

The Paul Butterfield Blues Band



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Here I will share with you something about the history of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, which very much influenced me and our band, the Prime Movers Blues Band. First, I will talk about my personal relationship with the Butterfield band, get in out of the way, and then go on with a general history of that band.

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As for me personally, our band, the Prime Mover's Blues Band, spent a lot of time hanging out with and around the Butterfield band. We went to hear them every chance we could, including driving all the way to Chicago just to hear them play. Butterfield was friendly enough, but always a little cool. I remember sitting outside in the van smoking some pot with Butterfield, just the two of us, and he explained that he was so good just because he was left-handed. He said left-handed people were always better than right-handed people (like me). He was probably pulling my leg, but you couldn't always tell with Butterfield. He not only was left-handed, but played the harp upside-down and backward. That, indeed, would be very hard to imitate. LOL.

I can remember one time in Chicago, my brother (our lead guitar player) and I were sitting behind a flimsy curtain in front of which the Butterfield Band was playing the landmark tune East-West. We had an old reel-to-reel tape recorder, and we were, as mentioned, recording an early version of the Butterfield band's tune East-West. This recording was later released on an album of East-West live recordings by Mark Naftalin.

Our go-to guy in the band was Michael Bloomfield, sometimes Mark Naftalin, because they were very friendly. I am told that Butterfield said the "Prime Movers Blues Band" was the second best white blues band in the country, of course, emphasizing second-best. The Butterfield Band was by far the best. We loved those guys.

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In 1967, the Prime Movers drove out to San Francisco for the "Summer of Love," and were taken in by Michael Bloomfield. We had about zero money. Bloomfield found us a place where we could stay, the Sausalito Heliport, and even asked us to substitute for his band, "The Electric Flag," when they couldn't make the gig. We opened for Cream in one of their few concerts at the Fillmore Auditorium.

Although the Butterfield band's albums, especially those first two, are incredible, nothing they recorded EVER sounded as good as hearing them in person. They killed it.

The History

Butterfield grew up in Chicago's Hyde Park, and according to his brother Peter:

"There was a lot of music around. Hyde Park, a place unique in Chicago because it was an island in the Southside ghetto, and a bastion of liberal politics. When we grew up there was a crime problem -- mostly due to scattered groups of Puerto Ricans and poor white trash -- but no one made a connection to the black community as a source of crime. We grew up about half a block from something called the International Houses and you would see people from all over the world in the immediate area. "

Butterfield was culturally sophisticated. His father was a well-known attorney in the Hyde Park area, and his mother was an artist -- a painter. Butterfield took music lessons (flute) from an early age and by the time he reached high school, was studying with the first-chair flautist of the Chicago Symphony. He was exposed to both classical music and jazz from an

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early age. Butterfield ran track in high school and was offered a running scholarship to Brown University, which he had to refuse after a serious knee injury. From that point onward, he turned toward the music scene around him. He began learning the guitar and harmonica.

He met the singer Nick Gravanites and started hanging around outside of the Chicago blues clubs, listening. He and Gravanites began to play together at various campuses -- Ann Arbor, University of Wisconsin, and the University of Chicago. His parents sent him off to the University of Illinois, but he would put in a short academic week, return home early (but not check in) and instead play and hang out at the blues clubs. Soon, he was doing this six or seven days a week with no school at all. When this was discovered by his parents, he then dropped out of college and turned to music full-time.

Butterfield practiced long hours by himself -- just playing all the time. His brother Peter writes "He listened to records, and he went places, but he also spent an awful lot of time, by himself, playing. He'd play outdoors. There's a place called "The Point" in Hyde Park, a promontory of land that sticks out into Lake Michigan, and I can remember him out there for hours playing. He was just playing all the time ... It was a very solitary effort. It was all internal, like he had a particular sound he wanted to get and he just worked to get it."

In the meantime, Elvin Bishop had come from Oklahoma to the University of Illinois on a scholarship and had discovered the various blues venues for himself. Elvin remembers "One day I was walking

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around the neighborhood and I saw a guy sitting on a porch drinking a quart of beer -- white people that were interested in blues were very few and far between at that time. But this guy was singing some blues and singing it good. It was Butterfield. We gravitated together real quick and started playing parties around the neighborhood, you know, just acoustic. He was playing more guitar than harp when I first met him. But in about six months, he became serious about the harp. And he seemed to get about as good as he ever got in that six months. He was just a natural genius. And this was in 1960 or 1961."

Butterfield and Bishop began going down to the clubs, sitting in, and playing with all the great black blues players -- then in their prime. Players like Otis Rush, Magic Sam, Howlin' Wolf, Junior Wells, Little Walter, and especially, Muddy Waters. They often were the only whites there, but were soon accepted because of their sincerity, their sheer ability, and the protection of players like Muddy Waters, who befriended them.

An important event in the history of introducing blues to white America came in 1963 when Big John's, a club located on Chicago's White North Side invited Butterfield to bring his band there and play on a regular basis. He said "sure," and Butterfield and Bishop set about putting such a band together. They pulled Jerome Arnold (bass) and Sam Lay (drums) from Howlin' Wolf's band (with whom they had worked for the past six years!), by offering them more money. Butterfield and Bishop (the core team), Arnold, and Lay were all about the same age, and these four became the Butterfield Blues Band. They had been around for a long time and knew the Chicago blues scene and its repertoire cold. This new racially-mixed

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band opened at Big John's, was very successful, and made a first great step to opening up the blues scene to white America.

When the new group thought about making an album, they looked around for a lead guitarist. Michael Bloomfield, who was known to Butterfield from his appearances at Big Johns, joined the band early in 1965. Bloomfield, somewhat cool at first to Butterfield's commanding manner, warmed to the group as Butterfield warmed to his guitar playing. It took a while for Bloomfield to fit in, but by the Summer of that year, the band was cookin'. Mark Naftalin, another music student, joined the band as the first album was being recorded, in fact while they were actually in the studio creating that first album on Electra. He sat in (playing the Hammond Organ for the first time!) and noodled around with one of his own tunes, "Thank You Mr. Poobah." Butterfield liked the sound. They recorded that tune with Naftalin that very day along with eight of the 11 other tracks on the first album. After the recording session, Paul invited Naftalin to join the band and go on the road with them. These six, then, became the Paul Butterfield Blues Band.

The first two Butterfield Blues albums are essential from an historical perspective. While East-West, the second album, with its Eastern influence and extended solos set the tone for psychedelic rockers, it was that incredible first album that put the music scene on alert to what was coming.

Although it has been perhaps over-emphasized in recent years, it is important to point out that the release of The Paul Butterfield Blues Band on Electra

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in 1965, had a huge effect on the white music culture of the time. Used to hearing blues covered by groups like the Rolling Stones, that first album had an enormous impact on young (and primarily white) rock players. Here is no deferential imitation of black music by whites, but a racially-mixed hard-driving blues album that, in a word, rocked. It was a signal to white players to stop making respectful tributes to black music, and just play it. In a flash the image of blues as old-time music was gone. Modern Chicago style urban blues was out of the closet and introduced to mainstream white audiences, who loved it.

Perhaps the next major event in the Butterfield band came when drummer Sam Lay became ill, late in 1965. Jazz drummer Billy Davenport was called in and soon became a permanent member of the group. Davenport was to become a key element in the development of the second Butterfield Blues Band album, *East/West*. In particular, the extended solo of the same name.

Fueled by Bloomfield's infatuation with Eastern music and Indian ragas at the time and aided by Davenport's jazz-driven sophistication on drums, their arose in the group a new music form that was to greatly effect rock music -- the extended solo. There is little question that here is the root of psychedelic (acid) rock -- a genuine fusion between East and West.

Those first two albums served as a wakeup call to an entire generation of white would-be blues musicians. Speaking as one who was on the scene, that first Butterfield album stopped us in our tracks and we were never the same afterward. It changed our lives.

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The third album (released in 1967), "The Butterfield Blues Band; The Resurrection of Pigboy Crabshaw" is the last album that preserves any of the pure blues direction of the original group. By this time, Bloomfield has left to create his own group, The Electric Flag and, with the addition of a horn section, the band is drifting more toward an R&B. sound. Mark Naftalin left the group soon after this album and the Butterfield band took on other forms.

Aside from these first three albums, later Butterfield material somehow misses the mark from a blues perspective. He never lost his ferocity or integrity, but the synergy of that first group was special. There has been some discussion in the literature about the personal transformation of Butterfield as his various bands developed. It is said that he went from being a self-centered band leader (shouting orders to his crew a' la Howlin' Wolf) to a more democratic style of leadership, providing his group with musical freedom (like Muddy Waters). For what it's worth, it is clear that the best music is in those first two (maybe three) albums. Subsequent albums, although also interesting, have not gotten as much attention then or now from reviewers.

When I knew Butterfield (during the first three albums), he was always intense, somewhat remote, and even, on occasion, downright unfriendly. Although not much interested in other people, he was a compelling musician and a great harp player. Michael Bloomfield and Mark Naftalin, also great players, were just the opposite -- always interested in the other guy. They went out of their way to inquire about you, even if you were a nobody. Naftalin

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continues to this day to support blues projects and festivals in the San Francisco Bay area.

After Bloomfield and Naftalin left the group, Butterfield more and more spun off on his own. The next two albums, *In My Own Dream* (1968) and *Keep on Moving* (1969) moved still farther away from the blues roots until in 1972, Butterfield dissolved the group, forming the group *Better Days*. This new group recorded two albums, *Paul Butterfield's Better Days* and *It All Comes Back*.

After that, Butterfield faded into the general rock scene, with an occasional appearance here and there, as in the documentary "The Last Waltz" (1976) -- a farewell concert from The Band. The albums *Put It in Your Ear* (1976) and *North/South* (1981) were attempts to make a comeback, but both failed. Paul Butterfield died of a drug-related heart failure in 1987.

Even to this day, Butterfield remains one of the only white harmonica players to develop his own style (another is William Clarke) -- one respected by black players. Butterfield has no real imitators. Like most Chicago-style amplified harmonica players, Butterfield played the instrument like a horn -- a trumpet. He tended to play single notes rather than bursts of chords. His harp playing is always intense, understated, concise, and serious -- only Big Walter Horton has a better sense of note selection.

The effect of the Butterfield Blues Band on aspiring White blues musicians was enormous and the impact of the band on live audiences was stunning. Butterfield the performer was always intense, serious, and definitive -- no doubt about this guy. Blues purists sometimes like to quibble about Butterfields voice and

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singing style, but the moment he picked up a harmonica, that was it. He is one of the finest harp players (period).

Butterfield and the six members of the original Paul Butterfield Blues Band made a huge contribution to modern music, turning a whole generation of white music lovers onto the blues as something other than a quaint piece of music history. The musical repercussions of the second Butterfield album, *East/West* continue to echo through the music scene even today!

I would like to thank Blues Access magazine for permission to use the quotes by Peter Butterfield and Elvin Bishop from the excellent article by Tom Ellis.