

# Ann Arbor Blues Festivals and More



by Michael Erlewine

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## INTRODUCTION

This is not intended to be a finely produced book, but rather a readable document for those who are interested in my particular take on dharma training and a few other topics. These blogs were from the Fall of 2019 posted on Facebook.

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Here are some other links to more books, articles, and videos on these topics:

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<http://SpiritGrooves.net/>

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### **Cover Photo of Muddy Waters and Michael Erlewine**

Photos by Stanley Livingston

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## CHICAGO BLUES GREAT "MAGIC SAM"

It was 1966 when I first saw Magic Sam live on Chicago's West-Side. He was playing in a large bar that reminded me of one of those ubiquitous Chinese restaurants, bare of furnishings, with very low ceilings and gray Formica-topped tables scattered everywhere, as far as you could see. However, at first I could see nothing because the place was so packed. My brother Dan and I managed to squeeze through the small front door and kind of flatten ourselves up against the back wall. It was standing-room only and all I could see were the heads of folks standing in front of me extending all the way to the stage somewhere way up front. But then I heard it, the sound of a human voice, a sheet of sound that shimmered like free-fall water falling. It was in a minor key and it cut through my brain straight into my heart. It was the song at the link below:

"All of Your Love."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ThzRE-bjlxY>

That was my first introduction to Magic Sam, who was playing that night with harmonica player Shakey Jake Harris, Sam's uncle. There we were, my brother Dan and I, perhaps the only white people in an otherwise all-black bar, listening to music that made the hair stand up on the back of my neck. How was I to know that only a few years later Magic Sam would pass-on at a young 32 years of age. I heard him again live in 1969 at the first Ann Arbor Blues Festival and got to meet and interview him. Not only was Magic Sam a unique singer, but he could play the guitar like few others. Listen to a few tunes take from the great

Delmark album "West-Side Soul."

"My Love Will Never Die."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C3Z51BKAGaE>

"Every Night and Every Day"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v8dGWYAnsNo> "I

Need You So Bad"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjjYTFNnsbs>

"All Night Long"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YSL9w3cqRtc>

"I found a New Love"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9IRjyCvJWpE>

"I wanna' Boogie"

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OF\\_wAwh2AkA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OF_wAwh2AkA)

And here is Magic Sam's version of "Sweet Home Chicago" and the tune "Mama, Talk to Your Daughter," featuring some Sam's guitar work.

"Mama, Talk to your Daughter"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cA3bf94IReg>

Sweet Home Chicago

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YCPTAtsg7Wg>

Magic Sam was born Samuel Gene Maghett in Grenada, Mississippi on February 14, 1937, and died December 1, 1969, not long after his taking the first Ann Arbor Blues Festival by storm that September. He moved to Chicago in 1956 and soon became a familiar performer in the West-Side clubs. He

recorded for Cobra Records from 1957 to 1959, and his tune "All Your Love" influenced many Chicago players. As mentioned earlier, Magic Sam was a big hit at the first Ann Arbor Blues Festival in 1969. The blues world was stunned by his loss. Not only was Magic Sam one of the most unique blues performers, his gentle nature and innate kindness to others endeared him to everyone who came to know him.

In the middle 1960s, I made a number of trips to Chicago, usually with some members of our band (the "Prime Movers Blues Band" to Chicago) for old blues 45s and to visit the blues clubs on Chicago's west and south sides. Our drummer Iggy Pop also studied blues drumming from Sam Lay, the drummer for the Paul Butterfield Blues Band. Anyway, we were befriended by Bob Koester, the owner of Delmark Records, one of the most important blues labels in the country. Koester was kind enough to introduce us to the black blues venues, taking us here and there where we could listen to our blues heroes live and in person, players like Junior Wells, Buddy Guy, Muddy Waters, Big Walter Horton, Little Walter, and so many others.

I can never thank Bob Koester enough for his kindness. He is a towering figure in the history of blues recording and a personal hero to me. Thank god there are people that pop up in our lives that are about something more than money and greed. Koester was one of these. He is still working today, now in his eighties, recording and running the Jazz Record Mart in Chicago. The Delmark album "West-Side Soul" featuring Magic Sam is still available; every electric blues lover has one.

## PERSONAL MEMORIES OF THE ANN ARBOR BLUES FESTIVALS

I want to write about my personal memories of that first Ann Arbor Blues Festival in early August of 1969. I already wrote the text for a whole (award-winning) book about the festival, but it was mostly the general history of the festival. You can find it here:

[http://www.amazon.com/Blues-Black-White-Landmark-Festivals/dp/0472116959/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1386328730&sr=8-1&keywords=blues+in+black+and+white](http://www.amazon.com/Blues-Black-White-Landmark-Festivals/dp/0472116959/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1386328730&sr=8-1&keywords=blues+in+black+and+white)

I have yet to write my own personal story of that event, so I am working on this for a short video I am putting together. I thought I might post some thoughts here, if you don't mind. And I have to back up a bit and first talk about how it was for me way back then in the 1960s. I will start by saying that in every life there are turning points, forks in the road, which if taken, change our life.

That first Ann Arbor Blues Festival in 1969 was such an event for me. I have never been the same since nor wanted to be. When I am asked how I happened to miss an event like the great Woodstock festival in August of 1969 (Aug. 15-18), my answer is simple enough. I was still in the throes of (and I am still recovering) from the landmark Ann Arbor Blues Festival two weeks earlier (Aug. 1-3), which in my life was an even more important cultural event: a gathering together of some of the greatest living blues masters in an event that could never be repeated because of impermanence.

Some performers died later that very year, and today almost none of them are still alive. That first blues festival in 1969 and the one that followed it in 1970 were basically one-time events, but I need to preface all of this. What is called the Sixties did not really start until the middle of that decade, in 1965 to be exact. It was in the summer of 1965 that the band "Grateful Dead" formed in the Bay Area, but the cultural event we call the 1960s did not have just a single starting location. Like a hot rash, it broke out all over this country and then spread to the world. I should know because I was there and came up during that time.

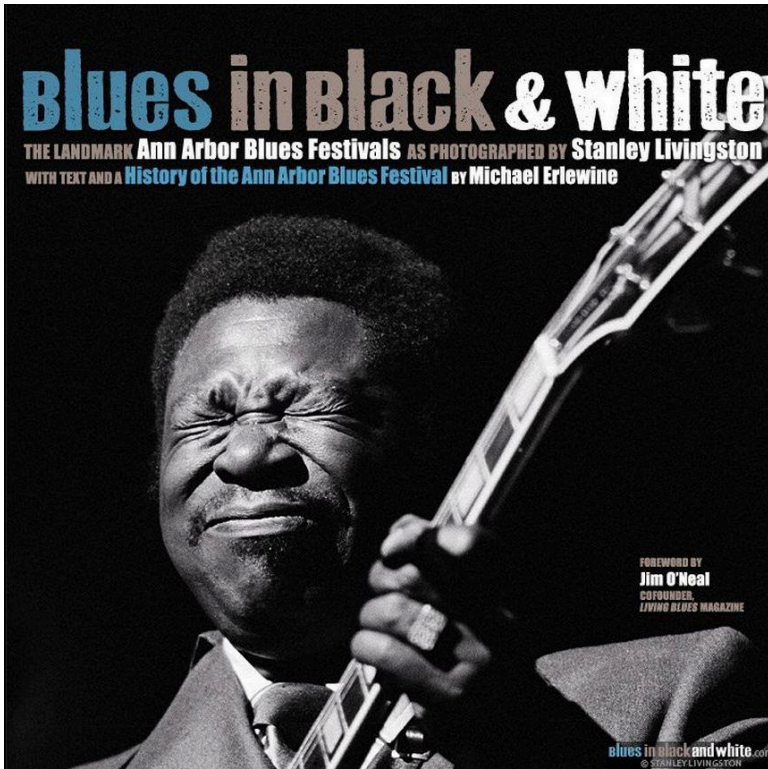
In fact, in that same late summer of 1965 in Ann Arbor, Michigan my brother Dan and I formed the Prime Movers Blues Band. We had never heard of the Grateful Dead. What we now call the Sixties arose all across the nation more or less simultaneously, especially where LSD had done its work. In my opinion, the common catalyst, the true cause of what we call the Sixties was the advent of LSD in this country around 1964; the original Sandoz patents for LSD had expired in 1963, so the drug was free to travel and it did. LSD was literally a game (and mind) changer for a whole generation; it opened up vast mental vistas that are still being explored today, almost sixty years later.

I dropped acid in May of 1964 in Berkeley California, where I was spending a year. I had tried various drugs before that, including marijuana, peyote, speed, and even codeine – that kind of thing. As I have written many times, only LSD really got my attention. In fact, it was (believe it or not) my introduction to the dharma, to the way things actually are in the mind.



LSD showed me that the outside world I saw and believed in was the result of my own inner projections, including my likes, dislikes, biases, and prejudices. LSD cut through the stagnant mental firewall of the 1950s like a blowtorch. The genie was out of the bottle and not about to go back in anytime soon. It was what I saw on LSD that fueled my interest in phenomenology, the study of my own consciousness and mind. And later it was the dharma that organized it for me and provided a path or method for continued development and even more awareness.

I have thought about these things for going on sixty years, and I can find no other cause - principle cause - for what we call the Sixties other than the advent of LSD on the scene. It was the single main catalyst that sparked what has been called the hippie revolution. Not everyone took acid, but most of the leaders of that movement did. It changed the mind of a generation, one person at a time. LSD gave an entire generation the courage and will to overturn the status-quo in favor of a new take on reality, one based on direct experience and not just what we were told.



[The graphic is the cover of a book with blues photos of those first two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals by Stanley Livingston, perhaps the best blues photographs I have ever seen. The book was designed and laid out by my brother Tom Erlewine. I wrote the text, short bios of artists, an interview with Howlin' Wolf I did, and the history of the festivals. ]

## THE ANN ARBOR BLUES FESTIVALS AND THE PRIME MOVERS BLUES BAND

Although we were not students or connected to the University of Michigan or officially part of the Ann Arbor Blues Festival committee, we were easily

identified with blues music in the Ann Arbor area, because we played it all the time. We were the only blues band in town. That's how we came to be part of the festivals. Our band (the Prime Movers Blues Band) was perhaps the first of the new 1960s-style groups in the Ann Arbor/Detroit area, having formed in the summer of 1965. Although some 37 musicians moved through the band over time, the main players were my brother Dan on lead guitar and myself as lead singer and amplified Chicago-style harmonica, sometimes rhythm guitar, Robert Sheff (AKA "Blue Gene Tyranny" on keyboards, Jack Dawson (or Ilene Silverman) on Bass, and James Osterberg (Iggy Pop) or J.C. Crawford on drums.

We never recorded much and what we did apparently was mostly lost. However, my brother Stephen Erlewine dug a bunch of old moldy reel-to-reel tapes of the Prime Movers out of his basement some years ago. What they amount to is about two sets of songs, one early in our career, and one later. That's all we have! For those who want to hear what we sounded like, here are some songs from back then:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZO5bsagUqY>



That album has been issued.

We had been into listening, studying, and playing the blues for years. Moreover, we had been to Chicago a number of times, down to the South and West Side of Chicago to hear the great blues artists play in their own clubs. We saw Little Walter, Buddy Guy, Junior Wells, Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, Magic Sam, and many other blues artists live on their own turf, so we just knew more about the music and the players than most of the students putting on the festival; It was a natural fit. And we were probably more excited about the festival than they were.

As for myself, I was enthused beyond imagining that almost all of my blues heroes were coming to Ann Arbor and would play here. After all, aside from looking for someone to love, about all I did in those days was listen to, study, and play the blues, tracing out the history of this or that artist and trying to hear something of everything they put out. I have been told that by my almost exclusive interest in Black Music I missed a lot of other music, music by my peers, which just makes my point. I could care less. I was so taken with the blues, especially the Chicago electric blues.

From where I stood, most modern (white) musicians back then were doing the same thing I was doing, listening to the great artists, which in blues and jazz means mostly black artists. Why would I be listening to my peers when I could hear Muddy Waters and Big Walter Horton live or on records. Same with Dylan. I had travelled with Bob Dylan back in 1961 and helped him put on his concert at the Michigan Union in Ann Arbor, so I knew him some. Although Dylan was very bright, to me he was just another folk-music traveling guy like myself.

This was before he was "Bob Dylan." Why should I listen to him in particular? Both he and I were listening to groups like the Swan Silvertones, The Mighty Clouds of Joy, and others. Looking back from today, I can see why Dylan was special, but you get the idea.

Artists like Janice Joplin interested me not at all. I had met Joplin and even hung out with her at the Grande Ballroom drinking whiskey together. Well, she drank most of the whiskey. It was fun to meet her, but as to her music, I am reminded of a story told to me by the great poster artist Stanley Mouse when I interviewed

him some years ago. Mouse said that Joplin rehearsed in (I believe he said) an old firehouse. One day the police showed up at the door because they had reports of a woman screaming. Now, that's funny!

So, if you get the idea that in those years I was very myopic, you would be right. I was focused on blues music and some jazz. And we were playing that music wherever we could, in particular at a black bar down on Anne Street in Ann Arbor, a one-block section of black businesses. It was called Clint's Club. We were performing there several days a week for \$35 a night, and that was for the whole band, all five members. Let's see, that adds up to \$7 a night for each of us. But even promises of real money failed to distract me from my study of the blues.

I have told this story before, but at one point a subsidiary of Motown came up to Ann Arbor from Detroit in long black limousines and proceeded to court our group, the Prime Movers Blues Band. It seems they wanted to find a group of white musicians that could play black music. We were sometimes racially mixed, but mostly white players. For a while they drove us around in those limousines and painted wonderful scenarios for us. For example, they arranged for my brother Dan and I to have lunch with none other than Don and Phil Everly, the Everly Brothers. Wow! What a thrill that was sitting at a table for four with our heroes. I'll never forget it.

However, the romance did not last long. When it came right down to where the rubber meets the road, they wanted us to play songs that they gave us, with no freedom on our part to choose. I am sure that they probably knew a lot more than we did what would be

good for us to make hits. However, I was not a bit interested in being their musical puppet. We totally refused to do what they wanted, and that was the end of the limousines. No more Everly Brothers. Looking back, we probably refused what could have been a big break, but at the time (and even now) I never blinked.

All I did was study, practice, and attempt to play the blues music we so respected. And then came the festivals. ...

<http://www.bluesinblackandwhite.com/>

## THE PERFECT BLUES STORM: THE ANN ARBOR BLUES FESTIVALS

Continuing with my story of those first Ann Arbor Blues Festivals in 1969 and 1970: While the Prime Movers Blues Band (my group) may have missed our chance to make it big with the Motown folks, we were right on time for that first Ann Arbor Blues Festival in 1969. As soon as we heard about it, my brother Dan and I were all over that event. Before we knew it, we were in complete charge of taking care of the performers as regards food and drink. What could be better than that, especially to dole out alcohol, which was still really big back then, especially with the blues crowd?

The Ann Arbor Blues Festivals were put on by the Student Activities Committee (or some such group) at the University of Michigan, but IMO it was mainly the work of one John Fishel, a student, who became the leader of the festival committee. It was he who voted down having some white British blues group play in

favor of the real deal – the great blues players themselves. After all, blues was not dead and gone like most folk music. It was alive and well, playing across town, and perhaps separated only by a racial curtain.



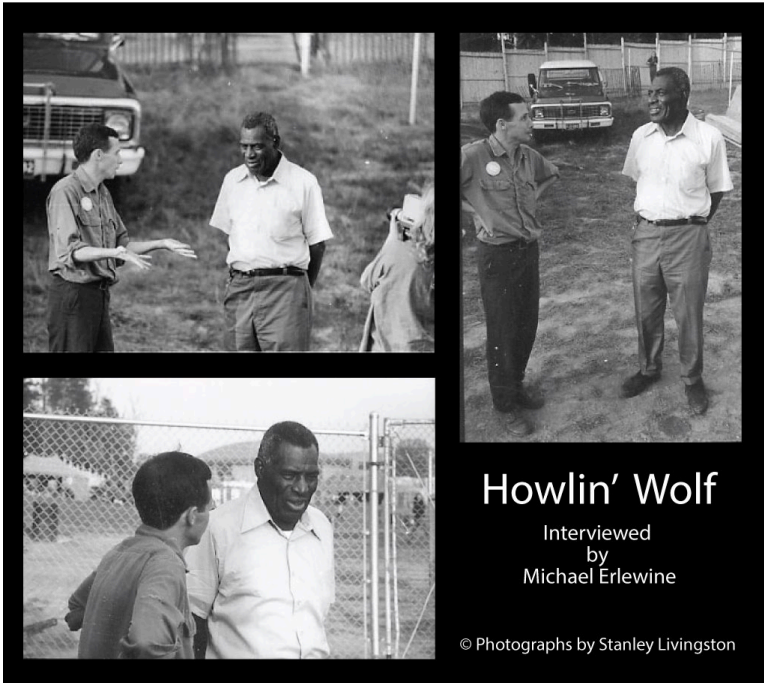
[Muddy Waters being interviewed by me.]

It was Fishel who really made this landmark event happen, and I thank him! So, there we were at those festivals, right back stage with the artists, serving them food and booze out of the tailgate of my father's station wagon. And it gets better. Let me set the stage. Until that first blues festival in 1969, a few of these great blues artists may have been together at one club or another, once in a while, but never everyone at one event and all together.

This had never happened before, and never has since. Suddenly, just about everyone who was anyone in the blues roster was present and standing



around talking with one another. It was like a blues convocation in heaven. And there is more.



For reasons I still don't understand, a number of the blues players like Big Mama Thornton, Arthur Big Boy Crudup, Fred McDowell, Yank Rachel, and others showed up many days before the festival. Who knows why, but suddenly here they were, being put up at the Michigan League and other places. I can remember going to the University of Michigan's West Quad and there was Mississippi Fred McDowell, Yank Rachel, and Johnnie Young all tucked away in little dark-wood-trimmed rooms. It boggled our minds. They were, our heroes, everywhere.

I don't want to beat you up with words, but these first two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals and the two Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festivalas that followed in 1972 and 1973 brought together the greatest collection of blue artists in history. Here is a list some of those who attended.



Stan Abernathy (trumpet) Otis Rush Band, Dave Alexander (vocals piano), Luther Allison (guitar vocals) & the Blue Nebulae, Willie Anderson (harmonica), Carey Bell (harmonica), Fred Below (drums), Big Joe Turner (vocals), Bobby Blue Bland (vocals), Juke Boy Bonner (harmonica vocals), Cassell Burrow , Leroy Campbell (bass), Clifton Chenier (accordion), James Cotton (harmonica), Pee Wee Crayton (guitar vocals), Arthur 'Big Boy' Crudup (guitar vocals), Jimmy 'Fast Fingers' Dawkins (guitar vocals), Doctor Ross (harmonica vocals guitar), Sleepy John Estes (guitar vocals), Lowell Fulson (guitar vocals), Paul Garon (blues writer), Ernest Gatewood (bass) Otis Rush Band, Buddy Guy (guitar vocals), Phillip Guy (guitar) Buddy Guy Band, Ted Harvey (drums) Hound Dog Taylor Band, John Lee Hooker (guitar vocals), Howlin' Wolf (guitar vocals harmonica), J.B.Hutto & the Hawks (guitar vocals), Bruce Iglaur (Aligator Records), John Jackson (guitar vocals banjo), Calvin Jones (bass) Howlin' Wolf Band, Albert King (guitar vocals), B.B.King (guitar vocals), Freddy King (guitar vocals), Bob Koester (Delmark Records), Sam Lay (drums vocals), Hopkins Lightnin' (guitar vocals), Manse Lipscomb (guitar vocals), Little Joe Blue (guitar vocals), Robert Jr. Lockwood Junior (guitar vocals), Lazy Bill Lucus (piano), Magic Sam (guitar vocals), Jim Marshall (photos), Mississippi Fred McDowell (guitar vocals), John Meggs (tenor

sax) Otis Rush Band, Little Brother Montgomery (piano vocals), Muddy Waters (guitar vocals), Charlie Musselwhite (harmonica vocals), Louis Myers (lead guitar harmonica), Paul Oliver (blues writer), Jim Oneil (Living Blues Magazine), Tom Osterman , Papa Lightfoot (harmonica vocals), Junior Parker (harmonica vocals), Brewer Phillips (lead guitar) Hound Dog Taylor Band, A.C.Reed (sax), Jimmy Reed Jr. (vocals guitar) Hound Dog Taylor Band, Bob Reidy (piano vocals), Freddy Roulette (guitar steel guitar), Otis Rush (guitar vocals), Roosevelt Shaw (drums), Johnnie Shines (guitar vocals), Harmonica George Smith (harmonic vocals), Son House (guitar vocals), Victoria Spivey (vocals), Chris Strachwitz (label owner), Hubert Sumlin (guitar vocals), Sunnyland Slim (piano), Roosevelt Sykes (piano vocals), Eddie Taylor (guitar vocals), Hound Dog Taylor (guitar vocals), Big Mama Thorton (vocals), Jeff Todd Titon (guitar) Lazy Bill Lucas Blues Band, Johnny Twist , Eddie Cleanhead Vinson (vocals sax), T-Bone Walker (guitar vocals), Sippie Wallace (vocals), Dick Waterman (manager), Junior Wells (vocals harmonica), Big Joe Williams (vocals), Robert Pete Williams (guitar vocals), Johnny Winter (guitar vocals), Little Johnny Woods (harmonica), Johnny Young (guitar vocals mandolin), Mighty Joe Young (guitar vocals), Abernathy (trumpet) Otis Rush Band, Dave Alexander (vocals piano), Luther Allison (guitar vocals) & the Blue Nebulae, Willie Anderson (harmonica), Carey Bell (harmonica), Fred Below (drums), Big Joe Turner (vocals), Bobby Blue Bland (vocals), Juke Boy Bonner (harmonica vocals), Cassell Burrow , Leroy Campbell (bass), Clifton Chenier (accordion), James Cotton (harmonica), Pee Wee Crayton (guitar vocals), Arthur 'Big Boy' Crudup (guitar vocals), Jimmy 'Fast Fingers' Dawkins (guitar

vocals), Doctor Ross (harmonica vocals guitar), Sleepy John Estes (guitar vocals), Lowell Fulson (guitar vocals), Paul Garon (blues writer), Ernest Gatewood (bass) Otis Rush Band, Buddy Guy (guitar vocals), Phillip Guy (guitar) Buddy Guy Band, Ted Harvey (drums) Hound Dog Taylor Band, John Lee Hooker (guitar vocals), Howlin' Wolf (guitar vocals harmonica), J.B.Hutto & the Hawks (guitar vocals), Bruce Iglaur (Alligator Records), John Jackson (guitar vocals banjo), Calvin Jones (bass) Howlin' Wolf Band, Albert King (guitar vocals), B.B.King (guitar vocals), Freddy King (guitar vocals), Bob Koester (Delmark Records), Sam Lay (drums vocals), Hopkins Lightnin' (guitar vocals), Manse Lipscomb (guitar vocals), Little Joe Blue (guitar vocals), Robert Jr. Lockwood Junior (guitar vocals), Lazy Bill Lucas (piano), Magic Sam (guitar vocals), Jim Marshall (photos), Mississippi Fred McDowell (guitar vocals), John Meggs (tenor sax) Otis Rush Band, Little Brother Montgomery (piano vocals), Muddy Waters (guitar vocals), Charlie Musselwhite (harmonica vocals), Louis Myers (lead guitar harmonica), Paul Oliver (blues writer), Jim Oneil (Living Blues Magazine), Tom Osterman , Papa Lightfoot (harmonica vocals), Junior Parker (harmonica vocals), Brewer Phillips (lead guitar) Hound Dog Taylor Band, A.C.Reed (sax), Jimmy Reed Jr. (vocals guitar) Hound Dog Taylor Band, Bob Reidy (piano vocals), Freddy Roulette (guitar steel guitar), Otis Rush (guitar vocals), Roosevelt Shaw (drums), Johnnie Shines (guitar vocals), Harmonica George Smith (harmonic vocals), Son House (guitar vocals), Victoria Spivey (vocals), Chris Strachwitz (label owner), Hubert Sumlin (guitar vocals), Sunnyland Slim (piano), Roosevelt Sykes (piano vocals), Eddie Taylor (guitar vocals), Hound Dog Taylor (guitar vocals), Big Mama Thornton (vocals),

Jeff Todd Titon (guitar) Lazy Bill Lucas Blues Band, Johnny Twist , Eddie Cleanhead Vinson (vocals sax), T-Bone Walker (guitar vocals), Sippie Wallace (vocals), Dick Waterman (manager), Junior Wells (vocals harmonica), Big Joe Williams (vocals), Robert Pete Williams (guitar vocals), Johnny Winter (guitar vocals), Little Johnny Woods (harmonica), Johnny Young (guitar vocals mandolin), and Mighty Joe Young (guitar vocals). There are a lot more that I have met in the years since then. I hope you get the idea.

If there is a blues paradise, for me that was it. Can you imagine? And this great conflux of blues greats pushed my buttons until they popped. Here I was actually talking one-on-one with my blues heroes and before I knew it I had a reel-to-reel tape recorder, microphone, and was officially interviewing these guys. It just happened.

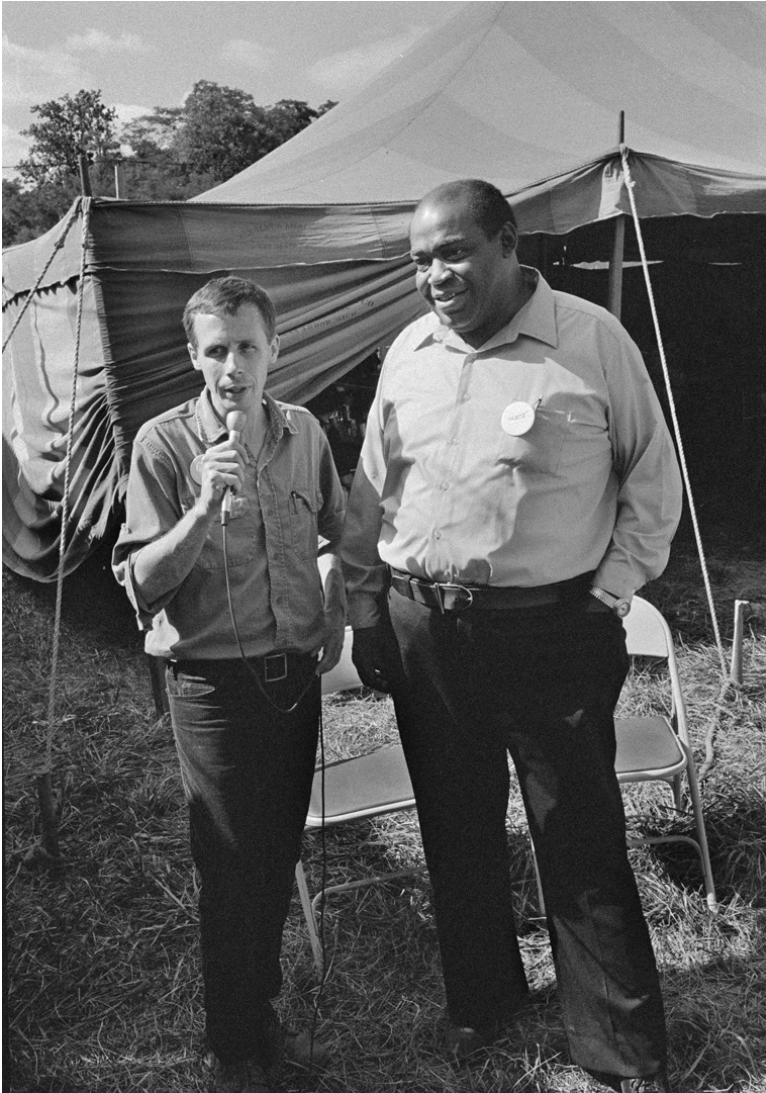


{Koko Taylor and Michael Erlewine}

Little did I know then that this incredible stream of talent and energy would divert my life and segue it

into something new, although it took some years for this to surface. I had been to Chicago and seen many of these players one at a time or in twos and threes, which was very, very different from suddenly being surrounded by them on all sides. The sheer energy of the all the artists at that first festival was so powerful.

Couple that with the fact that I believe the artists had their own minds blown at the same time we did. This was a first for them too. It was some very high energy, my friends. I don't know what pooling that many similar minds together can do, but however you want to describe it, we can agree it was a unique gathering, one never to be repeated. Even by the time of the 2nd Ann Arbor Blues Festival the following year (1970), the music world had lost blues greats like Otis Spann, Lonnie Johnson, Earl Hooker, Slim Harpo, Skip James, Kokomo Arnold, and others.



[Willie Dixon and Michael Erlewine

And it has been all downhill from there. That first festival in 1969, whatever we can agree it was or meant, could never be repeated. It was the culmination and a coming together of a massive force

of minds in one time and one place. We were all lit up. It was very much a celebration. There was joy there. Both the performers and the audience were open to one another and communicating.

Here are some quotes about the festival by the performers taken from my interviews.

James Cotton (August 3, 1969) "I've never seen nothin' like this in my life. This is the beautifullest thing I ever seen in my life. "

"This is so beautiful." Magic Sam (August 3, 1969)  
"This festival is like an all-star game."

Louis Myers "This blues festival is a big family reunion."

Luther Tucker (August 3, 1969) "As for the blues festival, I can dig it. I enjoyin' it."

Lightnin' Hopkins (August 3, 1969) "Well, I been looking forward for this for a long time. And I thought this would happen in the future and it did, so now I hope it lasts long. Fact of business is, I believe it will."

Sleepy John Estes (August 2, 1969) "When all the children get together, Oh that will be a day.

And I was busy. I could hear the performances filtering through to the backstage area, but had (or took) little time to sit out front and watch. I had done that before and much preferred working backstage where I was actually mixing with the artists, or getting off to the side with them and tape recording an interview. And I had my whole family all around me. I



am one of five boys (no sisters), and all my brothers were there, and my dad!



[Little Brother Montgomery (left) Roosevelt Sykes (center), my dad, Ralph Erlewine (right)]

My dad was a comptroller by trade, a CFO and money man; he was all about numbers. I never played by the numbers or was that concerned with financial matters, so he and I had not a lot in common. In my whole life I cannot remember even one personal or deep conversation with him. The 1970 blues festival was perhaps the only exception I can think of. My father had been an actor in college and a performing magician, so he liked to and was comfortable hob-nobbing with other performers, or so I realized when I saw him with them. They got tight. Dad came down for almost the whole event, and before I knew it, he was locked in deep discussions (and beers) with some of the older performers.

In particular, Roosevelt Sykes and dad hung out a lot, sitting back along the fence on a couple of hard-backed wooden chairs, side by side, making points by grabbing each other's arms, and so on. And under their chairs was a small army of empty beer cans. Personally, I didn't say much of a word to dad during the festival, but it was one of the most together times we ever spent. Dad was loving what I loved. That was enough.



[Left to right, my dad Ralph Erlewine, Roosevelt Sykes, Big Mama Thornton, Big Joe Williams, unknown.]

## BEYOND THE MUSIC THE ANN ARBOR BLUES FESTIVALS

This is the conclusion to my comments on these great landmark festivals. And what was I thinking during the festivals? Mostly probably not thinking, but living it, just being there. Life also has its high points, and for me this is one of them. I was taking it all in, one moment at a time. In the flurry and hubbub of the constant festival activity, something was sinking in,

and it had more to do with the interviewing I was doing than it did with the festival music or even the whole music scene itself.

I already knew the music, but never before the performers up close. And I interviewed scores of performers, not just the headliners or band leaders, but also their sidemen. Certainly, I had never been in such proximity to the great players as I was here. Sure, I had done some of it before, for example, at places like the Chessmate Coffeehouse down on Livernois at McNichols in Detroit, sitting in that tiny green room with John Lee Hooker while James Cotton was playing his gig. Hooker was waiting to hang out and perhaps sit-in with Cotton later on. Hooker, like Muddy Waters, was regal, dignified, elegant, and beautiful to look at, "awesome" is the right word.



[Me, Johnny Shines, Robert Junior Lockwood.]

I wish I could remember what we talked about. Perhaps it was very little. And of course, James Cotton and his entire band (including Luther Tucker) lived with us for weeks one summer. That was definitely up close and personal, so I had a taste, but nothing like this.

In those many interviews I was doing at the first two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals, and then later on at the 1972 Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival with video and elsewhere...there was another element that was registering with me. And it took hold. I probably couldn't put my finger on it then, but I sure can now. Hindsight is always 20/20.



[Me, Muddy Waters]

Of course, the blues music of these great artists fascinated me. After all, I had studied and listened to

it for years and years. But that was not it. Instead, it was the life savvy and wisdom of these men and women of the blues that was even more attractive, life wisdom like I never knew existed, but had always hungered for. I am not saying that all blues performers were open and friendly. Some of the younger ones, like Junior Wells, were more guarded and concerned with acting cool. They were hip, but distant. But many of the elder blues statesmen like Roosevelt Sykes, Big Mama Thornton, Arthur Big Boy Crudup were more than just good musicians.

They were kind and compassionate people with a deep experience of life, experience beyond my ability to measure. It was all I could do to soak it up. My brother Daniel reminds me of the night he and I took a bottle of Jack Daniels (hidden in his coat) up to the room where Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup was staying at the Michigan League and knocked at the door. No words were spoken. Crudup opened the door, Dan opened his jacked and Rudup looked at the bottle of Jack Daniels, and said "Come on in boys!." We were there for hours just talking and experiencing the wisdom and kindness of this man who wrote the first big hit Elvis ever sang, "That's All Right (Mama)." And it went on like that.

We spent another evening with Big Mama Thornton, up in her room at the League, doing much the same thing, just hanging out and learning. It was the same over in the tiny rooms at West Quad where Fred McDowell and others were staying. In those dorm rooms, there was hardly any room at all, so we sat on the floor at the feet of our heroes. I guess what I am trying to say is that my takeaway of those landmark

festivals was not so much the music as the minds and hearts of these great men and women that I had admired for so many years. And it was the wisdom they so freely shared, something that I had seldom encountered in my own life.



{Me interviewing Luther Allison}

All this time I had loved the music, but never thought much about what made that music possible. And then on meeting the artists close-up, I instantly knew. I could see it. It was the quality of their minds along with their deep experience and compassion that made the music what it was. All that time, I had it just backward, thinking it was the music that made the artists and not vice-versa. Of course, it was the artists that made the music and I finally saw why and how that worked.

This was the real takeaway of those early blues festivals for me. And it was that element of wisdom in



the music that attracted me to it in the first place, that sense of direct life experience that came out of it, plus the equanimity and kindness of many of the artists. This became a guide for me. I followed that trail of wisdom and kindness in the blues until it gradually (but literally) died away. I once figured out that the average age of the performers, at least the headliners, at those early festivals was something like 50+ years of age at the time. I was catching the beginning of the end of a major epoch of American music, electric blues, in particular Chicago blues.



[Me interviewing James Madison]

Later I was to find this same quality of mind and wisdom in the great Tibetan Rinpoches and lamas that poured into our country after the diaspora from Tibet in 1959. They too knew reality and became my life teachers. I am still working with the Tibetans today. And it took me almost twenty years before what happened back at those first festivals came to

fruition in my life. That's when I founded the All-Music Guide and attempted to document the lives and music of musicians of all kinds.



[Me (left), Johnny Shines (center), Dan Erlewine (right)]

And all that started in this little office I sit in right now typing this out. There I was in a small town in mid-America, what is called the heartland. And when other music reviewers on the east and west coast heard about this guy in the Midwest who had the nerve to attempt to document all recorded music, they laughed. I don't blame them. Yet the All-Music Guide today is the largest music database of albums, biographies, discographies, tracks, and music content in the world – hundreds of thousands of entries. My CD collection, which I no longer own is now a permanent part of the Michigan State University in East Lansing, some 720,000 CDs, all documented.



[Left to right, Dave Loop, Robert Pete Williams, Me, Lazy Lester, Johnny Shines, Phil Erlewine.]

It just shows you what dedication and perseverance can do. And a lot of that willpower to see that project through came out of what happened back at those early Ann Arbor Blues Festivals in 1969 and 1970,

and then the follow-up Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festivals in 1972 and 1973. It was there that my heart was enlightened by the wisdom of the great blues players and a purity of intent and dedication (and devotion!) was forged that was to guide me in creating the All-Music Guide.

I saw not only the beauty of the blues artist's music, but the equal beauty of the minds and hearts of these great blues players and I wanted to do them right, to give them their "probers," as they say. And like the pebble dropped in a still pond, the circles of inclusion of the guide spread from blues and jazz to all kinds of music, thus the name All-Music Guide.

So that's the story of how I experienced those first landmark Ann Arbor Blues Festivals. Sure, there are scores of mini-stories in there, but hopefully you get the idea. Years later I was officially appointed historian for the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival that followed those first two blues festivals and served two terms on their board of directors. And I have written about those original two festivals in an award-winning book which I wrote the text for "Blues in Black and White: The Landmark Ann Arbor Blues Festivals," and am working on a short video of those days, which I will share here when it is finished. The rough cut is here:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2NZL\\_KDI59s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2NZL_KDI59s)