

BEYOND THE MUSIC  
THE ANN ARBOR BLUES FESTIVALS  
December 12, 2013

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

This is the conclusion to my comments on these great landmark festivals. And what was I thinking during the festivals? Mostly probably not thinking, but living it, just being there. Life also has its high points, and for me this is one of them. I was taking it all in, one moment at a time.

In the flurry and hubbub of the constant festival activity, something was sinking in, and it had more to do with the interviewing I was doing than it did with the festival music or even the whole music scene itself. I already knew the music, but never before the performers up close.

And I interviewed scores of performers, not just the headliners or band leaders, but also their sidemen. Certainly I had never been in such proximity to the great players as I was here. Sure, I had done some of it before, for example, at places like the Chessmate Coffeehouse down on Livernois at McNichols in Detroit, sitting in that tiny green room with John Lee Hooker while James Cotton was playing his gig. Hooker was waiting to hang out and perhaps sit-in with Cotton later on. Hooker, like Muddy Waters, was regal, dignified, elegant, and beautiful to look at, "awesome" is the right word. I wish I could remember what we talked about. Perhaps it was very little.

And of course James Cotton and his entire band (including Luther Tucker) lived with us for weeks one summer. That was definitely up close and personal, so I had a taste, but nothing like this.

In those many interviews I was doing at the first two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals, and then later on at the 1972 Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival with video and elsewhere...there was another element that was registering with me. And it took hold.

I probably couldn't put my finger on it then, but I sure can now. Hindsight is always 20/20. Of course the blues music of these great artists fascinated me. After all, I had studied and listened to it for years and years. But that was not it. Instead, it was the life savvy and wisdom of these men and women of the blues that was even more attractive, life wisdom like I never knew existed, but had always hungered for.

I am not saying that all blues performers were open and friendly. Some of the younger ones, like Junior Wells, were more guarded and concerned with acting cool. They were hip, but distant. But many of the elder blues statesmen like Roosevelt Sykes, Big Mama Thornton, Arthur Big Boy Crudup were more than just good musicians. They were kind and compassionate people with a deep experience of life, experience beyond my ability to measure. It was all I could do to soak it up.

My brother Daniel reminds me of the night he and I took a bottle of Jack Daniels up to the room where Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup was staying at the Michigan League and knocked at the door. No words were spoken. Crudup opened the door, looked at the bottle of Jack Daniels, and said "Come on in boys!." We were there for hours just talking and experiencing the wisdom and kindness of this man who wrote the first big hit Elvis ever sang, "That's All Right (Mama)." And it went on like that.

We spent another evening with Big Mama Thornton, up in her room at the League, doing much the same thing, just hanging out and learning. It was the same over in the tiny rooms at West Quad where Fred McDowell and others were staying. In those dorm rooms, there was hardly any room at all, so we sat on the floor at the feet of our heroes.

I guess what I am trying to say is that my takeaway of those landmark festivals was not so much the music as the minds and hearts of these great men and women that I had admired for so many years. And it was the wisdom they so freely shared, something that I had seldom encountered in my own life. All this time I had loved the music, but never thought much about what made that music possible. And then on meeting the artists close-up, I instantly knew. I could see it. It was the quality of their minds along with their deep experience and compassion that made the music what it was.

All that time I had it just backward, thinking it was the music that made the artists and not vice-versa. Of course, it was the artists that made the music and I finally saw why and how that worked. This was the real takeaway of those early blues festivals for me. And it was that element of wisdom in the music that attracted me to it in the first place, that sense of direct life experience that came out of it, plus the equanimity and kindness of many of the artists. This became a guide for me.

I followed that trail of wisdom and kindness in the blues until it gradually (but literally) died away. I once figured out that the average age of the performers, at least the headliners, at those early festivals was something like 50+ years of age at the time. I was catching the beginning of the end of a major epoch of American music, electric blues, in particular Chicago blues.

Later I was to find this same quality of mind and wisdom in the great Tibetan Rinpoches and lamas that poured into our country after the diaspora from Tibet in 1959. They too knew reality and became my life teachers. I am still working with the Tibetans today.

And it took me almost twenty years before what happened back at those first festivals came to fruition in my life. That's when I founded the All-Music Guide and attempted to document the lives and music of musicians of all kinds. And all that started in this little office I sit in right now typing this out. There I was in a small town in mid-America, what is called the heartland. And when other music reviewers on the east and west coast heard about this guy in the Midwest who had the nerve to attempt to document all recorded music, they laughed. I don't blame them.

Yet the All-Music Guide today is the largest music database of albums, biographies, discographies, tracks, and music content in the world – hundreds of thousands of entries. It just shows you what dedication and perseverance can do. And a lot of that willpower to see that project through came out of what happened back at those early Ann Arbor Blues Festivals in 1969 and 1970, and then the follow-up Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festivals in 1972 and 1973. It was there that my heart was enlightened by the wisdom of the great blues players and a purity of intent and dedication (and devotion!) was forged that was to guide me in creating the All-Music Guide.

I saw not only the beauty of the blues artist's music, but the equal beauty of the minds and hearts of these great blues players and I wanted to do them right, to give them their "propers," as they say. And like the pebble dropped in a still pond, the circles of inclusion of the guide spread from blues and jazz to all kinds of music, thus the name All-Music Guide.

So that's the story of how I experienced those first landmark Ann Arbor Blues Festivals. Sure, there are scores of mini-stories in there, but hopefully you get the idea. Years later I was officially appointed historian for the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival that followed those first two blues festivals and served two terms on their board of directions. And I have written about those original two festivals in an award-winning book which I wrote the text for "Blues in Black and White: The Landmark Ann Arbor Blues Festivals," and am working on a short video of those days, which I will share here when it is finished. The rough cut is here:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2NZZL\\_KDI59s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2NZZL_KDI59s)

[A photo of the great blues guitarist B.B. King.]

