

BLUES BEFORE DHARMA

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Since the mid-1970s I have been involved in dharma practice and affiliated with Tibetan Buddhism. Most of my Facebook friends must know that about me by now. I have had the extreme good fortune to sit at the feet of the Tibetan Buddhist masters that escaped from Tibet and learn. But before I found the Tibetans I had other life masters that I studied. I want to tell you about one group of them.

I became involved in the folk-music revival of the late 1950s and early 1960s. I was learning to play guitar and traveling the same folk circuit that folk singers like Bob Dylan traveled at that time. In fact I hitchhiked with Dylan for a stretch in 1961, was with him when he performed in Ann Arbor, and things like that. That would be another story.

This was before singers like Dylan and most other young folk artists were writing their own songs. We were too busy reviving and preserving the folk music of the past, studying singers like Woody Guthrie, and so on. As for me, at that time it was still years before I would become a professional musician, but I already was sorting through the folks songs and focusing on the bluesy and minor-key parts of songs, and, of course, the country blues that would turn up at folk festivals from artists like Elizabeth Cotton and Jesse 'Lone Cat' Fuller. Gradually I came to know that Black Music was what I particularly most loved. And then there was the revelation.

It came as a big surprise to White folk-musicians like myself to discover (and we did) that unlike most folk music from Ireland and England, Black music did not need to be revived. It was very much alive and playing at a club nearby, separated only by a racial curtain. To a folk revivalist, this was like going back to a time when folk music was born, a music time-machine. There are a lot of stories I could tell about my learning curve, but perhaps another time. Here I want to fast forward through my own music career and settle on those first Ann Arbor Blues Festivals in 1969 and 1970.

That was definitely one of my Forrest Gump moments, a time when I was fully present along the sidelines at an amazing event, the first large-scale gathering of Black blues musicians in America. In fact, I wrote the text for an award-winning book on this event titled "Blues in Black and White: The Landmark Ann Arbor Blues Festivals," featuring the incredible photography of my friend Stanley Livingston, and designed by my brother Tom Erlewine. You can see it here.

<http://www.amazon.com/Blues-Black-White-Landmark-Festivals/dp/0472116959>

I spent years studying Black music, doing my best to play the blues. The blues music led me, of course, to the artists themselves, and in meeting the artists I found something more than just their music. I found the authentic wisdom that I missed in my own upbringing, the sage advice from elders (I never had a grandfather on either side) who had (at least IMO) fully lived life.

For years I not only studied, played, and celebrated Black music, I also began to interview and document the great blues musicians and their music. This led to my (along with my brother Dan) spending real time, as much as we could, with Black musicians. We would drive to Chicago and hear the great blues masters in the tiny clubs on Chicago's West and South Sides. This was around 1966. But the great opportunity was to be part of those first two Ann Arbor Blues

Festivals mentioned above, and then the following Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival in 1972 and 1973. Dan and I were lucky enough to be in charge of providing food (and drink!) to the blues musicians, and I began to interview in detail many of the great blues Artists.

I could not then know that those two early Ann Arbor Blues Festivals would never be repeated, because many of the major blues artists would begin to pass away soon after that first festival. I had painstakingly listened to their music, learned to play some, and then gradually began to document their lives as well.

Those interviews eventually led to my founding and starting the All-Music Guide (allmusic.com) in this tiny office where I sit typing now. The world definitely laughed at me and some of the well-known critics for the Rolling Stone Record Guide joked that some guy in a tiny town in the Midwest claims he is going to document all recorded music. LOL. In fact, we did, from 10-inch records onward.

Well, I am stubborn if not anything else, and today AMG is the largest music database of music reviews, biographies, and discographies on the planet. I sold the company and when I left there were 150 full-time employees and over 500 free-lance writers. It continues today, along with its sister site, the All-Movie Guide (allmovie.com), and other content. I also started perhaps the first site for video games and another for concert music posters (ClassicPosters.com). My CD collection, which I sold with the company, today is housed in a warehouse in Ann Arbor, and numbers over 600,000 music CDs. All that is part of my history as an entrepreneur, which I don't mention much here on Facebook.

What remains from those early years is the impression those great blues players made on me, not only with their music, but with their life experience and authentic wisdom that I soaked in as best I could. I got a chance to see blues greats like Little Walter play live in Theresa's Lounge on the South Side of Chicago. Brother Dan and I spent an evening drinking Jack Daniels with Arthur 'Big Boy' Crudup, author of Elvis Presley's first hit, "That's Alright Mamma." Another evening was spent with Big Mama Thornton, who wrote Presley's hit "Hound Dog," and so on. You get the idea. I was learning from the masters.

For those interested, here is an interview I did with Howlin Wolf in 1969 that I have been told is the best Wolf interview ever done. See for yourself:

<http://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10150098536007658.305358.587252657&type=3>

These blues artists were important life teachers for me until I began to practice the dharma in the early 1970s, meeting (in particular) Tibetans like the Venerable Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and then many, many others.

The Tibetan Buddhists were also authentic life masters that offered profound wisdom, and they did not have some of the unfortunate conditions (like alcoholism and poverty) that too often were the legacy of being Black in America in those years. How shameful racism is!

I continue my dharma practice and am grateful for the wisdom of the dharma. Yet, I can never forget the lessons learned, plus the kindness and acceptance, of many of the great Black blues artists. White society never took them in or treated them as they so deserved, but many of them had no trouble accepting (and being gracious and kind to) a young White kid like me. I am forever grateful and I salute them.

These Black artists gave so much to the culture of this country, and continue to do so.