

THE PERFECT BLUES STORM II  
THE ANN ARBOR BLUES FESTIVALS  
December 10, 2013

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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. 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 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 everywhere. 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. 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, 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. 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 beautifulest 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!

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.

... to be concluded.

[Here is a photo by Stanley Livingston of me interviewing Muddy Waters.]

