

THE BLUES IN THEIR OWN WORDS

I thought you might like to hear about the Ann Arbor Blues Festival and “The Blues” in general, right from the performers themselves. I did scores of personal interviews both with audio and later with video, as well. Here, in their own words are the voices of some of the performers at these festivals. Let’s start with some comments about the festival itself.

Magic Sam (August 3, 1969)

This festival is like an all-star game.

Louis Myers

This blues festival is a big family reunion.

James Cotton (August 3, 1969)

I've never seen nothin' like this in my life. This is the beatifulest thing I ever seen in my life. This is so beautiful.

Luther Tucker (August 3, 1969)

As for the blues festival, I can dig it. I enjoyin' it.

Lightnin' Hopkins (August 3, 1969)

Well, I been looking forward for this for a long time. And I thought this would happen in the future and it did, so now I hope it lasts long. Fact of business is, I believe it will.

Sleepy John Estes (August 2, 1969)

When all the children get together, Oh that will be a day.

And, I also asked many of these performers to tell me how they view the blues and what it means to them. Here are some responses:

Jim Connely (horn player for Otis Rush) -- (August 2, 1969)

Blues and jazz, they are one, yet still they are different, because to be able to play jazz, a musician has to be able to play the blues first. He's got to know the blues, because blues is soul. It's what you feel, and jazz is just a step farther than the blues. I mean it's musically a step up.

You see, blues is just the common ground that you meet on, but jazz you get sophisticated and you move out a little more. But if you can't play the blues, then to me you can't play jazz.

You play the blues and then you go a little farther and you go into jazz. Blues is a simple thing that anybody can understand. Jazz, you have to keep hearin' it, over and over again to really adjust to it, where anybody can understand the blues.

Whereas blues is a story, a story usually of one's life or somebody's life. And jazz is what a man...it's his life, but it's also what he lives in a dream world. And it's also what he would like to do outside of his life. And he goes into this world of his own, but they are (blues and jazz) are still close together that it's hard to separate the two, like love and hate. You can't have one without the other.

You don't learn how to play the blues. Blues is something that comes natural. You don't go around studying the blues. It's something that comes as natural as a baby sucks his mam'a breast.

Blues is something that's gonna' come natural, anyhow, and the next step you go, you learn to play with rock and roll, and the next thing you know, you are trying to modernize it a little bit. You're tired of that old down feelin' of the blues, and the next thing you know, your gonna' be tryin' to play some jazz.

Blues is me. Blues is the black man. Blues is what we had. Then you move up a step farther, not what we have, but what we want that that's jazz -- this other world we would like to have, when we can set here and imagine what we want. Blues is the most common thing that you have. It's a thing which will bring all people together, the common ground.

Roosevelt Sykes: (August 1, 1969)

Blues is a part of a man. It's the way he feels. Lot's of people have the wrong understandin'. They think a blues player have to be worried. Thinks the blues player have to be whipped or something, or worried, or troubled or something to sing the blues.

That's wrong. There's doctors. He has medicine. He ain't sick, but he makes stuff for the sick people. So blues players. He ain't worried and bothered, but he's got something for the worried people. With a doctor, your can see his medicine. He can see his patient. Blues, you can't see the music; he can't see the patient, because it's the soul. So I work on the soul and the doctor works on the body. So something for your soul. Do something for your body. All is mixed in one. Two makes one.

I been goin' to Europe since 1960-1961. People all appreciated the blues everynight I played... eight, ten thousand people a night, in Europe, even in the small towns.

There, nobody could ever become graduated on it, that they can't learn no more music. You just get to think you're finished up and there is something brand new started that you didn't get. So, on and on. It's gonna' be that way.

The blues is a talent. You can't learn that. there's nobody teaches that. No schools for it. Nobody can teach it to you. God gives every man a talent. It don't come in schools. It's something you born with. It's a feelin'. Can't nobody give you that feelin'. You have to have it. You can't buy it and you can't give it away if you got it.

Blues is a part of a man. It's the way he feels. Lots of people have the wrong understandin'. They think that a blues player have to be worried.

Freddy King (August 3, 1969)

Jazz gets a little too way out. I can't understand it if it gets too way out. You understand what I mean by too way out? Away from the beaten track, the common ground or bond of all men. Away from the heart. Blues is the heart.

Fred Below (August 3, 1969)

Altogether different beat, difference in chord structure. Modern Jazz is a measured thing. Blues is not measured. There's as much different between blues and jazz as between night and day.

Louis Myers (August 3, 1969)

Blues is a whole lot different than jazz. I think blues is more so the soul bag than jazz. Jazz is modified from the blues. This [the blues festival] is a big family reunion.

James Madison (August 3, 1969)

Blues is like something that's happened to you. You feel it. You have the blues each and every day. jazz is more or less something you learn. You wake up and are worried about something, try to put it in music, it's blues.

Jack Myers (August 1, 1969)

Improvisation: I think jazz is limited, man. You got certain changes you gotta' make, while if you play the 12-bar blues, a cat can just express his self. Blues is something that is happening every day, that you can understand.

James Cotton (August 3, 1969)

(Blues festival) I've never seen nothin' like this in my life. This is the beatifulest thing I ever seen in my life. This is so beautiful.

Luther Tucker (August 3, 1969)

Everyday brings a little change. As for the blues festival, I can dig it. I enjoyin' it.

Charlie Musslewhite (August 3, 1969)

Blues is a thing by itself. You can express it through music. You can express it by talkin' or paintin' or just walking' down the street, you know. Blues is a thing, separate. Music is a medium for it. Music just happens to be a very comfortable way to express the blues. Jazz is just like takin' a tune, it's just messin with it. You take music and mess with it. takin' a chord and instead of playin' it real conventional, playin' it real crazy. Blues is a thing.

Jimmy Dawkins (August 1, 1969)

I feel like the blues is the truth, because when a guy sings the blues, he sings what happened. Jazz, you can adlib. You can do the little things you wanta' do to please the public. When you're doin' blues, that's the truth, that's the whole story of blues, tellin' the truth. If something happened to you that sets you back, that's the blues.

Blues is standard. Maybe the jazzman makes a little money, so he don't want to be in the bag anymore. So he try to move away from it, but he never leaves blues. He just try to play something else.

When a musician has not paid his dues, he sounds like somebody else. He does not sound like himself.

The blues festival gives breathing space for smaller bands to expand and achieve self-confidence and standing.

When you got the blues, you're always searchin' for happiness, and when I'm up there on the stage, I'm always searchin for something deeper and deeper all the time.

Fred McDowell (August 1, 1969)

You play with understanding. That's the way I play.

Lightnin' Hopkins (August 3, 1969)

Now I just have to tell ya'. I never knowed anything about no jazz, because jazz never affected my life. In my life, the blues always dwell with me. Now, here's

what the blues is: that is a good man feelin' bad. You ever heard of that? Now, I'm gonna' show you and it is true. Now you can walk right here and have one dollar in your pocket. You going to the store. You loose that dollar, before you get there. then you walk on by and you turn around. Lord, what happened to me? And now what you got? You got nothin' but the blues.

[festival] Well, I been looking forward for this for a long time. And I thought this would happen in the future and it did, so now I hope it lasts long. Fact of business is, I believe it will.

Bob Koester (August 2, 1969) [Delmark Records]

What is Jazz? The element of improvisation has to be present, blues chord structure has to be present.

Blues is a vocal music and jazz is an instrumental music, and if you have an artist who is a great guitar player, and he does not sing well, he's eventually gonna' wind up in the jazz field, or somewhere else.

Jazz is the ability to get away from that chord structure and the 12-bar language. It's a matter of material. But also, I think it is the emphasis on the instrumental aspects of the music, rather than the vocal. Blues is not only vocal, it's verbal, where words mean a great deal.

Big Mama Thornton (August 3, 1969) [Hound Dog]

Jazz? I don't understand it in the first place. It don't have no endin. Here he is up there blowin' and maybe he blow till he get tired, then he just stop. What about rock and roll? Some folks say: It's nothin' but a hopped-up, fast-up blues. That's all it is.

I like to let my audience be close to me, you know what I man? And I want them to feel that they are close to me, anyway, because I wants to be close to them, because I want to express myself to let them know what I do and how I do it. And if they can do it, good luck to 'em, is all I can say.

Muddy Waters (August 2, 1969)

Blues. I lived them. I lived them musically and I lived them lifewise. Blues is the mother of jazz and all those things. A blues performer stays in blues, when he loves them like I do. To me, I'd rather remain with the blues and not try to move into the jazz field. I didn't even have it on my mind to try a change, to do something else.

Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup (August 3, 1969) {Wrote Elvis's first song]

I'm this a way. If I go to work for you, and just whatever I promise you, that's what I will do. If I promise you that tomorrow afternoon, me and you gonna' fight, we gonna' fight. The reason we don't fight is that I don't meet you, and that's the way I am. I only have nothin' but my word. And through not nothin' being but my word, I have to do as I say. A man's word is his bond. And if a man's word ain't no good, he ain't no good. And I've learned that.

You know the life of a musician is only thirty-three years, if he live it. Somebody will either poison you; some woman will kill him, or some man will kill him. And if you go beyond that, you got to treat everybody nice.

Magic Sam (August 3, 1969)

This festival is like an all-star game.

The blues has been handed down from generation to generation. Blues came from spirituals. It developed and developed. Jazz is taken from the blues.

T-Bone Walker (August 3, 1969)

Without Blues, there wouldn't be no jazz. Blues is the basis of all jazz.

Clifton Chenier (August 2, 1969)

Blues gonna' forever be here. Jazz goes on and off. See? The blues always standard. Jazz is Ok for those who like it, you know.

Otis Rush (August 2, 1969)

Blues is the foundation of all music. They keep buildin' and buildin' on it, just like these cars. They didn't use to look like this, jazz is a thing like I'm saying. They just pep blues up. They speed it up. they cut it up, all kinds of ways and pieces. They got time to go by, nothin' but time, and they can cut it up all kinds of ways. This is what I mean by cutting it up.

Son House (August 3, 1969)

Yeah, Yeah. It's all right I think. Mostly all the old guys, they mostly all are gone. I think Willie Brown was about the last one.