

THE ANN ARBOR BLUES FESTIVALS  
AND  
THE PRIME MOVERS BLUES BAND  
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Although we were not students or connected to the University of Michigan or officially part of the Ann Arbor Blues Festival committee, we were easily identified with blues music in the Ann Arbor area, because we played it all the time. That's how we came to be part of the festivals.

Our band (the Prime Movers Blues Band) was perhaps the first of the new 1960s-style groups in the Ann Arbor/Detroit area, having formed in the summer of 1965. Although some 37 musicians moved through the band over time, the main players were my brother Dan on lead guitar and myself as lead singer and amplified Chicago-style harmonica, sometimes rhythm guitar, Robert Sheff (AKA "Blue" Gene Tyranny) on keyboards, Jack Dawson (or Ilene Silverman) on Bass, and James Osterberg (Iggy Pop) or J.C. Crawford on drums.

We never recorded much and what we did apparently was lost. However, my brother Stephen Erlewine dug a bunch of old moldy reel-to-reel tapes of the Prime Movers out of his basement some years ago. What they amount to is about two sets of songs, one early in our career, and one later. That's all we have! For those who want to hear what we sounded like, here are some songs from back then:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZO5bsagUqY>

We had been into listening, studying, and playing the blues for years. Moreover, we had been to Chicago a number of times, down to the South and West Side of Chicago to hear the great blues artists play in their own clubs. We saw Little Walter, Buddy Guy, Junior Wells, Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, Magic Sam, and many other blues artists live on their own turf, so we just knew more about the music and the players than most of the students putting on the festival; It was a natural fit. And we were probably more excited about the festival than they were.

As for myself, I was enthused beyond imagining that almost all of my blues heroes were coming to Ann Arbor and would play here. After all, aside from looking for someone to love, about all I did in those days was listen to, study, and play the blues, tracing out the history of this or that artist and trying to hear something of everything they put out.

I have been told that by my almost exclusive interest in Black Music I missed a lot of other music, music by my peers, which just makes my point. From where I stood, most modern (white) musicians back then were doing the same thing I was doing, listening to the great artists, which in blues and jazz means mostly black artists. Why would I be

listening to my peers when I could hear Muddy Waters and Big Walter Horton live or on records. Same with Dylan. I had travelled with Bob Dylan back in 1961, and helped him put on his concert at the Michigan Union in Ann Arbor, so I knew him some. Although Dylan was very bright, to me he was just another folk-music traveling guy like myself. This was before he was "Bob Dylan." Why should I listen to him in particular? Both he and I were listening to groups like the Swan Silvertones, The Mighty Clouds of Joy, and others. Looking back from today, I can see why Dylan was special, but you get the idea.

Artists like Janice Joplin interested me not at all. I had met Joplin and even hung out with her at the Grande Ballroom drinking whiskey. Well, she drank most of the whiskey. It was fun to meet her, but as to her music, I am reminded of a story told to me by the great poster artist Stanley Mouse when I interviewed him some years ago. Mouse said that Joplin rehearsed in (I believe he said) an old firehouse. One day the police showed up at the door because they had reports of a woman screaming. Now, that's funny!

So if you get the idea that in those years I was very myopic, you would be right. I was focused on blues music and some jazz. And we were playing that music wherever we could, in particular at a black bar down on Anne Street in Ann Arbor, a one-block section of black businesses. It was called Clint's Club.

We were performing there several days a week for \$35 a night, and that was for the whole band, all five members. Let's see, that adds up to \$7 a night for each of us. But even promises of real money failed to distract me from my study of the blues.

I have told this story before, but at one point a subsidiary of Motown came up to Ann Arbor from Detroit in long black limousines and proceeded to court our group, the Prime Movers Blues Band. It seems they wanted to find a group of white musicians that could play black music. We were sometimes racially mixed, but mostly white players.

For a while they drove us around in those limousines and painted wonderful scenarios for us. For example, they arranged for my brother Dan and I to have lunch with none other than Don and Phil Everly, the Everly Brothers. Wow! What a thrill that was sitting at a table for four with our heroes. I'll never forget it.

However the romance did not last long. When it came right down to where the rubber meets the road, they wanted us to play songs that they gave us, with no freedom on our part to choose. I am sure that they probably knew a lot more than we did what would be good for us to make hits. However, I was not a bit interested in being their musical puppet. We totally refused to do what they wanted, and that was the end of the limousines. No more Everly Brothers.

Looking back, we probably refused what could have been a big break, but at the time (and even now) I never blinked. All I did was study, practice, and attempt to play the blues music we so respected. And then came the festivals.

... to be continued.

