

PERSONAL MEMORIES OF THE ANN ARBOR BLUES FESTIVALS

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By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

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

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 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, over fifty 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 fifty 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 reality, one based on direct experience.

... to be continued.

[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.]

Blues in black & white

THE LANDMARK Ann Arbor Blues Festivals AS PHOTOGRAPHED BY Stanley Livingston
WITH TEXT AND A History of the Ann Arbor Blues Festival BY Michael Erlowine



PHOTOGRAPH BY
Stan O'Neal
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