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[This was an interview by Craig Regan from the popular I=94 Bar (I94Bar.com), poster September 7, 2003



Prime Movers at Daniels Den

Daniels_Den.jpg (36.95 KiB) Viewed 1407 times

Turn the Clock Back to (Iggy) Pop's Beginnings: Prime Mover Michael Erlewine

Michael and Dan Erlewine are names with an enduring place in the Michigan, and wider, musical canon. As singer/harp player and guitarist respectively in seminal Chicago blues-styled outfit, the {Prime Movers Blues Band}, they were an influential force on the Michigan blues circuit of the 1960s.

Dan Erlewine, of course, went on to become guitar-maker to the stars and remains a master craftsman. Michael Erlewine (pictured right) founded the All Music Guide, the invaluable online and print publication that serves as a road map to all sorts of genres and collections.



Michael Erlewine circa 1967

Michael%20_e.gif (88.37 KiB) Viewed 1405 times

Of course, the Prime Movers are of vital interest to I-94 Bar patrons. They provided a musical home for one James Jewel Osterberg, a shy Ann Arbor boy who was later to carve out wide-ranging and eternal notoriety as {Iggy Pop}, crowd-baiting, self-mutilating frontman for the mighty Stooges, as well as innumerable solo bands. {Jessie Crawford} - later Reverend J.C. Crawford, Master of Ceremonies for the MC5 - and {Robert Scheff} (briefly a {Stooges} sideman and later to become avant garde musician {Blue Gene Tyranny}) were others to pass through the ranks.

The return of the Stooges to stages in America and Europe in 2003 seemed like as good a time as any to catch up with Michael Erlewine. THE BARMAN tracked down Michael to his home in Big Rapids, Michigan. Michael spoke about Iggy, the 1960s Michigan scene and Michael's latest venture which seeks to preserve the heritage contained within rock posters. Here's the result.

CRAIG REGAN:: How did you first cross paths with James Osterberg and how did he come across in those days?

MICHAEL ERLEWINE: Iggy played in a local band that mostly played for fraternities, called the Iguanas. That was how we met one another. Iggy liked what we were doing and soon joined up as our drummer. He came across as a shy, active, and ambitious young man.

The band liked Iggy and vice versa. Girls loved him, as he had long hair, long eyelashes, and appeared bashful around them. He loved to look down at the floor, when they crowded around him, and bat his eyelashes. They went wild.



The Prime Movers circa 1966

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CRAIG REGAN:: The Prime Movers had been something of a fixture on the Michigan blues circuit before Jim joined. Put some context around that for us. Who were some of your contemporaries?

MICHAEL ERLEWINE: The Prime Movers was the first hippie-style or new-style band in the Ann Arbor/Detroit area. Along with the MC5, who in the beginning appeared in suits, we helped to mark a change in what bands were.

We had been to Chicago and seen the blues greats (like {Muddy Waters}, {Howlin' Wolf}, {Little Walter}, {Magic Sam}, etc.) play, so we had no real interest in groups like the Rolling Stones, who, like us, used the blues greats as their mentors.

Our only contemporary and largest influence was the original Paul Butterfield Blues Band.

CRAIG REGAN:: I'm sure Paul Butterfield must have been a prime influence on you and just about every other Chicago-style blues band. Can you expand a little?

MICHAEL ERLEWINE: The {Paul Butterfield Blues Band}, which like some of our incarnations was a racially mixed band, were our heroes. Their music totally kicked ass, and they were cool on top of it. We went and heard them, whenever we could, in Detroit and Chicago. We even taped them and an early version of "East/West" that we taped in Chicago at {Poor Richard's} was published by {Mark Naftalin}, some years ago.

Other than the Butterfield band, we did not care that much for any other 'White' blues band. We liked the Chicago great blues masters and did not need anything else. Well, there is jazz too... and all that

classic rock and roll. We like all of that.

CRAIG REGAN:: I know the Prime Movers did play further a field than SE Michigan from time to time. Did this include the black blues clubs and was that something that white bands of the time did not do?

MICHAEL ERLEWINE: We played around the Midwest for the most part, but this did include black clubs in Grand Rapids, Chicago, and Sausalito. We also played for about one-and-a-half years as the house band at a black club in Ann Arbor, called "{Clint's Club}." I don't know of any other White band that played in black bands that early on, in the Midwest.

As for far a field, in the summer of 1967, the so-called "Summer of Love," the band piled into our van and drove across country to San Francisco, where we played at many of the major clubs, like the {Fillmore West}, {Matrix}, {Straight Theater}, {Haight A}, and others. We opened for {Cream} at the Fillmore, that year.

CRAIG REGAN:: Who were some of the other notable members of the Prime Movers? I thought Stooges sax player {Steve McKay} was one.

MICHAEL ERLEWINE: Steve McKay never played for us, but we knew and liked him. The original core group included Iggy on drums, my brother Dan Erlewine on lead guitar, Robert Sheff (aka Blue Gene Tyranny) on keyboards, {Jack Dawson} on bass, and myself as lead vocalist and amplified harmonica.

Iggy was replaced by J.C. ('Jessie') Crawford on drums, a force in himself.

Over the course of the Prime Movers, I once counted that we had some 37 members, so there was some turnover.



Robert Sheff (pre Blue "Gene" Tyranny)

Robert_Sheff.gif (115.39 KiB) Viewed 1404 times

CRAIG REGAN:: As you said, Bob Sheff was another Prime Mover and he briefly played with the latter-day Stooges. What's his involvement in music these days?

MICHAEL ERLEWINE: Today Robert Sheff is a well-known avant-garde classical composer and musician, living in the New York City area. He has many records and CDs under his belt. He goes under the name "{Blue Gene Tyranny}." He continues to pursue music, as he did then, on a full-time basis. In fact, we recently had a reunion of vintage musicians from the '60s in Ann Arbor, and we saw Robert (and many others, like the {Rationals}, etc.) there.

CRAIG REGAN:: The young Jim Osterberg of course did some time in blues bands in Chicago and closer to home prior to launching the Psychedelic Stooges. Was this prior to the Prime Movers? How did he rate as a drummer?



Iggy Pop and Jack Dawson

Iggy%20_tambourine.jpg (52.71 KiB) Viewed 1407 times

MICHAEL ERLEWINE: Jim was introduced to blues, in the larger sense, during his stay in the Prime Movers. He went to Chicago to hear the players with us, and it was only later that he pursued those contacts on his own. As for playing with Chicago bands, I am not aware of that. I know that drummer {Sam Lay} taught him how to do the double shuffle, and Iggy practised that for weeks until he could do it. Iggy was a good drummer.

CRAIG REGAN:: You're credited as the guy who gave him his stage name. Were there any hints of things to come, such as his extreme stage behavior?

MICHAEL ERLEWINE: We all named him 'Iggy,' when he joined up, first calling him "Iguana," and later shortening that to just "Iggy."

[ED: Obviously because he'd played in a local band called the Iguanas. The Pop part of his name was a gift from his fellow Stooges and was stolen from a local glue-sniffer.]

As for coming events casting their shadow back then, Iggy ALWAYS liked attention, but he was then not at all macho-like. In fact, he was more shy and retiring.

In fact, over the years, I have wondered about how Iggy could change so drastically from when we knew him. Then I saw a VH1 special on him, which had a lot of footage of him after we knew him. I was looking to see how he had changed, and to my amazement, I could see no change. He was still the old Iggy that we knew, as far as I could tell, and all of the macho stuff was something that he learned to do for effect. That is my opinion, at any rate.

Not sure how old he was [in the photo playing tambourine], but that is the Iggy I remember, young, kind of innocent, shy, and nice. I believe everything else, later, was hype, for the most part... hype and arrogance. Iggy turned his back on his roots, which is too bad. We all liked Iggy and treated him with respect. He came out of a modest background and climbing up meant more to him than where he came from, which he would just as soon forget, is my guess.

There is a sad story of our so-called manager, "Panther," who was one of Iggy's closest friends. Panther White was a natural comedian, and an all around good guy - beloved by all. I just saw him recently..

Years after Iggy was famous, they hooked up for a concert somewhere, perhaps Boston. Iggy invited him to ride in his limousine with him, and told him that he hardly lets anyone ride with him. Then, when they got to the concert, Iggy said he would issue him a complete pass, so that Panther could come back and visit with him, during intermission and what not. But when Panther, attempted to access the backstage area, he was told he was not on the list. Of course, he said that he was on the list and that Iggy put him there. He was rebuffed and had to go back to his seat. After the show, when he did meet up with Iggy, Iggy said to Panther, and I quote, "I decided you should wait and see me like the rest of my fans...I've got real friends now, like Keith Richards and David Bowie."

As if anyone could buy or hire a old friend. Priceless.

Imagine treating one of your closest friends this way. This is the part of Iggy we all wish never happened. He forgot his roots, because perhaps the past was not something he wanted to remember.

CRAIG REGAN:: I read that Iggy sang for the Prime Movers occasionally.

MICHAEL ERLEWINE: Iggy sang once in a while, mainly the Muddy Water's tune, "I'm a Man."



Michael Erlewine and Iggy Pop (drums)

Michael_Iggy.jpg (63.08 KiB) Viewed 1399 times

CRAIG REGAN:: What prompted him to leave? You mentioned his replacement on drums was J.C. Crawford, who's best known as the rabble-rousing Master of Ceremonies for the MC5.



J.C. Crawford on Drums, Michael and Daniel

Band_JC.jpg (37.04 KiB) Viewed 1407 times

MICHAEL ERLEWINE: Iggy moved on from us, just like he had from the Iguanas. There was no big fallout that I can remember. Iggy was ambitious and sought to find his way toward the limelight.

J.C. Crawford was his replacement and a good drummer and great guy, at that.

CRAIG REGAN:: So with two former members going on to play parts with two leading lights of the counterculture, did you guys have much to do with that circle?

MICHAEL ERLEWINE: Well all of the original band members kind of went on. Dan Erlewine played for {Sam Lay}, was invited to play for Butterfield, and ended up making great guitars for players like {Albert King}, {Ted Nugent}, and {Jerry Garcia}. As for knowing the local groups like the {MC5}, and the other members of Iggy's groups, we sure did know them. But the fact is that what interested us, was studying and playing Chicago-style blues. We were not impressed (musically) by any of the bands around us. What we liked were the great Chicago blues artists.

CRAIG REGAN:: How unsettling were the Stooges live? The impression I have from other people who saw them was that they were regarded as some sort of novelty act.

MICHAEL ERLEWINE: I never saw them live, just not interested in the music or the antics. Sounds kind of dumb on my part, but I could find nothing there musically that was compelling to me.

CRAIG REGAN:: How influential a figure was John Sinclair on the local jazz and blues scenes and did he and the Prime Movers cross paths much?



Daniel Erlewine on Guitar, Michael on Harp

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MICHAEL ERLEWINE: {John Sinclair} and the MC5 were more-or-less driven out of Detroit by the police and their situation in general. They arrived in Ann Arbor as self-proclaimed heralds of a 'new age', but those of us in Ann Arbor could find very little that they offered (musically) interesting. In time, they did contribute a lot to the community in Ann Arbor, primarily through the artistic work of{Gary Grimshaw} and, of course, through John.

I did not care much for John Sinclair then, because he made a point of riling the police just to maintain a high profile, when the cops were just standing around watching.

Our scene, before the advent of Sinclair and the MC5, was, for the most part, non-political. We were poets, musicians, and artists, getting along pretty well with authorities. Sinclair changed all of that, and not for the better, in my opinion.

In recent years, John Sinclair and I have had a chance to hang around some, and we get along great now. We are only a couple of months apart in age, a couple of old hippies who still love music. John Sinclair is a real expert on much of the blues music, and coming from me, that is a compliment. I like John a lot these years.

CRAIG REGAN:: {Jeep Holland}, of course, assumed management of the Prime Movers and tried to turn you into a British Invasion group. How strongly did you resist?

MICHAEL ERLEWINE: We resisted a lot. Jeep was a lovable (at times) asshole, who tried to do to us what he had done to the {Rationals} (our friends), and it just did not take. We tried the suits, but soon abandoned them. We tried going to the teeny hideouts and the teen circuit, but they did not get what we were playing and we did not feel like playing "Louie, Louie" or whatever they might have liked all night.

CRAIG REGAN:: Is it true you rejected overtures from {Motown}? What's the story there and do you have any regrets? (Hey - you could have been in "Standing in the Shadows of Motown"!))

MICHAEL ERLEWINE: We were courted, for a short while, by a subsidiary of Motown. They came to Ann Arbor and drove us around in black limousines, and all that. They arranged a dinner between the two Erlewine brothers and the {Everly Brothers}, and that all took place. But the bottom line was that they wanted us, a mostly white band, to play their version of black music.

The idea sounded good to us, but their music stunk, and that was the end of it. We refused (I refused) to play it and we went on playing and working at the Chicago blues. They did not like that and spat us out as fast as they had taken us up. We never felt bad about it, because it would have been horrible.

They were 'whiter' than we were.

CRAIG REGAN:: The MC5 are, of course, one of the bands that everyone now cites but, like the Prime Movers, did time on the frat and bar circuits. Do you remember them in their earliest days of matching suits and high kicks?

MICHAEL ERLEWINE: We knew the {MC5}, pretty much early on, at least from the advent of the {Grande Ballroom}, where we played with them. As for the matching suits, I can't remember if I saw them that way or not; probably not.

I like the MC5 as people, but never cared much for the aggressive attitude, which I thought was just for an effect.

CRAIG REGAN:: How about the {Rationals}? They're often cited as another of the bands that should have cracked it outside the Michigan market. Did the series of changes that they underwent surprise you given that you were both with the same management in some of that period?

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The Living End in Detroit

Livingend_ad.jpg (193.96 KiB) Viewed 1406 times

MICHAEL ERLEWINE: We were always big fans of the Rationals, not just because they were a good band, but because, more important to us, they were good people. I am still in touch with {Scott Morgan} and {Steve Correll}, and consider them my friends.

{Jeep Holland} was managing them, when he tried to manage us. We all knew each other and were friends. Here was a band that was pretty much guileless.

CRAIG REGAN:: When did the steam really go out of the Michigan scene? Is there any one event that marked it?

MICHAEL ERLEWINE: The steam went out of Michigan, when it went out of the rest of the country, as the '60s came to a close. In fact, an interesting article or even a short book might be written about how that happened.

I have interviewed many of the best-known poster artists from that period, trying to understand how it all came apart. There seem to be a lot of reasons, perhaps the main one being that the house-dance bands like the {Grateful Dead} and the {Jefferson Airplane} began to get famous, and stopped playing for

the small venues like the {Fillmore} and {Avalon ballrooms}. They were playing to stadiums, and there were no younger bands of the same something-or-other to take their place. The dance hall scene just sort of died out.

Another friend of my poster expert, {Eric King}, has his own take on the demise. He recollects, when all kinds of travelers would pass through town, and he would frequently put them up for the night. All was cool. Then, toward the end of the sixties, the traveler would come and you would wake up and your stereo would be gone, sold to fuel a narcotics habit. That kind of tightened up that old community feeling a bit, and helped to kill off that hippie generosity.

CRAIG REGAN:: Everyone credits the torrid sociological environment as a driver in the sort of music that Michigan produced in the late '60s. Is that valid or an exaggeration. Was it as heavy as people say? What was your own involvement in the counter culture back then?

MICHAEL ERLEWINE: The torrid environment was the '50s, and the crew cut, straight-jacketed, "You don't Know What's Happening Here, Do You Mr. Jones?" state of mind. The hippie scene grew out of the beat scene before it, and many forerunners of the hippie scene, like John Sinclair and myself, failed to get into the Beat scene, because it was drying up, like puddles after a rainstorm.

Those of us who missed that train, helped to found the next wave - the hippies. I was a musician, as you know, but I also was an astrologer and involved with that whole approach or view of reality. In addition, I was into natural foods (I designed the logo for {Eden Foods}, for example). I was basically a hippie, into natural foods, home birth, and home schooling. Still am.

We are just opening a coffeehouse restaurant here in Big Rapids, Michigan, the "Two Sisters Cafe." We will offer healthy food and entertainment and attempt to create a place for people to have some culture and fun.



The Living End in Detroit 1966

LivingEnd.gif (275.59 KiB) Viewed 1409 times

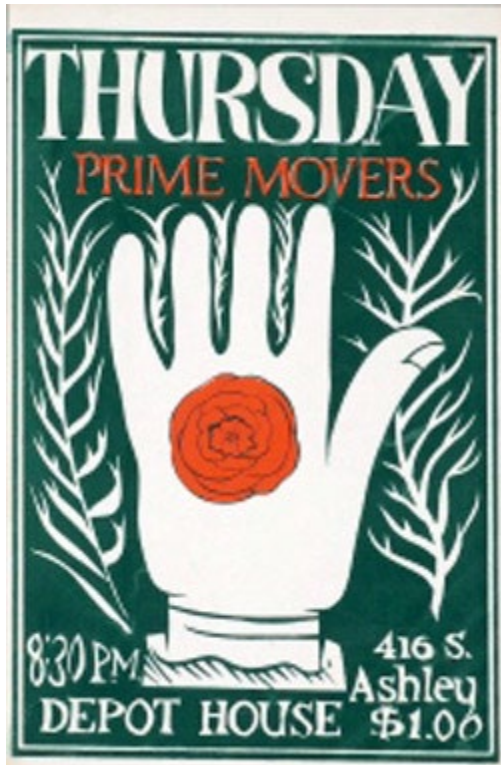
CRAIG REGAN:: Did you maintain an active involvement with music over the years? How did you move into All Music Guide and what was the inspiration?

MICHAEL ERLEWINE: I stopped playing, for the most part. My family can hear some pretty raggedy harmonica wafting through the house, once or twice a year. My daughter, May, who sings under the name "{Daisy May}," is a real musical force in Michigan, so I hear live music a lot. My whole extended family is into music or are craftsmen of one kind or another.

When I stopped playing in 1971, I gradually found my way into computers and online stuff. I had email in 1979, for example. When CDs started coming out, I began to collect them and was shocked to find bad-later recordings being released as original recordings. I did not like that, so I began to compile reviews and notes on all of this, and that grew into the {All-Music Guide}, which I founded and developed. Also, the {All-Movie Guide}.

CRAIG REGAN:: You've sold your interest in All Music Guide and moved into posters. What's the deal there? The graphics side of music has obviously been a long-held passion. When does this venture move into its next phase?

MICHAEL ERLEWINE: When I sold AMG, the All-Music Guide and All-Movie Guide, we had 150 on-site employees and about 500 offsite, freelance writers. I have always loved graphics, as my mother was an artist and raised all her five sons with an ability to draw and use color. I was the one who designed, cut, and printed all the posters for the Prime Movers, so I got into liking concert-music posters early on.



Michael Erlewine Designed and Printer the PM Posters

PM_Poster.jpg (54.88 KiB) Viewed 1405 times

I am about to open a large site devoted to concert-music posters, which is called {ClassicPosters.com}. This is not about record promotion posters, but only about event posters, particularly those from the '60s. It should be up in a few weeks.

CRAIG REGAN:: {Gary Grimshaw} original handbills and posters go for astronomical prices on eBay. Is that a pointer to the business prospects of what you're doing now?

MICHAEL ERLEWINE: Gary is one of the great artists from the '60s, who did posters. Gary also did an enormous amount of community art work. Tirelessly. I have documented some 1500 pieces of art that guy did. I consider him my friend.

CRAIG REGAN:: Since we're in a Bar, what are you drinking?

MICHAEL ERLEWINE: I am drinking a "Mandarin-Lime" spritzer, made by Knudsen's, since alcohol now causes me to have histamine reactions, that is: my nose swells up inside and I can't breath too well. I

played in bars for years, and had my fill of alcohol back then. Worse, I have seen it kill or ruin many friends and people I love. Same with smoking. I don't smoke or drink anymore, and I don't miss it.