



An Interview with Canadian blues artist Earl Klatzel: Painting the history and the legends of Blues

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Bluesworks by Earl Klatzel

Interview by Michael Limnios

Earl, when was your first desire to become involved in painting? What does "Art" offer you?



It wasn't until 1995 that I become involved with painting as a career choice. My biggest interest while growing up was always with drawing & sketching, mainly figurative work. My interest in drawing had led me into the Alberta College of Art to pursue illustration in their Visual Communication program. The program really helped refined my drawing skills through the many life drawing and anatomy classes I attended, in addition to three years of night classes in figure drawing. It wasn't until a year after leaving the Alberta College of Art that I considered painting as a trade. I'm actually self-taught in painting. Having all the fundamentals and technical skills for creating art, I just needed the experience of working with brush & paint applications. I experimented using the visual effects of both acrylic & oil mediums and created a process

using them together that gives me much more depth within my paintings than that of traditional oil painting methods.

Art has always offered me a challenge to create a realistic window in time. It allows me to experiment with different mediums to produce an interesting approach to the image I'm portraying. Art gives me an escape from my

surroundings and takes me on a journey into the scene I'm creating. It is a way for me to deeply focus on a painting for many hours and tune out the chaotic world around me. My artwork has let me combine all of my interests into one, using paint, music, and actual history to tell the story.

What do you learn about yourself from the colors and blues music?



I've learned that I am a realist, having a strong tendency to portray things as true as possible. My color choices are made from countless hours of researching, old signs colors, typography styles, vintage instruments, and even architecture, just to place you right back into the time period with detail accuracy. Muddy earth tones portray the true look and feeling of those days. I've replaced sky blues with orange-yellows to reflect the hot & humid south, weathered grays on all wooden architecture, and nicotine yellows reflecting a past age. My muted color variations are chosen very carefully for each painting I do.

As for Blues music, I have always loved Delta Blues for the simple but powerful raw sounds that reflect the harsh environment of the 1920' & 30's. You can smell the earth in Delta Blues, it was a sound that was seeded like the soil of the

land. The music's power really intrigues me to take everything that I'm feeling from the music, and express it through painting. Delta Blues has a strange magnetic pull, and once it has you... the sounds will steal your soul.

What characterizes the philosophy of your work & progress, how do you describe your philosophy about the ART?

My portfolio is divided into two on-going series, Famous Blues Personalities & Blues History. With the Blues History series, my passion is to bring to focus the street corners, juke joints and roadside cafe's that are so important to the music's history. I try to replicate the surroundings and atmosphere of the times that provided the mood, melody, and lyrics for the blues. I wanted to bring to light the rich heritage of the Blues in a form that can be viewed by many generations to come. I feel there is a place and need for visual documentation that reflects the history of the music in a truer form than literature or black & white photography.

I compliment my history paintings with a series of iconic portraits of the personalities that brought Blues & Jazz to the forefront. I pay tribute to unknown musicians as well as famous musicians with portraits of equal stature. My series on the History & Famous Portraits connect both sides to the story, as one would not be without the other.

What are some of the most memorable drawings you've had?

I did a unique series of drawings that was inspired by one very memorable drawing I did at the Art College.

We were asked to pick out one of our favorite masterpieces from the "Great Masters", and then recreate it as close as possible to the original artwork but with an added element that will bring the artwork to date. Hands down my favorite "Master" has always been Leonardo DaVinci, his paintings and drawings have been inspirational to me since I was young. At that point in time my skill was with drawing so I chose DaVinci's self-portrait to recreate, being that it was a sketching. I studied his mark making and created a very close replica of his work. I stained and washed out certain areas to look just like the original parchment he used. I then decided to add an element that would not jeopardize its authentic appearance, and gave him a modern day piercing. I applied a contemporary beaded ring on his right eyebrow. The piercing really co-insides well with Leonardo's eccentric character, and if you don't know the original well, you would not even notice the twist. It really gained great recognition at the collage.

The Leonardo portrait then inspired me to do a series on 18th & 19th century Classical Composers with the stain and aging effects. There are 8 portraits in all; Beethoven, Brahms, Verdi, Schumann, Berlioz, Schubert, and Wagner. Which then inspired another series on Victorian women in long dresses, and then another series on early Canadian history, images of settler's homesteads & Victorian architecture. I then finished the stain series with several artworks of 19th century wooden oilrigs in Alberta. Many of these stained artworks have never shown.

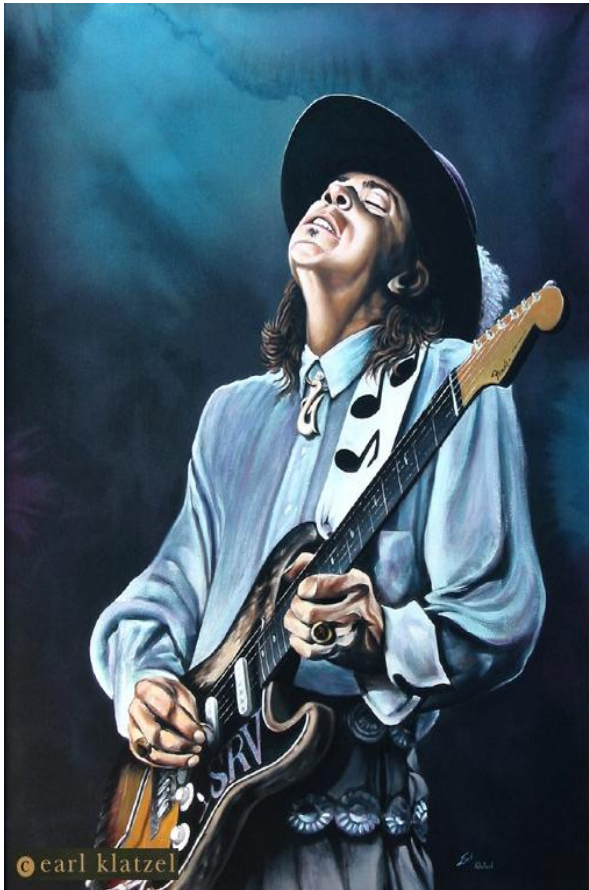
From whom have you have learned the most secrets about art...and the blues?

I don't think I've learned my art secrets from any one person over another; it's more of a collective thing that happens over the years. Ideas that I connect with, whether it's technique, style, color, or imagery, can slowly manifest itself into my work over time. It can be a very subtle change over a lengthy period, and unless you produce a large body of work you may not even notice a change.

I think the secret of the blues lies within the sound and the lyrics of each song. The more you have a passion for this music, the more you extract from it. The knowledge comes from listening to the blues and being able to live the musicians time and experience through their music.

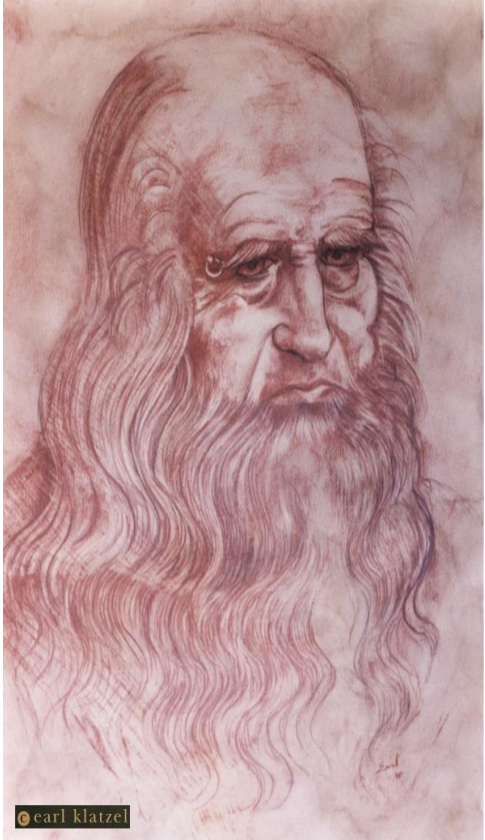
Which was the best moment of your career and which was the worst?

I have had many amazing moments that my blues artwork has brought about. One very proud moment involved the Stevie Ray Vaughan portrait I painted in 1999. My wife Tammy & I have been the biggest SRV fans since his first album release in 1983, with Double Trouble. The amazing moment for me came in 2001 when I received a phone call from Chris Layton in Austin Texas, drummer for Stevie Ray Vaughan. He called me at my home to tell me that my painting of Stevie was the best the band had ever seen, and that I had captured Stevie's true character within the artwork. He told me that the portrait reflected Stevie's personality so much that it made him believe that I had known Stevie personally. It was one of the best compliments I had ever received for my artwork. Chris Layton's phone call was a moment that I will always remember, it's the personal things in life that really push my ambition to do more.



It really made the portrait extra special to me and has adorned my living room ever since. Having ordered 20 reproductions of the portrait on cloth, Chris & Betty Layton planned to encase keepsake pillows that Betty had designed with the portrait. They were offered as gifts to Stevie's family & friends. It was nice to know that my portrait of Stevie had touched so close to his home.

The only thing that comes to mind as the worst moment in my career is the recent recession that affected the economy everywhere. It stopped a very important project that I did for blues history and a destination hotspot to blues fans around the world. The recession halted all progress on the building



of the Robert Johnson Crossroads & Blues Legends Park in Clarksdale Mississippi, situated at the legendary crossroads of old highway 61 & 49.

I was hired in 2008 by a Canadian businessman representing the Crossroads Group LLC to design a park around Robert Johnson and his mystical background. The Crossroads Group had purchased the legendary property and was promoting the RJ Park as a free leisure area for fans to visit, learn the history, and freely play their blues on hallowed ground. The Crossroads Group saw it as an international tourist destination that would draw fans from all corners of the globe. They had big plans to build the 5 story Crossroads Hotel & Entertainment Complex to house major blues concerts on an adjoining block. The public RJ Park was praised by many throughout Mississippi and got respectful attention from the Mississippi Tourism Board. It was to be a welcome addition to the famous Blues Highway. The legendary corner property still sits vacant today, and I have heard my park design is included with the property title. I still have my fingers crossed that someone will see the importance of the park and pick up where the Crossroads Group left off. The park design and all its fundamental elements can be viewed on my website in the Press Releases for anyone that might be interested. www.earlklatzel.com



The recession also affected a sequel park project I was working on, commissioned by a large Chicago firm that saw my RJ Park design online. They realized the importance and the potential that a large Blues music theme park would create just outside of Chicago. They obtained property in Spring Grove, IL. for a much larger park to represent the history behind both Delta Blues and Chicago Blues. The park was to resemble the same look as the RJ park, but on a much larger scale dealing with all of Blues History. I had a really good start on the design, having the major layout done with crucial elements for both styles of blues. The park was divided into two sides, Delta Blues on one side & Chicago Blues on the other. Two 100 ft. flagstone guitar shaped patios centered by a large stage for holding outdoor concerts divided the park, and a scaled down Mississippi river that wound its way through the entire park tying the historical path together. It was really going to be a fantastic park showing the entire History of the Blues. It was a shame that

it all stopped.

How does the blues music come out of your art? What kind of music do you hear when you are painting?

The many albums I’ve collected since the age of 13 have supplied me with endless hours of listening over the years. I always have a song running in my head while I’m painting, even if the stereo isn’t turned on. From my early days of Led Zeppelin & Jimi Hendrix, to my present interest in the sounds of the Delta, the blues has always been around me. Each image I decide to paint has a certain feeling within it, the sounds or song resonates from the scene before I even start the artwork, that’s what attracts me to it. The music does radiate from my paintings, it really seems to reach people. The reactions and remarks at public showings are a big confidence builder for me. Many clients from Europe and the USA have replied back to me after a purchase and said the painting was much better than expected. I know from my own experience that when I put the stereo on the paintings really do come to life.

Are there any “memories” of GREAT MUSICIANS you have painted which you’d like to share with us?

John Lee Hooker, the man was the real deal. When I saw him perform at a small club in Calgary on New Years Eve 1990, the music was just energizing. The outside temperature was 43 below zero that night and it actually took a John Lee Hooker to get me out into that weather. His band members were awesome musicians and they really gave the crowd a taste of some real Chicago blues. I took some great photo’s of the band performing, John Lee graciously held pose for me when he saw the

camera. After a super show we talked with Deacon Jones the keyboard player, he was quite a character with lots of wild stories about his career. After our lengthy conversation he invited our group to join the bands private party back at the Palacer Hotel. Deacon decided to ride along with us and encouraged me to bring along a very rare Hooker Lp that I had been telling him about, entitled “John Lee Hooker, Live at Soledad Prison”. After we arrived at the hotel I found out the weather had taken its toll on John Lee and he had already retired to his room. Deacon Jones kindly went up and talked with John Lee about us meeting him and signing the album I had brought. He soon came back down with news that John was already in bed, saying it would not be a good idea if we all went up. I understood his concerns and respected Mr. Hookers privacy and suggested that Tammy my wife could take the album up for signing. Deacon thought it was be the best idea and off they went. I really regret not getting to meet the man but I was happy for Tammy to be able to. When she returned after about 20 minutes, the record was signed and she explained that when John Lee saw the album, he said “wow, I don’t even have this record.” She said that her picture with John Lee was priceless, the photo shows John Lee in bed in his jammies and Tammy sitting on the bed next to him. It was a one of a kind photo! The memories from that evening are great, the band treated all of us like part of the gang.



Who from THE MUSICIANS you have painted, had the easiest pure original attributes for the painting?

I would say John Lee Hooker without a doubt. His features are very distinct and he has so much character in his overall appearance. I have painted his portrait more than any other musician, I think 8 times, and they sell as soon as the paint is dry. John Lee is the personification of the blues, his image speaks the history of the music, both in Delta & Chicago Blues, and his deep vocals have the true sounds of the past. You know he’s the Blues from just a glance.

Would you mind telling me your most vivid memory as inspiration to make a portrait?



The most inspiration definitely came after meeting Dave Honeyboy Edwards. It was a priceless moment for me to sit and chat with him for about 15 minutes. I think he was age 91, and it happened in a small blues club in Calgary called the Red Onion. Honeyboy was taking a break from his performance when I approached to greet him. He was the dearest man a person could ever meet. Once he realized who I was from promo posters of my artwork the club owner had hanging about, we struck up a conversation like you could never imagine. I knew the history about his

personal connection with Robert Johnson back in the 1930’s, and how he was there at Three Forks the night RJ was killed, so I didn’t want to ask him the questions he always gets asked. Honeyboy is a huge legend in his own, and he was one of the last pioneer bluesmen of the Delta alive.

Honeyboy’s career is probably the longest in history for any bluesman, and it spanned the hardest times from which the music speaks. Musicians hoboing through out the Delta lived a hard rugged life, which was very evident in Honeyboy’s weathered features. He told me that he never got to ride on the inside of a train until 1963, a statement that told me so much about his whole life. I asked him if he knew one of my favorite bluesmen,



James “Son” Thomas out of Leland MS. Most people have never heard of Son Thomas but I felt Honeyboy knew him because of the closeness of their home towns. He answered me immediately saying “Do you know he shot his wife”, “well, I guess it was because she shot him first.” I didn’t know how to react at first, and was amazed at where my question had led his memory. I really didn’t know how to respond except with a discouraging shake of my head. The conversation was unique, and unfolded like we were old friends.

I asked him about Stevie Ray Vaughan, and what he thought about his guitar playing. He looked at me and responded, “do you know he let me play his 59 Strat?” the proud look on Honeyboy’s face answered my question. Honeyboy gave me a priceless memory of meeting a real Delta Bluesman from the early days, it’s something that I’ll never forget. My portrait of Honeyboy was done just after meeting him in 2008, and our conversation inspired me to create his portrait as a montage depicting his lifelong career on the road.

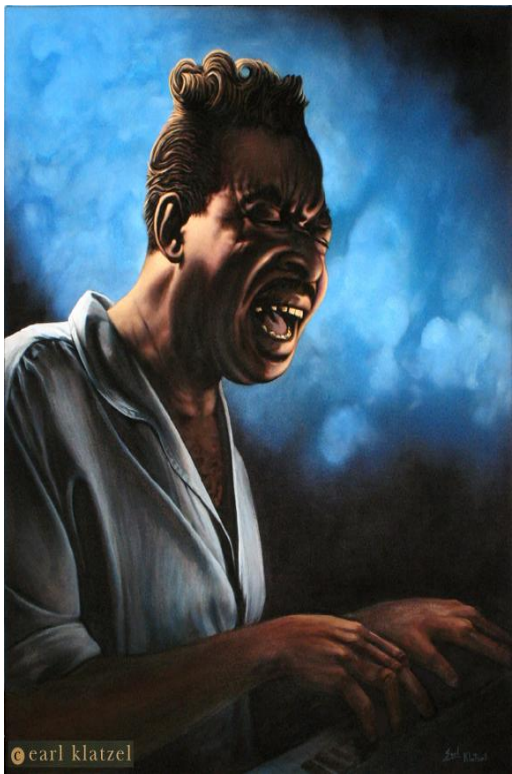
Which is your favorite portrait? In which drawing can someone see the best of your love for blues?

I have been asked about my favorite painting many times and there is no answer. They are all my favorites. Each musician I have painted is because their music has touched me deeply, and painting them is my way to express my gratitude and appreciation for their contribution. I really hear what they are saying through the sounds of their instruments more then the actual lyrics, the sounds they create have the biggest influence on me. I’m hoping people can see my love for Blues in every painting I do. I think you would have to see my portfolio in its entirety to realize my passion for the music.

Which is the most interesting period in your life and why?

The 1970’s were the most exciting time for me because of many things; my youth, the rock music at that time, busy collecting records. The early 70’s created phenomenal music by bands like Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, and Deep Purple. House parties at that time were everywhere and anyone was welcome, it was a much different social atmosphere than today. I also enjoyed the freedom of having my first car in 1975 and started a lifelong relationship with my wonderful wife Tammy in 1976, who is still my biggest supporter in everything I do. If not for her I would have never had the opportunity to become an artist. If you like my paintings, we actually owe it to her for making it possible for me to paint.

The 70’s gave me the opportunity of seeing Led zeppelin in 1977 at the Seattle Kingdome, which had a huge influence on me personally and my career. Their incredible talent and phenomenal unmatched music was an unforgettable experience for me, and it sank deep into my soul. The achievements Page, Plant, Bonham, and Jones made with their music is remarkable. They truly helped raise my ambition towards my own goals in life and have definitely influenced my artwork with the music theme to this day. I have an amazing collection of Led Zeppelin discography and memorabilia that started back in the 1970.



What is a quick review of your work & how do you want to be remembered?

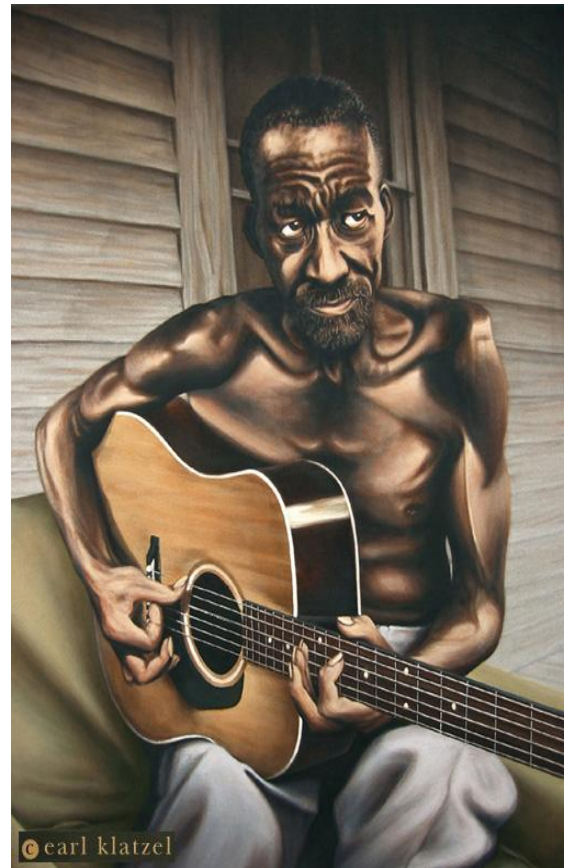
My blues paintings are a tribute to honor the music and the people it originated from. To visually document a period in time that has great importance to blues music. I seek no limelight as a messenger, but wish that my work be enjoyed for it’s historical content and the accurate visual documentation of what times were like when the music was being created. I paint the famous personalities that spread the word of the people through their sounds, songs, and lyrics about life. This is what needs to be remembered.

Which of the musicians were the most “difficult” and which was the most “gifted” on brush and colors?

It really comes down to the musicians that have character and charisma. The more character in ones features makes it easier to capture their personality through facial expression and pose. John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters, Otis Spann or Honeyboy Edwards are good examples of strong images. Many of the old timers had a lot of natural character because it was more about real life than a predetermined image like nowadays. The big difference with the bluesman of today is that they are not living the blues like the early years, they are doing it for the love of the music. You can feel the difference in ambience when looking at my Stevie Ray portrait and comparing it to my Son Thomas portrait, they both lived at the same time but capture extremely different energies in the blues. All my portraits are equally the same amount of work, and to capture just the right expression that speaks the musicians personality & sound, can be very difficult thing.

"A picture is worth a thousand words" it is certain...can music have images and the images have notes?

Yes, music creates many images in our minds, I think my work is testament to this. It is the music that I listen to which makes me want to create these paintings. Having two hundred blues paintings in this series speaks loudly about the images that music can provoke. As for images having notes... I think images can elude to a sound quite easily. Our minds are always connecting these two senses together with everything we visualize. When looking at a painting with a lone guitar player on a street corner, the visual idea will present a mood and an acoustic atmosphere in the minds of most people. It may not be the same sound as you or I had imagined, but there will be a connection to sound for them.



What is your “secret” painting DREAM?

I have always dreamed of painting a full-size portrait of Led Zeppelin on stage, I have had this notion since 1977 after seeing them live. My idea is to stretch 4 separate large canvases, one for each separate band members life size portrait, and when all 4 portraits are side by side they will create full display of the band on stage together. I have a really small studio which would cause big problems for the size of paintings I have in mind, maybe in the future.

Who are your favorite musicians, both old and new, who would you like to meet and paint?

Old, I would say John Lee Hooker, Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee, Sonny Boy Williamson, Otis Spann, Memphis Slim, Sunnyland Slim, Willie Dixon, Muddy Waters, R.L. Burnside, T Model Ford, Junior Kimbrough. I think there are just too many to mention, they are all part of the big picture and equally appreciated. It will take me a lifetime to paint all my favorites.

I do not keep up with much current music, so favorite new musicians would have to be musicians like Buddy Guy, Keb



Mo, Guy Davis, Eric Clapton, Jeff Healey, Dutchy Mason, and Lenny Kravitz. New is from about 1970 and up for me. To meet & paint any of the musicians mentioned would be a privilege

What first attracted you to the Blues & how has the blues and jazz music changed your life?

The blues entered my life unannounced from an early age through rock & roll. I never knew the music was called the blues, or that rock & roll ever derived from the blues. It was amazing to learn that some of the best rock & roll of the 60's & 70's was written by Willie Dixon or Muddy Waters, or Howlin' Wolf, just to name a few. After years of only rock & roll, I started really listening closely to the real blues. The more I listened the more I sought the earliest of blues. The roots of Blues connected me to a deep interest for southern Gospel, which enticed me to paint "The Golden Gate Quartet". Early Blues & Jazz are closely connected which lead me to paint "The Buddy Bolden Band", or "The Funky Butt Dance Hall Patrol." The path of my music interests has been visually documented through out my portfolio.

I guess you can say it changed my life in a very big way. My passion for the music built a career for me. I'm very flattered that my paintings are

known and scattered worldwide, the blues is a universal following that has broke all language barriers on every Continent. It has brought people together as one unified group over a common sound.

Some music styles can be fads but the blues is always with us. Why do think that is?

The Blues is not like any other music that was created for entertainment. The Blues was a product of a repressed but determined minority, people of color that could not speak freely about the demoralizing standards they were held to. Delta Blues was the information highway for Black Americans to communicate about real life and a struggle for freedom. The music touches our hearts and souls from the genuine nature it was created from, I don't know of any other music that was created under these circumstances.

Which memory during your career makes you smile?

It has to be the chat I had with Dave Honeyboy Edwards... a priceless memory.

How you would spend a day with Sonny Boy Williamson in Deep South?

Probably just sitting back and listening. Soaking up some of the finest harp to come out of Helena, Arkansas. Having the opportunity to meet any historic bluesmen would instantly pull you into their era. This reminds me of the story behind my Skip James portrait. The portrait image was taken from the 1964 Newport Folk Festival. I heard that when Skip walked out on the stage wearing a vintage suit and toting the Stella guitar he recorded with in the 30's, it was like a time warp for the crowd. He really took the audience back in time.

It was similar to hearing Honeyboy Edwards play that evening, the atmosphere he created brought the past to life because he was a genuine connection to the early Delta Blues. It is a sound that cannot be learned, because it also needed to be lived.

What would you say to Otis Spann? What would you like to ask BB King? What advice would you give to Robert Johnson?

Otis Spann is one of my favorite keyboardists and singers. I would probably plead with him to play “Ain’t Nobody’s Business If I Do”. He is one of the most passionate singers that I have ever heard, his songs come deep from his heart.

I would love to ask BB King about his radio days with WDIA in Memphis. Being 1948, and the very first all black radio station to hit the airwaves in America, it must have been amazing to see the talent that walked through those doors. He must have very interesting stories.

Since you have worded this question “advice”, I would probably say that I would advise Robert Johnson to always keep his eye on his drink.

Thanks Michael, I really enjoyed talking with you.

