

talkin' blues

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[the transfiguration of blind boy lesser]

Let me start by confessing that my knowledge of blues is not scholarly or encyclopedic. Whatever I may know I've learned from experience and from following a haphazard trail of discovery. I find it more fun to stumble upon cool stuff and that's more or less how I learned to play guitar... Stumbling onto cool stuff.

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There's an old saying that goes "the more things change, the more they stay the same.." and it's true for some things. Yes, the sun always comes up in the morning and always goes down at night and yes when an apple falls from a tree it hits the ground and for the foreseeable future these things will stay the same. What I'm writing about here today does not obey the "more things change.." rule. The disappearance of a certain type of blues progenitor is a prime example of irrevocable change.

There will never be another Charley Patton or another Son House or Mississippi John Hurt or Robert Johnson or Bessie Smith or Memphis Minnie. There won't be another Koko Taylor or Muddy Waters or Howlin' Wolf and the list goes on and on. They have a legendary/ mythical place in blues history. Fortunately, we still have B.B. King, Robert Belfour, and the generation that includes Corey Harris, Keb Mo, Guy Davis and Alvin Youngblood Hart but I'd say B.B. is the only historical legend among the living.

I know it sounds like nostalgia but for my money the writers, artists, bluesmen and blueswomen back about 90 or 100 years ago had a different, deeper gravitas. There's somethin' about the legends that were working and/ or came of age in that era and it wasn't only musicians and singers. We had Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein and the Wright Brothers. We had Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dali and right before that we had Vincent Van Gogh but now they're all lone gone.



Today we have really good living writers like Jim Harrison, Cormac McCarthy, Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, Tom Robbins and another recent wave that includes Jonathan Franzen, David Eggers, Wells Tower, John Jeremiah Sullivan and until 2008 we still had David Foster Wallace but there will never be another Mark Twain or Ernest Hemingway or F. Scott Fitzgerald or William Faulkner... You get the idea... The greats of a century ago are gone and unreplaceable. Irrevocable change.

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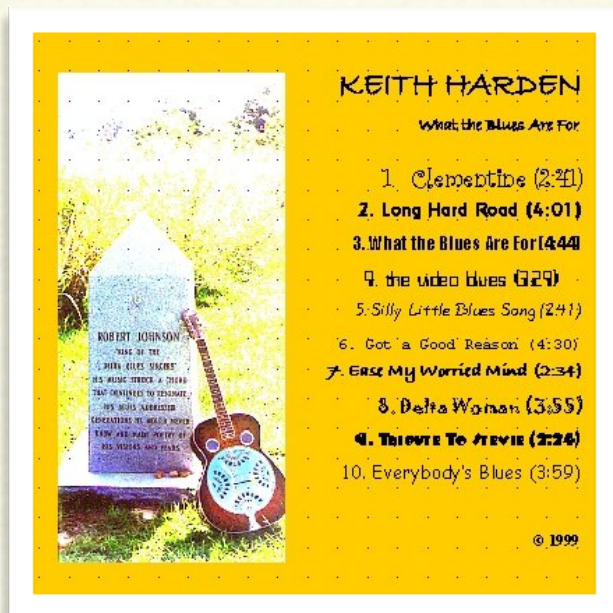
My first experiences of blues and music with a deeper gravitas came from hearing recordings of that pre-WW2 school of blues. As far as live music I heard B.B. King live when he opened for the Rolling Stones at the Assembly Hall in Champaign, Illinois when I was in high school. Other than a couple trips to Chicago for bar band gigs nothin' really hit me like B.B. till I heard live blues down south in Memphis. It must've been 1978 when I played in a band that played at Solomon Alfred's in Memphis and Elvin Bishop played a set after our band. I really dug the Overton Square area of Memphis but the neighborhood around Beale Street wasn't a good of place to go back then. In the 1980s the Beale Street area was revitalized and started being the place to go for blues and the scene came alive and thrived again.

In 1994 my girlfriend at the time and I went on a vacation/blues quest and drove from central Illinois down to New Orleans. Neither of us had been to the French Quarter and that was a great time. We heard a really good blues guitarist-singer named Bryan Lee at the Old Absinthe House on Bourbon Street. Not to sound like a rube but the Crescent City with it's cajun food and voodoo culture and open air bars felt almost like a foreign country when you compared it to life in the tiny farm towns we were raised in on the prairie of the American midwest.

On our drive back north we were surprised to find a petrified forest in Mississippi near Yazoo City, Mississippi and we drove on a lot of two-lane roads instead of the interstate highway so we could see how the other half live [as John Lennon said]. We saw cropduster bi-planes flying over this vast expanse of flat delta farmland and what they were spraying smelled like raw garlic and onions. I've heard the spray is a natural pesticide made from those two. It's much less toxic and that's what they use now that DDT is illegal. Instead of endless rows of corn, soybeans and wheat that we were used to seeing, we saw endless rows of cotton that looked almost pink from the reflection of

the evening sun and the rows of rusty brown sorghum looked even stranger than cotton to us cornheads.

I wanted to find Robert Johnson's gravestone so we searched around in some little towns in the upper part of the delta. The official Mississippi Blues Trail had been conceived but our mimeographed copy of the proposed map of the trail wasn't very good and there were no trail markers yet. [Now the state of Mississippi promotes the trail and has put up quite a few historical markers of various blues sites]. We stopped at some little gas stations and small town grocery stores and even some of the folks who lived in the area didn't seem to know much about the Blues Trail so it was easy to get lost in the middle of the countryside. At the gas station convenience store that looked more like an old-fashioned general store I asked a couple kids who were maybe 15 or 16 years old where Robert Johnson was buried and they'd never heard of him and that sorta blew my mind. One of the most famous bluesmen of all time was buried within ten miles of that little general store and no one had told them about him. Right outside of Itta Bena, MS we found two different gravestones for Robert Johnson near a little church and I took pictures of my resonator-dobro guitar leaned up against the monument dedicated to him. I'm not sure if that was good luck or bad luck [I spose it's too late now, isn't it?]



We stopped in Clarksdale, Mississippi for the Sunflower River Blues and Gospel Festival. We heard some of the rawest most authentic delta blues I'd ever heard live. For a blues guitar player like me this was the jackpot. I was very familiar with raw authentic blues because when I lived in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois I had been fortunate enough to be in the right place and time to open for a few greats like Muddy Waters and John Lee Hooker around 1980. I was 10 feet away from Muddy and his band at Panama Red's in Champaign and it was the deepest live blues experience I've ever ever had. I liked a lot of different

blues but my two favorite categories were the pre WW2 acoustic artists [like Robert Johnson] and the early electric blues recordings of Muddy and Wolf in their early Chicago days.

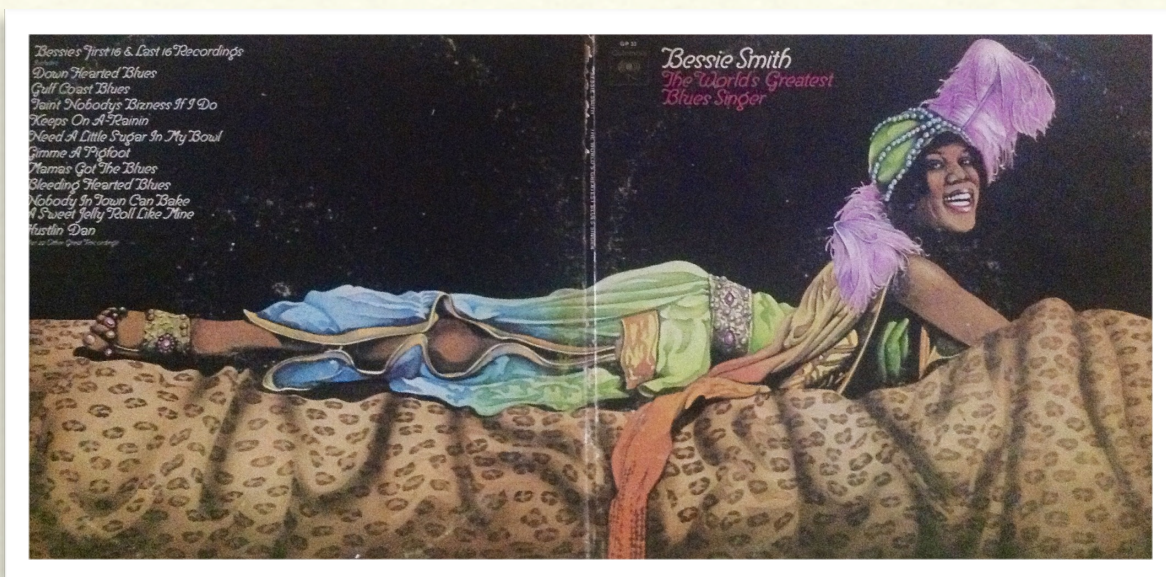
Being able to see and hear some of the still living persons at the Sunflower Festival who played the 'real deal' delta acoustic blues in 1994 was great and we also heard some great R & B and gospel performers like Bobby Rush. His butt-shakin' dancers/backup singers were as low down and dirty as it gets and the cherry on top was that the festival was free. We ate Abe's way good barbecue and drank beer and that's as good as it gets in the bluesworld.

Clarksdale was at the time the home of Rooster Blues Records owned and operated by blues protector/expert Jim O'Neal and his influence was key in bringing the good stuff to the festival. There were two stages goin' on at once and we mostly stayed at the acoustic stage where we heard R.L. Burnside and Kenny Brown as a duo, we heard Honeyboy Edwards solo, Jack Owens [guitar] & Bud Spires [harmonica] as a duo, Willie Foster [harmonica] and Big Jack Johnson [guitar] as a duo. One of the young up and coming young artists on the acoustic stage was Alvin Youngblood Hart who played excellent re-creations of Charley Patton, Robert Johnson and Leadbelly. The topper for me was hearing Lonnie Pitchford play the "Star Spangled Banner" on a one-string diddley bow guitar. After the festival we went and heard Big Jack Johnson play at the club he owned in Clarksdale. We sat with Honeyboy Edwards and drank whiskey and beer while Honeyboy told us some tall tales. He was a great storyteller, super friendly and so funny! The only two blues guys mentioned in this paragraph who are still alive in 2012 are Alvin Youngblood Hart and Kenny Brown. That's what I'm talkin' about when I say irrevocable change.

Me & my gal stayed in Memphis after the Sunflower Festival and took a stroll down Beale Street to see and hear what's new. We saw B.B. King's backup band live at his club and we talked to Rufus Thomas who hung out in the record shop catty-corner from B.B.'s club on Beale. We took the Graceland tour and it was wild to see how small [but very cool] Elvis's mansion was. Across the street from Elvis's place is his airplane and his Cadillac museum and several souvenir shops full of millions of trinkets etc... every possible way imaginable to sell you a little piece of the King... Elvis official FBI ID cards, Elvis sheets and pillow cases, Elvis toilet paper, Elvis's recipe for fried peanut butter-banana sandwiches, Elvis this and Elvis that... It's as gaudy as it gets but it's fun to see [once, maybe twice].

origins of the blues

The origins of the blues are uncertain but we generally know that blues as a 'brand' began in the early 1900s and the first wave flourished right up to the great depression. The historical conditions that allowed this blues explosion were unique. Right around 1900 was the invention of audio recording. At first sound was recorded by cutting grooves onto revolving wax cylinders which were cumbersome but soon after that 78rpm records were manufactured and within 15 or 20 years many households had a wind-up Victrola that played the 78s. Records became widely available for sale at a price most people could afford and it was off to the races.



Soon after Mamie Smith recorded "Crazy Blues" in 1920 and the blues became a commercial phenomenon several other blues 'queens' like Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Ida Cox and Sippie Wallace started gaining popularity. There was much similarity between early blues and early jazz in structure and the instrumentation that accompanied the classic women blues singers usually had piano, guitar and horns. The

classic women of blues usually dressed up in fancy evening gowns and were professional in their demeanor as they sang songs about trials and tribulations but they also sang songs that were humorous and many songs had 'dirty' double entendre lyrics about sex etc. Most of these blues queens faded as the vaudeville/theatrical circuit declined with the great depression.

One exception who lasted through thick & thin was Memphis Minnie. She was a blues singer who also played kick-ass guitar and played in duo situations with Kansas Joe McCoy and others. When the depression hit most of classic blues women could no longer keep their larger bands on the road but Memphis Minnie could keep her duo going by playing on the street if she had to and she kept on recording on up into the 1960s.

After the popularity of the first wave of women blues singers in the 1920s the search was on to find more and more blues singers and players who could be recorded. Talent scouts found small town street corner singers performing solo, guitar duos, guitar and harmonica duos, juke joint musician-singers red-light district barrelhouse piano players, backwoods fish-fry entertainers, plantation workers and obscure sharecroppers living in one room shotgun shacks. Most all of them were worth recording because the overhead was low and the record companies could make a profit especially when they paid the performers such a small amount which was almost always the case. Talent scouts scoured the countryside to find musicians and recruited hundreds and hundreds of blues musicians to be recorded. Some folklorists were interested in documenting different style and found musicians who would record for free but most of the musicians knew that they could make at least some money if they held out for payment. Many blues players would travel to Memphis or Chicago or New York City but there were



other places known for recording like Grafton, Wisconsin or San Antonio and Dallas, Texas. Any decent room would work to record because a record 'cutter' and a microphone was the only technology then. Many recordings were made and several were big sellers.

Record sales declined in the 1930s with the great depression. There was still a lot of recording done during the depression but most people didn't have much money to spend buying records. In the 1940s a lot of manufacturing switched over to make things for the war and things didn't pick up for blues recording in any significant way until after the war. Not long after WW2 the electric guitar pretty much took over as the chosen instrument for the 'bluesman' and the older acoustic blues performers who didn't buy an electric guitar or slap an electromagnetic pickup into the sound-hole of their acoustic guitar faded into relative obscurity.

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a revival of the blues

In the early 1960s the blues/folk revival began. Legends who had disappeared were rediscovered by folklorists and musicians. Even though most of their peers had died, Son House, Skip James, Mississippi John Hurt, Reverend Gary Davis, Big Bill Broonzy, Elizabeth Cotten, Bukka White, Josh White, Sleepy John Estes, Furry Lewis, Mance Lipscomb, Yank Rachell, Robert Pete Williams, Mississippi Fred McDowell, Lightnin' Hopkins and a few others had survived and found new audiences with college kids in the coffeehouses and folk clubs and festivals like the Newport Folk Festivals of 1963 & 64. Many of these survivors made new recordings of their old songs and some even recorded newly written material. All of these incredible individuals who bridged the 'old world' to the new world are now gone. Irrevocable change.

While the 60s blues revival was in full swing, many young musicians learned the old ways of playing blues and folk/blues. Jug bands became fashionable again. Being poor or coming from humble origins especially from the south was a badge of honor and a weathered face and a raspy blues voice was a certificate of authenticity. All kinds

of American rock musicians grabbed a hold of the blues and a big part of the British Invasion that swept America in the mid 60s included blues covers or thinly disguised copies of blues songs. The Rolling Stones took their name from a Muddy Waters song and the Lovin' Spoonful took their name from a Mississippi John Hurt lyric in his song "Coffee Blues". Eric Clapton and Cream recorded an incredible electric version of "Cross Roads Blues" by Robert Johnson.

People like Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Bo Diddley, B.B. King, Albert King, Freddie King and others benefited from the blues revival which was supported by college age audiences who realized the source of rock & roll was largely the blues. Many young musicians of the time also became interested in the really old pre-WW2 blues styles, too.

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the transfiguration of an illinois blues boy

[blind boy lesser finds more]

I lived in central Illinois a couple of hours south of Chicago for a long time and during that time I played and recorded in many different situations. I would be playing in a typical blues-rock bar band and I also played acoustic folk/blues gigs as well. I released CDs of original material and also released some acoustic blues covers CDs, too. No matter what project I was working on I kept one foot in the blues. Even when recording alternative/americana stuff there is still some blues related aspect in the DNA. I'm not a blues purist and I personally don't see how you could be totally authentic as a 'bluesman' unless you were born as a descendent of a plantation slave or sharecropper or unless Buddy Guy or Luther Allison or Lonnie Brooks etc etc is your dad or Koko Taylor is your mom. There is a big influence of blues on our culture but a lot of times it's someone who's wearing a blues mask or adopting a blues persona... sorta like acting. Greil Marcus likens this to wearing blackface makeup. That doesn't mean that it can't be really good or convincing because as they say all the world's a stage. All human's have a certain amount of suffering in their lives so if they are good

at expressing themselves and have a talent for music they can channel that suffering into something worth listening to. Good music of any style does that and that's why I'm not a blues snob. I can dig most anything regardless of style that sounds 'real'.

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new york blues



When I was living in central upstate New York I had a good blues gig every Tuesday for five years [2002-2007] in Rochester, NY at a place called The Beale Street Cafe which was a barbecue restaurant/ bar that had regular music and most of it was blues and that helped me to get several other bar gigs around there and kept me giggin' up in the northeast.

One of the original

Mississippi bluesmen Son House had lived in Rochester, NY in the 1960s and 70s and was 'discovered' there in 1964. When he was younger he didn't like plantation work so he became a preacher but then went and started playing the devil's music and shot and killed a man in a brawl. He did time at the Parchman Farm prison and after playing music with Charley Patton and Tommy Johnson in Mississippi he moved up north to find greener pastures. While living in Rochester he worked on the New York Central Railroad as a porter. After his rediscovery he started performing and recording again and the blues revival scene was his oyster.. Al Wilson from Canned Heat helped House to relearn guitar because he was so rusty he'd nearly forgotten how to play. Stories are

told of him sitting on his porch playing and that's how some of the locals like John Mooney learned about deep blues. Mooney championed House and his style contains a lot of House's influence. Joe Beard was another Rochester musician who did some playing around the area with Son House.

I ventured down and played a blues festival in the Catskills called BLUES-2000 & 3 that featured Hubert Sumlin who was Howlin' Wolf's main guitar guy for years. That snaky guitar sound you hear in "Smoke Stack Lightning" and all of Wolf's greatest jams is Hubert Sumlin. He had big influence on electric blues [Sumlin died in 2011]. I also played the Riverhead Blues Festival which is way out, almost to the eastern tip of Long Island. There's a fairly decent blues scene on Long Island and in certain parts of the northeast of the US. In Rochester, NY and I opened for Jorma Kaukonen who was playing some tasty acoustic fingerstyle country-blues in a string band setting and Shemekia Copeland and Bobby Blue Bland and I played a lot of acoustic blues & folk at some of the New York Wineries and local colleges.



The Downstate New York Blues Association in Long Island sent me to Memphis again to compete in the 2006 International Blues Competition and my Sunflower memories bloomed again. When you have that 'deep' blues experience it stays with you and for me, hearing the last wave of the original Mississippi hill country blues and delta players at the Sunflower Festival back in 1994 loomed large. Sure, there's Chicago blues and Texas blues and the east coast blues and west coast blues and other decent blues scenes scattered here and there but there's just something about Mississippi and the blues [I usually include Memphis in that equation because it borders Mississippi].

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nashville

After I moved to Nashville in 2007 I swore I'd hit the Sunflower festival again because Memphis is a three hour drive from Nashville and Clarksdale, MS is five hours away. It took me a while to get there because I was busy writing and recording and doing writers nights, trying to get my footing in Music City. In 2010 after I released an americana oriented CD called "calico" I decided to get in touch with my blues roots again. I had seen Lamar's Sorrento's blues-folk-art paintings in a couple galleries in Nashville and decided to commission him to do a painting of M.J. Hurt and in August of 2011 I went to Memphis and bought a couple of his paintings. Lamar's specialty is portraits of musicians and he's a swell guitar player, too. This was on my to-do list ever since

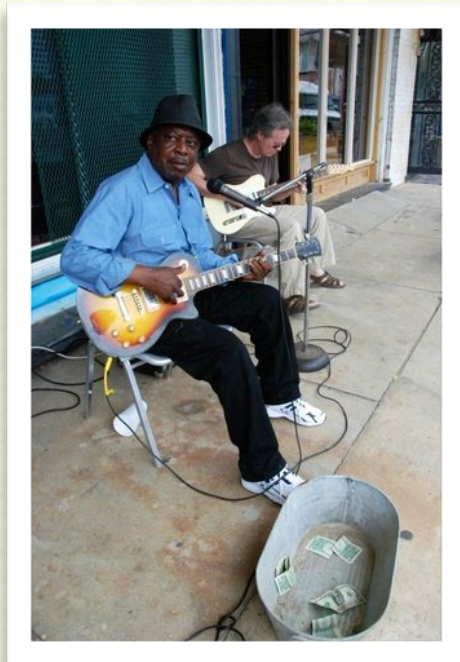
I first saw Lamar's art on the walls of the Center For Southern Folklore back when it was located on Beale Street in Memphis and my sister Kathy and I were in Memphis playing on Beale Street representing the Champaign-Urbana Jazz And Blues Association for the 1998 IBC competition. I'm gonna brag about my blues-singer-sister... If my sister Kathy was a dogwalker and if Koko Taylor and Memphis Minnie and Sippie Wallace and Janis Joplin were dogs, she'd have them all on a leash. How's that for a brag?

It's always pretty damn hot in Nashville in the summer especially in August. Even though you can hear lots of great musicians and singers there I was tired of their schtick and tired of the overly touristy carnival walk down on Lower Broadway

Avenue and needed a lowdown blues fix. Nashville has a B.B. Kings Blues Club and a Bourbon Street Blues and Boogie Bar but I needed something rawer like what ya hear down in Mississippi. I made a trip in July 2011 to Memphis and heard all the music on Beale Street and bought a new blues lid and that helped but it's a little carnivaly there, too. I needed was a Mississippi blues fix. It's way hot in the south and Clarksdale, Mississippi is always one extra little twist of the dial hotter than Nashville but I packed my Telecaster and a little tweed Fender Bronco amp in the trunk of my Volvo and drove from Nashville to Clarksdale for the 2011 Sunflower Blues Festival. Yeah, baby...

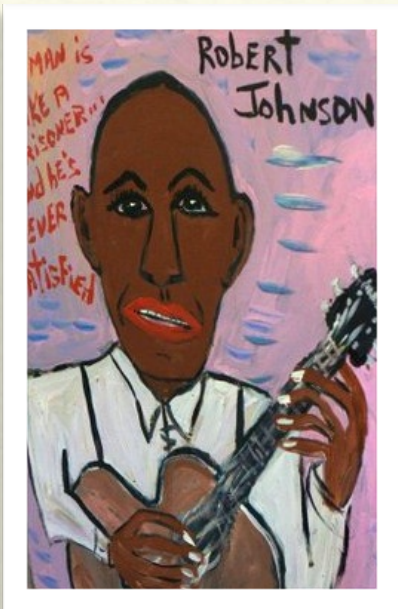
During the festival there are always musicians playing on the sidewalks outside of restaurants and bars and galleries and music venues etc. in Clarksdale and I took my Tele and my amp to the street and had a blast playing on the street with L.C. Ulmer and Little Joe Ayers.

Nowadays the Sunflower festival has the big stage down by the Delta Blues Museum by the railroad tracks and a small 'acoustic' stage next to the kayak/canoe place by the Sunflower River. On the storefront sidewalk stages like Cathead and other acoustic stages I heard two of my favorites of the remaining 3rd or 4th wave blues survivors. Kenny Brown played solo/duo set on the 'kayak' stage and my other fave, Robert Belfour played solo in front of Cathead Folk Art. Belfour has a lot of depth and has several different song structures and he uses a couple of alternate tunings from time to time. Sometimes he tunes his guitar down to a low pitch and it's gets a really deep blues sound that way. Belfour has enough variety to be more than a one-trick pony and that's why he's one of my faves. One of the other 'survivors' is Jimmy "Duck" Holmes and he has a cool blues style but there's not as much variety in his style as Belfour has. Cadillac John does some good blues singin' and plays some good harmonica stuff and another good harp player is Terry Harmonica Bean. If you listen to someone for a whole 45 minute set then you'll get what I'm talkin' about when I say one-chord-one-trick ponyism. I put "Duck" Holmes in the 'one chord progression-one



song' category along with L.C. Ulmer and T-Model Ford. I do dig what they do but it's the one trick thang that starts to bug me. To be fair that's sometimes true with a lot of music. Here's the thing... Blind Boy Lesser wants more!

I don't want to sound 'snooty' but the great blues players of yesteryear could play in several different styles under the big tent of the blues. Listen to a Robert Johnson record and you'll see what I mean. One man and one guitar made such a mark on blues history and he didn't even live to see it. There's still a mystery that surrounds him and only two photographs [possibly three] and lately they've found his son and grandson. Johnson left an unbelievable legacy with such a small amount of recordings. After hearing Johnson's recordings I know in my heart of hearts that I could've listened to him play by himself for two hours and not have been bored for even a millisecond because he had mastered four or five or six distinctive blues styles and tied them



together perfectly. Part of that has to do with playing in different keys with different chord shapes and part of it has to do with doing open tunings and playing slide guitar. On top of all of that he assembled the floating verses and added his own lyrical couplets sung with what could be called the perfect blues voice. His recordings are timeless and influential in huge ways for what came after. On the subject of high-blues-artistry I'm going to jump into a time machine for a second and say I saw Stevie Ray Vaughn play live three separate times and it was hands down the best blues guitar playing I've ever heard and not even a single nanosecond of one trick pony-ism. SRV was gone from this life way too soon... Irrevocable change.

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Believe me, I'm not a perfectionist or a snob. I'm not against uniqueness or originality or complexity or strangeness. I love all those things. The style of Mississippi John Hurt has intricacies and complex fingerpicking and a few little 'funny peculiar' parts here and there but they somehow make sense to my ears [and millions of other

ears]. Some of Robert Johnson's progressions are hard to figure out but are played with the very highest artistry within the acoustic blues genre. Great bluesmen have always had their musical quirks. And if you played with them you didn't challenge them or you might get your ass kicked [or shot]. Stories floated around about how Howlin' Wolf used to beat his drummer up if he didn't keep the beat right. John Lee Hooker and Lightning Hopkins had their own ways of deciding when to change the chord in their blues progressions and they packed enough heat to make sure they were the 'deciders'.

There are many precedents for unusual forms within the blues. You can hear the band behind John Lee Hooker miss the change sometimes but they kept those takes for the recordings cause that's what Mr. Hooker wanted. Lightnin' Hopkins always said "Lightnin' changes when Lightnin' wants". Can you imagine telling Muddy Waters that "Rollin' and Tumblin' Blues" has an odd number of measures, 13 & 1/2 bars instead of 12? He'd say, "I don't count it out man, I just feel it" or he might strike you down with one sideways glance of voodoo lightning. If you get a chance you should listen to Hambone Willie Newbern who recorded the original version in 1929. Then it was called "Roll And Tumble Blues" and it has the same extra 1/2 measure for every four bars which adds up to 13 & 1/2 bars. Weird, huh?

Speaking of added and subtracted beats and unusual blues song forms... Robert Johnson himself took some of the lyrics from "Roll And Tumble Blues" and used a similar 'feel' when he recorded "If I Had Possession Over Judgement Day". The chord structure for "Possession.." is even more unusual than Newbern's 13 & 1/2 bar pattern used for "Roll And Tumble..". I'm not exactly sure how to describe the structure for "If I Had Possession Over Judgement Day" but here we go... A measure with 4 beats then a measure with 7 beats then 4 beats then 5 beats then 4 beats then 7 beats. It adds up to 31 beats... 31 beats? You don't notice it if you're casually listening but you find out how hard Johnson's music was to figure out if you ever try to play it. Another example of odd measure blues is "Fourty Four" by Howlin' Wolf. It's a 13 & 1/2 bar blues most of the time but even that changes in a couple places during the song. Very strange, Penny Lane...

Maybe the strangest of all bluesmen [when I say strange that's a compliment] was Charley Patton. Patton had what many consider to be the most unique and original set of blues songs ever recorded of the pre-WW2 school and he's known as 'the Father of the Delta Blues' cause he came before most everybody else. They say he was a

showman and sometimes played the guitar behind his head and jumped around like a wildman and this was before Cab Calloway's stage antics or T. Bone Walker doin' the splits with the guitar behind his head or Chuck Berry's duck walk or Jimi Hendrix's playing guitar with his teeth and setting his guitar on fire. They say Charley Patton walked with a limp because of a gunshot in Helena, Arkansas and his throat had been cut really deep once in a brawl and maybe that's why Charley's voice sounded like a 250 pound bullfrog croaking. Patton's timing and the structure of his blues were simply off the charts and nearly impossible to emulate. About the only living person who comes close to playing and singing Charley Patton songs the 'right' way is Alvin Youngblood Hart. You hear everybody and their blues-brother playing simplified versions of Robert Johnson tunes but only a few have stepped up to the plate and took a swing at Patton tunes because they are ever so hard to cop.

Not much ever adds up to 31 beats or 13 & 1/2 bars in rock & roll, that's for sure. Most of it is straight ahead 4/4 like "Johnny Be Good". There are notable exceptions like John Lennon who often added and subtracted measures and the average listener is not usually aware of the fact. "All You Need Is Love", "I Am The Walrus", "Strawberry Fields" and many other songs that Lennon came up with have unique chord structures and odd amounts of measures but after the songs are imprinted in your memory they somehow make sense. "Yer Blues" from the White Album is an off measure blues by Lennon and it's supremely cool and gutsy as hell and "Yer Blues" is proof that John Winston Lennon could sing the blues as good as any white man. From time to time Bob Dylan who knows how his way around several types of blues has been known to change the chord when Bobby wants to change it and the band just holds on for dear life. Other examples of complex off-measure structure in 'rock' are groups like King Crimson or Frank Zappa or early Genesis and they are in the avant-garde or classical vein. They have elements of rock but probably not in the same category as most of the rock & roll that was born out of blues but they all have plenty of blues licks embedded in their guitar solos.

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A month after the 2011 Sunflower Blues festival I was headed down to the Mississippi John Hurt Festival near Avalon, MS and on the Friday before the festival I played a set at Hambone Art & Music owned by Stan Street [in Clarksdale]. Stan is a fine musician who plays sax and blues harp and an artist who specializes in oil paintings of blues musicians... some really good stuff. Stan took me over to a famous

juke joint called Red's Lounge to hear T-Model Ford and told me to go get my guitar & amp. So I had my guitar over my shoulder and T-Model's wife yelled over at me and said, "Honey, ya oughta get up and play cause T-Model needs some help". I sat in and very much enjoyed myself and beers kept appearing next to me and all my friends know that I like beer and the folks I had just met at Red's figured that out pretty fast. I played a non-stop 90 minute set with T-Model and his grandson on drums [who was about 13 years old]. T is in his 90s and seems happy to be alive and his blues style is about as primitive as they come. Every song is in the key of E and when he goes through what seems like a 12-bar blues but it's more like a 11 & 7/8s bar progression one time through then the next time through the progression it might be 11 & 5/8s bars. It seems to miss a tiny subdivision of the measure right before the five chord and it's hard to stay tight with that but you learn to just wait for the change and follow it. That may sound overly technical to an outsider but it's Blues101 to 99.9% of all blues players to know how to play a 12-bar and I'm not sure if T does. He has a charismatic vibe and a gutsy voice that overcomes any of his one-key drop-beat shortcomings. When he sings the blues it's the 'real deal' and you feel that little chill up your spine cause you know he's from a different time and he's in touch with the source of the blues and he's one of the last of a dying breed and he's in his 90s. In 2012 T-Model had a stroke. I'm not sure if he's still playing but I hope so. Almost irrevocable change.

The first time I heard T-Model was on a Fat Possum records compilation. Most of the early Fat Possum stuff was the opposite of ultra-slick clean studio recordings and that's what made them good. To me R.L. Burnside was the top dog of the possum pile but Junior Kimbrough, Robert Belfour, Scott Dunar and T-Model Ford all had one or two cool cuts on various Fat Possum compilations. 'Not the same old blues crap' was their motto. Ragged but right, sloppy but sublime... I'd read where T-Model did hard time for stabbing a man to death who had pulled a gun on him. That made the listening experience even better. It was good stuff, raw & raunchy unmistakably authentic. Still I feel like I'm stubbing my toe when T-Model goes through the progression and drops those beats. One man's mistake is another man's method. There's treasure to be found in the trash... Ragged but right.

When I played with him at Red's Lounge, T-Model was very friendly and smilin' away and the crowd loved him to death. Before I go up to play that night, Stan Street said "you gotta be on your toes on the five chord" and he was right because every time we came around to that missing subdivision of the beat it still felt like a dropped beat,

like a mistake. No way in hell would I tell him it felt like a mistake. I don't think anyone who plays with him would tell him that. It wouldn't be prudent. It wouldn't be right. I did in the end learn how to follow him but if I tried to change the chord that way on my own it would be a guess. The even stranger thing is that when I played with L.C. Ulmer and Little Joe Ayers they both changed to the five chord the same way as T-Model Ford. Maybe they learned that from him... Maybe it's an inside joke between old blues guys who are trying to throw us off and mess with our heads... Maybe it's a Mississippi blues survivor thing...

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avalon blues

The final leg of my 'back to the blues' summer was playing an acoustic set at the Mississippi John Hurt Festival on Saturday, September 2nd 2011. They hold the festival next to the little old house that Mississippi John lived in that now serves as a museum for some of his belongings. The M.J. Hurt Museum is way back in the woods outside of Avalon, Mississippi up steep hills and through deep woods with winding red dirt rocky roads and it feels so remote you almost think the cast of "Deliverance" will appear. The place gives you an idea of how M.J. Hurt grew up and lived most of his life within a few miles of Avalon, MS without electricity or running faucet water or indoor plumbing.

Mississippi John is unique among most the pre-WW2 Mississippi bluesmen in that his blues was mixed with older murder ballads like "Stag-o-Lee" and "Louis Collins" and ragtime influenced chord progressions and he's generally placed in the blues 'songster' category. According to everyone who ever met him he was a very sweet personality with a gentle voice and gentle manner. His fingerpicking guitar



style was oh so smooth and rhythmic and when he was 'rediscovered' in the early 1960s he was still playing at the top of his game after living disconnected from the mainstream music world.

Hurt had recorded in Memphis in 1928 and he talked about seeing Lonnie Johnson, Blind Lemon Jefferson and Bessie Smith waiting in the hall to record when he was doing his sessions. Later that same year Hurt recorded in New York City then returned to Avalon, Mississippi and tried to keep his musical momentum going but the depression hit and that slowed everybody down to a near halt. He worked and farmed and stayed close to home. He did some playing for local folks at down-home get togethers and sometimes played down at a nearby little general store but that's about it. He didn't end up recording again until after his rediscovery in 1960s.

In 1928 Hurt had recorded a tune called "Avalon Blues" and that's how Tom Hoskins found him in the 1960s. Hoskins went to Avalon, MS and asked the local folks if he lived there and they pointed him down the road and back into the woods and there was Hurt who didn't then have a guitar. Thus began the second phase of Hurt's recording and performing career. Some of the other players who were rediscovered in the 60s were ravaged by old age or illness or alcohol and some were bitter about being left behind but M.J. Hurt was gracious and 1960s audiences loved him. He recorded several albums in the 1960s and moved to Washington DC for a while and made more money in a year than he'd made his whole life as a farmer or laborer.

Hurt left Mississippi to tour in the east at colleges and clubs and to play the Newport Folk Festival. He needed a guitar to record so the record company took him to a guitar store and said, "John, pick out any guitar you want and we'll buy it." The store had some pricey Martins with fancy inlays but John picked up an inexpensive plain looking Guild guitar and said, "This one will do." That humble spirit is what people loved about Mississippi John. There are two pieces of black & white film with M.J. Hurt singing and playing on a Pete Seeger folk music program from the 1960s and you can see what a great fingerpicker Hurt was. You can see that he was a link to music that goes back to the days before recording was invented, back before the blues, before ragtime to the era of minstrel shows and who knows how far back some of these influences go. Some say they go all the way back to Africa and to Elizabethan English troubadours.

Some really nice folks were at the 2011 festival and they all love Hurt's music and his granddaughter Mary Hurt-Wright was there from Chicago for the release of the first major biography about Hurt's life by an English writer named Phillip Radcliffe. When it was time for my set I played "Poor Boy Long Ways From Home", "Louis Collins", "Beulah Land", and everybody joined in with me and sang "You Got To Walk That Lonesome Valley". At the end of the festival there was a gathering at a little cemetery a couple of miles from the museum where John Hurt and several of his relatives are buried and we took off our hats and sang a couple of gospel songs for the kindest, most gentle bluesman of all time.

-----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.

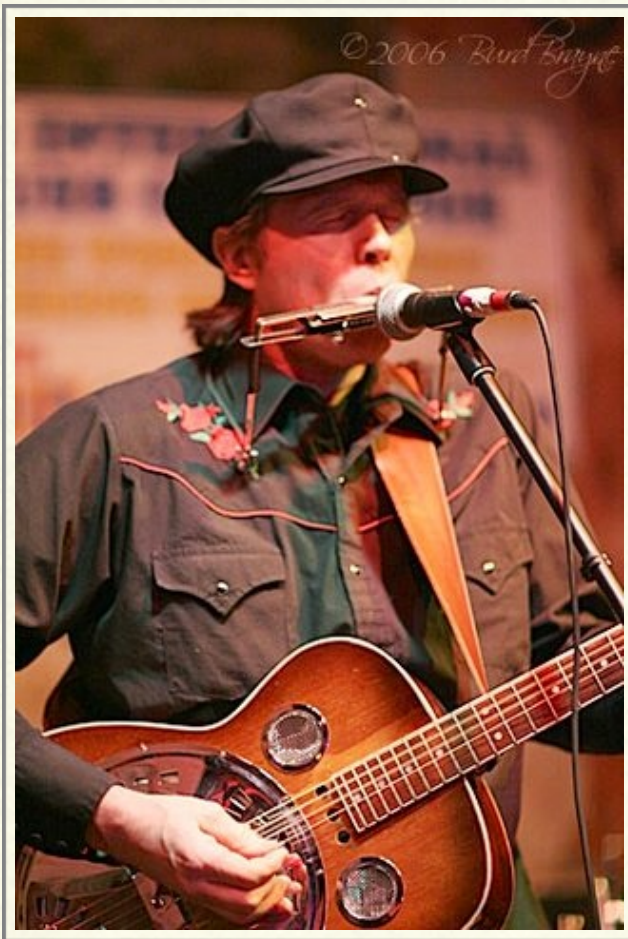
December 23, 2010 the Prairie Crossroads Blues Society presented Keith with an Honorary Membership for his many years of performance and dedication to "The Blues" in Champaign-Urbana, IL.

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

-----photos and visual art-----



Robert Johnson? and Johnny Shines?

Bessie Smith LP album cover art by Phillip Hays

Robert Johnson Memorial monument with author's resonator guitar

CD covers collage

The author at the Beale Street Cafe in Rochester, NY

Author performing at the 2006 IBC in Memphis, TN

Son House folk-art painting by Lamar Sorrento

Little Joe Ayers and the author in Clarksdale, MS

Robert Johnson folk-art painting by Lamar Sorrento

M. J. Hurt folk-art painting by Lamar Sorrento

Author performing at the 2006 IBC in Memphis, TN