

Son House



The Ann Arbor Blues Festival: What it Was

The Ann Arbor Blues Festival was just that, a festival of blues featuring modern electric city blues -- the first of its kind in North America. Those two festivals helped to mark the discovery of modern blues music and the musicians that made that music. It was something more than just black music for white people. It was somewhat of a celebration for the black musicians themselves and the list of great blues artists present, on or off the stage, reads like a "Who's Who" of blues musicians (of all types) alive at the time. They came from all over to play, of course, but also they came just to be together, to hang out – a real celebration.

Can you imagine? There was my dad, the controller of a small Michigan college sitting on folding chairs with blues great Roosevelt Sykes, the two of them leaning back up against a chain-link fence, swapping stories, and having beers all afternoon. They just liked each other and were having a ball. That's the way it was all

around – one big getting-to-know-one-another party. It was special.

That first Ann Arbor Blues Festival had its inception in the fall of 1968 at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. An on-campus entertainment group had called a meeting with the idea of putting together some kind of musical event loosely based on the blues-rock music that was emerging from Great Britain, groups like the Rolling Stones, John Mayall, and its reflection in this country. The self-appointed chairman of this group was Cary Gordon, a student from the suburbs of Detroit.

However, also present was John Fishel, another student who had just transferred to Michigan from Tulane University. Fishel (who knew no one in town) came across a handbill asking for people interested in being involved in a “blues” festival to attend an initial meeting at the Michigan Student Union. Being new in town, Fishel decided to check it out. At that time, he was already well into listening to blues.

John Fishel:

“I had a growing interest in the black music from my high school days in Cleveland. At the time I had seen as many of the Motown and other acts who came to town as well as a number of acts on the “folk club” circuit including the Paul Butterfield Blues Band and James Cotton, etc. I was listening to many of the country artists who were being rediscovered. I had also spent a summer in Great Britain and seen some of the British bands influenced by the blues like John Mayall, the Stones, Peter Green, etc. I had been attracted to the music and began to collect albums by *their* influences: BB King, Albert King, Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, Otis Rush, John Lee Hooker, and later Junior Wells and Magic Sam.”

Fishe, whol was not so much interested in the blues-rock concept, but rather in the authentic blues masters

themselves, volunteered to be the entertainment co-chair along with another U. of M. Student, Janet Kelenson. Other original members of that core group included Bert Stratton and Fred Braseth (PR chairs), Ron Marabate (technical), and Ken Whipple (business affairs), plus Chris Seltsam, Howard Husok, Rena Selden, Dick Tittsely, Charlie Yoryd, Carol Maxwell, and local DJ Jim Dulzo.

The University of Michigan with some initial reluctance had agreed to be a sponsor without really understanding either the concept or the financial commitment. Later the Canterbury House (sponsored by the local Episcopalian Church), an organization that had run a coffee-house/folk club in Ann Arbor for some time, also came on board as a sponsor. Something should someday be written about the generosity and foresight of the Canterbury House, which sponsored so much good music in those early years in the Ann Arbor area.

For many young white blues lovers living in the Midwest, like myself, a trip to Chicago, where the electric city blues was born was just a part of our general education. I should know. Our band, the Prime Movers Blues Band, made that trek in 1966 and at other times too, with our drummer (a young Iggy Pop) in tow. I was the lead singer and harmonica player, my brother Dan Erlewine played lead guitar, Robert Sheff (aka "Blue" Gene Tyranny) was on keyboards, Jack Dawson (later with Siegel-Schwall Blues Band) played bass, and Jimmy Osterberg (aka Iggy Pop), a young drummer we had found in a frat band.

And like so many students of the blues, the first place we landed was in Bob Koester's "Jazz Record Mart." Koester, who founded Delmark Records (in my opinion the most important electric blues label ever) has probably introduced more blues fans to the real Chicago blues than anyone else on earth. He has my undying gratitude.

It was through Koester's kindness and generosity that we were able to visit many of the seminal blues clubs on Chicago's West and South side, places like Theresa's Lounge, Peppers Lounge, and others, watching artists like Little Walter, Junior Wells, Buddy Guy, Big Walter Horton, and all the blues greats playing live in these small clubs. John Fishel took the same route in 1968, as he notes here:

John Fishel:

"By Thanksgiving I was on a roll and decided that I should go to Chicago to deepen my understanding of the scene and begin to identify artists to sign for the festival. My roommates were going home to Highland Park in the suburbs for the holiday, so I tagged along. Once there, I announced I was going into the Loop to visit the Jazz Record Mart, home of Delmark Records. I took public transportation to Jazz Record Mart, then located at 7 West Grand Street and walked into this very small crowded space.

"There were bins of hundreds of albums (blues, traditional jazz, bebop, etc. all the way to the new music being played by the AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians) and recorded by Delmark), the covers all wrapped in plastic. The actual records were stored on shelves behind the counter to prevent rip offs. Hundreds of 78's were stacked on the floor for collectors. There were also posters and handbills advertising music playing throughout the city. It was crowded with lots of customers, a number of very hip staff, and Bob Koester.

"Koester was the founder of Delmark Records in St Louis; he later moved to Chicago. The label was in the cellar entered through a trap door in the back. Bob was and is an original and he is the guy whom I credit for helping me to explore the blues and enter a world which

I only knew from albums and 45's, but had no idea about as lifestyle.

“On that first visit I began to discuss with him the idea of a festival focused on the real blues (if at the time I had a sense of what that meant), his ideas on who might be invited to perform, and perhaps most important for me, I asked about visiting some clubs. I heard about artists I never knew existed, guys like Luther Allison, Jimmy Dawkins, Mighty Joe Young, in addition to many legendary figures I didn't know were still alive, like Big Joe Williams, Sleepy John Estes, and Roosevelt Sykes, the Honeydripper. I was hooked!

“The next day, to the horror of my hosts in Highland Park, I announced I was going out to clubs on the South Side. I was back at the Jazz record Mart at closing time and one of the Jazz Record Mart clerks (Jim Brinsfield) took me by the El down to the clubs. I remember going to Peppers at 43rd Street and Vicennes (among others) and spending a night listening, watching, and becoming immersed in a lifestyle which would impact the first two festivals in 1969 and 1970. I remember a young Junior Wells and lots of bands who I never heard of, but who shook the place and reflected the connection of the migration from the south to the north in previous decades.

“I spent the next few days "living" at the Jazz Record Mart and talking to Bob Koester. I have (forty years later) three pages of mimeographed (remember that?) notes with dozens of names, addresses, and phone numbers of blues singers and players which Bob gave me. Looking at it today, many became the artists later contracted for the festivals, while others never were included. The sheets have my handwritten notes, names like: Carey Bell, the Myers Brothers with Fred Below, Johnny Young, Robert Pete Williams, Johnny Shines, Otis Spann, St Louis Jimmy Oden, Matt Murphy, Eddie Taylor, Little Brother Montgomery, Billy Boy Arnold, Lonnie Johnson, Tampa Red, Bukka White,

Hounddog Taylor, Earl Hooker, Fred McDowell and the Howlin' Wolf. I had hit the Jack pot."

Jim Dulzo, popular DJ in the Ann Arbor/Detroit area at the time writes:

"The next thing I remember is that the blues committee decided they wanted to do a kind of like a warm-up or promotional concert for the festival. The idea was that since the festival itself was going to happen in like very late summer or very early in the fall, it would be very difficult to promote the students as they were coming back, so we wanted to do a kind of a warm up concert in the spring, before everybody left town.

"And so we did a show at the Michigan Union Ballroom, with the Luther Allison Trio. And I remember that I MC'd the show, because I was the disk jockey. And I think for me that was a very transforming experience, because although I had really enjoyed seeing the blues in those South-Side bars, there was so much else going on that I don't think I really locked into it like I did at this concert. That concert really changed me. I think that's when I really bonded with the blues, but my memory was that Luther was spectacular and this was a whole lot of U. of M. white kids seeing blues for the first time. And I think it really electrified a lot of people. So those are my very early memories of it.

John Fishel:

"Over the next few months, I began to be a regular visitor in Chicago. I discovered not only the South Side but the West Side as well. One of the younger guys I saw play was a then very young Luther Allison. He seemed old to me, but I was only twenty and Luther was probably ten years older. Luther was, as you know, an amazing performer and by early 1969 (as we began to solidify the support from our sponsors to make the Ann Arbor Blues Festival happen) I decided we should bring Luther Allison with Big Mojo on bass and Bob

Richey on drums to the Michigan Student Union. We secured the ballroom, the student volunteers put up the handbills, and about 8:30 P.M. they took the stage. The room was maybe a third full. Luther played his first gig in Ann Arbor and an hour later the word of mouth had resulted in a packed house. I think this performance was the beginning of Ann Arbor's love affair with Allison and really launched his successful career. Here was a guy with a few singles, but no album yet, an unknown, but a wonderfully emotional singer and guitarist.

“By March, we had gotten into high gear. The contours of the first festival were underway. Through Bob Koester I met more and more artists and experienced amazing music by artists totally unknown in the white community. I was introduced by Koester to Dick Waterman, who at the time was managing Buddy Guy, Junior Wells, and a number of extraordinary bluesmen from the south, such as: Fred MacDowell, Robert Pete Williams, and Arthur Crudup. I began to make the connections between the enormous diversity in styles of blues and their influence on the blues rock bands playing at the Fillmore Auditorium in San Francisco and other halls around the country. Waterman was a major influence on my growing interest in country blues and my awareness of how so many blues artists had been ripped off during their careers. He was a very honorable guy in a less than honorable field.

“Between May and July, the show took shape and various artists were contracted. Looking at the copies of the contracts today it is hard to imagine how inexpensive the great blues artists were to book. One contract for the Muddy Waters band shows it cost the festival \$3000 for the evening. Many of the country blues artists were costing between \$250-300.

“In May we began to do the little bit of publicity we could afford. The festival budget was tiny! A press release states the Ann Arbor Blues Festival Committee "has no desire to become a part of the mammoth blues

exploitation and is discriminately choosing its performers. We are interested in presenting a festival in which the artists and the audience will generate a blues mood, avoiding at all costs a teeny-bopper cultist happening." I think we succeeded. The festival tickets were priced at \$14 for the three days or \$5 per concert. How times have changed."

The 1970 Ann Arbor Blues Festival

The 1969 Ann Arbor Blues Festival captured a moment in time of the blues scene as it was back then. By the 1970 festival, many great players had already passed away, starting with the untimely death of Magic Sam in December of 1969. Magic Sam (along with Luther Allison) had taken that first festival by storm. It was hard to believe we would never hear Sam play again. We had only just found him.

Otis Spann was also gone in the spring of 1970. Others who died in the interval between festivals include Lonnie Johnson, Earl Hooker, Slim Harpo, Skip James, and Kokomo Arnold. Already that first festival in 1969 (less than a year before) began to look more and more precious. The 1970 Ann Arbor Blues Festival was dedicated to Otis Spann's memory.

John Fishel writes:

"Shortly after the 1969 festival, Delmark Records recorded and released "Southside Blues Jam" featuring Buddy Guy and Louis Myers. I remember talking with Otis Spann in the Jazz Record Mart about performing at the 1970 show. I also had the privilege of being at the "Southside Jam" recording session where Junior Wells sang about an ill Muddy Waters and Howling Wolf... In Chicago for Spann's funeral, I remember a large crowd at the service and sitting in the back of a Cadillac drinking a toast to Otis Spann with his former colleagues Birmingham Jones and drummer S.P. Leary"

“Visiting Toronto in early 1970, I saw Lonnie Johnson (no longer able to play guitar due to a stroke) sing in his beautiful soulful voice, accompanied lovingly by Buddy Guy. All these losses created an urgency in producing the second festival for 1970. The sponsors remained the University of Michigan and Canterbury House. The cast of volunteers changed. Ken Whipple became (along with me) the co chair and my friend Mark Platt took on the task of coordinating the entertainment. Other blues enthusiasts included Marian Krzyzowki, Dick Pohrt, Austin Iglehart, Glenn Baron, and Worth Gretter. A new stage was designed. The show was moved to the newly named Otis Spann Memorial Field.

“I traveled with my friends back and forth to Chicago, broadening my knowledge of the blues. We decided that we wanted to move beyond Chicago blues as our primary focus and try to give the audience an even better sense of the entire black blues genre. As I listened to more blues on albums, I tried to find out if the artists were still around and could come to the 2nd Ann Arbor Blues Festival.

“From the West Coast we signed Pee Wee Crayton, Eddie “Cleanhead Vincent, and Big Joe Turner. Also from the West Coast came Lowell Fulson. From Houston we brought in Juke Boy Bonner, from rural Texas we signed Mance Lipscomb, and from Louisiana, Robert Pete Williams. Both Lipscomb and Williams were represented by Dick waterman's Avalon Productions. From Virginia came John Jackson.

“We branched out into a still more modern blues sound with Bobbie Bland and Little Junior Parker. Having heard a cut on an album of harpist Papa George Lightfoot, I was happy to learn that he was still gigging. The festival's success in 1969 resulted in interest in blues artists currently playing and began to spark what, over time, was almost a blues renaissance and growth

of the blues festival concept, which today is still going strong.

The first festival created the impetus for the American blues publication "Living Blues" joining "Blues Unlimited," a British publication, with Jim O'Neal, Amy Van Singel, and Bruce Iglauer (later of Alligator Records) among others taking the lead, all of them working at Delmark Records and the Jazz Record Mart. Delmark Records, Chris Strachwitz's "Arhoolie" label in Berkley and other specialty labels began to reach a wider audience.

"By late 1969 and early 1970, we were identifying acts from Chicago to be included including Hound Dog Taylor (an original if there ever was one) and the House Rockers (a fantastic "bar" band), Johnny Young, Sunnyland Slim, Carey Bell, and Buddy Guy. It was a blast traveling back and forth to Chicago and we made many trips on treacherous winter weekends just to see an act. Fortunately the blues scene was still very exciting with dozens of bars, taverns, and clubs.

"I remember some very unusual venues. One night we saw Junior Parker playing in what was a renovated bowling alley. You never knew what could happen. One weekend we traveled to the West Side to see Hound Dog. It was a very funky club on West Roosevelt, with a wild crowd. One of the guys brought his girl friend for a first-time visit to see the real blues. When we got ready to leave, a mean looking guy comes over and says that the girlfriend is not leaving except with him. Fortunately, with a little help from Ted Harvey, Hound Dog's drummer, we safely exited an hour later. Another night, Luther Allison was playing up the street and a group of European blues fans were visiting the club. Suddenly guns were pulled and all hell broke loose. The French guy sitting next to me seemed to be unaware that something was going on.

"I was fortunate (after graduating in the spring of 1970) to spend the summer preparing for the festival working at the Jazz Record Mart and living in an extra bedroom at Bob and Sue Koester's apartment. It was perfect. Every day I sold blues albums and every night, if I wanted, I could go hear music. Blind Arvella Gray the street musician played out front. The Jazz Record Mart was a meeting place for all kinds of musicians including both Jazz and blues.

"People came from all over the world to see and hear the blues. One night there was an official from the still communist Czechoslovakia in town who went out with Bob Koester and his entourage to hear the music. Every Monday there were jam sessions at various venues. It is hard to remember who performed, but literally every working musician in the South or West Side would show up, beginning in the early afternoon and jam until the places closed late at night.

"It remains some of the finest most soulful experiences of my life. I got to know well most of the musicians. Carey Bell who played the 1970's festival was just starting to break out, and I remember his cousin Royal Johnson (an unknown guitarist who gigged with him) blowing my mind. I brought them to Ann Arbor to play at Canterbury House before the festival and I have some great snapshots of their visit to my crib.

"Finally the big weekend of the festival came, August 7-9, 1970. We opened as in the previous year with Roosevelt Sykes and closed again with Son House. In between, we had a few returning groups and some new ones. John Lee Hooker came in from Detroit, the extraordinary and articulate Johnny Shines, and Albert King. We were better organized and the crowd was larger. Sadly people decided that paying \$15 for the series was too much and we had lots of gate crashers. Still it was a mellow scene. There were magic moments:

“The second year, our emcee was Paul Oiliver, the British blues scholar and academic expert in African architecture. He brought a more serious tone to the proceeding then Big Bill Hill in the first year, but did a wonderful job reflecting his love of the music.

“Memories of sitting with Fred McDowell, later my house guest, after the festival, Sunnyland Slim, and others listening to stories about Jim Crow and days on the cotton plantations of the South were a sobering experience which made me better understand the blues and its roots

“The festival was again a superb cross section of the music I continue to love. Sadly, the gate crashers created a financial crisis which resulted in the second Ann Arbor Blues Festival being the last until it was resurrected by another group a few years later as the Ann Arbor Blues and Jazz festival. I have a memory of sending out our volunteers with empty card board barrels (with a Kentucky Fried Chicken logo on them) to raise a few bucks to cover the deficit seems incongruous, but maybe not.”

The 1970 Ann Arbor Blues Festival would be the last. A benefit featuring artists Otis Rush, Johnny Winter, Buddy Guy, Luther Allison, and Junior Wells at the University of Michigan Events building was a wonderful show, but could not save the festival. Neither could a benefit show at the University of Wisconsin Blues Society that generated \$1800, but again not enough to save the day.

The 1970 Ann Arbor Blues Festival was well received by the critics including a feature in the New York Times written by music critic John S. Wilson each of the three days. He commended the audience for its patience, receptivity, and the less familiar artists for giving the festival its unique distinct flavor.

A review in Rolling Stone magazine, still a relatively young publication, in September 1970 called the 1970 Ann Arbor Blues Festival almost a perfect success. "Rarely has an audience heard so much great music in a weekend."

John Fishel went on to do a series of small festivals at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Florida with his brother Jim, who also helped on the two Ann Arbor Blues festivals. Jim Fishel was instrumental in turning John Fishel on to various blues artists when he was younger, artists such as Luther Allison, Rober Jr. Lockwood, Houston Stackhouse, and Eddie Bacchus (a great organist from Cleveland). John Fishel later worked with Dick Waterman for a short while when Luther Allison was trying to break out into a larger audience and when Bonnie Raitt was beginning her career. John went on to do social work and today directs a large not-for-profit corporation in Los Angeles.

The End of the Blues Festivals

The 1970 festival ran into stiff competition from a large (and historic) rock concert being held at the same time in nearby Goose Lake. The Goose Lake Bonanza drew a lot of attendees away from the blues festival, with the result that, when all was said and done, the festival came out in the red, a loss of some \$25,000, which was a lot in those days.

It has been said by way of criticism of the first two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals that they were too esoteric, that the artists were not known by the general public, and so forth. That is of course true, by definition.

At the time of those first two blues festivals, most of these performers were generally unknown to White America. City blues was esoteric, by definition. It hadn't been found by the mainstream yet and that is a major reason why the original Ann Arbor Blues Festival was undertaken in the first place: to bring these artists to

general attention, which it did. If not for the insight of festival chairman John Fishel into these (mostly) Chicago artists, we would probably have had a good blues-rock concert that would be quite forgettable by now.

It is true that there was no attempt to include jazz, R&B, or popular headliners in these first festivals and it is true that mainstream artists might have resulted in a larger attendance. It is fair to say that John Fishel and crew were purists. A cross-section of music genres was not envisioned by the festival coordinators (or any of us involved), who were struggling to bring modern-electric city blues to national recognition. It is not that we were scholars or historians, at least not most of us. More than anything else, everyone involved just really wanted to hear this music live and meet the performers. We just loved the music and felt it deserved a wider audience.

Discovering that these great blues artists were alive and living all around us, but never previously accessed or known, was a revelation at that time. Here was not a dying or antiquated music needing our revival, as was the case with certain styles of folk music. Modern electric blues was very much alive and well in cities across the United States, only separated from white America racially. It just needed some ears.

Removing that racial curtain exposed a vast wealth of music to be experienced and absorbed. What happened in that first blues festival in 1969 was a musical and personal revelation to many of those in attendance, at least to the white members of the audience. It helped to launch a new era of blues discovery and acceptance.

The Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festivals

There was no Ann Arbor Blues Festival in 1971, but a year later the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival was founded by promoter Peter Andrews and blues expert

John Sinclair. Although quite similar and wonderful in its own right, the succeeding Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festivals were different in that they widened the scope of the festival to include jazz and R&B, for example Miles Davis and Ray Charles. The emphasis on purely blues was gone. This, coupled with the attrition rate of great blues masters in the subsequent years, made it increasingly difficult to repeat the format of those initial Ann Arbor Blues Festivals in 1969 and 1970 even if we wanted to. The attrition rate alone meant that those first festivals could never be repeated. Here are some details.

After losing money at the 1970 Ann Arbor Blues Festival, the University of Michigan was cautious about continuing the festival and asked their events director Peter Andrews to look into it. In an interview I did with Andrews, he states: "The University of Michigan administration asked me to look into reviving the Ann Arbor Blues Festival, because everybody saw that it was a great artistic success, which it was."

Andrews wrote in the program for the 1973 Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival:

"In 1971, I was appointed to the position of Events Director for the University of Michigan and asked by the Vice President in charge of student affairs to try to recreate the festival for the coming year. I told them that it would be impossible to have a festival that summer and that they should aim toward 1972. No 1971 festival was held."

John Sinclair and Peter Andrews wrote in the printed program for the 1972 Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival:

"The Blues and Jazz festival was conceived last winter by Rainbow Multi-Media president Peter Andrews as a revival of the original Ann Arbor Blues Festival, which after two incredible years (1969 and 1970) of artistic (but not financial) success was laid to rest by the

University of Michigan before a 1971 festival could struggle into life.”

And from the same text:

“... careful booking, detailed planning, and superior organization, coupled with the expansion of the festival into contemporary jazz music and a slightly less esoteric line-up of blues artist, would not only insure the success of the 1972 festival, but would also expand upon the musical base laid down by the producers and participants in the earlier blues festivals, which had essentially limited their potential appeal to music lovers by featuring little-known (though musically excellent) blues performers from many different disciplines with the blues idiom.”

Finances and the Blues Festivals

Something that has come up again and again over the years for some reason is the statement that those first two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals didn't make money, while their successor, the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival did. The actual records don't support that statement. Here is what a little research turned up.

1969 Ann Arbor Blues Festival

The 1969 Ann Arbor Blues Festival had a total proposed budget for \$57,200 in revenue and \$52,950 in expenses, giving a profit of \$4,250. In actuality, they received \$63,533 in revenue, had \$63,137.17 in expenses, giving a profit of \$406.04, still a profit and not a loss. This data was taken from the “Financial Report for the Ann Arbor Summer Blues Festival,” Summer of 1969, Bentley Historical Collection, UAC VP collection.

1970 Ann Arbor Blues Festival

“The major problem with the 1970 Blues festival was its tremendous financial failure, leaving a debt of some

\$25,000, most of which was attributable to last-minute emergency police and “security” costs and to over booking (too many artists at too high prices) and underpricing of festival tickets (four shows for \$10).“

This was taken from the 1972 Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival program. In fact, most authorities blame the loss on the huge pop festival at Goose Lake, Michigan on the same days. John Fishel confirms the loss as about \$25,000.

1972 Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival Financial Report

Released by the Rainbow Multimedia, after the festival. These figures were preliminary, and miscellaneous bills were still coming in.

Total Revenue \$242,034.62

Expenses \$246,603.94

Loss of \$3,569.32

“We averaged 11,000 persons per show last year for each of five shows. Due to losses in the area of food concessions, our gross revenues fell some \$4,000-\$5,000 short of our final budget...”

This from co-founder Peter Andrews in the program for the 1973 Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival. Source: Bentley Historical Collection, John Sinclair Papers. They ultimately lost perhaps five grand.

1973 Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival Financial Report

According to Peter Andrews the co-producer of the 1973 festival, he remembers that the 1973 festival just about broke even.

1974 Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival in Exile

In 1974, with a change in city government (more republicans on the city council), Sinclair and Andrews ran into problems getting a festival permit. The festival promoters were denied permission to hold the event in Ann Arbor and the fate of the festival became a bitterly debated issue in the press and about town. There was nothing to be done about it, so, it was decided to hold a 1974 festival, but in exile, at another location. A small college in Windsor, Ontario volunteered a spot and it was decided to hold the 1974 Ann Arbor Blues and Jazz Festival in another country - Canada.

All the standard festival preparations took place, including an extensive car-pool system for busing blues enthusiasts from Michigan to the site in Canada. There was only one problem and it was a big one. They failed to anticipate that the FBI and other law enforcement officials would prevent the thousands of would-be attendees from crossing the border. They just refused to let concert goers from the states of Michigan cross the border, ordering their cards to turn back.

Worse, they refused to allow John Sinclair, who was co-producing the festival, to cross into Canada, forcing him to retreat to a temporary headquarters in the Shelby Hotel in Detroit. No reasons were given at the border for turning the cars back. Cars were searched and any with drugs were confiscated and their occupants arrested. That same was true at the gates in Windsor: anyone found smoking Marijuana or carrying it was immediately arrested and taken to jail. The net effect was to ruin the

festival, causing over \$100,000 in losses -- a financial disaster.

So, in the last analysis no real money was made at any of these festivals, but that first Ann Arbor Blues Festival made a profit of \$406.04, enough perhaps to buy pizza for the staff and volunteers!

As for me, I continued to interview blues artists as part of the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festivals and to take care of the performers, only now I was using video equipment. After the 1974 fiasco, the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival folded and was not resumed until 1992. In recent years, I served on the board of directors for that organization for a number of years and ended up as the official archivist. The festival closed in 2006 for lack of funds. By then there were blues festivals each year in almost every large Midwestern town. It is the end of an era.

The Blues Today

Today blues continues to be popular across America. What I did not realize so well at the time of those first festivals is that the majority of the performers were not young men and women. The average age of all the main performers for the two festivals (some 47 of them, including the youngest players) was about fifty years of age and a number of them were in their sixties (Mance Liscomb was 74). We are talking about the end of a movement, not the beginning. In 2008, of the main headliner blues artists in those first Ann Arbor Blues Festivals, over 90% of them have passed away. Only some of the youngest artists (then) still remain alive and then only a few of them. They are the grandfathers now.

Of course there are some wonderful younger blues players. But let's not kid ourselves: we still have the form of the blues, but today we probably have more form than substance. Where is the next Howlin' Wolf or Muddy Waters? Players of that caliber have not

appeared among the younger players and for a very simple reason: modern city blues, like all things in life, has a beginning, a middle, and now an end. This is not to say that blues are dead.

The Blues

Everyone gets the blues sometimes. We can all agree on that. But everyone does not get the particular blues that African Americans have had. We can all learn to sing the blues if we have that talent, but the historical blues sung by the black Americans that migrated from the South to Chicago is not open to us just because we all happen to get the blues from time to time.

African-American Chicago blues, like those played at the first two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals is now a piece of history, a period in time, that (as racial exclusion ceases and racial tensions ease) has become a closed book for all of us (black and white together) going forward. We can all sing the blues, just not “those” blues. Even the racial divide that separated the races is weakening. The election of Barack Obama is certainly a signal that America is becoming multicultural and multiracial, and this country is no longer the exclusive province of white men. The discovery of modern blues on the part of white America did not happen in a vacuum. It came exactly at a time when the whole American culture was in upheaval. We are talking about the heart of the 1960s, from 1965 onward.

As some folk music enthusiasts moved from studying folk music into the blues, there was something in the blues that we really did not know in ourselves. Blues was (at least to me) a call from somewhere deeper than the white audiences knew about, a call that resonated and lured us to dig beneath the social veneer of white America and to see if what we heard out there from the black blues artists was also in here, somewhere deep within ourselves. Was there really such a thing as one human voice and condition?

Some have written that white artists were simply feeling guilty, trying to save their own souls. The white musicians I knew were not trying to save their souls as much as trying to reach a level playing field where they believed all humans stand. Sure, we were afraid we might be missing something in the soul department and we just wanted to get down to it. Most of us were not religious in the sense that we were trying to “save” anything.

We were perhaps guilty of ascribing to the blues something outside of our own experience and longing to know what that experience meant. It was not the suffering itself of black history we were seeking, but a taste of the life wisdom that came out of that suffering. We looked up to black artists as mentors and perhaps we were questioning our own lack of suffering, the inequality of it all. I don't recall ever meeting a folk or blues artist who was a right-wing John Bircher.

Did white players lack soul? That is a loaded question. I don't believe anyone lacks soul, black or white, but we sure heard something in the blues that resonated with us, something we did not fully understand or know much about in ourselves. Otherwise, the blues would not have fascinated us as it did. Perhaps some of us did feel guilty for our lack of suffering and our easy upbringing. In the mid-1960s, the whole culture was being shed like a snake sheds its skin. There was something real and permanent (beyond time) in the blues that spoke out to us, something we wanted to get to know, to understand, and also to find within ourselves. The blues helped us find that feeling for our self and for others.

What is music anyway? Why do we listen to it? Why do we listen to certain songs over and over? What do we absorb or get out of our favorite tunes? These are all questions that I have pondered.

Obviously, blues music contains some kind of information that we somehow can't get enough of and that some of us feel we need, at least important enough to listen again and again to these tunes.

That's what happened to me. As a folkie, I was used to listening carefully to music. When I came across authentic modern blues, I heard something that resonated deep within me and I yearned for more of it. There was something in that music that I needed to understand and to absorb.

In 2006 I heard a young white musician singing a classic blues song. He was singing in full Ebonics dialect and he was sincere about it. I was amazed and almost offended, but he was so innocent about it.

What was he thinking? It took me a while to understand that my over-reaction to this young player was not so much his arrogance, because he was not arrogant; it was something else. This young twenty-something kid was re-enacting the blues, word for word, including the black dialect and this amounted (in my hearing it) to pushing the blues from the present into the past. Chicago city blues is becoming folklore rather than reality – a part of history. And I hated to see it go there.

And time since then has shown this to be true. The Chicago city blues was a wave, an era like all other great periods of music and those first two Ann Arbor blues festivals brought this great music to public attention. Today, almost all of the great players are gone. Time marches on. Those of us who still hear Chicago-style blues alive in clubs or festivals well know that more and more we are subject to re-enactments - "it sounded like this." The very fact that today musicians try to recreate, to sound-like, and to try to get back to what is already gone is telling in itself, as the poem "Memory," by William Butler Yeats so clearly states:

"The mountain grass cannot but keep the form,

Where the mountain hare has lain.”