesting to write about" Sebastian Junger

I wrote more and more songs as time went by and being a songwriter for many years I developed the habit of putting pen to paper on a very regular basis. Writing song lyrics involves imagination and you're trying to distill or concentrate an idea or a feeling into a very short form and that helps to keep your writing muscle and your editing skills in shape. My first songs were simple and straight ahead but later on some pieces were longer, more involved with stories contained in the songs and the lyrics sometimes became more of a narrative. When I realized that some stories were too long to fit inside a song I started thinking about someday writing short stories or a novella or maybe even graduate into writing a novel but music was still my main focus and I was still making a living as a performer and that took up all my time... somehow forty years plus went by...

They say you learn to write by writing and by living and experiencing life. You certainly have something to write about if you're paying attention but it's not always easy to get the stuff of life onto the page unless you're a born genius [which I'm definitely not]. For nearly all scribes, learning to write well is a slow process and whatever one may think of the results I'm presenting here, I can honestly say I've paid my dues. After being a working musician for more than forty years I can say without boasting I've put in my Gladwell-ish 10,000 hours at least three times over.

After paying all those dues and singing all those blues I really began thinking about the fact that I was more than halfway through a normal life expectancy and I started to wonder about what [if anything] I was leaving behind.... What was my legacy? A song or a group of songs on an album are one thing but writing down your stories in prose form lets you fill in the sordid details, the juicier the better, right?

Being the furthest island out in the archipelago of my family I always lived my life in a different way than the rest of the brood. I never had any children of my own but I do care a lot about my family and friends. Sometimes you get a phone call from one of



those friends or a sibling who's in a tizzy and you hear yourself dispensing a bit of home grown old-school wisdom and you think to yourself, "hmmm... maybe I have learned a little about life... maybe I do have an ounce or two of horse-sense.." Then some of your stumbles and miss-steps pop up like a bubbles in pasta sauce that's over-heating on the stove and once again you are humbled and you amend your delusions of grandeur, you dial-down the volume of your attained wisdom, you avoid slipping on the slope of your pride... Then your counsel includes comforting phrases like, "Yeah, I know how you feel because I've made my fair share of mistakes just like everybody else... Mistakes help you to learn how to live and at some point you just have to forgive yourself.." You let them and yourself off the hook at the same time... party, bonus!

Growing up I partook in some minor teenage vandalism [a step above Halloween pranks] with some buddies who shall remain anonymous and before I knew any better I occasionally perpetrated other minor misdemeanors here and there but fortunately no felonies remain on my record because the majority of my mischief was prankish good clean fun. My dad stoically cleaned up my messes. Most weekends he would sit down at our local tavern with his old buddies and they would occasionally drink too much and he'd come home and lay down on the couch and he'd be in a really good mood and he'd start telling stories from when he was a rowdy kid. Maybe he didn't have as much fun now that he had five kids to raise and he saw me having fun being rowdy and he couldn't help himself, he just had to brag about his teenage escapades.

Dad said that when he was about fifteen he and couple of his friends put a towing chain on the back bumper of grandpa's 1948 Ford and hooked it around the outhouse that belonged to this crabby old guy who lived on the edge of town. They pulled over the shit-house and unhooked the chains and lit outa there like bats out of hell in the middle of the night. Well the old guy busted his ass and got some help standing that outhouse back upright. So my dad and his crew waited a couple of months before they decided they would pull that outhouse down again. This next time the old neighbor guy heard the commotion and came out of his house with a shotgun loaded with shells full of rock-salt and my dad and his buddy got hit in the legs by that rock-salt and it took a few months for the welts to heal up.

My dad had several other stories like that and that's why he'd sometimes get a shit-eatin' grin on his face when he grounded me for two weeks for my fuck-ups [I usually got paroled for good behaviour after only a week]. In my defense, the entitlement of an older-brother teasing his younger sibs and a natural born streak of



cruelty [inherited from my dad] were probably my worst traits while I was growing up and I'm proud to say I've never maimed or killed anyone and I've never been hit by rock-salt while pulling over an outhouse with a 48 Ford..

When it comes right down to it the S-curves and mis-steps and stumbles seem to be more interesting and funnier in retrospect than the uneventful strolls along a straight-line... Deviations from the straight & narrow are especially more interesting and full of life-lessons when they result in incarceration of one kind or another as in the minimum-security prison of a live-in love relationship.... or the maximum-security facility surrounded by electric fences otherwise known as marriage.... or in being behind bars in the county jail for an overnight stay and trying to sleep off a horrific hangover on a hard shiny metal bench while being surveilled by in-house cameras without your wallet, without your belt and without your shoelaces or without food... or being 'voluntarily' signed in [under the advisement of the police] for a week-long vacation on the fifth floor of Her Sisters Of Mercy Hospital...

Mistakes make for a better memoir, a better story... If nothing else maybe someone will have a laugh at my expense and that's AOK because I've learned to forgive myself and best of all to laugh at myself...

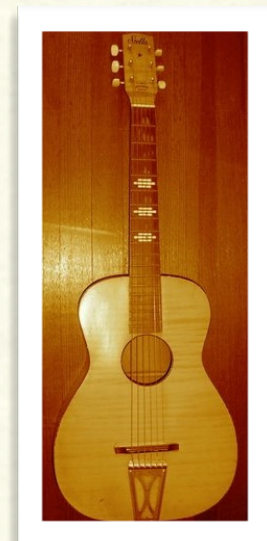
"In order to write about life first you must live it." Ernest Hemingway

What if Billy The Kid carried a guitar – instead of a gun  
What if William Bonney – never ever killed no one  
What if President Lincoln – had never come to free the slaves  
What if Honest Abe – decided not to see the play – heh heh  
I'm waiting for the Kingdom come – thy will be done

What if John & Yoko – stayed inside the castle walls  
And what if the Walrus – wasn't John or wasn't Paul  
What if Jesus came back – & no one believed that it was him  
What if Ghandi got mad – and struck a blow with his hands  
I'm waiting for the Kingdom come – thy will be done

What if Bobby and Martin– got to see their dreams come true  
What if JFK – lived to be 102  
What if the Cherokee Nation - never walked the Trail Of Tears  
What if we could be – free from all our pain and fear

And they're gone to stay – many worlds away - We will all be there someday -  
So let's paint our pictures – and tell our stories - as we wait - Till the kingdom comes





-----about the author-----

In a past life Keith Harden was a well traveled blues-folk-american-etc guitarist-singer. He plays dobro, harmonica, & blues mandolin. Born between Chicago and the Mississippi delta at the crossroads of the Illinois Central and Wabash railroads this Tolono, Illinois native performed for many years in the midwest, opening shows for performers including Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, Blind John Davis, Mighty Joe Young, Son Seals, Bobby Blue Bland, Clarence Carter, Magic Slim and The Teardrops, Shemekia Copeland, Jorma Kaukonen [Hot Tuna], Dr. John, Delbert McClinton, Roomful Of Blues and others.

When he relocated to central upstate New York in 2001 Keith continued his dedication to the blues and in 2005 Keith won the Downstate New York Blues Association Acoustic Blues Challenge and advanced to Memphis to perform in the International Blues Challenge in January of 2006.

In 2007 Keith relocated to Nashville, TN to be at the center of the singer-songwriter universe. In the spring of 2008 Keith was chosen to be a featured writer at the IBMA World Of Bluegrass Songwriter Showcase with a song called "Learning How To Be A Better Fool" written with Rick Alan Carpenter.

In 2008 Keith also wrote a song called "Rest In Peace" that was in the soundtrack of the Mark Roberts play "Where The Great Ones Run".

In 2009 Keith produced an EP for Kayla Brown entitled "Steady Now" which was released on Parasol Records. Keith also produced and recorded an EP for a Nashville songwriter duo named Julie & John Pennell [including Sam Bush on mandolin]. John Pennell is known for his songs recorded by Alison Krauss.

Keith is currently writing songs for a project for a Nashville based singer-songwriter named Ty Brando.

In 2010 Keith was again a featured writer at the IBMA World Of Bluegrass Songwriter Showcase held in Nashville with a new song he wrote called "We Lived To Love".

In 2010 Keith released his newest CD "calico" in the americana-roots-country-folk-rock-blues vein.

December 23, 2010 the Prairie Crossroads Blues Society presented Keith with an Honorary Membership for his many years of performance and dedication to "The Blues" in Champaign-Urbana, IL.

Keith has two of his original blues songs "Grace Under Pressure" and "HOME" [written with George Faber] featured in the upcoming movie "Abel's Field" starring Kevin Sorbo. The release date is December 2012.

In April of 2012 Keith start writing his memoirs, some essays and some fiction and hopes to publish them when and if fortune's grin ever turns into a full-blown smile.

for a more complete bio and other bits of trivia like music, photos and links to videos go to;

[www.keithharden.com](http://www.keithharden.com)



