ANN ARBOR
The 1960s Scene

by Michael Erlewine
ANN ARBOR
The Sixties Scene
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INTRODUCTION

This is not intended to be a finely produced book, but rather a readable document for those who are interested in my particular take on dharma training and a few other topics. These blogs were from the Fall of 2018 posted on Facebook and Google+.

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Here are some other links to more books, articles, and videos on these topics:

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ANN ARBOR

Here are a series of articles on Ann Arbor, Michigan culture in the late 1950s and 1960s. It mostly some history of the time from my view and experience. I could add more to them, but I’m getting older by the day and I feel it is better to get something out there for those few who want to get a sense of Ann Arbor back in those times.

I have edited them, but only roughly, so what you read is what you get. I hope there are some out there who can remember these times too. As for those of were not there, here is a taste as to what Ann Arbor was like back then.

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How I Fell in Love and Got Married

ANN ARBOR LOVE SONG

Ann Arbor has always, for me, been a romantic place. After all, it was the one place in all the world that I fell in love with a woman and married her. I guess I had been looking for her ever since I was in Tappan Junior High School, or before that when I was going to Catholic school at St. Francis of Assisi, just across the street.

Through all my early years, despite all the other interests and activities I had going on, deep within me, there was this search to find my life partner, the woman that I would love and who possibly could also love me. I am not always that easy to be around.

And I can't forget all those late-night walks around Ann Arbor when I was unable to sleep, just walking the streets, hoping against hope, to run into "Her." Well, as it turned out, it wasn't quite that easy. It took time for me to settle down and even be ready for marriage. Here is my story. I am sure there are those of you reading this that have one too.

As a musician about town, there were always women who wanted to get to know me, but I grew tired of dating, one-night stands, and short flings. I wanted someone that I really loved and to be with her for the rest of my life, you know, the traditional marriage -- a partner. And that is apparently a lot to ask from the universe. Anyway, she sure took her sweet time in showing up, but she finally did and I am thankful for that.

Perhaps I had first to build a nest. For many years I had slept on a tiny mattress that I had specially made. It was so thin, little more than a pallet on the floor, and very, very narrow, not built for two. But then in the January of
1971 I found myself getting rid of the mat in favor of a real mattress, in fact, a waterbed, something I didn't need, so who was it for? I'm sure I didn't know, but it was some kind of ritual and sign all the same. Or was it a case of coming events casting their shadow?

As mentioned, I had kind of reached the end of trying to get together with this woman or that -- flings. I was serious about getting together with a partner and had more or less given up short flings in favor or more permanent or serious relationships. My latest attempt was with very nice young lady and we both did our best to put something together. In the end it did not work out and we both did our best to remain friendly, but it was not easy. That great love I yearned for and wanted to feel was just not there. That's just how it was at the time of this story. And I am getting to what happened next, the good part.

I used to play music on Monday nights, just myself and my old Wurlitzer piano, at a place called the Odyssey Bar. It was at 208 W. Huron Street in Ann Arbor, just off Main Street. If I remember right, Wednesday was "Wine Night" at the Odyssey and they served this cheap Boone's Farm stuff (or some kind of ripple wine), but we drank it just the same. So, once in a while I would wander down on wine night to hear a band I really liked called "Buddies in the Saddle." And way up at the front was a big long table, sort of reserved for the local regulars; at least all my friends would sit there. It was set parallel to the stage.

So there I was, sitting on the far side of that table from the stage, right in the middle of wine night, but drinking orange juice. My love of alcohol was an on and off thing. I never drank all that much and when I did, I was often sorry. Anyway, I knew most, but not all, of the people at our table that night, but certainly not the dark-haired woman sitting across from me to my right and perched
on an old piano. But she had apparently noticed my orange juice and made a point of calling me out on it, and loudly, so everyone could hear. After all, this was wine night.

"Drinking orange juice? What are you, some kind of pansy?" Well, that got my attention for sure, and she probably had no idea that as a performer I had no qualms about speaking up in a group or that I was not as shy as the orange-juice guy she thought she was teasing. I could be direct too, so I got right in her face, but in a friendly way. I probably made her squirm a bit and wish she had just left me alone. I can't remember exactly what she said in response to my challenge, but the last part of it was something to the effect she wanted no more conversation with me and that "this is the end of it!" And then something really strange happened, something that has occurred only once or twice in my life.

And that is, as I responded to her ending our conversation, I suddenly could hear my own voice speaking in the silence of my mind as if I were listening to myself talk, as I said out loud to the woman: "This is not the end; this is just the beginning!" As I spoke, I found my own words ringing in my head and took them in as almost some kind of cosmic message. "What was that all about?" I thought, and then dropped it. Nothing much else happened that night.

Instead, it all happened about a week later at a favorite Ann Arbor bar called "Mr. Flood's Party," a place where I had often performed. They had a high (but small) stage that looked out over the room, and nestled right near and under that stage was a long booth, one that could seat a bunch of people, but you had trouble getting out of because of the length.

So, I was sitting in Floods having a beer with a group of
friends. I was kind of wedged in there at the back, but all was good until the woman I had been having the relationship with walked in. Now, as I mentioned earlier, I guess we were not getting along that well and I wondered if from the look she gave me as she came through the door and spied me sitting there that she was not happy with me. Worse, there I was, stuck at the far end of the booth and surrounded by friends. She had me in the perfect spot to give me some lip in public, which I assumed she might be about to do. And she quickly sat down at the end of the table near the door, blocking my exit. I felt trapped.

Well, I just couldn't have that, so while everyone's attention was on this woman, and before she could settle in, I climbed over the back of the booth and was out of there, heading deeper into the bar looking for a seat and hopefully more friends, pleased that I had escaped what could have only been a difficult scene. However, as I looked around, I could see that all the tables were full and the only open seats were a few barstools.

As I moved along the bar, in front of me I saw the dark-haired lady that had teased me at wine night about drinking orange juice. She was sitting on a barstool, and there was an open seat right next to her. Any port in a storm, thought I, and quickly slipped onto the seat beside her, jokingly saying something like, "Hello you nasty old woman," to remind her who I was and what she had tried to do to me last week. She just smiled.

Yet, it seemed that my sitting down with her was OK and we were soon trading small talk. It turned out that her name was Margaret. And then the most amazing thing happened. She told me that she already knew who I was and that we used to live just down the street from one another, and would at times pass each other walking from here to there.
When she said that, I remembered seeing her one day while I was carrying some stuff from Circle Books (the metaphysical bookstore up on State Street where I worked) to my room on Division Street, and back, about two blocks away. To get there, I would cut through the corner of the First United Methodist Church lawn at Huron and State.

And there, one time, sitting on some low steps at a side entrance to the church was this same young lady. I remember that when our eyes met that day by the church my heart went out to her, and perhaps that feeling was returned. I don't know. It was just something a little magical that had happened in passing. As you know, I was always hoping to meet the "One."

Anyway, sitting on that bar stool in Mr. Flood's Party that night, it all came back to me. And when I realized who she was, I looked into her eyes more intensely to check her out and one of the most profound moments in my life just spontaneously arose. In a flash, I was somehow looking through and beyond her personality and deep within her mind or the Mind. And I was struck to the heart by the purity and innocence I saw there, despite all the attempts on her part to appear tough and world-wise.

Instead, she seemed so completely vulnerable and open to me. In that instant, I fell down the rabbit hole. And to my total surprise, all I wanted to do was to protect her, to endlessly care for and love this woman, and shield her from the sorrows and sufferings of what I knew life could bring. I had never felt this way about anyone before, not even close. As they say in that moment "the dewdrop slipped into the shining sea." I was gone.

At the same time that I was overcome with feelings of wanting to care for this girl I had just met, I also had a
metaphysical revelation as I tend to do. I am always having these insights and visions. For all these years I had been looking for someone just like me, but of course a woman -- some other “One.” There was me over here (this one) and I was looking for my counterpart (another one) over there, who would love me like I loved her. And this is a little hard to explain, so please bear with me.

Then, in that moment at the bar, I realized for the very first time that in all the world that is there was no “other One,” but as the Greek philosopher Parmenides had pointed out so long ago: "Being Alone Is." There has never been two, but all along only one. My idea of "alone" and being alone, which I had held close all those years morphed on the spot into a new concept, that instead of alone, the reality was "all one," almost the same word. I got it, a major and profound realization for this guy.

It became clear to me that all dualities resolve into one, sooner or later. So, there was no independent being, "me," over here and then another independent being in "her" over there. Yes, there were two persons, but only one “Being.” As Parmenides said, “Being alone is!” Well, being alone was all I had ever known, but this being all-one was new to me, and instantly I know this with the truth. And in that moment, for me, the two separate beings became one, at least in my mind.

I can't expect to be understood here; I can only tell it like it was, as I remember it. Anyway, in that moment when I looked into her eyes, all of this just happened, and without thinking, without a thought. I write it here in words, but in reality it just happened. I finally realized that the idea of the “two” that I carried around all my life was already one and always had been so. And it was Margaret's person through whom (and with whom) I realized this apparent eternal truth. That, my friends,
was a sign. LOL.

And to take a note from the movie "Jerry McGuire," she had me from that first moment of insight into her purity. I was gone, no longer looking or able to honestly continue in good faith to look outside myself for some mysterious "other," for I had just realized that there was (and could be) no other "One." It was a logical impossibility. But here 'was' Margaret and it was she through whom I realized this truth. As mentioned, I took this as a good sign and just naturally responded to her with my entire being.

And I felt that unless someone like me, who could see how precious she was, cared for and shielded her from the harshness of life, she, like a rare flower, might be lost in the struggles life brings. I could not bear the thought of this and, in that instant (and probably for the first time in my life) I put someone else's welfare above my own – Margaret's.

I guess, at least for me, that's what love is. There was no way I could just have walked on by her in my life (as I had with other relationships) and just leave her there. Not possible. And it was already too late for that. For the first time I felt personally responsible for another human being and, as mentioned, I was more concerned with caring for her than I was for my own comfort. And that was news! I had been the island and suddenly I was the sea.

You might say that it was love at first sight, from that very first moment when I looked deep within her mind (or my mind) -- whatever. And for me, that was it. I was hooked. I had already and without question just said "I do" or "I will" to her in my mind, but she didn't know it yet. In truth I was as married as I have ever been from that very night and not three months later when we actually got married. Marriage is when it happens, not at
Anyway, later that evening Margaret and I left the bar together and have never been separated since. As mentioned, we got married a few months later and have remained so for going on 48 years. Lest you get the wrong idea that marriage for me is just a dream, it's not. Marriage is also hard work, but what they say about death and old age fits here: it beats the alternative. At least that is my view.

I share this to point out what I have come to know love is and how it happened. So that's the story of how I fell in love and got married. I was thirty years old. She was twenty-three. I met Margaret March 26, 1971 and we were married about three months later. We had only $200 for a wedding and had it outside under a 200-year-old oak tree, with a couple of hundred friends. We made our own food, which was nothing more than French bread, potato salad, and beans. Our dear friend Tecla Loup made the wedding dress, the heart-shaped wedding cake, and was the maid of honor. My English Bull Terrier Manley was the entertainment, swinging like a propeller on a rope from a limb of the oak tree. We didn't stand on ceremony, but we did have one. It was great!

Today we have four grown kids, three daughters, a son. And we have eight grandkids.

Here is a short video of my dog Manley at our wedding in 1971.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D0q4Tv-MnC8

[Here are some shots of Margaret I took on video back in 1971 soon after we were married, when the two of us ran a greenhouse in the middle of winter in Evart Michigan. Isn't she lovely?]
Beautiful Margaret
Ann Arbor Bars
Looking for guidance, looking for a sign or pointing where to go, how to live. The Beats were cool and were into something different. A little more social and outward yet was the burgeoning jazz scene in Ann Arbor. And this was before it was legal to buy liquor by the glass in Ann Arbor, which meant that for the most part there was no music in the bars. Music was happening but it was happening privately, in the houses, and usually in the apartments and rented houses of U-M grad students and liberated townies.

It was jazz that was being played live in these houses and when the music was not live, it was more jazz or classical albums on the turntable. And what atmosphere there was came from the Beat atmosphere, low lights, little or no furniture, and always a sense of the “cool.” For most of us it was follow-the-leader and this meant ignoring American films and instead having late night conversations, cigarettes, and coffee after a Bergman or Fellini film. It was cool to get “down” and be serious.

And it was literate, in particular European literature, Thomas Mann, Rilke, Kafka, Gide, Sartre, Camus, Kierkegaard, etc.

Try as we might, the Beatnik generation was fading and so much seriousness was no longer fun, and probably never had been. We tore ourselves away from the European shtick we had been emulating and started to wake up to our own youth.

And there were things happening in Ann Arbor, things that did not stem from or depend on Europe
Ann Arbor Drive-Ins

Ann Arbor townies back in the late 1950s knew where to spend their weekend nights and often weekday afternoons too. It was just a short ride from the new Ann Arbor High School (built on Stadium Boulevard and Main in 1954) to the first Ann Arbor McDonalds drive-in at 2000 W. Stadium. This was when McDonalds was posting to its sign less than 100,000 burgers sold nationally or thereabouts. Today it is more like 300 billion and climbing.

On Friday and Saturday nights, carloads of teenagers (boys in one car, girls in another) would endlessly circle between Everett’s Drive in and the A&W (both on stadium Blvd.), only a block or two apart, and then every third pass or so we would sweep down to McDonalds and back. All the hot cars, low to the ground, with their deep-voiced mufflers, would growl through the drive-ins, going around again and again all the way until 2 AM or so. It was “American Graffiti” in real life. We lived it.

Cute carhops would shuttle back and forth hanging their trays of ice-cold root beer and Coney dogs off your windows. We would park next to our friends and carry on or jump out and move around the parking lot, getting in or leaning-on the cars of those we knew. Or, if you had a steady girl you would circle around, but that was less common. Most of us didn’t have anyone, which is why we were there in the first place.

And on some nights we would exit the drive-ins almost en-masse and convoy out Liberty Street to Zeeb Road where we would race the fastest cars against one another for a quarter mile. Dozens of cars would be parked along the road. My friend Doug (Fontaine) Brown would get his dad’s Studebaker Golden Hawk
and that thing could do 150 mph. And we rode that fast, just to test it out.

And if you were cool, perhaps you were part of a hotrod club. I was a member of the Tachs, and had a little metal plate saying so hanging from my back bumper. Then I was driving my dad’s old Ford Victoria hard-top coupe, dark green with cream trim. I was cool.
Ann Arbor Drugs in the Early 1960s

How did the drugs in the late 1950s compare to what took place when the Sixties were in full swing? For one, the stupid inhalers and cough syrups were just gone. No one did that anymore. And the rolls of Dexedrine and Benzedrine disappeared too. There was speed, but it was usually methamphetamine, much more dangerous to play around with. As for pot, it was a constant, but the quality got better and better and, so I am told, it does to this day.

As for alcohol, it remained, but wine was no longer the drink of choice. Beer, and good beer at that, was much more common and the hard stuff also crept back in. And now we come to the one important drug of those times: LSD.

Everyone smoked pot at least once in a while. I can remember we had a whole pound of marijuana hidden under a board in the attic at the Prime Mover house and it was not very good pot at that. We smoked every last fiber of it, like it or not.

In the middle Sixties I did not know many who were into hard drugs like heroin or even cocaine. I tried to like pot, would get high and write music or poetry far into the night. But when morning came and I got up, whatever I wrote the night before was always terrible. For me there was no utility in pot, just getting high was all, which never has been enough for me. I have to be ‘doing’ something. Now LSD is a whole different story. With LSD I actually learned something, like: a lot. It literally changed my life.

I have written extensively elsewhere about LSD and in particular my own experiences with the drug. Here I just want to point out that this particular drug played a very important role in shaping the Sixties experience, at least
in the many people I have spoken to since that time who took the drug back then. I can’t tell you that LSD was easy sailing for many of us, but I can say that the overall consensus from everyone I know who took the drug was that the business end of LSD was all about learning. Learning what?

LSD is not a casual drug. Once you have had it you think more than twice before you do it again. If pot is a merry-go-round ride than LSD is the rollercoaster and a steep one at that. Speed is like having four arms and getting everything done. Pot is more like just getting high like with alcohol but certainly more entertaining. LSD and some of the other hallucinogens are a whole other experience and not at all like just getting high.

Boiling the LSD experience down, my own and that of many others I have discussed this with over the years, the main lesson learned from LSD is that it is capable of resolving the habitual subject/object dichotomy, which simply means the tendency to think I am here in my head looking out and the world I am looking at is independent of what I think.

On LSD that rigid division starts to break down. What we see in the outside world depends on what we project from our inside world. Perhaps we all get glimpses of this once in a while in day-to-day living, but acid makes it very clear: the world is our movie screen and upon it we project whatever prejudices and labels we are carrying around. And then, to make it worse, most of us take what we project, our own projections, as validation that what we see out there is in fact real – reality.

LSD is capable of breaking this dichotomy down and revealing to us that actually we play both parts, the projector and what is projected. Once we realize that we are the victims of our own projections… I mean ‘really” realize, then we can begin dismantling the projection
apparatus that has been doing this to us all of our lives. This is the positive power of LSD and other hallucinogens.

And while perhaps it is sad that it takes a drug like LSD to make this clear, IMO this is a small price to pay for the lesson learned: responsibility. The key take-away from LSD is that once we see our own dualisms for what they are, we become personally responsible for removing them. Up to then we are just fat in a frying pan, driven hither and thither by every passing wind and phantom our mind projects. We don’t even know that we watching a movie we ourselves are creating as we go along.

So the bottom line for me is that LSD and other hallucinogens made a whole generation more responsible for their own actions and it is this sense of responsibility that ‘responded’ (pun intended) to the actual needs of the real world and gave us whole and organic foods, home birth, home education, local responsibility, a greater sense of community, the Internet, etc., not to mention a unique generation of music, film, and the arts.

And it is this responsibility (feeling responsible like “it’s ours”) that is the reason that drugs like LSD cannot just be dismissed as simply an excesses of the hippie life, a side road or tangent. LSD was mainline, part of the main road or avenue that the Sixties folk travelled and the 1960s would not have been what they were without it.

After some fifty-five years of thinking about this, for me this is one of a few key considerations for understanding how the Sixties worked. My friend and 1960s icon poet/activist John Sinclair has come to the same conclusion, that LSD is the key to how the Beat movement ended and what we call the Sixties began.
LSD helped to make us responsible for our own actions and for this world we live in. And the Sixties children have proved this by their actions. They have walked their talk.
Ann Arbor Drugs in the Late 1950s

I know it is not popular to talk too much about drugs and it is especially bad to suggest that any drug whatsoever has value, so I want to be a little delicate here. At the same time drugs were very much a part of the Sixties and also part of the Ann Arbor scene, at least from the late 1950s when I tuned in. Let’s start there.

As a high school kid trying to hang out with college students and the few actual beatniks that Ann Arbor sported, there were drugs available to me and they ranged from the fairly harmless (unless used regularly) speed to heroin. I never used heroin and actually never tried to get any for that matter, but older friends of mine did. Some were addicts and some died.

Dexedrine was available (sometimes Benzedrine) and they would come in little rolls of ten or so (like candy) wrapped in aluminum foil. Their chief virtue is that with one or two of them you could stay up all night and we did. I can still remember the nausea that speed caused from being up way too long. It was real hard to finally get to sleep. Again, this was the late 1950s for the most part.

And of course there was marijuana, although for a teenager that was hard to come across. The people I met on campus were careful not to share that with me. As I have written elsewhere, we were so devoted to trying pot out that my friends and I would snort the ashes from joints that others left in the ashtray. That, my friends, is real dedication.

A little more weird was trying to extract the amphetamines from Valo inhalers, which were available in most drugstores. Now doing this could really make you sick for a while. Of course you threw up to get that high. Only a little more palatable was the habit of driving
from town to town buying one bottle in each town of Romular, a cough syrup that contained some amount of codeine. It was a cough syrup, but one you had to sign for. This was before the age of computers and if you moved fast enough you could stay ahead of the registration process and gather enough Romular to really get high. It too was disgusting stuff to drink in any quantity, but this is one of the things that the beat crowd did on a semi-regular basis.

Another popular drug was Paregoric, an anti-diarrheal drug that contained powdered opium and, for some odd reason, was available over the counter in Michigan until April of 1964, after which a medical prescription was required to purchase it. The Elixir Terpin Hydrate, which contained Codeine, was available without a prescription and still may be available.

As for hallucinogens, all we had early on was Peyote or Mescaline. Some had mushrooms or Psilocybin but I did not see much of it around Ann Arbor. When I was in high school I chewed some Peyote buds down in my little basement room, fairly promptly threw it all up, and watched tigers racing around on my bedroom walls for the night.

And let’s not forget alcohol, although people I knew were not really into the hard stuff. In fact even beer was not common. It was mostly about wine and often cheap wine at that. The beats drank wine and, therefore, so did I.

And last but not least there is nicotine. Literally everyone smoked and smoked a lot. Late nights were filled with smoke and either instant-coffee or wine. That’s the way it was.
Cinema Guild and the Ann Arbor Film Festival

Cinema Guide, established in 1950, was a student-run organization at the University of Michigan dedicated to the culture of films. The guild is the second oldest college-campus film society in the country. We all went to Cinema Guild and if you were looking to run into someone, they usually could be found at Cinema Guild sooner or later.

We all went there and saw an enormous variety of films, most of them foreign. In fact, Cinema Guide and the Campus Theater up on South University Street were where we actively absorbed whatever was European, most of it dark and brooding but some of it (Italian) occasionally bright and uplifting or at least nostalgic.

It could put you in such a dark light that you stayed up all night smoking, drinking instant-coffee (with powdered creamer), and talking the films through. Cinema Guild was held in the smallish Lorch Hall Auditorium in the old Michigan School of Art Building at 611 Tappan Street. Before and after films we often would walk through the various floors and look at the student statues and paintings that lined the halls.

In 1963 Cinema Guild and avant-garde composer/artist George Manupelli formed the Ann Arbor Film Festival. As of 1980, the festival has been independent of the University of Michigan and is now a non-profit arts organization. The festival usually presents almost a week of films, some 200 of them, and is the oldest experimental film festival in North America. Its mission has always been to present film as an art form. In March of 2012 the Ann Arbor Film Festival will celebrate its 50th year.

 Mostly I remember Cinema Guild and Lorch Hall Auditorium. The films shown there were films you would
never see anywhere else in Ann Arbor at that time except perhaps at the Campus Theater. During those years most everyone I knew avoided American films and theaters in favor of the dark, brooding European varieties.

During those early 1960s we all tried on everything dark and European, their films, philosophy, art, and literature. But although it gave us an education, it somehow didn’t stick. We were young, American, and just not that happy being so unhappy, which is how I interpreted much that was European after years of trying to emulate it.

I gradually threw it off and went back to being a young American in my twenties and that process really accelerated the advent of what we call the Sixties. Many of us back then escaped from the 1950s into all things European and then tiptoed out of that into our own peculiar celebration of American life. Forget about intellectuals and too many books Just live.

**The Gay Scene**

Back in the early 1960s the gay scene in Ann Arbor was pretty well defined. There was the Flame Bar and the Town Bar.

The Michigan Union (MUG) bathrooms were pretty much places that if you were straight you didn’t spend much time in. Since many of us spent loads of time in the cafeteria, trips to the john were always quick in-and-out affairs. You didn’t look to the right or left because
someone could be eyeballin’ you. You did your business and got out.

The north exit to the Michigan Union opened onto a small fountain in the center of a circular drive used to drop people off. To your right was a long low cement wall that extended all the way out to S. State Street and that wall was a major cruising area for gays. Since a number of us who were in the folk-music crowd liked to be outside too, we would occupy the grass to the south of the wall, but tended not sit on the wall unless we be viewed as inviting invitations. No words were ever said but each group kind of stayed in their particular territory.

And there was definite a group of gays working at the Graduate Library and they would throw parties, gay parties but straight people were also invited, especially guys of course.
The Promethean Coffee House

These days when I visit Ann Arbor it takes twenty minutes just to drive across town. If I have one phrase to describe the difference between Ann Arbor back then and now, it is “overly caffeinated.” Today there seems to be a coffee shop on almost every corner and it makes a difference. Back then there was just one coffee house and that was Mark’s Coffee House on East William Street, and for those of you who are as old as I am you might remember the actual first coffee house in Ann Arbor, “The Promethean” on the other side of William Street from Mark’s and about a block west, just down from where the Cottage Inn pizza place is today.

The Promethean Coffee House served (non-espresso) coffee, mulled cider (with cinnamon sticks!), and played jazz albums, not to mention the Shelly Berman comedy albums. Once in a while folksingers like Al Young (today Poet Laureate of California) would play there. This must have been in the late 1950s. I went there as often as I could just to sit around, drink coffee, smoke cigarettes, look serious, look for beatniks, and (most of all) hope that I would meet the love of my life. Nothing much really happened there aside from all of the sitting around and sneaking glances at one another and after a while it just closed. It was not really much of a hangout. It had somehow already been sanitized. The Michigan Union Grill (MUG) was where the real “beats” hung out anyway. As a high-school student I used to work there busing dishes and what-not. When not working my high-school buddies and I would hang around in the Michigan Union, either playing pool on one of the upper floors or having fun in the tiny bowling alley that was there. I suppose we were trying to pass for college students, but with our antics I doubt that was successful except maybe in our own minds.
Still, for someone like me, who was reading all of Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs, and the Beat writers, this was as close as I could then get to joining up with the Beat Movement. I was still in high school. Unfortunately the beat movement was already almost over, only I didn’t know that yet. I still hoped I could catch a ride on that train before it left the station. But I would have to wait for the next wave, which turned out to be the Sixties and (I hate this term) the “hippies.” I was never a hippie. I am a couple years older than the hippies, so call me a pre-hippie or a post-beat.

And at that time in Ann Arbor I would be at parties with Anne Waldman, Norman Mailer, Bob Ashley, Bob James, and others. And I read anything that had to do with alternative spirituality, books on Zen, Existentialism, Confucius, astrology, numerology, etc. -- things like that.

And I inhaled the beat literature. It was everything I was not. Where I felt that I was trapped in a middle-class button-down society with crew cuts and permanent waves, Kerouac and kind were out in the real world glorifying the blue-collar working types, the blacks, or those not working at all. And I liked that. Instead of a future of fitting into some job that I could not imagine, how about no job at all? How about that for a future? The beats dreamed of an intellectual life of poetry, music, the arts, and they talked and talked, staying up late, smoking cigarettes, drinking wine, and taking substances -- just what I like to do. Meanwhile, I was facing the status-quo head-on and didn’t even have the status of a high-school diploma as a door opener. My lack of a diploma had already sealed my fate to working outside the middle-class, so the beats indeed seemed like an alternative: little to no work at all. What a wonderful idea!
Back then I was not in the least phased by “down,” by living on the edge or even beyond it in relative poverty, forced simplicity, and even discomfort. It was all cool to me at the time. The fact that it was mostly a drug and alcohol scene while living on next to nothing and (a dirty nothing at that) seemed something of a solution to me. A little dirt never hurts. Picking up and smoking other people’s cigarette butts was kind of cool in a way, at least cool enough to tell others about. It was what beats did. Getting handouts at a shelter or free health care at a clinic was just beating the system. Pilfering some food here or a little wine there was what everyone did. I had no trouble with that. I was an apprentice to that.

Back in 1960, as I have pointed out, there were no hippies and for that matter it was not even the Sixties when I studied up on the Beat Movement; it was still the 1950s and a life (up until them) lived in school, forced to study (which I did not), made to hide under the school desks because the Soviets might bomb us with atomic bombs any day, and having ourselves labeled by the idiot psychology of the time as manic-depressive, paranoid, schizophrenic, etc. I was not personally these things, but these were the kind of terms that were applied to our minds and psyche by society. This was my introduction to the mind – sick labels. So I left. I just dropped out. It was a relief.

All that I cared about is that I was at last out of boring, boring school, on my own, and free to experience for myself what I could only read about and imagine in the books of Kerouac and the poems of Ginsberg. As mentioned, the Beats were very educated in the liberal arts, often self-educated. They were not academics, but amateurs in the truest sense, in love with literature, music, and the arts. That is what I deeply wanted as well. I have always educated myself in all things. Back then I was my own teacher.
Clint’s Club: Anne Sreet

Clint’s Club at 111 E. Ann Street in Ann Arbor was one of those long narrow buildings that reach way back from the street. As you came into the club, the bar ran along the left side, while on the right was a row of picnic-sized tables at right angles to the door. In between the bar and the tables was space to walk. The small bandstand, located at the back and to the right, was raised something less than a foot high. We could barely fit all of ourselves and our equipment on it. Behind us, to the left (as you came in), was a single door that led to a backroom, and to the right bathrooms.

This single block on Ann Street (and only on one side at that) was the center of all Black businesses in Ann Arbor. It had a couple of bars, a pool room, and so on. There were two bars right next door to one another, the Derby Bar at 113 E. Ann, and then Clint’s Club one door to the east.

The Derby was a hangout for the younger Blacks and the Ann Arbor police journals have plenty of entries as to its toughness. This was where young policemen went to prove themselves and where they claim heroin and just about any other kind of illegal-whatever took place. To their mind, this was the “nastiest” part of Ann Arbor. The local police called it “The Block.” Apparently there were two murders in the bar in one year in 1974. The police claimed that when they answered a distress call and rushed to the bar, they often would find just a dead body and no witnesses.

Right next door was Clint’s Club, where the older Black folks went for a drink and to relax. We played at Clint’s club for something like a year and a half, sometimes on and off, but usually on weekends and often Thursday through Sunday nights from 9:30 until 2 AM. Our 5-
piece band was paid $35 a night for the whole bunch of us.

I have been in the Derby Bar a number of times and it was a lot rougher. The younger Blacks were ashamed (or so it seemed) that their parents and elders would listen to a mostly White blues band next door while they were into the latest R&B tunes. And at the Derby they didn’t like White folks all that much. I remember one time when my brother Dan Erlewine and I went into the Derby for a drink. Dan remembers:

“There was this guy Ron from my 9th-grade class at Slauson junior-high school. “Thelma” was his mom’s name (and also his nickname, since the young Black guys at Slauson called each other by their mother’s name). They called me “Phyllis” (my mom’s name) and that’s what Thelma said when we walked in. “Say Phyllis… etc. Then he said “Let me get you and your brother’s picture…” Then he charged us for the photo, and fleeced us for what little money we had… no bills, since we’d just bought a Pabst Blue Ribbon and I think we split that because it was all we had the money for. If they got $1.25 out of us, it’d have been all we had.”

It was like that. Racism works both ways.

Meanwhile, next door at Clint’s Club things were a lot friendlier. Mostly our band was all White, but sometimes we had a Black drummer, and so on. About as threatening as it got for us was that once in a while, when a song was over, one of the Blacks would call out “Come on everyone, let’s give these boys the clap.” That was kind of funny but also harmless.

I also remember one time when we were unloading equipment in the middle of the afternoon and, as we came in, we found Ernie, the manager, rolling on the floor with a customer who had a knife in his hand and
Ernie was smashing his head with a hammer. That got our attention, for sure.

Otherwise we were happy to play at Clint’s and did so for quite a long time. I know the bathroom was a little crude for some of our band. There was just one long white porcelain trough (about eight-feet long) for a urinal and a single bare toilet setting out in the open, OK for a whiz but not in great demand for ‘number two’. We would walk a couple of blocks east to our home for the serious stuff.

We loved playing Black music at a Black bar, as stupid as that might sound. We practiced hard and wanted to prove our sincerity by having our tunes heard by people who knew what they were all about. And these older Black folks knew the tunes. We were doing many of Little Walter’s songs, but also songs by Jimmy Rogers, Junior Wells, and all kinds of great blues songwriters. And we played our hearts out. Unfortunately we never made a record (one is coming out in 2019). A few years back one box of tapes emerged out of someone’s basement in which was one reel of a single set at Clint’s Club. Some of our band thought it stunk but I was glad to hear anything at all and to get to play it for my kids. Anyway, everyone but me sounded great!

I often wonder about my interest in seeking out wise older men to learn from. Perhaps it is because, although I had both grandmothers, I never had a grandfather, on either side. How I would know what I was missing I have no idea, but perhaps there is something in there that goes way back in the human race that wants to have a grandfather, someone separate from one’s father with perhaps more life wisdom, kindness, and hopefully a little time on their hands, enough for a grandkid or two.

What I never found in a grandfather I found in the great blues artists of Chicago. How did I get close enough to
know them? That started with me serving them food and
drink at the landmark Ann Arbor Blues Festivals in 1969
and 1970, and at the 1972 Ann Arbor Blues and Jazz
festival. Even more influencing was interviewing and
spending time with scores of the finest blues artists.
That sealed the deal. I was hooked.

Anyway I got close enough to encounter the kindness
for others in their life experience, no matter what color
you were. They had seen it all or most of it, and the
great ones were way beyond pettiness. Artists like Big
Mama Thornton, Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup, Roosevelt
Sykes, and others were accepting and nourishing. Of
course there were players that were stand-offish and
not friendly, but they were in the minority. Without
thinking, I immediately took these great beings as my
mentors.

For about six years I pretty much studied Black music,
the blues in particular. I played the records and played
along with the records. I supplemented that by playing
live music in the Prime Movers Blues Band from 1965
on. I stopped playing, more or less, in the spring of
1971. And I went to Chicago to see the blues artists
playing live and hosted them when I could. James
Cotton and his entire band stayed with us for, if I
remember right, some weeks.

I can’t say much for my playing, but I do know that I did
not lose respect for the great blues players. I was
always the student, and never graduated to arrogance
in this area. I feel the same today. I was never trying to
get anywhere and I did not get far in that regard. It was
enough to hear, study, and attempt to play the blues.

When it came to white boys playing the blues, our
greatest influence was that first Paul Butterfield Blues
Band album which came out in the fall of 1965. They
were our heroes and we got to know them some.
Whenever they played in Detroit or near us, we would go. And we traveled to Chicago just to hear them play. I was told that Paul Butterfield himself said that the Prime Movers were the second-best white blues band in the country. Of course the Butterfield band was the best, and they were, no doubt about it.

For a while we would do the same songs they did, many of which were the same songs the great blues masters did. Then we moved on into mostly songs that I liked because I had to sing them.
DAVID’s BOOKS

David’s Books was located inside Saguaro Plants on Ashley Street, but relocated to Liberty Street in 1978. David Kozubci sold the store and moved to Beverly Hills, where he did bit parts in commercials (Godfather’s Pizza) and movies (Sylvester Stallone movie).

I knew David back then and he lived near me. My David Kozubci story is when one early morning in the dead of winter David showed up on my front porch stark naked except for a pair of underpants. His wife had thrown him out and locked the door. I gave him an old camel-hair coat that I had always intended to wear but never got around to it because it had too much attitude. David gratefully accepted it and vanished on down the street with it on.
Liquor by the Glass

How could the repeal of prohibition in 1933 affect the onset of the Sixties in Ann Arbor? It sounds like Chaos Theory where the flapping of a butterfly wing in Brazil affects the amount of snow that falls in Greenland. But such an effect did occur.

Prohibition was repealed at 6 P.M. May 11, 1933 at the Court Tavern on 108 East Huron and simultaneously at some nineteen other Ann Arbor businesses that day. But there was a catch that, although Ann Arbor would no longer be a dry city, liquor by the glass could not be sold at bars but only in private clubs like the Elks and the Town Club. And here is how it affected the onset of The Sixties.

Because liquor by the glass was illegal, it meant that bars did not have the extra cash to hire musicians and their bands. The result of this was that the jazz scene in Ann Arbor was not in the bars but instead in houses (usually student rentals) around town. This “liquor by the glass” law was finally repealed on November 9, 1960, but up to that point there was a special music atmosphere that only existed privately. As a high-school student interested in all things Beat, including jazz, I found my way into that scene, albeit only as a tolerated bystander. And there was a vibrant music scene happening in Ann Arbor for those who knew about it.

I can remember one large rental on the north side of the street in the first block or two of E. William Street. Hanging from the second story out over the front steps was an enormous flag with a photo of Thelonious Monk and (if I remember right) just the single word “Monk” or did it say “Thelonious Monk” It may have only had Monk’s image. It was in houses like these that the forefront of jazz was taking place. Jazz players like Bob
James, Ron Brooks, Bob “Turk” Pozar, and Bob Detwiler played. Small groups formed and improvised far into the night.

As a high-school kid, I was allowed in but had to keep a very low profile, sitting along the floor with my back against the walls and taking it in. No one offered me any of the pot they were smoking, but a friend and I used to snort the ashes left by the joints. That was how dedicated we were in our wish to emulate everyone there. Aside from smoking pot, there was lots of wine and when they were not improvising jazz, they were playing classical music on the stereo. And although the atmosphere of those parties was not pure Beat, it was all serious and “down” as the beats liked it. The sunlight and nakedness of the Sixties was yet nowhere to be seen. This was the late 1950s.

The point of relating this is to point out that these underground jazz sessions were just one of several indicators that pointed the way from the Beat movement forward to what was to come in just a few years, the advent of the Sixties. I am talking here of the late 1950s and very early 1960s.

These houses and jazz parties usually had one or two largish rooms. The jazz players would set up in a corner…. drums, a standup bass, and a horn, usually a saxophone, but sometimes a flute. And of course a piano, if one was present. There was very little vocal jazz as I remember. The drink of choice back then was wine, red wine, and you would usually find it out in the kitchen in gallon jugs or bottles.

And there was pot, something that for a high-school boy like myself (who was reading Kerouac) desperately wanted to get a taste of. And these things went late. Time was something we had back then, with nothing better than that night waiting for us before the next day.
The right-now of the late nights was just about perfect. And it was oh, so serious. All of the dark mood of European movies, art, and literature had rubbed off on us until “down” was our form of cool. The word “cool” says it all. We were not hot, or even warm. We were cool.

And let’s not forget the poetry. Words were big with the beats, and literature and poetry were the coin of the realm. If it was not about music, it was cigarettes, coffee, and endless talking until the bennies or Dexamills wore off. And it is not like we had any experience in life at that point, so it was all speculation.

If I was on speed and also drinking coffee, some sort of high nausea will take hold of me as it got toward morning. My hands would shake, but I also knew that in that state no sleep would come for a long time yet, and any attempts to rest would be find me lying there wide awake, slightly in the zone, when dawn came. Any sleep would only be a half-sleep. I would be telling myself by that time that I never wanted to take speed again, but I probably would. And I am talking about those little rolls of Benzedrine wrapped in aluminum foil… about ten or so, the size of aspirin.

So those were the two places where I felt (at the very least) the presence of the Beat muse, in those all-night house parties at night and sitting in the Michigan Union by day. For Ann Arbor, that was it. And although the beat stereotype image might be of the solitary thinker, the beats (or wannabes) I knew were remarkably social. They seemed to like gathering together. Of course there were one-to-one talks in apartments or even single rooms, but as often as not they were about administering drugs. I can remember one beat person, Fran Trun. He was older than me and had all the earmarks of the beat generation, including a heroin habit. He lived way out State Street in Ann Arbor,
almost to the Stadium bridge. Some late nights I would venture out there and if his light was one, I would go up. More than I once I had watched him cook his heroin, tie off an arm, and shoot up. Too me that was something to see, about as close to real experience as I got back then. Sometime later I heard he had died when his car careened off a Pennsylvania turnpike. I can only guess at where his head was at that moment.

And many of the Ann Arbor beats were just students, although students that were conspicuous by their berets, long hair, and navy pea coats. I had the pea coat, but was too embarrassed to wear a beret. And of course, they seemed to always be older and more serious than me. I so much wanted to be older and to be part of all that. And there were the women. I was too young to really deserve much attention from the beat women, although they were so beautiful. As I was really just a townie, I gravitated to the townie women who, like myself, danced at the edge of the student beatniks. And there were not many.

I remember a tall, skinny blonde girl name Francis Hurley that I kind of followed around or hung out with. She was shared by a number of us and I was more a friend than anything else. I do remember spending the night with her at this or that place, although probably nothing much happened.

And places to have sex in Ann Arbor when you were in high school and living at home were very hard to come by. The empty room or apartment, the tiny side room off where others were partying, the back seat of a car, the summer grass – anywhere you could. It was a constant problem. I can remember my grandmother who live at the corner of East University and Hill Street had a little basement room that she would rent out to students. Sometimes it would be empty and I would sneak in with
my girlfriend, file down the basement steps and past the old furnace and slip into that small room. What a godsend it was to be out of the elements and alone with someone you wanted to make love with. Of course grandma, good Catholic that she was, would have hated the goings on there, or would she?
Russell Gregory: Transcendentalist

Every college town probably has a local bookstore where everyone who is ‘anyone’ educated hangs out. In Ann Arbor in the late 1960s (pre-Borders), that was Centicore Books, originally on Maynard Street, but relocated to South University. Somewhere I read that the official title was “Paper Back Bookstore and Centicore Modern Poetry Shop.” It was the South University period I am writing about here. Sure, there were other bookstores in Ann Arbor, but this particular one is where both the students and professors bought their books and hung out. Centicore was the place where you might run into Andy Warhol, Norman Mailer, or John Cage when they were in town. Centicore was “the” place.

And what made it that ‘place’ was a single individual, Russell Gregory. He didn’t own the store but he made the store what it was. He knew more about books and literature than any of us, professors included. And he was not simply a walking inventory of book names. He had read them all and could talk to you about them with real intelligence. Literally everyone who read knew Russell.

And he not only read books, understood them, and could guide any of us to where the best parts were, he also was a poet and writer (journals and essays). It was not enough for Russell to hold forth at the bookstore, he also had years of weekly get-togethers at his home at which all were welcome and great discussions took place. While the above is remarkable, that alone was not what endeared Russell Gregory to me.

Russell Gregory is a living Transcendentalist, just like Whitman, Emerson, and Thorough, the only one I have ever encountered who not only carries that lineage but
is able to project it into your consciousness and: what a view!

Russell Gregory in the Centicore bookstore pointing out which books on a topic are important and just why is one thing, important in itself, but Russell after hours or off in a corner of the shop actually reenacting the mental landscape of the Transcendentalists, empowering you in its vision is quite another. His ability to make that unique American philosophy actually come to life and live again or live on was another. Gregory’s sense of local history, his sense of “place,” was profound.

I am not talking about imparting the history of people, times, and places from a bygone era, but rather a sheer transport into those realms. You are there and those thoughts live again in you, now! Russell had that power and he shared it with those who could receive it, whenever possible. I would say Russell Gregory lived for those moments.

Personally, he was about as polite and careful in his dress and mannerisms as a human can be and yet he was also able to show you just enough of the edge of what he did not like for you to be guided. He was no stranger to opinions, just very careful to deliver them in such a way as not to be offensive. I wish I had that talent!

In time, Centicore and the 1960s went the way of the world and two brothers name Border took over and launched a completely different kind of bookstore in Ann Arbor. Russell eventually left Ann Arbor and moved back closer to his roots in Ionia, Michigan, where he lived. He served as the editor of the local Ionia newspaper for many years and I wish I had time to research what he did with that newspaper. I am sure it was remarkable. Later, Gregory worked part-time at Schuller’s Books in Grand Rapids, still guiding readers
to the best of the best and I am sure occasionally empowering lucky souls in American ideas.

I can remember one time I was being a little assy and chided Russell for not writing any poems recently. He turned and looked my dead in the eye and said: “Michael, these days my best poems are walking around Ann Arbor.” Enough said. I got the point.

Anyone else here remember Russell Gregory and care to comment?
Ann Arbor’s “The Ark”

The Ark is one of, if not “the” oldest folk or acoustic music venues in America from the 1960s that is still going. My band the Prime Movers Blues Band used to play there in 1966 when Iggy Pop was our drummer. This is when The Ark was a large fraternity-sized house at 1421 Hill Street known as the Henry Carter Adams House. There was no stage. We played in front of a fireplace in a large room and there were two connecting rooms that had wide open archways. There were not even any chairs. The audience sat on the bare floor or on cushions.

In fact, Dave Siglin, who became the manager of The Ark in January of 1969, told me the first time he ever stepped foot in The Ark was to hear my band the Prime Movers play. Dave just retired in 2008 after making The Ark one of the greatest music venues in this country.

The Ark really was there at the beginning and thanks to Dave & Linda Siglin and a host of dedicated board members and volunteers, the venue has grown from a small beginning through the very difficult process of scaling to the national treasure it is today.

The Ark was the inspiration of four Ann Arbor churches, the First Presbyterian, Calvary Presbyterian, Northside Presbyterian, and Campus Chapel. It was intended as a coffee house and gathering place for young people and the First Presbyterian not only came up with the majority of the funding but also provided the building on Hill Street, which was known as “Hill House.” By December of 1965 it was renamed “The Ark,” and has been known by that name ever since. From the get-go, The Ark was busy almost all week long and not just with music, but with poetry, movies, a Wednesday night hootenanny,
political and theological discussion, and Thursday Night Forums which featured a wide variety of local speakers.

Over time the church support became less available and the venue began to depend upon donations and admission fees. By the later 1970s, there were no funds available from the churches and this crisis precipitated a key fundraiser in the form of the Ann Arbor Folk Festival, an all-weekend happening that today has become an annual event. In addition, The Ark reorganized as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. That festival goes on today.

By the early 1980s, the First Presbyterian Church needed the Hill Street location for its own use and this resulted in The Arks move to 637 ½ S. Main Street where its first show featured Michael Clooney on September 8, 1984. And a little over ten years later the venue made is move to the current location at 316 S. Main Street, where it opened on September 12, 1996 featuring Greg Brown, Maura O’Connell, and the Chenille Sisters.

I have had the privilege to sit on a number of boards, including this venue, but never one as devoted or organized as that of The Ark. Not only is the Board of Directors and the Charter Members (who elect that board) remarkable but so is the group of over 400 volunteers who work to make each performance all that it can be. The Ark is a well-oiled machine that has produced what IMO is the finest folk, roots, and ethnic venue in the country. And it offers music 300 nights a year.

Over the years there have been something like 3000 acts, including national acts such as 3 Mustaphas 3, Adrian Belew, Ahmad Jamal, Aimee Mann, AJ Croce, Al DiMeola, Alvin Youngblood Hart, Andy Cohen, Angela Strehli, Ani DiFranco, Anson Funderburgh, Archie
The Beats and MUG (Michigan Union Grill)

Although an affluent community like Ann Arbor was hardly the culture in which the Beat movement (theoretically) thrived, nonetheless the influence of the Beats was present and very much felt in Ann Arbor back in the late 1950s and the early 1960s. There were no lines of skid-row apartments or dives where the beats hung out like you might have found in Detroit or Oakland but we did our best. The hang-out of choice was the “Union” (Michigan Union Grill or MUG as it is officially called) located in the basement of the Michigan Union on State Street. Of course all that has changed now and those rooms are unrecognizable but in the late 1950s and early 1960s this was where it all went down.

Back then there were three very large rooms in the basement of the Michigan Union, each one capable of seating between 100-200 people and the clientele in each room was segregated… not by race but by the type of people who hung out there. The room to the extreme right as you entered the MUG had not only the self-serve cafeteria line but both tables and booths. Here you would find mostly students, some townies, and people none of us knew. We didn’t go there, although I can vividly remember that room one dark day in 1963, staring up at the elevated TV, on the death of John F. Kennedy. That is where I was when Kennedy died.

The large dining room on the extreme left was not always open or at least was empty most of the day except for dinner or sometimes for lunch overflow. It was dinner time when this room was most active. People I know never went there unless they really needed to study or just to be alone. Otherwise it was empty, with the lights dimmed at times.
It was in the central room where everyone I knew hung out. This large low-ceilinged room with its harsh flat light was filled with small gray Formica tables that seated four each. The tables and chairs coupled with the low ceilings gave the impression of a sea of gray, about as 1950s a look as you could ever hope to find. The monotony of the place was punctuated here and there by large columns. We ignored all of that because here was where all the “Beats” hung out, and we usually would sit at tables closest to the door between the middle room and the empty dining room on the left. And this was how it was for many years. It was here that I sat around with folksingers like Joan Baez drinking coffee or patiently waited with a nervous Bob Dylan for the review in the Michigan Daily of his concert (of the night before) to appear.

Earlier, when I was in high school I used to bus dishes in the MUG, so even then I knew it well, but not as well as I would just a few years later. It was here that the local beats sat around, often so serious and with long faces. But it was (as mentioned earlier) also where the folk crowd hung whose faces were anything but long or dour. It was a case of two generations or lifestyles passing one another or coexisting. I wanted ever so much to fit into the beat crowd but in the end I found myself already naturally a part of the folk crowd and later on of the arts crowd.

In the end, it was with the music and arts crowd that I made my peace and more or less fit in. This was in 1960-1963, some years before I began to play music professionally. Back then I was… well… nothing much, not yet anyone at all. Some would say I was serious and I would say I “meant well.” That was the sum total of my ability at the time, to mean well. I was about twenty years old.
The Union was not like a restaurant or café where you were served or watched over. It was all cafeteria style and if you weren’t in the cafeteria line you were out of mind as far as the establishment was concerned, unnoticed, and free to just sit there with one cup of coffee (or nothing at all) all day long. No one ever came by and kicked you out. And we did just that. This was before there were any coffee houses in Ann Arbor, even before Mark’s Coffee House, and certainly before the plethora of caffeine-saturated places that Ann Arbor sports today. Oh yes, there was one sanitized beatnik coffee house, “The Promethean,” on E. Williams Street, but that was earlier and there only briefly -- hardly there at all.

Of course the cafeteria food of the MUG sucked, which is why we mostly just drank tea or coffee, plus the fact that no one had any money. And we drew on the napkins with our little Rapidograph ink pens. You had to be quick or the ink would spread fast and spoil your drawing. And there we sat… and talked…and talked. We smoked cigarettes. This went on for years and looking back it was a wonderful time, a time of belonging to a small close-knit group of friends, friends that were not too close, mind-you, but always (so it seemed) getting closer. And that was the fun. To us that was living.
The Frat Scene

What’s the one venue that always needs bands? Where do you often have to lug your equipment up three flights of stairs? and once on that third floor, you might find a sandy beach and everyone in bathing suits in the middle of winter? And where else will 20 guys moon all the girls in the room? You got it, on fraternity row. They didn’t pay that well, but when you had nowhere else to play you could often get a gig at a frat house. I have seen more than I would care to write about playing frat parties.

And they usually would feed us something and occasionally even tell us to help ourselves. I can remember eating bologna for weeks after one haul. Robert Sheff, our keyboard player, would fry it in a pan like it was a steak. I didn’t go that far. That was a lot of bologna.
Influence of the Beat Generation in Ann Arbor

We know about the stereotype crew-cut 1950s mentality out of which the Sixties emerged and it is a cliché by now to argue that the one was probably the cause of the other. And most of us know something about the Beat Generation that cast its shadow on the late Fifties and into the early Sixties, but less is known about that transition period from, let’s say, 1960 until the Sixties and “hippie” movement took hold around 1965. This appears like a gap or void in the history books relating to the Ann Arbor scene. What happened in Ann Arbor during that time? What were the influences that helped to shape the emerging Sixties culture?

This time period was not simply a dead-calm or empty void in history, and not just a pause between what had been and what was to come. In fact, Ann Arbor was very active during those years and that activity helped to shape what we now refer to as “The Sixties” mentality.

And let’s get a few things straight:

I wish I could say that the Beat Movement was “the” primary influence on the Sixties generation but that is not quite how it happened, at least in Midwest towns like Ann Arbor Michigan. By the early 1960s the Beat generation had mostly vanished, gone underground, or (embarrassing to groupies like me) had found ways to pimp a meager existence somehow. The Beats influenced and left their mark on the generation just a couple of years older than the Baby Boomers, what we might call the pre-Hippies or near-beats. Those pre-hippie kids like myself (and my friend John Sinclair) did everything we could to embed ourselves in the beat ethic, but it was just a little too late. We didn’t make that
train and were left standing at the station wondering what to do with our lives.

I learned a tremendous amount from the beats about art, poetry, European literature and philosophy, classical musical, jazz, and substances. The beatniks were literate, educated, sophisticated intellectually, and very aware of poetry and the arts. The hippies (at least in the beginning) were just the opposite: unsophisticated, uneducated, not literate, and so on. You get the idea. It probably was the baby boomers who failed to teach their kids how to really read and love books, a fact that is playing out today.

In other words, it was not the Beats themselves, but the near-beats (the pre-baby boomers) like myself who educated the hippies and pointed out to them the virtues of the arts, history, music and literature. I can recall members of my own group the “Prime Movers Blues Band,” players like our drummer Jim Osterberg (Iggy Pop), who soaked up all that sophisticated European stuff we knew about like a sponge. Both I and our keyboard player Robert Sheff (composer “Blue” Gene Tyranny) had been thoroughly trained in the intellectual tradition of The Beats. Iggy’s tenure with the Prime Movers Blues Band was like a crash course in everything that The Beats and continental culture had taught us: literature, philosophy, poetry, movies, and the arts. Maybe Iggy didn’t know it by chapter and verse but he had been introduced. He had taken the initiation. He knew it was hip.

In this way we communicated what the beats had taught us. I assume this was being done all over the nation. I know my friend John Sinclair did this and he was the one who first pointed out to me that this is what we had done. Thanks John!
Ann Arbor has been the birthplace for more than one new type of music and here I am talking about the now legendary Once Festivals. Originally held on February 24-25 and March 3-4, 1961 in the old Unitarian Church at 1917 Washtenaw Avenue and then continued annually until 1966, the Once Festivals changed the face of modern classical or avant-garde music forever. It turns out that I met and probably partied with most of these now famous avant-garde composers but I am sorry to say I was a Luddite at the time as relates to this kind of music.

I was lucky enough to have as a good friend Robert Sheff (aka “Blue” Gene Tyranny) who later played keyboards in our group the Prime Movers Blues Band. But in 1961, the Prime Movers were not yet even a twinkle in my eye. Robert and I lived in the same house and I was constantly exposed not only to Robert’s own compositions but by association most of the other composers who are now famous.

To the Once musicians, anything and everything was music. I can remember one concert where I believe they played the same note on the piano… was it for hours or was it all night? I got the idea after only a minute or two and the rest was wasted on me. I didn’t stick around for it.

Once Composers included Robert Ashley, George Cacioppo, Gordon Mumma, Roger Reynolds, Philip Krumm, and Donald Scavarda. And of course my friend Robert Sheff. There were six Once Concerts over five years (1961-1965) The last was held on the roof of Ann Arbor’s Thompson Street parking garage. Artists for that event included John Cage, Eric Dolphy, Morton
Feldman, Lukas Foss, David Tutor, and others. I was there for that event.

Whatever the Once Group did made a splash. They stirred things up. In fact the faculty at the U-M School of Music boycotted the festivals. Of course they did. That only made the group more special. In 1964 the Once Group issued a publicity poster with political activist Martina Algire posing nude on the counter of Red’s Rite Spot, everyone’s favorite go-to diner for coffee and a grilled pecan roll. If you can remember the original Red’s Rite Spot on E. Williams, you really are an Ann Arborite.
The Peoples Ballroom

First, the People’s Ballroom was burned down by a disgruntled kid with a grudge. Then, after a wildly successful second edition in September 1973, the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival was undermined and destroyed when a felonious crew chief who had been entrusted with the cash for the payroll of the many workers on the grounds of the festival absconded with the money—something like $20,000—and lost it all in a failed dope deal.
The Schwaben Inn, 215 S. Ashley Street

Back in 1966 the Schwaben Inn was a large low-ceiling place in the middle of the block at 215 S. Ashley Street. Upstairs were some pretty nice meeting rooms and in later years some gigs (more like catered parties) were held there, but back in 1966 we are talking about the ground floor at street level, a wide room with a cement floor and the bar all along the back. On your left as you came in was a little bandstand raised not more than a few inches where we played.

The place stunk of stale beer and cigarettes. Perhaps it was the low ceiling and lack or air or perhaps they never really washed down the bar or the floors. It kind of caught you when you came in and took a minute or so to adjust. Of course back then we drank and smoked as much as anyone there, well, perhaps we didn’t drink as much.

Washboard Willie and his Super Suds of Rhythm would also play there on other nights of the week and we were geeked that we shared a stage (not at the same time) with this Detroit bluesman that used to play behind the great Eddie “Guitar” Burns. I can still remember Washboard Willie singing the line “See the girl with the red dress on; she can do it all night long.” When we were not playing there I would sometimes come and listen to Washboard Willie like everyone else.

Our band, the Prime Movers Blues Band, would play at the Schwaben and often. There was one problem. Two very different kinds of people liked to come to the Schwaben to hear us play, the townies and the college kids. I was a townie. We called the students “pinheads.” These two did not get along, not hardly ever, and huge fights would break out. When I mean huge, I mean
really big. I remember one fight where it took nine police cruisers to break it up.

And there we would be crouched behind our equipment, trying to protect both it and ourselves. We were mostly townies ourselves, but not about to join that fight.

This venue later became Mackinac Jacks, featuring acts like Radio King & His Court of Rhythm, Lightnin’ Slim, The Rockets, New Heavenly Blue, and none other than Washboard Willie and the Super Suds of Rhythm. Some things never change.
The Teen Circuit

For some of the new-style Ann Arbor bands there was the teen circuit. You had to have a manager for that and for a while we worked with Jeep Holland who also managed our friends “The Rationals.” Jeep tried real hard to get us all into matching suits and run us through the teen circuit. We gave it a good go, but teeny-bop venues were just not our thing. We liked to play concerts in clubs when we had the chance and in bars at any other time. The teens had never heard blues before and our repertoire of rock tunes got a little thin after perhaps the first set.

I can remember one gig when my brother Daniel (lead guitar) and I (rhythm guitar) were playing in I believe it was Daniel’s Den in Saginaw, Michigan. We had smoked some reefer before we went on and it was a lot more powerful than we had expected. There we were in the middle of the stage, lights shining us, several feet from one another and looking into each other’s eyes. We were in the middle of a song and I swear we had no idea whatsoever what the next chord could possibly be. Everything was in slow motion and as the chord change came around somehow, miraculously, we found it. There we all were with our suits and ties.

It didn’t take us long to find that wearing suits & ties and minding our Ps & Qs was not our bag and it didn’t help that Jeep Holland, our manager at that point, was not someone we cared for that much. Although he knew a lot about pop music, he still managed to creep us out and so we just let that whole shtick go.

We did have one more near brush with fame when a subsidiary of Motown took an interest in us, a white band playing black music. They would drive up from Detroit in their black limousines and cart us around. And
some fun things happened. For example, they arranged for my brother Dan and I to have lunch with the Everly Brothers, just the four of us. Now that was cool because we loved the Everly Brothers.

However, it did not take very long before they made it clear to us that they would provide the Black music that we would then play and that we would not choose our own music. Say what? Well, that was not about to happen because, if no one else, I was totally into doing the great Chicago blues standards and was not about to sell out my rights even for the occasional perk or two. As I look back, I probably passed up a chance at some sort of fame and some of the other band members might have benefited. But I never thought twice. That was not about to happen and that did not happen. Nor were there any more limousines or lunches with the Everly Brothers.
U-M Folklore Society
THE FOLK MUSIC REVIVAL IN ANN ARBOR (LATE 1950s-EARLY 1960s)

In 1957 freshman students Al Young and Bill McAdoo founded the University of Michigan Folklore Society. Today Young is a Poet Laureate of California. Although oriented toward the campus and students, the Folklore Society was also a natural interface between the university folk and the townies – music. As a high-school dropout, I had no trouble integrating and being accepted in the folk circles. No questions were asked. We were all just ‘folk’ and it was a culturally rich scene.

And the University of Michigan was not the only campus with a folklore society. Folk music was popping up on campuses all over the nation and we were interconnected by what came to be called the folk circuit, a constant stream of folk enthusiasts that traveled from campus to campus playing and sharing folk music. The circuit went from Cambridge to New York City to Ann Arbor to Chicago to Madison to Berkeley and back again. We were hitchhiking or piling into old cars and driving the route. Musicians like then unknown Bob Dylan would hitchhike into town, hang out, play a gig or two, and be on down the road. And well-known folk singers also came to Ann Arbor.

Folksingers like Ramblin’ Jack Elliot and groups like the New Lost City Ramblers and the Country Gentlemen were regular visitors to Ann Arbor and this was before anyone was famous. They didn’t stay in fancy motels, but with us. They stayed in our houses, where they slept on a couch or in the spare bedroom. And we all hung out together and played music or sat in the Michigan Union and drank coffee all day. Whatever music and culture they brought with them really had a chance to
sink in. They shared themselves and their time with us and we with them. They were just like us, only better. We knew we could be like them.

Ann Arbor had its own players. The president of the Folklore Society was Howie Abrams and the society sported folk musicians like Marc Silber, Al Young, Dave Portman, Peter Griffith, and Perry Lederman. And we put on festivals and events. For example, the folklore society raised money to bring Odetta to Ann Arbor where she gave her first college performance. And a young Bob Dylan gave an early performance as part of a small folk-music festival in Ann Arbor put on by the U-M Folklore Society. I can remember sitting in the Michigan Union with a very nervous Dylan drinking coffee and smoking while we waited for the review of Dylan’s performance the night before to come out in the Michigan Daily newspaper. It was something like 10:30 AM when the review surfaced and it was positive. With that good news Dylan gathered up his guitar and backpack and proceeded to hitchhike out of town. And when Odetta sang at the Newport Folk Festival in 1960, Al Young, Perry Lederman, and Marc Silber hitchhiked to Rhode Island to see her. There was also a subtle change taking place.

Folk music in the late 1950s and early 1960s was part of what is now called the “Folk Revival,” and those of us who were part of it were very much aware of the need to protect and revive our musical heritage. Dylan and Baez were not writing their own tunes back then but rather reviving and interpreting songs that harkened from other generations. What made you a good folksinger in the later 1950s and early 1960s was the ability to authentically reproduce, reenact, and revive a particular song. The keywords were “authentic” and “revive.” Folksingers went to great lengths to locate and reproduce the most authentic versions of a song.
Writing our own songs only came years later. Back then we were busy rescuing this part of our cultural heritage from oblivion. We were on a mission, that and growing up.

Folk music at that time was mostly White folk music with maybe a peppering of Black country blues artists or a virtuoso Black singer like Odetta. They were the exception but were treated like the rule: revive them too and be authentic. When we heard the country blues, we wanted to revive and sing them as authentically as we could, Ebonics and all.

It was not too many years ago that, while giving a young White musician voice lessons, my first suggestion was that the song he himself picked out and wanted to sing for me “Mississippi Mud,” with the lyrics “It’s a treat to beat your feet on the Mississippi mud” might sound better if he dropped the Ebonics. I doubt that this young man even knew the song was written in Tin Pan Alley and not by black Americans. LOL.

So it was somewhat confusing folk enthusiasts in the early sixties when we eventually found out that the blues not only didn’t need our reviving but were alive and well, playing at a bar just downtown, where they were perhaps separated by a racial curtain. We didn’t go there because… well, just because. Another insidious form of racism.

But in fact blues, especially city blues, was very much alive, still seminal, and very, very available. In the early and mid-1960s young White Americans began the trek to the other side of the tracks, not only taking the trip downtown, but eventually the journey to Chicago and other places where electric blues were being played. Ann Arbor played a very significant role in introducing White America to city blues. The original two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals were landmark events and the three
succeeding Ann Arbor Blues and Jazz Festivals just opened it all up to a wider audience.

There is more on this general topic in my book “Blues in Black & White: The Landmark Ann Arbor Blues Festivals,” which was picked as one of the top 20 books published in Michigan last year. You will find it here:

Prime Movers Blues Band

Although they never released any records, the Prime Movers were a pivotal band in Southeastern Michigan during the late '60s. Where many of their Michigan contemporaries played straight, frat-house rock & roll, the Prime Movers were a blues band. They were purists, inspired first by classic Chicago blues and then by the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, the group who proved that white boys could play the blues. Led by brothers Michael and Dan Erlewine, the Prime Movers set out on the same path as Butterfield, playing countless gigs at clubs, frat parties, and festivals around the Ann Arbor and Detroit area. They were slightly older than their contemporaries like the Rationals, the MC5, and the Amboy Dukes, and were a core part of the scene - not only as a blues band, but they also touched on folk and avant-garde music, as well. And they earned a large local following. The Prime Movers also ventured out to San Francisco, playing a few opening dates at the Matrix, Straight Theater, Haight "A", and Fillmore West, yet they never quite achieved national success. Nevertheless almost all of the core members of the group made their mark in music one way or another.

The Prime Movers were formed in the summer of 1965. Initially, the group featured Michael Erlewine on lead vocals and rhythm guitar, Dan Erlewine on lead guitar and vocals, Robert Sheff on keyboards and vocals, Robert Vinopal on bass, and Spider Winn on drums. Before long, all the members lived in a large house at 114 N. Division Street in Ann Arbor. Michael began playing amplified harmonica in addition to lead vocals and also rhythm guitar. Vinopal left the band and was replaced by Jack Dawson, while James Osterberg, a former member of a local band called The Iguanas, took over the drums. (Since Osterberg played in the Iguanas,
the other members called him "Iguana," which soon became shortened to "Iggy," which led to the name he became famous as – Iggy Pop.) As it turned out, this would be the classic line-up of the Prime Movers - the one that rose to popularity in Southeastern Michigan, the group whose members went on to greater fame after their disbandment.

Initially, the Prime Movers played frat parties, leaning toward bluesy rock & roll, but they soon decided to concentrate on blues, spiked with a little soul and gospel. They became known for a cover of the Swan Silvertones (a key gospel group) ' "Seek, Seek and Ye Shall Find." They played frequently around Ann Arbor, travelling from gig to gig in a Dodge van with the phrase "Gonna Ring a Few Bells in Your Ear" on the front, a quote from New Orleans singer Jessie Hill's "Oop Oop Pah Do," and "The Prime Movers" emblazoned on the sides; occasionally, they were mistaken for a moving company.

Early on, they worked with local band promoter Jeep Holland as their manager. Holland is perhaps best known for managing “The Rationals,” a local group he brought to national attention and he attempted to push the Prime Movers in a similar direction. He wanted the group to play rock & roll and wear matching jackets, just like a British Invasion group. Although they did play some shows on the teen-rock circuit (Mt. Holly, Daniel's Den, etc.) in Michigan (as well as a couple of shows in Chicago in places like Mother Blues), the Prime Movers obstinately refused to abandon Chicago Blues. One of the hallmarks of the Prime Movers was their dedication to the blues and their stubbornness.

A subsidiary of Motown at one time courted the band, pulling up in their limousines and driving the band
around in them. They even arranged to have brothers Michael and Daniel Erlewine have lunch with the Everly Brothers – that kind of thing. But when pushed came to shove, Motown wanted the Prime Movers to play music they would provide, as a way to showcase a “White” group that played Black music. As soon as the group realized that this was the game, they said they would not do it, preferring to play their own mixture blues from the great Chicago bluesman.

The Prime Movers would travel to Chicago where they heard such blues greats as Little Walter, Magic Sam, Big Walter Horton, Buddy Guy and Junior Wells play. Legendary producer Bob Koester of Delmark Records showed the band around Chicago, taking them to the Chicago’s south and west sides, into the bars and clubs where their blues heros were playing. In this way, the Primer Movers got to here many of the greatest blues musicians playing live on their home turf.

However, it was the Paul Butterfield Band that really turned their heads. Butterfield and his band illustrated that not only were the blues alive, but that White boys could play it - not only credibly, but astonishingly well. The Prime Movers went to hear the Butterfield Blues Band whenever they could and soon became friends and fans of the band; Butterfield himself was not the easiest to approach, but Mike Bloomfield and Mark Naftalin were friendly and supportive of their younger contemporaries.

After hearing the Butterfield band, the Prime Movers became more dedicated to the blues than ever. Unlike other bands in the areas, they now played frat parties only rarely, concentrating on clubs like Schwaben Inn, the Town Bar, Mr. Flood's Party, the 5th Dimension, and
Clint's Club - the only Black bar in Ann Arbor. They also played free concerts and in concert halls like Mothers (the old armory in Ann Arbor) and the Depot House. Among the Detroit venues, they played at the Grande Ballroom, the Chessmate, Wisdom Tooth, and a number of times at the prestigious Living End.

Despite earning a local fan base, the group (like most musicians) never had much money. They all lived at the same house, and they often took as much catered food from frat parties as they could possibly carry. Nevertheless, they all stuck it out for the love of music - not just blues, either. Michael and Dan Erlewine had a deep love of the blues, but they also knew folk music well. Robert Sheff, the keyboardist was a classically trained musician, involved with the avant-garde "Once Group," a collective that performed the work of modern classical composers like Bob Ashley, Gordon Mumma and John Cage. Iggy - who, by all accounts, was a shy, well-mannered, quiet guy during his time with the Prime Movers - worked hard on his drumming, and he also sang the occasional song, often the Muddy Water's tune "I'm a Man." Iggy left the group somewhere around early 1967 and he was replaced by J.C. Crawford; Crawford also became known as an emcee and announcer at such places as the Grande Ballroom.

During the summer of 1967 - the Summer of Love - the Prime Movers journeyed across the country to San Francisco in their van. Mike Bloomfield, the former guitarist in the Butterfield band and the founder of the group "The Electric Flag," helped the group secure a place to stay at the Sausalito heliport, which is also where they practiced. The group played a couple of shows at a rib joint (for food), and spent their days auditioning for headlining gigs. When the Electric Flag couldn't make a gig in San Francisco, Bloomfield asked the Prime Movers to fill in for his new band at the
Fillmore Auditorium. At that show, they opened for Cream, the first time that British group ever played in the U.S.

Upon returning to Michigan, the Prime Movers returned to the bar/frat/teen circuit. They also became the honorary house band at the teen club Mothers, where they backed up travelling R&B bands like the Shang-ri-la's and the Contours. The Prime Movers also were a big part of the first two Ann Arbor Blues Festival’s and the first Ann Arbor Blues and Jazz Festival; Michael Erlewine interviewed most of the major players at those festivals. The group also became regulars at the 5th Dimension, where they often played as an after-hours band, starting their shows after they completed their set at Clint's Club around two AM.

The Prime Movers did make some recordings, but they were never released. Michael Erlewine also contributed some harmonica to Bob Seger's first album, 1968's Ramblin' Gamblin' Man. The band continued in various incarnations. According to Michael's estimation, some 37 musicians passed through the band over the years, as the group added keyboards and horns, and then shed them - until 1970. Throughout it all, Michael and Dan Erlewine were at the core of the band. Following the group's slow disbandment, Dan became an internationally-known guitar repairman and a monthly columnist for Guitar Player magazine. Michael played as a solo piano act for about a year; after his marriage in 1971, he gradually stopped playing music. In 1977, he founded Matrix Software, which was the first astrological computer software company in the nation. In 1991, he founded the All Music Guide, which became the largest music database in the world; he also helped found AMG's companions, All Movie Guide and All Game Guide.
Robert Sheff became a well-known avant-garde composer under the name Blue "Gene" Tyranny. Jack Dawson became the bassist for the Siegal-Schwall Blues Band. Iggy Pop, of course, became a punk rock legend.
ANN ARBOR MICHIGAN: A WISHING STAR

Most of us have a home town where we came from. Ann Arbor Michigan is my home town; I grew up there. In the 1960s Ann Arbor was very different from the overly-caffeinated and sophisticated city it is today. For one, it did not used to take me 20 minutes to drive across town, but that is beside the point. Back then Ann Arbor appeared much less sure of itself (or was it just me growing up?). It seemed to be overly self-conscious and playing second fiddle (weak sister) to other college towns like Cambridge, Madison, and Berkeley.

Ann Arbor had not yet found its place in mainstream America and what it lacked in bravado, it made up for in introspection and a quiet humility. What I did not fully grasp back then is that Ann Arbor is fecund, a fertile place, indeed a womb. It is pure feminine.

In the 1960’s, Ann Arbor’s innate receptivity and ‘femininity’ might well have been mistaken for passivity and naïveté, not that there was not some of that also present. Ann Arbor in the Sixties was not fully aware of itself, a city yet to awaken to its mission, but nonetheless busy taking a direction that time would reveal as significant. And it took a while.

Most city names are feminine, but that is not what I mean by saying that Ann Arbor is feminine. There are two kinds of sculpture, one made by adding clay until we have a form, and the other by cutting away stone until we have a form. Ann Arbor is definitely of the second variety. It reveals rather than posits; it is passive rather than active, passive enough to give and actually allow birth.

At the time, growing up in Ann Arbor (and never really knowing any other city) I was only dimly aware that my home town was more ‘passive’, more giving (as in
‘giving way’), and generally just more receptive and understanding than some. I might better say that I felt that other college towns (like Berkeley or Cambridge) were in some way more aggressive or just ‘on their game’. It was natural to assume that Ann Arbor was busy bringing up the rear. Obviously it had not yet found itself.

Exactly when Ann Arbor did find itself (in the contemporary sense) I cannot say. I was too busy finding my own self and that happened in 1967. In 1980 I moved about 180 miles northwest to Big Rapids Michigan where I live to this day. As near as I can tell, Ann Arbor became an adult somewhere after I left town. Certainly it is confident and sure of itself today, and I am not just talking about students walking right in front of your car either. They always did that.

My best guess is that Ann Arbor became aware of its feminine qualities the same way I discovered my own gentler side, gradually but certainly, by surrendering to surrender. In time, the passive qualities of the town have become a power, not a defect or liability. It is my opinion that this fertileness, this receptivity that Ann Arbor has in such high degree is very rare among cities. At least in this regard, to me Ann Arbor is very special indeed.

And I sometimes wonder just how many of us there are who lived in Ann Arbor beyond our college years (not that I went to college) and were somehow unable to be all that we could be while living there, and yet blossomed almost as soon as we left the town. This has always puzzled me and perhaps every town is like that. ‘A prophet is never known in his own country’ kind of thing, but is immediately recognized from the outside. I don’t have enough data to even make a guess at this.

Or, is the deep receptiveness and anti-macho quality of
Ann Arbor Michigan something that makes traditional superficial success more difficult-to-impossible to achieve in this town, yet at the same time builds strong habits for responding and accommodating life. This I wonder.

It is interesting that my first real business (incorporated) was formed in Ann Arbor, Matrix Software. I chose the word “Matrix” not for its mathematical meaning, but because it meant ‘womb,” a place where something could be born. In lieu of my remarks here, I find that fact fascinating.

Or am I just a little crazy when it comes to the meanings in life. I find it hard to get away from myself and all the crazy associations that run through my mind. And there is no use apologizing here for my endless self-referencing either. Isn’t it natural? Trying to disassociate oneself from referring to oneself has got to be some kind of oxymoron, the ultimate tar baby. The more you protest and struggle, the deeper into the tar you sink. It is OK to reference yourself. Who else did I have in mind when speaking in the first person?

My point here is that Ann Arbor has always seemed for me to be a sacred womb from which good things come. Whether this just works for me I cannot say. I can only say it is true for me.

After all, how do towns come to be located where they are? Is it only because this road is connected to that road, is connected to another road? Or does the natural world have springs of spirit just as it has natural springs of pure water flowing? I like to believe in the later take on this, that land has indwelling spirits that also speak to us or for us, as oracles.

It is my belief that Ann Arbor is such an oracular place. At least in my life, it has functioned like an oracle, that rare vortex through which the universe has spoken
directly to me, albeit not in words that I have always immediately understood. In essence, Ann Arbor has been a wishing well for all my hopes and dreams.

In ancient Greece they had oracular places, why not here in America? What great female spirit indwells in a city christened after two women named Ann and a stand of bur oak? The Anns’ arbor -- Ann Arbor. Tree Town.

“When you wish upon a star,
Makes no difference who you are,
Anything your heart desires,
Will come to you”
WHAT THE 1960s WAS FOR ME

The 1960s was many things. I have looked through some of the dozens and dozens of books explaining it and understand why they wrote what they did, but don’t recognize my experience in them. Perhaps it is because I was raised in Ann Arbor, Michigan, a kind of weak sister back then to more aggressive (and progressive) cities like Berkeley and Cambridge. That is no longer true. Today Ann Arbor is state of the art. My experience of the Sixties was very much colored by my life in Ann Arbor. I can only tell it like I saw and remember it.

The books say the Sixties was about the radical politics, anti-war movement, sexual revolution, women’s liberation, rock music, the almost-socialism, and so on. And many say that the cause of the 1960s can be laid directly on then button-down life of the 1950s. The Sixties is said to be a reaction to that decade. I can see all these different views and they make some sense. For me it was simply the drugs that caused the Sixties to be what they were.

And by drugs I don’t mean to say that I was a druggie or that all drugs were responsible. To my mind it was only the psychedelic drugs that mattered. They were responsible for what made the Sixties memorable to me. Obviously this statement requires some explanation.

I am not going to comment on any of the above movements and causes just now, except the one about the 1950s. That decade was indeed bland, too much about surface, and overly conservative. Beehive hairstyles, crew cuts, Pat Boone, non-fluid dancing, and so on were something my generation sought to get away from. I only wish I had recognized European
cinema and Fellini films as just as retarded back then in the opposite direction, but I didn’t.

I worshipped the Beats in the late 1950s and early 1960s, but I was well behind the curve on that one. My time Beat surfing left me high and dry, right back where I started. It went nowhere, but it did leave me with something of a liberal education.

I have examined carefully what I did from 1960 until the Sixties actually started for me in 1964. Rebelling against the 1950s? Sure, but I was 20 years old! What twenty-year old does not carve out a little distance from the previous generation? OK, maybe a lot of distance and considerable time too, but that alone still does not explain the Sixties to me. If the Sixties had a wider gap between it and the 1950s than other generations, what caused that gap? The revulsion at my parent’s life style and the 1950s by themselves did not cause that gap.

Which leaves me with drugs and in particular one drug: LSD. Drugs like speed, pot, opium, and so on were mostly entertainment in my opinion. I was not really better or worse off for them. But the psychedelics are another matter, LSD especially.

The Sixties began for me from the moment I took LSD in the bathroom of a small coffee shop in Berkeley California on May 6th, 1964 at 10:30 PM. And I caution you please to be very careful in how you understand this. It is not really about the drugs alone. Drugs were all around and not all that interesting to me at that. And it was not simply the conscious-altering quality of drugs. Marijuana altered my consciousness too, but not in any lasting way.

However LSD altered my consciousness in a lasting way and that altered-consciousness created just enough of a gap in my mind that I got a real glimpse of
myself in various dualisms. LSD let me catch myself in a few of the miss-takes in my life, for example that there was a ‘me’ and then an outside world separate from me that I fought against or lived in. LSD allowed me to clearly see that my own biases and thoughts colored and shaped not only how I saw the outside world but actually the outside world itself. I saw what I believed. Bias kills truth. Now this was a revelation for me. LSD enabled a gap to open that has never closed, but remains a doorway into the mind itself. This was for me the defining parameter of the 1960s – an introduction to the mind and a way of understanding the “self”.

In the last analysis the Sixties was for me about seeing into the mind. I changed my mind during that time (or watched my mind change) and the mind’s openings (at least for me) led to the decade known as the Sixties. I realize it is not romantic to link the Sixties to drugs, even the exotic LSD. Anti-war, feminism, anti-establishment, and so on sound like a better cause or reason. It just was not the case in my experience. These various movements were results but not the cause or root as I know it.

As mentioned earlier, when LSD appeared in my life I was happily being a 23-year old body trying to discover myself, find what I wanted to do as a career, and meet the woman of my life. I was quite happy to have some respite and distance from society as my parents lived it. None of these factors could add up to the Sixties as I eventually lived it.

The wild card is missing, that bit of breakthrough or genius that made the difference between an average generational gap and a gap large enough to embrace the changes that actually took place. It may be embarrassing to find that my bit of genius came with the help of drugs rather than from between my own two ears, but the truth is that it did come from drugs. Would I
prefer that my insights came directly from the “Spirit” and not from a drug? Sure, but I say to myself: “Get over it! It is all god or spirit anyway!” And here is the subtle part.

I really can separate the baby from the bathwater here, the drugs from the insights of the psychedelics. The drugs may be regrettable, but the insights gained through them were and still are profound. Today there are other ways to get the same insights, like the Asian forms of mind training and meditation, but they take a very long time and lots of work. LSD did the job in hours, but it took a very long time and lots of work to stabilize those insights, if they could be stabilized. It’s pay me now or pay me later; either way takes a lot of work. The LSD and other psychedelic drugs happen to be the way it went down for me. Meditation and mind training were not readily available back then, and are just starting to really come into the picture now, here in the 21st Century.

If my mind had not been opened by LSD, I would never have seen what I saw. I have no reason to believe that short of that kind of sudden cram course in the mind and how it actually works I would have come upon those kinds of insights normally. The course of my life changed then and forever. IMO the insights from psychedelics opened my mind and allowed me to discover and appreciate all of the other important themes born in the Sixties, themes like home birth, home schooling of our kids, psychedelic music (obviously), the place of women in the world, food, health, and a spiritual life.

And I will make a prediction:

Just as a college diploma or degree is the coin of the realm today, it will be replaced in importance tomorrow by somehow measuring the degree of realization an
individual has attained through mind training of one form or another. The kind and degree of mental clarity and realization will be how we know one another. Just my two cents. Photo by me of some Holiday flowers my daughter May gave us
PRE-HIPPIES AND MORE

I am a pre baby-boomer, so when the Hippies came along in the mid-1960s I was already fully present at that time, however as more of an instructor of the Hippies than one of them. That period from the late 1950s until the Hippie Movement actually started in the summer of 1965 has not been written about much or looked at very closely.

Those of us who were coming into our own during that time period kind of bridged the gap between the crew-cut mentality of the 1950s and what came out in the middle-to-later 1960s, which we call The Sixties. As for myself, I wanted to be a Beatnik, but came too late to that party. Yet, I absorbed a lot of beatnik culture and their ethos. One thing we learned from the Beats was European literature and philosophy, perhaps more than we then knew of our own American literature.

For one, we were literate, which can’t be said for the Hippies. We knew art, literature, and music -- classical, jazz, and of course rock n’ roll. I also knew folk music. As mentioned, we were more into the dark European view of things than we were into American culture, although the Hippies soon made short work of that, and with them, love of American music and movies came to the forefront. It was goodbye to the dark night of Europe and the Beats. Hippies were all about full sun and dancing.

So, it was quite natural for the Hippies to look up to us. After all, we were just a few years their senior, so we became a finishing school when they came up short in the liberal arts department. We knew that stuff.

Much of this was before the advent of any available spiritual training; that came with “The Sixties.” However, we still had spiritual experiences back then and an
interest in learning more. For example, everyone I knew (or hung out with) loved the mystic poetry of William Blake, pieces like “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.”

If someone has come up without knowing some William Blake, life goes on of course, but they also missed something, quotes like:

“How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way,

:Is an immense world of delight, clos’d by your senses five?” William Blake – from “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.”

Below find the original text to Blake’s work, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.”

https://archive.org/details/marriageofheaven00blak

And here is a facsimile of his original illustrated portfolio:

Those of us who came up reading and studying the psychological and emotional side of literature came into mind training through the back door. Deeply romantic novels like “The Wanderer” by Henri Alain-Fornier or Goethe’s “The Sorrows of Young Werther,” heart moving, are classic examples of what the Germans call “Bildungsroman,” self-building novels. We inhaled those and loved them.

I read the novels of Dostoevsky, all 52 of them. They were another vein of psychological education for me. I even learned to read a little Russian to that end. In music, I gradually moved away from folk music and began to mine the emotional creativity of blues, and the funkier, the better. I was all about the juice in things.
The simple truth is that in all my studies I clung to the psychological and emotive edge of life. Buddhism appealed to me, because, in my eyes it was not a religion, but rather a methodology, a path, and a psychological one at that. I am like a fish in water when it comes to psychology, but in the more arid realms of academic learning, I don’t do as well. I am an addict of the sense world, in particular the sense that language and words make.

In time, I became aware that all language and the words that make it up point to the sense it makes, to action and living, experiences we must have for ourselves. Once I understood that, communication became much easier.

We all know about the inherent dualism in language, in words and sentences, the fact that they have a subject and object, something I learned diagramming sentences in Catholic school. This is dualism in a nutshell, our own language, with its subjects and objects.

That being a fact, then much of our spiritual training, at least our preparation for it, comes down to metaphorically removing that habitual duality in language, eliding consonants, collapsing sentences into a single action, a leap of faith into the sense world of real-life experience. Here is one of what I call a Mantra Poem, something I wrote in the mid-1960s, a tongue-twisting way to skirt the edge of nonsense in order to recreate in the mind the logic of a concept, if pronounced out loud and carefully. I apologize if it is too tightly wrapped.

THE FORCE OF FAITH

The form of force enforcing form,
Finds freedom from that form in fact.

And in fact forced is freed,
A form of force with faith in form that finds in fact: Faith itself a force.

Thus, force finds itself in form on faith. And force enforcing faith in form, And form informing faith of force, Faith is that force in form. Faith is our form of force.
The Sixties Race Riots in Detroit and the Summer of love -- 1967

Over the years I have often felt like Forrest Gump, always on the sidelines of major movements or events, but not quite front and center. This was not true for the landmark Sixties event “The Summer of Love.” I was right there and it was 1967.

For those of you who are too young, the “Summer of Love” was San Francisco in 1967, when more than 100,000 hippies showed up at the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco wanting to hang out. I was there for that in late summer and early autumn.

The summer of 1967 was also the when the race riots broke out in Detroit, July 23, 1967, what was called the “12th Street Riot.” I remember, because I was living in Ann Arbor at the time and a few of us were foolish enough to drive into Detroit during the riot just to see what was happening. Well, that was a stupid thing to do, because all we found out were nervous cops putting shotguns to our heads and telling us to turn around and get the hell out of there. We got.

And the Detroit race riots had their own little ripple-effect as far out as Ann Arbor and the one-block section of Black businesses on Ann Street, where our blues band played at a Black bar by the name of Clint’s Club. During the Detroit riots the police closed down that one-block area of Ann Arbor and even put orange saw-horses around Clint’s Club to signify something. Nothing race-related was happening in Ann Arbor, as far as I knew, and suddenly we had no gig.

This probably led to our getting out of Dodge. In fact, my group “The Prime Movers Blues Band” drove all the way across the country to San Francisco (and back) in our
1966 Dodge Van. We had our band name all over the van, but most people thought we were a just another moving company, even though across the front of the van we had the slogan “Gonna Ring a Few Bells in Your Ears” by legendary New Orleans performer Jessie Hill from his song “Ooh Poo Pah Doo.” Any of you remember that song? Here is that tune for those of you with open ears:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3qhxE5z9xRI

How we crammed all of our band equipment and the entire band (there were five of us) into that Dodge van and managed to get it across the U.S. is beyond me. God knows there was not room for all that and also five suitcases, so who knows what we were wearing out there. We took turns driving and made it a non-stop trip. I can remember waking up as we crossed the Continental Divide to find us moving at a snail’s pace surrounded on all sides by a flock of sheep. That moment was a long way from what we were going to find in San Francisco.

And of course we had no money and no place to stay once we got there. We just went there cold, because we knew it was happening. I am eternally grateful to my friend Michael Bloomfield (lead guitar in the Paul Butterfield Blues Band and guitarist on Dylan’s “Highway 61 Revisited”) for finding us a place to live for the summer, which turned out to be the Sausalito Heliport. This was a place where some music groups practiced, and where we crashed on the floor. I remember some famous woman singer gave us $5 at the heliport for food. It might have been Gale Garnet (“We'll Sing in the Sunshine”). We had zero money. Remember those days?

In fact we played blues at a local Black rib-joint for free just to have something to eat. We ate a lot of ribs
because of our situation. The Sausalito Heliport was just across the San Francisco Bay Bridge to the north. Some people there live on houseboats, which was way cool. The band and I spent most of our time in San Francisco, where we auditioned and/or played at all the major Sixties clubs, places like the Avalon Ballroom, The Straight Theater, The Matrix, The Haight A, and even the Fillmore Auditorium. In Berkeley we played at the New Orleans House.

It was thanks to Michael Bloomfield that we played the Fillmore. Bloomfield was not only one of the most incredible guitarists I have ever heard, he was also one of the nicest and most compassionate musicians I have ever met. We knew the Butterfield Blues Band pretty well, and Bloomfield was our friend, for some reason. In fact we had recorded the Butterfield Band in Chicago when they were first doing their (now legendary) tune East-West, which is probably the first extended-solo track ever recorded and the harbinger for much psychedelic rock. It is over 13 minutes, then unheard of on vinyl, except in jazz. Heavy metal music kind of grew out of that. Our recording of East-West was released on an album some years ago by Butterfield keyboard player Mark Naftalin.

Bloomfield not only found us a place to stay but asked us to fill in for his band, the Electric Flag when they could not make a gig, and it was at the Fillmore at that. This was August 29th of 1967 at the Fillmore Auditorium, when we opened for Cream on what I believe was their first concert in the U.S. or at least in San Francisco. For those of you who don’t know about Cream, it was the British rock supergroup featuring Eric Clapton on guitar, Jack Bruce on bass, and Ginger Baker on drums. Their songs included many classic blues tunes and, of course, their smash hit “Sunshine of Your Love.”
In fact, I watched Cream (with needles in their arms) shoot up speed in the green room before the show. And I had a shouting match with Fillmore promoter Bill Graham before the show about how to mic our amplifiers. Graham wanted to run our sound directly through these giant walls of speakers, but I wanted them to mic our amps through their speakers, so our particular amp sound would be preserved. I am sure I was wrong, but at the time it seemed so right. And shouting with Bill Graham was almost required back in those days.

We played at a number of venues in San Francisco and in Berkeley. My best friend Michael Katz lived in San Francisco and played in the band “Anonymous Artists of America” (AAA). They dropped acid every time they performed. The house in which their band lived was covered (walls and ceilings) with San Francisco concert posters. Those posters are worth a small fortune these days.

I remember a gig the AAA did at Stinson Beach, north of San Francisco, near Mt. Tamalpais. I believe Charlie Musslewhite was on the same bill. Yes, they all dropped acid and then played. I must say that it was different.

The poster shown here was for one of our gigs, in this case the “Haight A,” in San Francisco. I can’t remember all that much from the time, but the whole summer experience was over the top. I can remember one time wandering through the Palace of Fine Arts in the Marina District of San Francisco, a huge palace constructed in 1915 for the Panama-Pacific Expo. I believe it was made out of Paper Mache. In the early morning with the mist rising, it was like some kind of dream. Looking back, the whole Summer of Love appears like that to me now.
Anyway, there you have a few of stories from the Summer of Love and the race-riot effects in Ann Arbor in 1967. I am giving you the cream off the top and not the blood, sweat, and tears that also went along with it. I am sure you get the idea. It is hard to even remember how it was back then, much less to describe it to someone else. It was the “Summer of Love,” and our band was there. Hopefully you can sense a bit of the flavor from that time.
Personal Memories: Ann Arbor Blues Festivals

I want to write about my personal memories of that first Ann Arbor Blues Festival in early August of 1969. I already wrote the text for a whole (award-winning) book about the festival, but it was mostly the general history of the festival. You can find it here:

http://www.amazon.com/Blues-Black-White-Landmark-Festivals/dp/0472116959/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1386328730&sr=8-1&keywords=blues+in+black+and+white

I have yet to write my own personal story of that event, so I am working on this for a short video I am putting together. I thought I might post some thoughts here, if you don't mind. And I have to back up a bit and first talk about how it was for me way back then in the 1960s.

I will start by saying that in every life there are turning points, forks in the road, which if taken, change our life. That first Ann Arbor Blues Festival in 1969 was such an event for me. I have never been the same since nor wanted to be.

When I am asked how I happened to miss an event like the great Woodstock festival in August of 1969. (Aug. 15-18), my answer is simple enough. I was still in the throes of (and I am still recovering) from the landmark Ann Arbor Blues Festival two weeks earlier (Aug. 1-3), which in my life was an even more important cultural event: a gathering together of some of the greatest living blues masters in an event that could never be repeated because of impermanence. Some performers died later that very year, and today almost none of them are still alive. That first blues festival in 1969 and the one that followed it in 1970 were basically one-time events, but I need to preface all of this.
What is called the Sixties did not really start until the middle of that decade, in 1965 to be exact. It was in the summer of 1965 that the band "Grateful Dead" formed in the Bay Area, but the cultural event we call the 1960s did not have just a single starting location. Like a hot rash, it broke out all over this country and then spread to the world. I should know because I was there and came up during that time.

In fact, in that same summer of 1965 in Ann Arbor, Michigan my brother Dan and I formed the Prime Movers Blues Band. We had never heard of the Grateful Dead. What we now call the Sixties arose all across the nation more or less simultaneously, especially where LSD had done its work. In my opinion, the common catalyst, the true cause of what we call the Sixties was the advent of LSD in this country around 1964; the original Sandoz patents for LSD had expired in 1963, so the drug was free to travel and it did.

LSD was literally a game (and mind) changer for a whole generation; it opened up vast mental vistas that are still being explored today, over fifty years later. I dropped acid in May of 1964 in Berkeley California, where I was spending a year. I had tried various drugs before that, including marijuana, peyote, speed, and even codeine – that kind of thing. As I have written many times, only LSD really got my attention. In fact it was, believe it or not, my introduction to the dharma, to the way things actually are in the mind.

LSD showed me that the outside world I saw and believed in was the result of my own inner projections, including my likes, dislikes, biases, and prejudices. LSD cut through the stagnant mental firewall of the 1950s like a blowtorch. The genie was out of the bottle and not about to go back in anytime soon. It was what I saw on LSD that fueled my interest in phenomenology, the study of my own consciousness and mind. And later it
was the dharma that organized it for me and provided a path or method for continued development and even more awareness.

I have thought about these things for fifty years, and I can find no other cause - principle cause - for what we call the Sixties other than the advent of LSD on the scene. It was the single main catalyst that sparked what has been called the hippie revolution. Not everyone took acid, but most of the leaders of that movement did. It changed the mind of a generation, one person at a time. LSD gave an entire generation the courage and will to overturn the status-quo in favor of a new reality, one based on direct experience.

… to be continued.

[The graphic is the cover of a book with blues photos of those first two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals by Stanley Livingston, perhaps the best blues photographs I have ever seen. The book was designed and laid out by my brother Tom Erlewine. I wrote the text, short bios of artists, an interview with Howlin' Wolf I did, and the history of the festivals. ]
Roots of the Sixties: Part 1: The Beats

Winter is cold this year and already too long, so I am editing various early areas of my life story, one of which is when I wanted to be a beatnik, back in the late 1950s. Some of this was blogged before, but that was a while ago and these are updates of that material.

What is called "The Sixties" actually didn't start until the summer of 1965, which is like halfway through the decade, so what of those little-spoken of years from 1960 through the mid-1965? I don't know what they are officially called, but I call them the Post-Beat years, and they run from the late 1950s to, as mentioned, the summer of 1965, and they were crucial in helping to make the "1960s" what they were. For one, they represented the end of the Beat Movement, the remains of that day.

I was never a hippie, per se, but I was greatly influenced by the Beat Movement of the late 1950s, although I was a little too young for the full experience. That train had already left the station, but I still learned all that I could. And what was it that I learned from the Beats? What was that lifestyle actually like?

For one, I can start out by saying that the beats as I came to know them were very, very serious folk. Or was that just me? They had none of the wild dancing that came along with the Avalon Ballroom and Fillmore Auditorium in the mid-Sixties. They were in no way hippies. Slow dancing, sure. Light shows and strobes? No. And it was a different kind of drug scene as well.

Let's be clear; the Beats drank wine, not beer. Hard stuff, some, but it was not promoted. No, what we drank as Beats was wine, and wine with cigarettes or whatever else we might be smoking. And it was dark out too. The Beats did not celebrate the sunshine or the daytime as did the hippies when they finally arrived. The
Beats were creatures of the night that only really came to life when it got dark out. Sure, we shuffled along the streets in the daytime wearing our old olive-drab army jackets and surplus clothing. I never wore a beret, but some of my friends actually did. I would have felt self-conscious in one. And remember, I was not a 'Beat', but only wanted to be. Alas, I was too young. I searched for the Beats everywhere, but they already were getting old. Even my naïve youth and enthusiasm for their existence could not revive them. It was like sand running through my fingers.

As mentioned, it was nighttime that was bohemian, and I mean all night or at least until the wee hours of the morning. I can remember when the album “My Favorite Things” by John Coltrane was released in March of 1961. I stayed up all night listening to it at Harvey Armstrong’s spacious second-floor apartment down on Packard Street.

Armstrong not only had a grand place to live, but he had a beautiful girlfriend. I only had a single small room at the time and no girlfriend. I seem to remember I did have some Dexedrine (speed) that night, so sleep was not an option. It was coffee, cigarettes, and Coltrane, and the heartbeat was fast from the speed. What an album that was (and is). Next to the Miles Davis “Kind of Blue,” “My Favorite Things” was probably my most listened-to jazz album back then. And I particularly love the piano of McCoy Tyner on the title tune. It is just the best. If you have not heard it, really listened to it, by all means do yourself a favor! I had no idea at the time that in only a few short months I would be out on the road hitchhiking with Bob Dylan. Imagine that.

So what does the apprentice beatnik do? Well, I quickly established for myself that he or she is well read in literature and poetry. Ginsberg and Kerouac showed me that.
Familiarity with the Existentialist philosophers like Sartre, Camus, and their kin is also suggested, and probably required. Kierkegaard? Yes, and Hegel too. Classical music (at least some of it) is mandatory, and the more the better, and jazz? The Beats were all about jazz. Blues was not big back then, at least in Beat circles, but folk music was fine.

My first home away from home was a tiny single room at 335 Packard Street in Ann Arbor, just across the street from Crazy Jim's, home of the Blimpy Burger, an Ann Arbor landmark that I am told recently has been torn down. This was around 1963 or so, before I moved out to Berkeley, California for a year early in 1964. There was a bed, a wooden chair, a side table which held a hotplate (which was not allowed, next to which was my jar of instant coffee), and a cheap record player, one of those kinds that had a hinged top that closed so you could carry the whole thing as a suitcase. For records I had Mozart and Bach. Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro" was one of the few records I owned and the "Brandenburg Concertos" of Bach. I had "borrowed" a few of my parent's records too, which ones I can't remember, perhaps Art Tatum and Joe "Fingers" Carr. I might have had a few jazz records, because that was where I was headed. Needless to say I did not spend a lot of time at "home." I was almost always out, and usually in the M.U.G, Michigan Student Union Grill, where I sat for untold hours drinking coffee, smoking Camel straights, and doodling on napkins with my Rapidigraph pen.

And the 'good' beatnik was familiar with art, at least the French Impressionists. So there you have the general idea. I believe I mentioned that Beats only come out at night and stay up to (or near) dawn. Did I also mention how serious life was back then? I did. So, no sunshine, not too much laughing or day tripping, and a strict diet of
Ingmar Bergman films and the darker European shtick, which was infinitely preferable back then to any of the more entertaining Hollywood flicks. Those American films were just uncool. It was all about the darkness and depression of Europe.

We would see these foreign films at the university-sponsored "Cinema Guild" in the old Art and Architecture building or at the "Campus Theater" down on South University Street, the only other theater that showed these films early on. In later years you could find them at the "Fifth Forum" downtown on 5th Avenue. As I look back on that time I can't believe I bought into that dark, depressed, alcoholic and nicotine-stained world view. And I really tried to enjoy it. Back then I would not allow myself to be entertained. Humor was not a highlight in my life. We would take in a dark European film and then spend the rest of the night smoking, drinking coffee, and talking about it. Today those films seem more like horror films to me or just funny. I know... I have no taste. And those dark European films went out of style as the hippies came in.

And jazz. Forget about rock n' roll; I didn't listen to it much when I was a "beatnik." Pop music was on the back burner. As mentioned earlier, it was mostly jazz that we listened to, in particular Miles, Coltrane, bop, and most of all the 'cool' jazz. Beats were, above all, cool. And it was kind of hard for me to be cool. I was excitable, too much of an enthusiast, and as I found out, simply 'not cool'. And then there was the "just sitting around."

We did a lot of sitting around with serious talking, and often I would find myself watching a friend shoot up heroin. I never went there, but I was familiar with all the dope paraphernalia, the little bent spoons, the
tourniquet, the flame, the ‘works’, etc. I most remember my friend Frank Trun who was really steeped in the Beats and a kind of model beatnik for me. He had a little upstairs apartment way out on South State Street near Stadium Boulevard. I would hike down there very late at night hoping his light would still be on so I could dare go up and knock. It usually was and he was friendly to me. How wonderful that any older person could even see me! To myself, there was still nothing to see.

I am sure we talked (probably he talked) about all kinds of philosophy and deep-life matters, but mostly what I remember is Frank shooting up and me watching. Just watching him shoot up was an inoculation against my ever doing it. It was not pretty, but pretty scary. Sometimes I would have to just leave him there and go home. He was out. Later I heard that Trun was killed when his car ran off the road on the Pennsylvania Turnpike while driving back from New York City. I can only imagine his state of mind.

Just like that, he was gone from my life - impermanence.

And the Beats lived ‘down’. As a rule, my Beat friends had no interest in working a straight job and tended to do just barely (or less) than enough to get by. And they were likely to live in the poorest parts of town where rents were cheap and no one cared how they looked or lived. Theirs was a life of the mind. For the most part, the Beats I knew were dedicated intellectuals and aesthetes.

In reality, much of the Beat movement for me amounted to my just trying to get in the door, to be accepted, and to be like them. Just to find real Beats was tough. Reality is seldom what we hope for or expect. My own dreams and imagination of the Beat movement were perhaps more interesting than the final reality. I never
really became an insider because by 1960 that movement had already mostly dried up and grown old.

There was no inside to ‘become’, but only the diminishing remains of what Kerouac and Ginsberg wrote of. Even though Ginsberg lived on and I would see him once in a while here or there, he was by then a celebrity and no longer just a beat. What I wanted was to have those inspired visions that the beat authors had, not the withered remains of where they had been. I was just a little too late.

Perhaps that was why all the Beats looked so old to me, because I was young. Finding the beat movement was like when the hourglass sand runs out. I tried to grasp it, but it was already gone, slipping through the fingers of time. There was only a taste left. I so wanted to become them.

With the Beats gone or going, soon there remained only a bunch of latecomers like me going through the motions, but that ‘Beat’ train had already left the station or was trying to turn commercial. But I did have some Kerouac-like times of my own. I actually left Ann Arbor and hitchhiked to places like Greenwich Village (late 1950s), Venice Beach (in Santa Monica), and North Beach in San Francisco. If you have the patience, I will tell some of those stories. In 1960 I hitchhiked across the country on Route 66 to Venice Beach in Santa Monica.

[My mother was a fine artist. Here is a batik mom did of me from a sketch, a self-portrait, I did back in the 1960s. It gives you an idea of where I was at.]
Continuing with my story. Unfortunately for me, I never took to schooling. I guess I am hard to teach. So have ended up teaching myself almost everything I know how to do. Well, there was one year, and one teacher. When I was in fourth grade, a benign teacher by the name of Mrs. Althouse took me under her wing. I flourished, but the very next year, in fifth grade, the mean Mrs. Ryder ended that exception and proved the rule, that I hate school. All the other years I went to school were just a long, long, and boring wait.

There was one other uptick when I won the Biology Award for my high school and got sent to MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) for a special showing of my study of the "Marine Fauna of the North Shore of Boston," but I followed that award by flunking out the same year, and having to repeat the whole grade. I should mention that I took Algebra One three semesters in a row because I could not understand that abstract a language. They finally passed me, just to get me out of there. Oddly enough, I got straight A's in geometry. Go figure.

And I was not well-behaved either. Toward the end I was thrown out of school a couple of times for bad behavior, and I finally just left school on my own accord, and never finished high school. I was perhaps too anxious to stop with all the teaching and just get out in the real world and live. And so I did.

About the first significant thing I did after dropping out of school was to leave Ann Arbor (along with my friend John Stanger) and hitchhike out the legendary Route 66 to Venice Beach in Santa Monica, California, where one of the great Beat Movement Meccas was already in decline. We headed out U.S. 12 across Michigan to
Chicago. There is nothing quite as lonely as being stranded in a poor section of Chicago in the rain in the middle of the night trying to hitch a ride. All I can remember is the wet pavement and the hazy light of the occasional streetlamp, and waiting. It has been a long time, but I believe from Chicago we hitchhiked to St. Louis, to Tulsa, to Oklahoma City, then Amarillo, and on to Albuquerque. In Albuquerque we got picked up by a fellow with a fancy new Plymouth who asked us if we wanted to take a detour for a night down to Juarez Mexico and have some fun.

CIUDAD JUAREZ

Well of course we wanted to go and we did. I will spare you the blow by blow details, but suffice to say that in Juarez I could drink tequila at a bar, and before I knew it I was drunker than a skunk. The tequila led to a whore house and the rest followed the natural order of things. I woke up back in the U.S. in a cheap motel along Route 66 with a harsh hangover, but that was not all. Every cent we had was gone. That man had shown us a good time, waited until we passed out, taken whatever valuables we had (and they were few), and then was on down the road. I was left only with some experience I had never had before and not to mention (later on) a case of the clap.

We hitchhiked on to Santa Monica with some money my parents wired me through Western Union. Can I ever thank my parents enough for being who they were? Back then I just took it for granted.

Anyway, I was already discovering the difference between expectations and reality. But hey, what good beatnik has not been with a whore or two? As mentioned, I came down with the clap. Worse, I had no
medicine to cure it. What a mess. It really was no fun. I finally went to some public health clinic in L.A. (such as they were back then), waited and waded through that, and was administered sulfur pills, a very slow cure indeed. No antibiotics for me.

**VENICE BEACH SANTA MONICA**

For a time when we first arrived at Venice Beach, with the few dollars we had, John and I rented a two room suite where we stayed. I believe the rooms were in one of those buildings along Venice Boulevard, with all the Venice-Italy type arches and trim. The building was more like a home for winos and drug addicts than anything else, and therefore generally creepy. We shared the bathroom with the entire floor and with little to no furnishings, the rooms were more like a wasteland, a place we spent more time away from than in. But our money soon ran out and my friend John went back to Ann Arbor (I don’t remember why), leaving me to find my own way. With no more rent money, the rooms were abandoned and I was soon back out on the street. As I look back on it today, I can’t remember anyone else my age there, at least not many. Of course I always liked to hang with those older than myself anyway. After all, they had all the wisdom and experience that I so desperately wanted.

For a short time I worked in a small neighborhood convenience store stacking shelves, something I knew how to do from jobs at the A&P and Wrigley food stores back in Ann Arbor. I had so little food then that back in the stockroom I would wolf down anything I could find around the store and that would be my meal for the day. Of course I had to do this without the proprietor finding out. I am not sure how I left that job, but it might have been when I found a room to stay in the basement of the Gas House. I never liked working for someone else.
What did I do all day and most nights? In retrospect, not much it seems. I would mostly just hang out, ponder life, and talk. Conversations were big. And that was enough back then. Of course I would look for women, but being naturally shy by nature, those opportunities were few and far between, not to mention that I had gonorrhea for most of the time I was in California that trip. That didn’t help romance at all.

THE GAS HOUSE

I am trying to paint you the flavor and I could go on, but I write this just to give you a sense of what it was like, where I was coming from, and what I was trying to do. I was living at the (now legendary) Gas House, the notorious art gallery and Beat gathering place at 1501 Ocean Front Walk right on Venice Beach. It held sway for three years, from 1959 through 1961, and was one of the main centers of the Beat movement during its demise. There I met and hung out with icons like Lawrence Lipton, Eric “Big Daddy” Nord, Mad March, the poet Taylor Mead, the artist Ed Newell, and Tamboo the conga player. Everyone came there, including Kerouac, and later Ken Kesey, and after I left, folks like Janice Joplin, Peter, Paul and Mary, and so on, also came. I remember drinking whisky with Joplin one night (she drank the whiskey), but that was later on at the Grande Ballroom in Detroit around 1966.

This was still 1960 and I lived in an old walk-in cooler (a non-functioning one) in the basement of the Gas House. It was not large, but made of beautiful natural woods inside, and of course there were the racks where food was stored. That was where I slept. At that time I was an artist, or thought I was, a painter in oils and, of course, a poet. Everyone was. I spent my days… or more likely nights… painting, drawing, and writing poems, Beat poems of course. By that time I was not only yearning for the Beat life but, since misery loves
company, I was also searching for a partner, a woman to love, one who would love me just as I was. Imagine that! I had no money and lived on what I could find or fall into, picking up old cigarette butts on the long wide sidewalk that ran up and down Venice beach along the ocean. I had nothing, but I was in California and I was living with the Beats. And that was something!

And then there was my friend found hanging from a rafter in his upstairs flat, an artist like me who decided to commit suicide, why I never knew. He was much more gifted than I.

**DRINKING SWEET WINE**

I remember going to a party along Venice Beach in a small house of a friend or at least someone I had heard of, perhaps it was Tamboo the conga player and Mad March, his woman. I brought with me half a gallon of cheap wine to pass around. I must have been nineteen years old at the time and a young nineteen at that.

When I came through the door of the house where the party was being held, there were two federal narcotic agents waiting. They were frisking each person as we came in, looking for dope, and paid no attention to my wine or the fact that I was underage. They didn’t even check my ID. I was directed to sit down along a wall with a string of other folks who already had gone through the same routine. So there I sat while the feds continued to play their game, frisking each person who showed up at the party.

Needless to say, I was very nervous.

In my nervousness I opened the wine and started to take a sip or two. Well, before I knew it I drank the entire half gallon all by myself. I didn’t want to bring attention to myself as underage by trying to share it. Later, free and outside once again, I puked my guts out
for hours. Nothing makes you sicker than a wine drunk, especially sweet wine.

Venice Beach and the Gas House was the real deal, the dying remnants of the Beat Movement, certainly enough to give me a taste of what Beat life was all about.

However, all in all, the bloom was off the rose. The characters I found myself with were stained by their own habits and made a better story in a book than close friends. It took me quite a while to acknowledge my disappointment and realize that I did not want to spend my life with these folks, bohemian or not.

WILD RIDE TO NORTH BEACH, SAN FRANCISCO

I can remember one all-night car ride from L.A. to San Francisco, too many of us packed into the vehicle, penniless, and probably high on something, hurtling through the night and up along the Pacific Coast on highway 101, all squashed together like that.

When we finally reached North Beach, San Francisco (which was then the heart of the bohemian culture in that city) near dawn, the first thing we did was to pull into an outdoor vending area and pile out of that cramped car into the cool night air. The stars were out. Someone pried open a cigarette machine and we made off with what coins we could find.

And later, I found myself standing outside a bakery on one of San Francisco’s steep narrow streets waiting for the bakers to throw out the day-old baguettes, and we feasted on those. Perhaps one of us would lift a sausage or some cheese from an all-night grocery and we would have that too. And cigarettes; somehow we always had cigarettes. Usually wine appeared along the way as well; that and marijuana were the common denominators back in those days.
I have a drawing of me sitting on a statue on Telegraph Hill, up near Coit Tower. I had climbed up there. It was 4:00 AM, November 2nd, 1960. I believe it was drawn by an artist named Verne Gagne or something like that.

And I can remember spending time at the City Lights Bookstore, founded by the Beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti. I was finally in San Francisco, in North Beach, where the Beats hung out. I had been to the three main habitats for the Beat Movement, Greenwich Village (NYC), Venice Beach (Santa Monica), and North Beach (San Francisco). I came, I saw, and I was too late. The soul of the Beats had already flown. Only the remains remained. It was not long until my internal clock told me it was time to go back to tranquil Ann Arbor.

So there you have some more story. Had enough, or still want more?

[Here is a portrait of me drawn by well-known Beat artist Ed Newell back in 1960 somewhere around Venice Beach.]
Also a sketch of me sitting on top of the famous statue on Telegraphy Hill, near Coit Tower. This was drawn by Verne Gagne, around 4:00 AM on November 2, 1960]
What Made the 1960s “The Sixties” for Me

The 1960s was many things. I have looked through some of the dozens and dozens of books explaining it and understand why they wrote what they did, but don’t recognize my experience in them. Perhaps it is because I was raised in Ann Arbor, Michigan, a kind of weak sister back then to more aggressive (and progressive) cities like Berkeley and Cambridge. That is no longer true. Today Ann Arbor is state of the art. My experience of the Sixties was very much colored by my life in Ann Arbor. I can only tell it like I saw and remember it.

The books say the Sixties was about the radical politics, anti-war movement, sexual revolution, women’s liberation, rock music, the almost-socialism, and so on. And many say that the cause of the 1960s can be laid directly on then button-down life of the 1950s. The Sixties is said to be a reaction to that decade. I can see all these different views and they make some sense. For me it was simply the drugs that caused the Sixties to be what they were.

And by drugs I don’t mean to say that I was a druggie or that all drugs were responsible. To my mind it was only the psychedelic drugs that mattered. They were responsible for what made the Sixties memorable to me. Obviously this statement requires some explanation.

I am not going to comment on any of the above movements and causes just now, except the one about the 1950s. That decade was indeed bland, too much about surface, and overly conservative. Beehive hairstyles, crew cuts, Pat Boone, non-fluid dancing, and so on were something my generation sought to get away from. I only wish I had recognized European cinema and Fellini films as just as retarded back then in the opposite direction, but I didn’t.
I worshipped the Beats in the late 1950s and early 1960s, but I was well behind the curve on that one. My time Beat surfing left me high and dry, right back where I started. It went nowhere, but it did leave me with something of a liberal education.

I have examined carefully what I did from 1960 until the Sixties actually started for me in 1964. Rebelling against the 1950s? Sure, but I was 20 years old! What twenty-year old does not carve out a little distance from the previous generation? OK, maybe a lot of distance and considerable time too, but that alone still does not explain the Sixties to me. If the Sixties had a wider gap between it and the 1950s than other generations, what caused that gap? The revulsion at my parent’s life style and the 1950s by themselves did not cause that gap.

Which leaves me with drugs and in particular one drug: LSD. Drugs like speed, pot, opium, and so on were mostly entertainment in my opinion. I was not really better or worse off for them. But the psychedelics are another matter, LSD especially.

The Sixties began for me from the moment I took LSD in the bathroom of a small coffee shop in Berkeley California on May 6th, 1964 at 10:30 PM. And I caution you please to be very careful in how you understand this. It is not really about the drugs alone. Drugs were all around and not all that interesting to me at that. And it was not simply the conscious-altering quality of drugs.

Marijuana altered my consciousness too, but not in any lasting way.

However LSD altered my consciousness in a lasting way and that altered-consciousness created just enough of a gap in my mind that I got a real glimpse of myself in various dualisms. LSD let me catch myself in a few of the miss-takes in my life, for example that there was a ‘me’ and then an outside world separate from me.
that I fought against or lived in. LSD allowed me to clearly see that my own biases and thoughts colored and shaped not only how I saw the outside world but actually the outside world itself. I saw what I believed. Bias kills truth. Now this was a revelation for me. LSD enabled a gap to open that has never closed, but remains a doorway into the mind itself. This was for me the defining parameter of the 1960s – an introduction to the mind and a way of understanding the “self”.

In the last analysis the Sixties was for me about seeing into the mind. I changed my mind during that time (or watched my mind change) and the mind’s openings (at least for me) led to the decade known as the Sixties. I realize it is not romantic to link the Sixties to drugs, even the exotic LSD. Anti-war, feminism, anti-establishment, and so on sound like a better cause or reason. It just was not the case in my experience. These various movements were results but not the cause or root as I know it.

As mentioned earlier, when LSD appeared in my life I was happily being a 23-year old body trying to discover myself, find what I wanted to do as a career, and meet the woman of my life. I was quite happy to have some respite and distance from society as my parents lived it. None of these factors could add up to the Sixties as I eventually lived it.

The wild card is missing, that bit of breakthrough or genius that made the difference between an average generational gap and a gap large enough to embrace the changes that actually took place. It may be embarrassing to find that my bit of genius came with the help of drugs rather than from between my own two ears, but the truth is that it did come from drugs. Would I prefer that my insights came directly from the “Spirit” and not from a drug? Sure, but I say to myself: “Get
over it! It is all god or spirit anyway!” And here is the subtle part.

I really can separate the baby from the bathwater here, the drugs from the insights of the psychedelics. The drugs may be regrettable, but the insights gained through them were and still are profound. Today there are other ways to get the same insights, like the Asian forms of mind training and meditation, but they take a very long time and lots of work. LSD did the job in hours, but it took a very long time and lots of work to stabilize those insights, if they could be stabilized. It’s pay me now or pay me later; either way takes a lot of work. The LSD and other psychedelic drugs happen to be the way it went down for me. Meditation and mind training were not readily available back then, and are just starting to really come into the picture now, here in the 21st Century.

If my mind had not been opened by LSD, I would never have seen what I saw. I have no reason to believe that short of that kind of sudden cram course in the mind and how it actually works I would have come upon those kinds of insights normally. The course of my life changed then and forever. IMO the insights from psychedelics opened my mind and allowed me to discover and appreciate all of the other important themes born in the Sixties, themes like home birth, home schooling of our kids, psychedelic music (obviously), the place of women in the world, food, health, and a spiritual life.

And I will make a prediction:

Just as a college diploma or degree is the coin of the realm today, it will be replaced in importance tomorrow by somehow measuring the degree of realization an individual has attained through mind training of one form or another. The kind and degree of mental clarity and
realization will be how we know one another. Just my two cents. Photo by me of some Holiday flowers my daughter May gave us.
I grew up in the folk-scene environment of the late 1950s and beyond. Even back then Pete Seeger was a landmark, a single person who perhaps best represented what the folk music scene was all about to me. So much of that world revolved around Seeger. Even when the younger players begin to emerge, Pete Seeger was always in there somewhere, just being himself. Seeger has passed on, but will never be gone. He is like a rock that has always been there. I was very much part of that folk scene, so perhaps a little history is in order.

By the 1950s, more and more young Americans were interested in their own indigenous music – American folk music. In the later ‘50s and early ‘60s, folk music had become increasingly popular, in particular on college campuses and among more affluent white Americans. Along with the interest in folk music came the folklore societies and finally the festivals.

My first experience with these groups was the University of Michigan Folklore Society in Ann Arbor in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In 1957 freshman student Al Young and Bill McAdoo founded the University of Michigan Folklore Society. Today Al Young is the Poet Laureate of California. The Folklore Society was a natural interface between the University folk and the townies – music. As a high-school dropout I had no trouble integrating and being accepted in the folk circles. No questions were asked. We were all just ‘folk’ and it was a culturally rich scene.

And Michigan was not the only campus with a folklore society. Folk music was popping up on campuses all over the nation and we were interconnected by what
came to be called the folk circuit, a constant stream of folk enthusiasts that traveled from campus to campus playing and sharing folk music. The circuit went from Cambridge to New York City to Ann Arbor to Chicago to Madison to Berkeley and back again. We were hitchhiking or piling into old cars and driving the route. Musicians like Bob Dylan would hitchhike into town, hang out, play a gig or two, and soon head down the road. And well-known folk singers came.

Folksingers like Ramblin’ Jack Elliot and groups like the New Lost City Ramblers and the Country Gentlemen were regular visitors to Ann Arbor and this was before anyone was famous. They didn’t stay in fancy motels, but with us. They stayed in our houses, slept on a couch or in the spare bedroom. We all hung out together and played music or sat in the M.U.G, the Michigan Union Grill and drank coffee all day. Whatever music and culture they brought with them really had a chance to sink in. They shared themselves and their time with us. They were just like us.

Ann Arbor had its own players. The president of the Folklore Society was Howie Abrams and we sported folk musicians like Marc Silber, Al Young, Dave Portman, Peter Griffith, and Perry Lederman. There was also an important lady named "Bugs," but I can't remember her last name. Anyone know?

And we put on festivals and events. For example, the folklore society raised money to bring Odetta to Ann Arbor where she gave her first college performance. And a young Bob Dylan gave an early performance as part of a small folk-music festival in Ann Arbor put on by the U-M Folklore Society. I am told that I helped to put that concert on, but I can't remember the details. I can remember sitting in the Michigan Union with a very nervous Dylan, drinking coffee and smoking, while we waited for the review of Dylan’s performance the night
before to come out in the Michigan Daily newspaper. It was something like 10:30 AM when the review surfaced and it was positive. With that good news Dylan proceeded to hitchhike out of town. And when Odetta sang at the Newport Folk Festival in 1960, Al Young, Perry Lederman, and Marc Silber hitchhiked there to see her.

And there was also a subtle change taking place. I could write more, if there is interest. God speed Peter Seeger!
More on the Folk Scene: Part 2

Since I see no reason to stretch this out for many days, when Seeger's passing is so fresh in our minds, I am just going to blog on this and let those we feel like reading it, read it.

And of course there were the folk festivals, of which the one in Newport, Rhode Island is perhaps the most famous, if not the first.

The Newport Folk Festival was established in 1959 by George Wein, the same man who in 1954 established the Newport Jazz Festival. The first Newport Folk Festival was held on July 11-12, 1959 and featured, among other acts, the Kingston Trio, a group that had exploded to national prominence only the year before. Flanking the Kingston Trio were classic folk singers like Odetta, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, and of course, the ubiquitous Pete Seeger.

During a set by the singer/songwriter Bob Gibson at that first 1959 festival, a young Joan Baez made her national debut to a wildly enthusiastic audience of over 13,000 people. The Newport festival is still considered to be the granddaddy of all folk festivals, even though it has been reduced in size in recent years.

The folk scene in the early '60s was very active and organized enough to have a well-established set of venues (coffee houses, church sponsorships, etc.) and routes that stretched across the country and over which performing folk artists traveled, mostly by hitchhiking. By the early 1960s folk enthusiasts everywhere were learning the rudiments of music research, at least to the point of tracing particular songs back through time to their roots or at least trying to. It was axiomatic at that time that the original version of a song was preferable to later versions, almost always enriching the listener’s
experience and enjoyment of the tune. “Sing Out! Magazine” was one of the main repositories of this research, our musical collective-heritage.

It should be remembered that the folk-music revival emerged toward the end of the 1950s and the early 1960s, a time when more and more young people were rejecting the culture of the 1950s (the flattop haircuts and what we felt was a cookie-cutter mentality) and thirsting for something a little more real. It is a simple fact that most of us looked to the folk music tradition as a way of grounding ourselves, a way to somehow get underneath or break through the social veneer in which we were raised. Future events cast their shadows and the counterculture hippie revolution that was to come later in the mid-1960s was already emerging.

The Folk Scene

Unlike folk music, whose roots were often in England or Ireland, with blues, to the surprise of most white folk-blues lovers, a trip into the history book was often as easy as venturing into a different part of town, only we didn’t know it then. The folk music scene was flourishing on college campuses and what started at Newport in 1959 was echoed in the next few years by startup folk festivals all across America, including the Berkeley and Chicago Folk festivals, both of which debuted in 1961. And, although these folk festivals also featured some blues (country blues), the blues at those festivals was mostly treated as part of the folk genre, and as a sidelight at that.

For example, one could hear Jessie ‘Lone Cat’ Fuller at Hertz Hall (Berkeley, CA) in 1959 and at Newport in 1960. In 1960 Robert Pete Williams performed at Newport. Other festivals in the early 1960s had Lightnin’ Hopkins, Mance Lipscomb, and Mississippi John Hurt, Rev. Gary Davis, Sleepy John Estes, Jesse Fuller, and
occasionally John Lee Hooker. It is hard for me to imagine John Lee Hooker or Lightnin’ Hopkins not getting mainstream attention wherever they played. In 1965, an electrified Bob Dylan, backed by the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, shocked the Newport folk crowd and helped to bring awareness of modern city blues to a mostly white folk crowd. Dylan was booed. Dylan's album "Highway 61 Revisited" was released in August of 1965, including the hit single "Like a Rolling Stone."

**The Folk Revival – Looking for Roots**

This folk music revival in the later 1950s and early 1960s was just that, a revival, an attempt to revive a music that most felt was already deeply embedded in the past. The revival started out looking back and, for the most part, stayed that way for many years. We sought to revive and find our future in past songs rather than writing our own songs for the future.

Initially, younger folk artists were just too shy. Emerging players like Bob Dylan, Ramblin’ Jack Elliot (and scores of now-unknown players schooled in traditional folk music) were (at first) not focused on writing songs themselves. Their favorite contemporary songwriter was probably Woody Guthrie, but most of the songs they played came from even earlier times, sometimes all the way back to England and Europe. The great majority of folk artists did covers of earlier songs, Dylan included. The goal then was to do them well, make them live again, to revive them.

Pivotal artists of the time like Joan Baez and the New Lost City Ramblers were not writing their own songs, but instead re-enacting and re-presenting the finest in traditional folk music. Their technique was flawless, but it was not their own songwriting creativity that was being featured. Groups like the Kingston Trio and the Weavers are perfect examples. The folk music
magazine “Sing Out!” is a written testimony to this approach. White America was exploring its roots, but we were looking backward to find what we felt was missing in the present – our living roots. Folk artists as a group had not yet empowered themselves to write for the present, much less for the future. They were too busy trying to make the past live again, reviving their heritage. That's why it is called a folk revival.

I was fortunate enough to be part of the early folk scene in the late 1950s and early 1960s. There was a route we all traveled that went from Cambridge, Massachusetts to New York City, to Ann Arbor, to the University of Chicago, to Madison, Wisconsin, to Berkeley, California, and then round back again. For the most part we all hitchhiked or piled into cars that could barely run all the way across this wide country. If I remember right, I believe I hitchhiked the distance from Ann Arbor to New York City some ten times, and hitchhiked to and lived in Venice Beach and North Beach, San Francisco as early as 1960. I even travelled with Bob Dylan for a while, hitchhiking together with my friend Perry Lederman, who then was already a legendary guitar instrumentalist.

The folk route also included side trips to places like Oberlin and Antioch colleges in Ohio, and so on, wherever colleges and universities were. In Ann Arbor, folk artists like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez were frequent visitors, while groups like the New Lost City Ramblers and the Country Gentlemen were pretty much regulars, and Ramblin’ Jack Elliot spent a lot of time there. We met mostly in houses or apartments and it seems we spent an inordinate amount of time drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes in the cafeteria of the University of Michigan Student Union, the place called M.U.G, the Michigan Union Grill. I can recall sitting around the Union with a nervous Bob Dylan who was awaiting the
Michigan Daily review of one of his earliest performances in Ann Arbor. He couldn’t bear to leave town until the review came out. When he saw that the review was good, Dylan was on his way, hitchhiking out of town.
The Folk Scene: Part 3 – Singers, Not Songwriters

For the most part, the folk movement at this time was oriented around covering traditional folk tunes. The folk artists originality was in how well they sang the song and not yet in the writing of contemporary songs. This is not to say that no songs were written; some were. My point is that back then it was all about the ‘singer’ in ‘singer/songwriter’ and not yet so much about the ‘songwriter’. For most of us, that came a bit later.

I can remember well traveling in 1961 with Bob Dylan and stopping at Gerde’s Folk City on West 4th Street in New York. Gerde’s was ‘the’ happening place back then and the folk star of the moment in that club was a guitar virtuoso named Danny Kalb, who later became part of the group known as the “Blues Project.” Dylan was obviously jealous of the attention Kalb was getting (you could hear it in his voice), but it was not just petty jealousy. He honestly could not understand what Kalb had going for him that he didn’t. It boggled his mind. I didn’t know then that my traveling companion was “The” Bob Dylan, but I am certain he must have. After all, he had something to say that we needed to hear.

Remember, all of this was in the early 1960s, well before Haight Ashbury and the hippie scene. Most folkies (like myself) were wanna-be Beatniks, but that train had already left the station. We stood outside conventional society, but we were not so much politically alienated from that society as we were repulsed by it, and fascinated by the world of music, literature, art, and our own little social scene. Things were happening man! I was 19 years old.
THE FOLK BLUES

Real folk-blues artists like Elizabeth Cotton and Jessie ‘Lone Cat’ Fuller began to be featured at festivals like the Berkeley Folk Festivals in the late 1950s. Many of them came to Ann Arbor where I lived and we heard them live, songs like “Freight Train” (Cotton) and “San Francisco Bay Blues” (Fuller). To folk enthusiasts like myself, this was still just folk music, but you did get a different feeling when you heard the blues. To me at the time, this just sounded like really good folk music – ‘really’ good. Back then we didn’t know much about the blues, but we sure could feel that music.

While folk enthusiasts heard some blues early on (as mentioned), it was at first mostly only the folk blues, and folk blues were seen as just another form (albeit, with a lot of feeling) of folk music. Later, and only very gradually, more and more country blues began to appear, but usually only southern acoustic blues, not music from the North and nothing at all from the inner cities. There was no awareness of inner-city blues or electrified blues and no interest either. At that time electric-folk music was an oxymoron.

Being Part of the Scene

As a folkie myself, I can remember listening to acoustic folk-blues and really loving it, but I treated it the same way I treated traditional folk music, as something that also needed to be preserved and revived – learned, played, shared - kept alive. It was a natural assumption on our part that we were listening to the vestiges of what had once been a living tradition and we wanted to connect to that past, to revive and relive it. We had no idea that modern electric blues music was not only ‘not-dead’, but was playing ‘live’ most nights of the week probably only blocks away, separated from us by a racial curtain. We just had no idea. The folk music
scene had few blacks in it (other than a handful of performers) and those that were present were usually the older folk-blues artists like Sonny Terry, Odetta, and so on. Their music was perceived by folkies as coming out of the past, not part of the present.

Please don’t get the idea that our exposure to folk music was only at concerts or folk societies. Like most musicians, we played or practiced music all the time, if only to learn the songs and how to play our instruments. We were also exposed to a lot of jazz. In Ann Arbor in the early 1960s, before bars could serve liquor by the glass, everyone met in apartments and houses around town to drink, smoke pot, and play music. This was primarily a jazz scene and young folkies (underage high-school kids like me) were tolerated as long as we kept to the shadows and sat along the far edges of the rooms.

And quite a scene it was. I remember one house on E. Williams Street in Ann Arbor. Protruding horizontally from its second story hung a huge flag with a picture of Thelonious Monk. At nights, especially on weekends, there was impromptu jazz in that house that went on most of the night, with players like Bob James, Bob Detwiler, Ron Brooks, and many others. It was music, music, music plus wine and pot. High school kids like me sat on the floor, squeezed in along the back wall. We didn’t rate any pot, but we used to snort the ashes from joints that others had smoked. That should tell you how desperate we were to be part of the scene!

SEARCHING FOR ROOTS

We experienced jazz along with our folk music, but still not much blues. And the jazz was anything but bluesy jazz; it was more frenetic, like bop. And if it wasn’t jazz we heard, then it was classical music played in the background on the stereo. Again: not much blues. This
is an important point, because when the mostly-white folk musicians like myself were suddenly exposed to modern (and virile) inner-city blues players like Junior Wells, Magic Sam, and Howlin' Wolf, we were astonished.

As folkies made the gradual transition from studying and researching traditional folk music to also searching out historic country folk blues and then on to discovering modern city blues, all of a sudden things lit up. We got it. Blues was not simply R&B or pop music like you heard on the radio, but music by plain folks – folk music! We could see that blues was the same as folk music, only modern, fresh – alive, well and incredibly potent.

What we had assumed must always be lost in the past, like folk music that depended on our efforts to restore and revive it, was, when it came to blues, was very much alive and in the present – staring us in the face and more-or-less happy to see us at that. This blues music we were hearing lived in the present and not just in the past. It did not need us to revive it. Our idea of folk music as something to restore and treasure suddenly moved from the past into the present in our minds. We made the connection. Blues didn’t need restoration. It was still with us and it was powerful. It was like the movie Jurassic Park; we had found a living dinosaur, folk music that lived in the present! And this music revived us and not vice-versa!

The blues scene in the early 1960s as played out in the small clubs and bars of Chicago, Detroit, and other major industrial cities, while very much still alive, was by then itself on the wane, only we newcomers didn’t know that yet. To us, it was way more alive than the standard folk music we knew. Intercity electric blues music was still authentic and strong, but (for the most part) the next generation of younger blacks was already not picking up on it; they were just not interested. Chicago-style city
blues was, to younger blacks at that time, old-peoples music, something from the South, a past and history they wanted to get away from rather than embrace. Younger blacks had already skipped ahead to R&B, Motown, and funk. Forget about those old blues.

My band played in a black bar for something like a year or a year and a half, a bar filled with mostly older black folks and a sprinkling of hippie whites who had come to see us. This was in 1967. Right next door was another black bar, where all the younger blacks hung out and where they played only the latest R&B hits. The younger blacks seldom came into our bar and, in general, were embarrassed that their parents and elders were listening to blues played by a racially-mixed band – listening to white boys play the blues. How embarrassing! Interest in the classic Chicago blues was just not there for the younger generation of blacks. They felt that blues was music from an older generation, music for old people.

While within the black community the door was slowly closing on the Chicago blues artists (even the artists knew this), another and much wider door for this music was opening onto white America, an open door that would extend the careers for many of these artists and secure their music well into the future.

B.B. King said in Time Magazine in 1971:

“The blacks are more interested in the ‘jumpy’ stuff. The whites want to hear me for what I am.”
Folk Music Scene: Part 4

1965: A Sea Change

This will be the end of this series on the folk-scene in the later 1950s and the early 1960s and how it gradually turned into "The Sixties" and the whole hippie scene.

As pointed out, in the early 1960s the folk music revival was one of the main things happening on all the major campuses across America: Cambridge, Ann Arbor, Chicago, Madison, Berkeley, etc. What happened to it?

For one, in the mid-1960s, pop music groups like the Rolling Stones were busy recording covers of blues classics and pointing out the source – the artists who originally wrote and recorded them. White players like me, eager for guidance, hunted down the original blues 45s, which were a revelation to us. I can remember rummaging through bins of old 45s in downtown Chicago and finding just incredible music.

That first “Rolling Stones” album, of the same name, was released in April of 1964. It contained tunes like Jimmy Reed’s “Honest I Do,” “Willie Dixon’s “I Just Want to Make Love to You,” “I'm a King Bee,” plus songs by Chuck Berry and Rufus Thomas.

The Stones second album, also released in 1964, veered away from the blues and contained tunes recorded by Chuck Berry, Wilson Pickett, Dale Hawkins, songs like “Under the Boardwalk.” It also included the blues-R&B tune made famous by Irma Thomas, “Time Is on My Side.” In 1965, the album “Rolling stones, Now!” had the Dixon-Wolf classic “Little Red Rooster.”

From that point onward, the blues content of Rolling Stones albums decreased. In 1965, the album “Out of
Our Heads” had no real blues tunes, and neither did their other 1965 album, “December’s Children.” It was those first two albums in 1964, and in particular the first album, that pointed the blues out to many in the white audience. The U.K. was all about authentic blues well before white America ever heard of them.

In the wake of the Beatles and Rolling Stones, late summer and early fall of 1965 saw the emerging dancehall scene in San Francisco and the arrival of bands like the Grateful Dead. This was the beginning of the hippie era, and it’s when my own band, the Prime Movers, formed in Ann Arbor, Michigan. We knew nothing of the Grateful Dead, yet we too arose at the same time and represented a new era in music and lifestyle.

In fact the summer of 1965 was the trigger point for so very much. It marked a change in the folk scene with the advent of groups like the Paul Butterfield Blues Band. If there was a single band that opened up blues to white players, it was the Butterfield Band. That first Butterfield album appeared late in 1965, and it totally kicked ass. The Butterfield band in person was way more powerful than anything they managed to record.

This racially mixed band playing authentic Chicago blues sent a lightning bolt-like signal to all of us who were just waking up to the blues anyway. Their message was that white players could overcome their fear to play black music, including the blues. The Paul Butterfield Blues Band set the standard and set white musicians on notice that anybody was free to try to play the blues. We were emboldened to try.

Unlike many areas of folk music, modern city blues at that time was anything but a dead art. While the lineage of most folk music required revival, like trying to trace out the history and line of the music, this was not true of
blues. The blues lineage was not only unbroken, but indeed very much alive, both on black record labels and in thousands of bars and clubs across the nation. Perhaps some forms of country blues were endangered, but inner-city blues (at least for the older generation of Blacks) was in full swing. White Americans just knew little or nothing about it. During the later 1960s, all that changed. And last, but not least, many of the modern city blues players were still reasonably young and more than willing to be discovered.

They needed the money and appreciated the recognition.

Historians would agree that from the middle to the late ‘60s, music in general was, to a real extent, fusing. The whole psychedelic era blurred the boundaries of different music genres and emboldened white players to play music of all kinds – black, Indian, Asian, etc. The first extended psychedelic-like guitar solo/jam was Michael Bloomfield and the tune “East-West ” on the Butterfield album of the same name in 1966. It was over 13 minutes in length and inspired legions of heavy metal players that followed.

[Photo of the great Muddy Waters, with James Cotton on harmonica in the background. James Cotton and his entire band stayed with us at the Prime Movers House (my band) for some weeks, including the great rhythm-guitar player Luther Tucker. ]
Michael Bloomfield and How I Became a Groupie

Back in the 1960s the musicians I really loved and looked up to were players like Muddy Waters, Junior Wells, Otis Rush, Little Walter, Magic Sam, Buddy Guy, and the list goes on, mostly the great blues players. And I had the chance to meet these artists, interview and hang out with them, plus hear them playing live in clubs and other venues. I was a total fan of these folks.

I am sometimes asked why I didn't spend more time listening to my own peers, groups like the Grateful Dead, Janice Joplin, The Band, and so on. My answer is simple. Their music didn't interest me.

If that sounds flip, it's not meant to. It was because those players who were my peers were people much like me. No matter how great they were, we all drank from the same cup. We were all derivative, all drawing inspiration from the same musical root-sources, those great rock, blues, and jazz players who came before us. It was not disrespect, but simple camaraderie.

For example, I met and hung out with Janice Joplin at the Grande Ballroom, where we both played. She was cool, no doubt. But I had already heard the original "Take Another Little Piece of my Heart" by Erma Franklin and "Ball 'n Chain" by Big Mama Thornton. I spent a whole late-night talking and drinking with Big Mama Thornton, so I know where Joplin was getting her stuff. Joplin was a popular singer, but she was no Big Mama Thornton. We both revered Big Mama Thornton. Joplin herself would be the first to say so.

It was the same with the Rolling Stones. Of course I like their tune "Time is On My Side," because that is an Irma Thomas song. What's not to like, but I like the original by Irma Thomas much better. Thomas is one of the...
greatest woman singers I have ever heard. Period. I had the chance to have dinner with her and hang out some years ago and it was out of this world. Later that night at the gig, Irma Thomas changed her set list to include many of her early songs that I especially love, just for me. We are exactly the same age. I can't say enough about what a great artist Irma Thomas is.

So you get the idea. It is not that I was somehow too good for the music of my peers. It was because it wasn't their music and in almost all cases the original was better, and they knew it too. That's why they covered it in the first place.

It's the same with the Grateful Dead. We were all studying the same root music. I remember jamming with Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead in West Park in Ann Arbor one sunny afternoon in the 1960s. It was fun, but we were both reading from the same playbook of those great artists that we revered, most of whom were still living. An exception would be Jimi Hendrix. Although he too had roots, he transformed those roots into something really new, IMO. Hendrix was unique in this way.

There is one other exception, only one group I can think of among my peers that I would acknowledge myself a "groupie" of, and that was the Paul Butterfield Blues Band." When the Butterfield band burst on the scene in late 1965, we were spellbound.

Although Butterfield and his band made a number of albums, IMO none of those albums captured the experience of hearing that band live. And I should know. As a 'groupie' I heard them many times.

And we hung out with the Butterfield band and even recorded them. In the spring of 1966 my brother Dan and I recorded an early version of the Butterfield band's landmark tune East-West in "Poor Richard's" club in
Chicago, before it came out as an album. "East-West" is considered the first extended rock solo (13 minutes) ever issued on an album, and it served to fuel the future of any number of heavy-metal artists.

Our recording of East-West is the first complete rendering of this tune that is extant. If I remember right, we were sitting behind a curtain on the stage recording this, but I could be wrong. My brother Dan might remember. Anyway, the recording we made was issued on an album called "East-West Live" by the Butterfield keyboard player Mark Naftalin in 1996. I sent him the tapes. Here is the album for those interested. Our recording is the second cut. But I digress.

http://www.amazon.com/East-West-Live-Paul-Butterfield/dp/B0000034D7/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1392441358&sr=8-1&keywords=east-west+live

There were many reasons the Butterfield band's imprint on us was so profound. For one, they were just that good, and they were a racially mixed band as we sometimes were. That first Butterfield album stopped us in our tracks and our band was never the same again. That was probably the time we added the phrase "Blues Band" to our name, making it the "Prime Movers Blues Band." That first Butterfield album served as a wakeup call to an entire generation of White would-be blues musicians, a notice that we could go ahead and try to play the blues, "whiteness" and all, and so we did.

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 – IMO only Big Walter Horton has a better sense of note selection.

When I knew Butterfield (during those 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. But Butterfield liked to mess with your mind. Here is an example.

I can remember one time Butterfield and I were sitting out in our van, probably smoking something or other. He was explaining that he was left-handed and that only left-handed people would ever amount to anything in this world. The rest of us were shit-out-a-luck. That was Butterfield's humor. It is true that he held the harmonica opposite to the standard right-handed player who holds it in his left hand. Butterfield held it in his right hand, upside down, with the low notes to the right.

Michael Bloomfield (lead guitar) and Mark Naftalin (keyboards) in the Butterfield band, 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 like we were.

Naftalin continues to this day to support blues projects and festivals. But it was Butterfield's lead-guitar player, Michael Bloomfield, who most stands out in my mind. Bloomfield actually was our friend. He cared about us. We could feel it.

Michael Bloomfield also played lead on Dylan's album "Highway 61 revisited." Michael Bloomfield is one of the greatest guitarists I have ever heard, and I have heard a bunch. Bob Dylan thinks so too, as this quote from a Rolling Stone article (May 2009) shows:
"The guy that I always miss, and I think he'd still be around if he stayed with me, was Mike Bloomfield. He could just flat-out play. He had so much soul. And he knew all the styles, and he could play them so incredibly well. He was an expert player and a real prodigy too. He could play like Robert Johnson way back then in the 1960s. He could play the pure style of country blues authentically." – Bob Dylan

In my experience, Michael Bloomfield was always filled with light, positive, and interested in helping others into the future. If there are bodhisattvas wandering around in this world, Bloomfield has to be one of them. I am running out of space here, but let me give you just one example of Bloomfield's compassion that I personally experienced.

For those of you who are too young, the “Summer of Love” was San Francisco and the Bay Area in 1967, when more than 100,000 hippies showed up at the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco wanting to hang out. I happened to be there for that summer. In fact I made a point of it.

My entire band and I drove all the way across the country (and back) in our 1966 Dodge Van. We had our band name (The Prime Movers) all over that van, but most people thought we were a just another moving company even though across the front of the van we had the slogan “Gonna Ring a Few Bells in your Ears” a quote by legendary New Orleans performer Jessie Hill from his song “Ooh Poo Pah Doo.” Any of you remember that song? Here it is for those of you with open ears:

http://youtu.be/3qhxE5z9xRI
How we crammed all of our band equipment and the entire band (I think there were five of us), not to mention five suitcases into that Dodge van and managed to get it across the U.S. is beyond me. We just did it, took turns driving, and made it a non-stop trip. I can remember waking up as we crossed the Continental Divide to find us moving at a snail’s pace surrounded on all sides by a huge flock of sheep. That moment was a long way from what we were going to find in San Francisco and Haight-Ashbury.

And of course we had no money and no place to stay once we got there. We just went there cold because we knew it was happening. And here is my point:

It was our friend Michael Bloomfield who cared enough about us to find us a free place to live for the summer, which turned out to be the Sausalito Heliport, where many music groups practiced. We crashed on the floor. I remember some famous woman singer gave us $5 at the heliport for food. It might have been Gale Garnet (“We’ll Sing in the Sunshine”). We had zero money.

In fact we played blues outside on the pavement next to a local Sausalito Black rib-joint for food, just to have something to eat. We ate a lot of ribs that summer. The Sausalito Heliport was just across the San Francisco Bay Bridge to the north. However, the band and I spent most of our time in San Francisco and Berkeley, where we auditioned and/or played at all the major Sixties clubs, places like the Avalon Ballroom, The Straight Theater, The Matrix, The Haight A, and even the Fillmore Auditorium. We also played in Berkeley at the New Orleans House and other places.

And there is more to my Bloomfield story. It was also thanks to Michael Bloomfield that we played the Fillmore Auditorium. Bloomfield not only found us a place to stay, but asked us to fill in for his band the
"Electric Flag" when they could not make a gig, at the Fillmore itself. It was August 29th of 1967 at the Fillmore Auditorium that we opened for Cream on what I believe was their first concert in the U.S. or at least in San Francisco. For those of you who don’t know about Cream, it was the British rock supergroup featuring Eric Clapton on guitar, Jack Bruce on bass, and Ginger Baker on drums. Their songs included many classic blues tunes and, of course, their smash hit “Sunshine of Your Love.”

In fact I watched Cream (with needles in their arms) shoot up speed in the green room before the show. And I had a shouting match with Fillmore promoter Bill Graham at that time about how to mic our amplifiers. Graham wanted to run our sound directly through these giant walls of speakers, but I wanted them to mic our amps through their own speakers, so our particular (old Fender Concerts) amp sound would be preserved. I am sure I was wrong, but at the time it seemed so right. And shouting with Bill Graham was almost required in those days.

Anyway, I wanted to share with you my history as a groupie and my undying respect for the compassion and genius of Michael Bloomfield, certainly someone worthy of my respect. At long last, there is a compilation of Bloomfield's guitar work called "From His Head to His Heart to His Hands." Even that title sounds like a bodhisattva to me. It is here:

http://www.amazon.com/His-Head-Heart-Hands/dp/B00I1CRJN0/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1392445893&sr=8-1&keywords=michael+bloomfield

Also, a bio I did on the Butterfield Blues Band here:

http://michaelerlewine.com/viewtopic.php?f=148&t=53&sid=67fe8580b0bbaa8fe627efe1b f823d3c2
The Perfect Blues Storm II: The A2 Blues Festivals

Continuing with my story of those first Ann Arbor Blues Festivals in 1969 and 1970:

While the Prime Movers Blues Band (my group) may have missed our chance to make it big with the Motown folks, we were right on time for that first Ann Arbor Blues Festival in 1969. As soon as we heard about it, my brother Dan and I were all over that event.

Before we knew it, we were in complete charge of taking care of the performers as regards food and drink. What could be better than that, especially to dole out alcohol, which was still really big back then, especially with the blues crowd?

The Ann Arbor Blues Festivals were put on by the Student Activities Committee (or some such group) at the University of Michigan, but IMO it was mainly the work of one John Fishel, a student, who became the leader of the festival committee. It was he who voted down having some white British blues group play in favor of the real deal – the great blues players themselves. After all, blues was not dead and gone like most folk music. It was alive and well, playing across town, and perhaps separated only by a racial curtain. It was Fishel who really made this landmark event happen, and I thank him!

So there we were at those festivals, right back stage with the artists, serving them food and booze out of the tailgate of my father’s station wagon. And it gets better. Let me set the stage.

Until that first blues festival in 1969, a few of these great blues artists may have been together at one club or another, once in a while, but never everyone at one
event and together. This had never happened before, and never has since. Suddenly just about everyone who was anyone in the blues roster was present and standing around talking with one another. It was like a blues convocation in heaven. And there is more.

For reasons I still don't understand, a number of the blues players like Big Mama Thornton, Arthur Big Boy Crudup, Fred McDowell, Yank Rachel, and others showed up many days before the festival. Who knows why, but suddenly here they were, being put up at the Michigan League and other places. I can remember going to the University of Michigan's West Quad and there was Mississippi Fred McDowell, Yank Rachel, and Johnnie Young all tucked away in little dark-wood-trimmed rooms. It boggled our minds.

They were everywhere. If there is a blues paradise, for me that was it. Can you imagine?

And this great conflux of blues greats pushed my buttons until they popped. Here I was actually talking one-on-one with my blues heroes and before I knew it I had a reel-to-reel tape recorder, microphone, and was officially interviewing these guys. It just happened. Little did I know then that this incredible stream of talent and energy would divert my life and segue it into something new, although it took some years for this to surface.

I had been to Chicago and seen many of these players one at a time, which was very, very different from suddenly being surrounded by them on all sides. The sheer energy of the all the artists at that first festival was so powerful. Couple that with the fact that I believe the artists had their own minds blown at the same time we did. This was a first for them too. It was some very high energy, my friends.

I don't know what pooling that many similar minds together can do, but however you want to describe it,
we can agree it was a unique gathering, one never to be repeated. Even by the time of the 2nd Ann Arbor Blues Festival the following year (1970), the music world had lost blues greats like Otis Spann, Lonnie Johnson, Earl Hooker, Slim Harpo, Skip James, Kokomo Arnold, and others. And it has been all downhill from there.

That first festival in 1969, whatever we can agree it was or meant, could never be repeated. It was the culmination and a coming together of a massive force of minds in one time and one place. We were all lit up. It was very much a celebration. There was joy there. Both the performers and the audience were open to one another and communicating. Here are some quotes about the festival by the performers taken from my interviews.

James Cotton (August 3, 1969)
I've never seen nothin' like this in my life. This is the beautifulest thing I ever seen in my life. This is so beautiful.

Magic Sam (August 3, 1969)
This festival is like an all-star game.

Louis Myers
This blues festival is a big family reunion. 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 was busy. I could hear the performances filtering through to the backstage area, but had (or took) little time to sit out front and watch. I had done that before and much preferred working backstage where I was actually mixing with the artists, or getting off to the side with them and tape recording an interview. And I had my whole family all around me. I am one of five boys (no sisters), and all my brothers were there, and my dad!

My dad was a comptroller by trade, a CFO and money man; he was all about numbers. I never played by the numbers or was that concerned with financial matters, so he and I had not a lot in common. In my whole life I cannot remember even one personal or deep conversation with him. The 1970 blues festival was perhaps the only exception I can think of. My father had been an actor in college and a performing magician, so he liked to and was comfortable hob-nobbing with other performers, or so I realized when I saw him with them. They got tight.

Dad came down for almost the whole event, and before I knew it he was locked in deep discussions (and beers) with some of the older performers. In particular, Roosevelt Sykes and dad hung out a lot, sitting back along the fence on a couple of hard-backed wooden chairs, side by side, making points by grabbing each other's arms, and so on. And under their chairs was a small army of empty beer cans. Personally I didn't say much of a word to dad during the festival, but it was one of the most together times we ever spent. Dad was loving what I loved. That was enough.
The Perfect Storm (conclusion)

Little did I know at the time that I had stumbled on the missing ingredients to my meditation practice, and was totally mixing my mind with my practice for the first time. Better yet, I was meditating, and no longer just practicing meditation. Somehow my personal disappointments were being purified through this whole process. This, mixed with true joy in deep concentration on nature, created the perfect storm for my meditation. I had no idea this would take place. It was an adventitious byproduct.

Out of that mix was forged a clarity and insight I had somehow ignored up until then. Like a kid on a bike, whose training wheels have been removed, I soared down the street, finally right there, perhaps a little wobbly, but experiencing something that never went away, but was always there whenever I took the time to look. It is still there today.

Looking back from now, it is so easy to rattle off the poetry of that time. But back then I was in the thick and thin of it, up to me ears in change, and pretty much alone. Even my family could do little to solve my existential crisis. What transpired back then as regards meditation was incredible, but the whole time itself was so amazing that I hardly noticed at first. I only gradually realized that I had realized something. I was too busy realizing it.

And perhaps the main reason for that was because it didn't happen on the cushion like I always imagined it would. It happened out in fields and streams, peering through a lens at nature. It never occurred to me that virtually ANY object of meditation will do, not just a pebble or a candle and a cushion. But you have to love
doing it! What had always been missing for me were the exact right conditions, in particularly the joy of practicing, a joy that I found while looking through a lens. I had always loved nature.

And it was my friend Lama Karma, a Tibetan monk, who pointed this out to me. Teachers are those who point things out to us. What I learned from all of this is that to succeed in meditation, like anything else in life, all of the right conditions must be present. I had been practicing meditation for decades, but had not spent enough time creating the right conditions. Of course I couldn't know what they were. I must have assumed dharma practice was like some Jiffy Mix, just stir and bake. But it is not like that.

This kind of alchemy requires just the right ingredients and in just the right proportions, carefully mixed by time and place. I don't know what I was thinking all those years, but the fact was that I had not thought much about it at all. I had little idea how delicate the whole practice of meditation is. Now I do, which is why I am trotting all of this out for you to read. It is hard to know what you have never even heard of, right? Well, now you have.

And less you think that I am telling you I am enlightened, think again. This is not about enlightenment, of which I know nothing. This is about what is simply called "recognition," which I had a glimpse of in 2005 while attending a teaching on the instructions for pointing out the true nature of the mind by my dharma teacher. That opened the door, and it was followed by almost three years of intense practice on my part, not just on the cushion, but practice all day long in whatever I did, as much as I could manage anyway.
And then this personal crisis shoved me off track and up against my attachments to money and career, but I put myself aside. I just did not care. In that ensuing time, the missing elements of my meditation training came together quite naturally and, like superglue, stayed that way. That is the difference between experiences and simple recognition.

And here is the point of all this: What I had been looking for all those years of dharma practice was some kind of enlightenment. That never happened, but I did realize that I had no idea whatsoever what enlightenment might be. I just thought I did. I assumed.

What did happen is that I realized (and became clear about) the nature of how the mind works and immediately saw that, because it is so simple, even I could work it. This after some thirty years of not knowing, but still practicing.

My advice to anyone listening to this? We must learn the physical process and muscle-memory of sitting meditation. Like any other kind of practice, we have to get it down cold until it becomes automatic. There is no way around this that I know of. But there is more, what we might call the intangibles. I call them intangible because we are not yet in touch with them.

For example, there is more to music than learning chords. You have to love and hear the music in your mind and also be sensitive enough to play it beautifully. Meditation is like that. Yes, there is great benefit to just learning the basic technique and applying it throughout your life. That is true.

We are not all Mozarts, but when it comes to meditation, we have no choice. We must all be Mozarts, just like we must eventually be Buddhas. There is no such thing as a bargain-basement Buddha, an almost-Buddha, much
less a copy or rip-off. The paths may be many, but the final ascent to enlightenment is the same for us all.

Beginning meditation has its mechanical aspects, but beyond that it requires not only all our sensitivity, but an awareness we have never known and have yet to develop. It is all about awareness. We have to rise to the occasion beyond even our imagination and certainly beyond our expectations. It all happens above the clouds of obscuration in our mind.

Our whole environment must be fine-tuned with the proper aspirations and dedications, with love and compassion in everything we do. There is no brute-force final assault to peak of enlightenment. The nearer we get, the more we back up, bow down, and make way for real clarity. Me, myself, and I are left at the doorway because they cloud the mind until we learn to see through them. Obscurations are removed.

So the moral of this story is that while the mechanics of meditation can be a grind, actual meditation requires more than just brute force. And while we hone the mechanics, we should at the same time develop the context in which all of this takes place.

We can wait for the perfect storm to form like I ignorantly did or we can set about preparing the conditions for a perfect storm and help to bring it about.

In my opinion, questions that are natural to sincere students might include: How do I make my practice joyful? How is compassion developed?

What are proper meditation objects? How do I log enough hours each week? When does the good stuff begin? What are the natural waypoints of learning this? Why can't I just do it on my own? What about aspiration, dedication, and intent?
Ann Arbor Blues Festivals and the Prime Movers Blues Band

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.

The graphic is by my brother Tom Erlewine, who designed the book "Blues in Black and White: The Landmark Ann Arbor Blues Festivals," for which I wrote the text. You can read more about the book here: http://www.bluesinblackandwhite.com/

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Blues Before Dharma

Since the mid-1970s I have been involved in dharma practice and affiliated with Tibetan Buddhism. Most of my Facebook friends must know that about me by now. I have had the extreme good fortune to sit at the feet of the Tibetan Buddhist masters that escaped from Tibet and learn. But before I found the Tibetans I had other life masters that I studied. I want to tell you about one group of them.

I became involved in the folk-music revival of the late 1950s and early 1960s. I was learning to play guitar and traveling the same folk circuit that folk singers like Bob Dylan traveled at that time. In fact I hitchhiked with Dylan for a stretch in 1961, was with him when he performed in Ann Arbor, and things like that. That would be another story.

This was before singers like Dylan and most other young folk artists were writing their own songs. We were too busy reviving and preserving the folk music of the past, studying singers like Woody Guthrie, and so on. As for me, at that time it was still years before I would become a professional musician, but I already was sorting through the folks songs and focusing on the bluesy and minor-key parts of songs, and, of course, the country blues that would turn up at folk festivals from artists like Elizabeth Cotton and Jesse ‘Lone Cat’ Fuller. Gradually I came to know that Black Music was what I particularly most loved. And then there was the revelation.

It came as a big surprise to White folk-musicians like myself to discover (and we did) that unlike most folk music from Ireland and England, Black music did not need to be revived. It was very much alive and playing at a club nearby, separated only by a racial curtain. To a
folk revivalist, this was like going back to a time when folk music was born, a music time-machine. There are a lot of stories I could tell about my learning curve, but perhaps another time. Here I want to fast forward through my own music career and settle on those first Ann Arbor Blues Festivals in 1969 and 1970.

That was definitely one of my Forrest Gump moments, a time when I was fully present along the sidelines at an amazing event, the first large-scale gathering of Black blues musicians in America. In fact, I wrote the text for an award-winning book on this event titled “Blues in Black and White: The Landmark Ann Arbor Blues Festivals,” featuring the incredible photography of my friend Stanley Livingston, and designed by my brother Tom Erlewine. You can see it here.


I spent years studying Black music, doing my best to play the blues. The blues music led me, of course, to the artists themselves, and in meeting the artists I found something more than just their music. I found the authentic wisdom that I missed in my own upbringing, the sage advice from elders (I never had a grandfather on either side) who had (at least IMO) fully lived life.

For years I not only studied, played, and celebrated Black music, I also began to interview and document the great blues musicians and their music. This led to my (along with my brother Dan) spending real time, as much as we could, with Black musicians. We would drive to Chicago and hear the great blues masters in the tiny clubs on Chicago’s West and South Sides. This was around 1966. But the great opportunity was to be part of those first two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals mentioned above, and then the following Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival in 1972 and 1973. Dan and
I were lucky enough to be in charge of providing food (and drink!) to the blues musicians, and I began to interview in detail many of the great blues Artists.

I could not then know that those two early Ann Arbor Blues Festivals would never be repeated, because many of the major blues artists would begin to pass away soon after that first festival. I had painstakingly listened to their music, learned to play some, and then gradually began to document their lives as well.

Those interviews eventually led to my founding and starting the All-Music Guide (allmusic.com) in this tiny office where I sit typing now. The world definitely laughed at me and some of the well-known critics for the Rolling Stone Record Guide joked that some guy in a tiny town in the Midwest claims he is going to document all recorded music. LOL. In fact, we did, from 10-inch records onward.

Well, I am stubborn if not anything else, and today AMG is the largest music database of music reviews, biographies, and discographies on the planet. I sold the company and when I left there were 150 full-time employees and over 500 free-lance writers. It continues today, along with its sister site, the All-Movie Guide (allmovie.com), and other content. I also started perhaps the first site for video games and another for concert music posters (ClassicPosters.com). My CD collection, which I sold with the company, today is housed in a warehouse in Ann Arbor, and numbers over 600,000 music CDs. All that is part of my history as an entrepreneur, which I don't mention much here on Facebook.

What remains from those early years is the impression those great blues players made on me, not only with their music, but with their life experience and authentic wisdom that I soaked in as best I could. I got a chance
to see blues greats like Little Walter play live in Theresa’s Lounge on the South Side of Chicago. Brother Dan and I spent an evening drinking Jack Daniels with Arthur ‘Big Boy’ Crudup, author of Elvis Presley’s first hit, “That’s Alright Mamma.” Another evening was spent with Big Mama Thornton, who wrote Presley’s hit “Hound Dog,” and so on. You get the idea. I was learning from the masters.

For those interested, here is an interview I did with Howlin Wolf in 1969 that I have been told is the best Wolf interview ever done. See for yourself:

http://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10150098536007658.305358.587252657&type=3

These blues artists were important life teachers for me until I began to practice the dharma in the early 1970s, meeting (in particular) Tibetans like the Venerable Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and then many, many others.

The Tibetan Buddhists were also authentic life masters that offered profound wisdom, and they did not have some of the unfortunate conditions (like alcoholism and poverty) that too often were the legacy of being Black in America in those years. How shameful racism is!

I continue my dharma practice and am grateful for the wisdom of the dharma. Yet, I can never forget the lessons learned, plus the kindness and acceptance, of many of the great Black blues artists. White society never took them in or treated them as they so deserved, but many of them had no trouble accepting (and being gracious and kind to) a young White kid like me. I am forever grateful and I salute them.

These Black artists gave so much to the culture of this country, and continue to do so.
Searching for Roots
Discovering Electric Blues in White America

In the late 1950s and early 1960s the interest in folk music and its roots in rural America and the European Continent reached a high pitch as thousands of young adults crisscrossed America documenting folksongs and sharing authentic music. Folklore societies sprung up at many major campuses. This was a folk revival, one that has not been repeated since. But old English and Scottish ballads were not the only music discovered during this time. There was another even more indigenous music that needed no revival. In fact this music was very much alive and probably playing somewhere just across town, separated only by a racial curtain: modern city blues. This article is about the heyday of folk music in the late 1950s and early 1960s and something about how white America discovered the blues.

Blues Festivals – A Brief History

On a warm summer night in August of 1969 a music legacy was born. Several thousand blues lovers gathered in a small athletic field called Fuller Flats near the North Campus of the University of Michigan (a spot along the Huron River in Ann Arbor, Michigan) to witness the first “Ann Arbor Blues Festival.” By the time blues icon Sun House took the stage to close the show it was clear that something magical was happening in this southeast Michigan college town. Few present also knew that music history was being made, for the 1969 Ann Arbor Blues Festival was the first electric blues festival of its kind in North America.
When we look back at the roster of performers at those first two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals, it is hard to imagine that all of this great talent managed to converge at one place and time, blues greats like Bobby “Blue Bland,” Big Joe Turner, Buddy Guy, John Lee Hooker, B.B. King, Albert King, Freddy King, Lightnin’ Hopkins, Howlin’ Wolf, Magic Sam, Muddy Waters, Son House, T-Bone Walker, and Junior Wells, to name a few. And that is just the short list.

**How I Happened to Be There**

Before I begin, let me tell you something about why I happen to be writing this and how I got involved with these landmark festivals in the first place. It is simple: those first two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals changed the course of my life forever.

Sometimes I think of myself as similar to the lead character in the movie “Forest Gump,” always on the edge of history, witnessing, but never quite front and center, never in exactly the right place at the right time. However, when it comes to those first two blues festivals in Ann Arbor, I was there AND then, one-hundred percent. Those festivals were life-altering events for me, a pivotal point in deciding who I was going to be and what I would do in my life. Let me give you a quick idea what I was about back then.

In 1968, when that first blues festival was being organized, I was part of the only blues band in the area. The “Prime Movers Blues Band” first came together in the summer of 1965, the same summer that the Grateful Dead formed in San Francisco. This was a time of real cultural change across the country. I was studying and learning to play Chicago-style blues 24x7. It was my passion.

We hooked up with the blues festival organizers pretty much by default: we were the only band in the area that
knew anything about modern city blues. We had been to Chicago years before and seen all the blues greats live, not to mention: you couldn’t keep us out of that festival for the world. This festival was like a dream come true for me, a chance to see my idols, these great blues players up close and right here in my own home town. Who could ask for more?

My brother Dan and I volunteered (we probably forced ourselves on the organizers) and ended up being put in charge of feeding all the performers and making sure they had drinks. Trust me, providing drinks proved to be “key” in gaining access to these players. The opportunity to meet our heroes was way beyond anything we could have imagined on our own.

And to put the icing on the cake, I ended up officially interviewing (on reel-to-reel tape) almost every blues artist and sideman at the festival - dozens of them. Later in my life, the experience of putting all that interview information together led to my becoming something of an archivist of music data in general and I eventually founded and built the All-Music Guide (allmusic.com), which today is the largest database of music reviews, bios, tracks, and information on the planet. So you can see what I mean when I say that these festivals were life-changing for me. They gave me direction. Now you know how I fit into all of this, so let’s move on.

In this writing, I have two stories to tell. One of course is the importance of those first two Ann Arbor blues festivals, how they came about, who was involved, and the artists that played there – the music itself. The second story I want to share with you has more to do with my experience of how white America first became aware of electric-city blues music and, as you will see, the two are to some degree interdependent.

A Short History of Blues Festivals
To appreciate the uniqueness of those first Ann Arbor Blues Festivals, some historical context may be helpful. Blues as a genre did not always have festivals. Although some blues was included in many of the early folk festivals, it was almost exclusively of the acoustic “folk-blues” variety, more of an add-on than a featured style at folk festivals like those held in Newport Rhode Island. It was the “folk” in folk-blues that was what most people came to hear, not the blues. The “blues” was just a feeling that the folk-blues held for many of us and was not recognized as the genre it is today, at least by folkies like me. Until the late 60s, modern, electric, citified blues was almost exclusively the province of black Americans, made available on black record labels or served up in hundreds of small clubs and bars across the land. White Americans didn’t go there. All that began to change with that first Ann Arbor Blues Festival in 1969, but let’s back up just a bit.

The Chitlin’ Circuit

Chitterlings or “Chitlins” as they are called are the large intestines of pigs that have been specially cleaned, stewed, and then fried. The Chitlin’ Circuit as it was called consisted of hundreds of small venues (mostly in the south) where chitlins were served along with plenty of beer and music. These were the places where black musicians travelled to play the blues and where black audiences could congregate in a racially divided country and age. The chitlin’ circuit also included (on the high-end) some major black theaters like the Apollo Theater in Harlem, the Howard Theater in D.C., the Cotton Club in NYC, the Royal Theater in Baltimore, the Fox Theater in Detroit, the Uptown Theater in Philadelphia, and so on. But for the most part, this kind of blues was played in the hundreds of small bars, clubs, and way-stops along the circuit. Many of the great blues musicians featured at those first Ann Arbor blues festivals knew
the chitlin' circuit only too well. For years, these performers had traveled the circuit playing the blues - one-night stands at roadside bars and clubs. To white America, the chitlin' circuit was practically invisible. City blues at that time was black music played in black venues - music for blacks.

**The Folk Festivals**

By the 1950s, more and more young Americans became interested in their own indigenous music – American folk music. In the later ‘50s and early ‘60s, festivals and folklore societies became increasingly popular, in particular on college campuses and among more affluent white Americans. Along with the interest in folk music came the folklore societies. My first experience with these groups was the University of Michigan Folklore Society in Ann Arbor in the early 1960s. And of course there were the folk festivals, of which the one in Newport, Rhode Island is perhaps the most famous, if not the first.

The Newport Folk Festival was established in 1959 by George Wein, the same man who in 1954 established the Newport Jazz Festival. The first Newport Folk Festival was held on July 11-12, 1959 and featured, among other acts, the Kingston Trio, a group that had exploded to national prominence only the year before. Flanking the Kingston Trio were classic folk singers like Odetta, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, and of course, the ubiquitous Pete Seeger.

During a set by the singer/songwriter Bob Gibson at that first 1959 festival, a young Joan Baez made her national debut to a wildly enthusiastic audience of over 13,000 people. The Newport festival is still considered to be the granddaddy of all folk festivals, even though it has been reduced in size in recent years.
The folk scene in the early ’60s was very active and organized enough to have a well-established set of venues (coffee houses, church sponsorships, etc.) and routes that stretched across the country and over which performing folk artists traveled, mostly by hitchhiking. By the early 1960s folk enthusiasts everywhere were learning the rudiments of music research, at least to the point of tracing particular songs back through time to their roots or at least trying to. It was axiomatic at that time that the original version of a song was preferable to later versions, almost always enriching the listeners experience and enjoyment of the tune. “Sing Out! Magazine” was one of the main repositories of this research, our musical collective heritage.

It should be remembered that the folk-music revival emerged toward the end of the 1950s and the early 1960s, a time when more and more young people were rejecting the culture of the 1950s (the flattop haircuts and what they felt was a cookie-cutter mentality) and thirsting for something a little more real. It is a simple fact that most of us looked to the folk music tradition as a way of grounding ourselves, a way to somehow get underneath or break through the social veneer in which we were raised. Future events cast their shadows and the counterculture revolution that was to come later in the mid-1960s was already emerging.

The Folk Scene

Unlike folk music, whose roots were often in England or Ireland, with blues, to the surprise of most white folk-blues lovers, a trip into the history book was often as easy as venturing into a different part of town, only we didn’t know it then. The folk music scene was flourishing on college campuses and what started at Newport in 1959 was echoed in the next few years by startup folk festivals all across America, including the Berkeley and Chicago Folk festivals, both of which debuted in 1961.
And, although these folk festivals also featured some blues (country blues), the blues at those festivals was mostly treated as part of the folk genre, and as a sidelight at that.

For example, one could hear Jessie “Lone Cat” Fuller at Hertz Hall (Berkeley, CA) in 1959 and at Newport in 1960. In 1960 Robert Pete Williams performed at Newport. Other festivals in the early 1960s had Lightnin’ Hopkins, Mance Lipscomb, and Mississippi John Hurt, Rev. Gary Davis, Sleepy John Estes, Jesse Fuller, and occasionally John Lee Hooker. It is hard for me to imagine John Lee Hooker or Lightnin’ Hopkins not getting mainstream attention wherever they played. In 1965, an electrified Bob Dylan, backed by the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, shocked the Newport folk crowd and helped to bring awareness of modern city blues to a mostly white folk crowd. Dylan was booed.

The Folk Revival – Looking for Roots

This folk music revival in the later 1950s and early 1960s was just that, a revival, an attempt to revive a music that most felt was already deeply embedded in the past. The revival started out looking back and, for the most part, stayed that way for many years. We sought to revive and find our future in past songs rather than writing our own songs for the future.

Initially, younger folk artists were just too shy. Emerging players like Bob Dylan, Ramblin’ Jack Elliot (and scores of now-unknown players schooled in traditional folk music) were (at first) not focused on writing songs themselves. Their favorite contemporary songwriter was probably Woody Guthrie, but most of the songs they played came from even earlier times, sometimes all the way back to England and Europe. The great majority of folk artists did covers of earlier songs, Dylan included.
The goal then was to do them well, to make them live again.

Pivotal artists of the time like Joan Baez and the New Lost City Ramblers were not writing their own songs, but instead re-enacting and re-presenting the finest in traditional folk music. Their technique was flawless, but it was not their own songwriting creativity that was being featured. Groups like the Kingston Trio and the Weavers are perfect examples. The folk music magazine “Sing Out!” is a written testimony to this approach.

White America was exploring its roots, but we were looking backward to find what we felt was missing in the present – our living roots. Folk artists as a group had not yet empowered themselves to write for the present, much less for the future. They were too busy trying to make the past live again, reviving their heritage. That’s why it is called a revival.

I was fortunate enough to be part of the early folk scene in the late 1950s and early 1960s. There was a route we all traveled that went from Cambridge, Massachusetts to New York City, to Ann Arbor, to the University of Chicago, to Madison, Wisconsin, to Berkeley, California, and then round back again.

For the most part we all hitchhiked or piled into cars that could barely run all the way across this wide country. If I remember right, I believe I hitchhiked the distance from Ann Arbor to New York City some ten times, and hitchhiked to and lived in Venice Beach and North Beach, San Francisco as early as 1960. I even travelled with Bob Dylan for a while, hitchhiking together with my friend Perry Lederman, who even then was a legendary guitar instrumentalist.

The folk route also included side trips to places like Oberlin and Antioch colleges in Ohio, and so on,
wherever colleges and universities were. In Ann Arbor, folk artists like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez were frequent visitors, while groups like the New Lost City Ramblers and the Country Gentlemen were pretty much regulars, and Ramblin’ Jack Elliot spent a lot of time there. We met mostly in houses or apartments and it seems we spent an inordinate amount of time drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes in the cafeteria of the University of Michigan Student Union. I can recall sitting around the Union with a nervous Bob Dylan who was awaiting the Michigan Daily review of one of his earliest performances in Ann Arbor. He couldn’t bear to leave town until the review came out. When he saw that the review was good, Dylan was on his way, hitchhiking out of town.

**Singers, Not Songwriters**

For the most part, the folk movement at this time was oriented around covering traditional folk tunes. The folk artists originality was in how well they sang the song and not yet in the writing of contemporary songs. This is not to say that no songs were written; some were. My point is that back then it was all about the “singer” in “singer/songwriter” and not yet so much about the “songwriter.” For most of us, that came a bit later.

I can remember well traveling in 1961 with Bob Dylan and stopping at Gerde’s Folk City on West 4th Street in New York City. Gerde’s was “the?” happening place back then and the folk star of the moment in that club was a guitar virtuoso named Danny Kalb, who later became part of the group known as the “Blues Project.” Dylan was obviously jealous of the attention Kalb was getting (you could hear it in his voice), but it was not just petty jealousy. He honestly could not understand what Kalb had going for him that he didn’t. It boggled his mind. I didn’t know then that my traveling companion
was “The” Bob Dylan, but I am certain he must have. After all, he had something to say.

Remember, all of this was in the early 1960s, well before Haight Ashbury and the hippie scene. Most folkies (like myself) were wanna-be Beatniks, but that train had already left the station. We stood outside conventional society, but we were not so much politically alienated from that society as we were repulsed by it, and fascinated by the world of music, literature, art, and our own little social scene. Things were happening man! I was 19 years old.

**The Folk Blues**

Real folk-blues artists like Elizabeth Cotton and Jessie “Lone Cat” Fuller began to be featured at festivals like the Berkeley Folk Festivals in the late 1950s. Many of them came to Ann Arbor where I lived and we heard them live, songs like “Freight Train” (Cotton) and “San Francisco Bay Blues” (Fuller). To folk enthusiasts like myself, this was still just folk music, but you did get a different feeling when you heard the blues. To me at the time, this just sounded like really good folk music – really good.

Back then we didn’t know much about the blues, but we sure could feel that music. While folk enthusiasts heard some blues early on (as mentioned), it was at first mostly only the folk blues, and folk blues were seen as just another form (albeit, with a lot of feeling) of folk music. Later, and only very gradually, more and more country blues began to appear, but usually only southern acoustic blues, not music from the North and nothing at all from the inner cities. There was no awareness of inner-city blues or electrified blues and no interest either. At that time electric-folk music was an oxymoron.
Being Part of the Scene

As a folkie myself, I can remember listening to acoustic folk-blues and really loving it, but I treated it the same way I treated traditional folk music, as something that also needed to be preserved and revived – learned, played, shared - kept alive. It was a natural assumption on our part that we were listening to the vestiges of what had once been a living tradition and we wanted to connect to that past, to revive and relive it. We had no idea that modern electric blues music was not only „not-dead?, but was playing „live? most nights of the week probably only blocks away, separated from us by a racial curtain. We just had no idea. The folk music scene had few blacks in it (other than a handful of performers) and those that were present were usually the older folk-blues artists like Sonny Terry, Odetta, and so on. Their music was perceived by folkies as coming out of the past, not part of the present.

Please don’t get the idea that our exposure to folk music was only at concerts or folk societies. Like most musicians, we played or practiced music all the time, if only to learn the songs and how to play our instruments. We were also exposed to a lot of jazz. In Ann Arbor in the early 1960s, before bars could serve liquor by the glass, everyone met in apartments and houses around town to drink, smoke pot, and play music. This was primarily a jazz scene and young folkies (underage high-school kids like me) were tolerated as long as we kept to the shadows and sat along the far edges of the rooms.

And quite a scene it was. I remember one house on E. Williams Street in Ann Arbor. Protruding horizontally from its second story hung a huge flag with a picture of Thelonious Monk. At nights, especially on weekends, there was impromptu jazz in that house that went on most of the night, with players like Bob James, Bob
Detwiler, Ron Brooks, and many others. It was music, music, music plus wine and pot. High school kids like me sat on the floor, squeezed in along the back wall. We didn’t rate any pot, but we used to snort the ashes from joints that others had smoked. That should tell you how desperate we were to be part of the scene!

**Searchin’ for Roots**

We experienced jazz along with our folk music, but still not much blues. And the jazz was anything but bluesy jazz; it was more frenetic, like bop. And if it wasn’t jazz we heard, then it was classical music played in the background on the stereo. Again: not much blues. This is an important point, because when the mostly-white folk musicians like myself were suddenly exposed to modern (and virile) inner-city blues players like Junior Wells, Magic Sam, and Howlin’ Wolf, we were astonished.

As folkies made the gradual transition from studying and researching traditional folk music to also searching out historic country folk blues and then on to discovering modern city blues, all of a sudden things lit up. We got it.

Blues was not simply R&B or pop music like you heard on the radio, but music by plain folks – folk music! We could see that blues was the same as folk music, only modern, fresh – alive, well and incredibly potent.

What we had assumed must always be lost in the past, like folk music that depended on our efforts to restore and revive it was, when it came to blues, was very much alive and in the present – staring us in the face and more-or-less happy to see us at that. This blues music we were hearing lived in the present and not just in the past. It did not need us to revive it. Our idea of folk music as something to restore and treasure suddenly moved from the past into the present in our minds. We
made the connection. Blues didn’t need restoration. It was still with us and it was powerful. It was like the movie Jurassic Park; we had found a living dinosaur, folk music that lived in the present! And this music revived us and not vice-versa!

The blues scene in the early 1960s as played out in the small clubs and bars of Chicago, Detroit, and other major industrial cities, while very much still alive, was by then itself on the wane, only we newcomers didn’t know that yet. To us, it was way more alive than the standard folk music we knew. Intercity electric blues music was still authentic and strong, but (for the most part) the next generation of younger blacks was already not picking up on it; they were just not interested. Chicago-style city blues was, to younger blacks at that time, old-peoples music, something from the South, a past and history they wanted to get away from rather than embrace. Younger blacks had already skipped ahead to R&B, Motown, and funk. Forget about those old blues.

My band played in a black bar for something like a year or a year and a half, a bar filled with mostly older black folks and a sprinkling of hippie whites who had come to see us. This was in 1967. Right next door was another black bar, where all the younger blacks hung out and where they played only the latest R&B hits. The younger blacks seldom came into our bar and, in general, were embarrassed that their parents and elders were listening to blues played by a racially-mixed band – listening to white boys play the blues.

How embarrassing! Interest in the classic Chicago blues was just not there for the younger generation of blacks. They felt that blues was music from an older generation, music for old people. While within the black community the door was slowly closing on the Chicago blues artists (even the artists knew this), another and much wider door for this music was opening onto white America, an
open door that would extend the careers for many of these artists and secure their music well into the future.

B.B. King said in Time Magazine in 1971:

“The blacks are more interested in the “jumpy” stuff. The whites want to hear me for what I am.”

1965: A Sea Change

As pointed out, in the early 1960s the folk music revival was one of the main things happening on all the major campuses across America: Cambridge, Ann Arbor, Chicago, Madison, Berkeley, etc. What happened to it?

For one, in the mid-1960s, pop music groups like the Rolling Stones were busy recording covers of blues classics and pointing out the source – the artists who originally wrote and recorded them. White players like me, eager for guidance, hunted down the original blues 45s, which were a revelation to us. I can remember rummaging through bins of old 45s in downtown Chicago and finding just incredible music.

That first “Rolling Stones” album, of the same name, was released in April of 1964. It contained tunes like Jimmy Reed’s “Honest I Do,” “Willie Dixon’s “I Just Want to Make Love to You,” “I'm a King Bee,” plus songs by Chuck Berry and Rufus Thomas.

The Stones second album, also released in 1964, veered away from the blues and contained tunes recorded by Chuck Berry, Wilson Pickett, Dale Hawkins, songs like “Under the Boardwalk.” It also included the blues- R&B tune made famous by Irma Thomas, “Time Is on My Side.” In 1965, the album “Rolling stones, Now!” had the Dixon-Wolf classic “Little Red Rooster.”

From that point onward, the blues content of Rolling Stones albums decreased. In 1965, the album “Out of Our Heads” had no real blues tunes, and neither did
their other 1965 album, “December’s Children.” It was those first two albums in 1964, and in particular the first album, that pointed the blues out to many in the white audience. The U.K. was all about authentic blues well before white America ever heard of them.

In the wake of the Beatles and Rolling Stones, late summer and early fall of 1965 saw the emerging dancehall scene in San Francisco and the arrival of bands like the Grateful Dead. This was the beginning of the hippie era, and it’s when my own band, the Prime Movers, formed in Ann Arbor, Michigan. We knew nothing of the Grateful Dead, yet we too arose at the same time and represented a new era in music and lifestyle.

In fact the summer of 1965 was the trigger point for so very much. It marked a change in the folk scene with the advent of groups like the Paul Butterfield Blues Band. If there was a single band that opened up blues to white players, it was the Butterfield Band. That first Butterfield album appeared late in 1965, and it totally kicked ass. The Butterfield band in person was way more powerful than anything they managed to record.

This racially mixed band playing authentic Chicago blues sent a lightning bolt-like signal to all of us who were just waking up to the blues anyway. Their message was that white players could overcome their fear to play black music, including the blues. The Paul Butterfield Blues Band set the standard and set white musicians on notice that anybody was free to try to play the blues. We were emboldened to try.

Unlike many areas of folk music, modern city blues at that time was anything but a dead art. While the lineage of most folk music required revival, like trying to trace out the history and line of the music, this was not true of blues. The blues lineage was not only unbroken, but
indeed very much alive, both on black record labels and in thousands of bars and clubs across the nation. Perhaps some forms of country blues were endangered, but inner-city blues (at least for the old generation of Blacks) was in full swing. White Americans just knew little or nothing about it. During the later 1960s, all that changed. And last, but not least, many of the modern city blues players were still reasonably young and more than willing to be discovered. They needed the money and appreciated the recognition.

Historians would agree that from the middle to the late 60s, music in general was, to a real extent, fusing. The whole psychedelic era blurred the boundaries of different music genres and emboldened white players to play music of all kinds – black, Indian, Asian, etc.

The first extended psychedelic-like guitar solo/jam was Michael Bloomfield and the tune “East-West ” on the Butterfield album of the same name in 1966. It was over 13 minutes in length and inspired legions of heavy metal players that followed.

The American Folk Blues Festival in Europe

The first large-scale blues festivals, “The American Folk Blues Festivals” were not really festivals and were never held in America. Established in 1962 and lasting through 1972, these so-called festivals were in fact tours of Europe by groups of black blues artists thankful to get the work. This is what informed the British blues-oriented groups like the Rolling Stones in the first place. Starting in 1962, at a tour run of three weeks, the American Folk Blues Festival excursions eventually would run up to six weeks. Individual concerts often lasted three to four hours. The tours started up again in 1980 and lasted until 1985.

Europe has always been in love with American black music, especially blues and jazz. Whereas in this
country players like Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf found it hard to get a job outside of their home-town bars and the Chitlin’ Circuit, in Europe these players were treated like VIPs and played to rapt audiences. Race was never a real issue on the continent. This is why so many black blues and jazz artists have relocated to Europe. They found jobs that paid well and they were not considered second-class citizens.

Thanks to these touring festivals, Europe heard such blues greats as T- Bone Walker, Memphis Slim, Willie Dixon, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, and John Lee Hooker. In 1963, the list was joined by Muddy Waters, Otis Spann, Victoria Spivey, Big Joe Williams, Lonnie Johnson, and Sonny Boy (II) Williamson. 1964 brought Hubert Sumlin, Lightnin’ Hopkins, Sunnyland Slim, sleepy John Estes, and Howlin’ Wolf.

And in 1965, there was Mississippi Fred McDowell, J.B. Lenoir, Big Walter Horton, Roosevelt Sykes, Buddy Guy, Big Mama Thornton, Doctor Ross, and others.

In a very real sense, Europe was privileged to hear the more modern, electric, city blues well before the general (white) public in America knew anything about it. White America for the most part did not even know this music existed until the later Sixties.

**Memphis Country Blues Festival 1967**

Perhaps the earliest festival in this country dedicated exclusively to blues, albeit the more acoustic folk or country blues, was the “Memphis Country Blues Festival.” Although it was organized in 1966 with the help of the great blues journalist Robert Palmer, the first festival was actually held in 1967. For example, the 1968 festival featured artists like Bukka White, Nathan Beauregard, Joe Callicott, Furry Lewis, and Rev. Robert Wilkins. Again, as the festival title suggests, this was country blues and acoustic artists, not the inner-city
electric blues that had not yet been celebrated. That was to happen in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

**The Ann Arbor Blues Festival: The First of Its Kind**

There is no doubt that the first North American all-out blues festival for modern, electric city blues (in fact all types of blues) was the Ann Arbor Blues Festival held in the fall of 1969. It featured artists like Muddy Waters, Junior Wells, B.B. King, Otis Rush, J.B. Hutto and the Hawks, Howlin’ Wolf, T- Bone Walker, Magic Sam, Freddy King, and dozens of modern-electric blues players as well as traditional blues artists like Son House, Lightnin’ Hopkins, and those in between like Clifton Chenier, Roosevelt Sykes, and many others.

In the Ann Arbor festivals, the accent was off the folk and country blues and right on modern, big-city, electric blues artists. After all, Ann Arbor is only about a three-hour drive from Chicago. While the Newport Folk Festival sometimes featured more than folk music, and to a small degree helped blues to segue from folk and country blues to a more modern blues, this was not something they actively featured. For many years, electric anything was frowned upon at the Newport festival. It was in Ann Arbor that we find the first all-out presentation of modern electric city blues.

It has been said that those first Ann Arbor blues festivals mark the end of the city-blues era and the beginning of its exploitation. Of course there is some truth to that if we mean that by reaching a wider audience, the music will be more easily embraced and imitated. But in fact the electric city blues by that time was already dying out of its own accord. The younger blacks had turned away.

Reaching the larger White audience actually prolonged the music’s decline and extended its life. Today (2008), with most of the original blues giants gone, we may be
facing what amounts to reenactment and revival once again – blues as folklore.

There is no record of a blues festival of any similar scope and extent that predates that first Ann Arbor Blues Festival, which was organized in 1968 and held in 1969, much less one that endures to the present day. Actually, the popular Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival, which saw its roots in those first two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals, was suspended in 2007 due to lack of funds. The last festival was in 2006.

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 fo 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 into well into listening to blues.

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.”

Fishel, who 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 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:

“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, Houndog 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 then 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 Oliver, 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 cardboard 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 overbooking (too many artists at too high prices) and under-pricing 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 enthusiast 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? Why 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 Ebonic 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 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.”

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Blessings of the 1960s: Eden Foods

"Mighty oaks from little acorns grow." It has taken 47 years, but that aphorism has proved itself true regarding natural foods. There certainly was nothing very natural about Ann Arbor food back in the early 1960s. And I am so tired of ne'er-do-wells telling me that "The Sixties" was a mistake and has brought the country nothing of real value. Are they serious?

A topic for another article would be the fact that while the establishment banished the Sixties children and closed the front door to their inner circles, they left the back door open via the Internet and programmers like myself just walked in and took over the means of technology. Now, that's a hoot all by itself, but I digress.

I keep waiting for someone to set the record straight, but as Dylan says "It's not dark yet, but it's getting there." So, as we can find the time, let's those of us who were there count the blessings of The Sixties, one-by-one, while we can. I am going to start off with food and my connection with Eden Foods. What would Ann Arbor (or for that matter, the whole country) be like without Eden Foods and natural-food endeavors like it? Eden Foods is just one of the great concepts that became companies in the 1960s. I was very much there, so allow me set the stage here for a moment.

Diet, like family backgrounds, is very hard to change. In the early 1960s, when I was still (at least in my mind) a wannabe beatnik, I was not into natural foods or whole foods, much less organics. I would eat about
anything. My mom brought her five sons up on a regular American diet, whatever we can agree that was.

It was only in the later 1960s, after the onset of what we now call "The Sixties" that my interest in WHAT I ate stirred, and I can't remember just how that went down. I do remember reading (and re-reading) "The Mucusless Diet Healing System" by Arnold Ehret, with his emphasis on fasting and the value of alkaline over acidic foods. Certainly I went on all kinds of raw-foods diets back then, mostly my idea of salads, and probably more so in the summertime. Even today, I still believe the best first step when I reach a food crisis (and it seems I reach these all the time) is to fast from eating for a day (or part of a day) and see what's going on with me.

And it's not like Ann Arbor was already "green" or obviously into healthy foods back then. Sure, Ann Arbor had restaurants and they were mostly run by Greeks, but they didn't serve actual Greek food, but just the same old mashed potatoes, meatloaf, and olive-drab peas kind-of-thing. And Ann Arbor also had a handful of good German restaurants, but there is nothing healthy about that food either.
I can’t remember when I first fell in with the Eden's crowd. For one, they weren't even a crowd yet back then, but just people like myself coming together. I knew Eden Food's original founders Bill and Judy Bolduc early-on, just as folks about town. I believe they were astrological clients of mine. As for Tim and Pattie Redmond, who also helped found the company, they were friends. In fact, I married Tim and Pattie Redmond, something I used to do now and again back in the day, and they are still together!

I'll bet I knew most of the natural food-folks in Ann Arbor at the time. There were not that many. It probably got more real when Eden Foods asked me to pick the exact date and time for their company's incorporation and opening. As mentioned, I was an astrologer- about-town, even back in the day. And the date I picked turned out to be November 4, 1969. I guess it was propitious, because Eden Foods is still going strong. I am told that Eden Foods is the only large natural-food company that is not today owned by conglomerates, and this probably is thanks to the tenacity and vision of Michael Potter, their current CEO.

Originally called Eden Organic Foods, it was first incorporated as a non-profit corporation by entrepreneur Bill Bulduc, and was kind of a loose natural-foods co-op with a retail store at 514 East William St. in Ann Arbor, which was little more than a small upstairs apartment as I recall.

I also was asked to design a poster for Eden Foods, which promptly became the logo which they still use today, you know, those four little sprouts in a circle. I include it here. For the record, the inspiration for that logo came from my love of the incredible simplicity
and beauty of Japanese art, and in particular Japanese funereal crests. I was struck by the utter understatement and clarity of Japanese family symbols. Anyway, that's where Eden's logo came from.

And while I don't want to lean on the horn, I owe you younger folks at least a tiny reminder of how hard-fought the fight has been to bring healthy food to the table in this country, almost forty-seven years later! Back in the 1960s, there were no natural-food restaurants, Whole-Foods stores, or anything like that.

Sure, we had health-related stores, sometimes even called "health-food" stores, like the one that was down on N. Ashley in Ann Arbor, but there was no real food there, just rows and rows of vitamins and supplements, mostly for older folks. I could never find anything there I wanted to have. To me, they always seemed like a throwback from the 1950s or earlier. In late 1971, Julian Moody opened Applerose at 404 W. Liberty and it actually had some natural foods. It was wonderful, but it lasted only about a decade.

One friend of ours was Ken King, who founded Frog Holler Organic Farm back in the early 1970s and began producing organic, pesticide-free, food for the Ann Arbor area.

The company is still going today. And King was also co-owner of Indian Summer Natural Foods Restaurant in Ann Arbor, where we would go mornings to have their
incredible natural-grain pancakes. And it was there that my friend Dana Wilkinson made yeast-free loaves of bread each day.

In the early 1970s, for a while, there was also the Rainbow People's weekly neighborhood grocery program, where for a few bucks you could get two grocery bags full of produce hauled in from Detroit's Eastern Market. Margaret and I subscribed to that and it was a good thing. I believe my friend John Sinclair helped to get that going. And of course there was the 4th Street Coop and all of the inexpensive (at one time) food. You could find something healthy to eat on their food bar.

My point here is not to put down what was there back then, but rather to point out that just as babies take time to grow up, new ideas and approaches take just as long, sometimes until the die-hards die off, but perhaps nothing takes as long as changing our eating habits, unless it's losing weight.

So, way back then Eden Foods was just a tiny store with a new idea run by people we knew, our friends. I can very much remember macrobiotic dinners and cooking classes, where we would go to someone's home, learn to cook a macrobiotic dish, and then all sit down and have dinner together. For me, it all kind of started there.

And I will spare you what little I know about the many changes Eden has gone through, changes of ownership, location, etc., like their move down into the basement of 211 S. State Street, where my old alma-mater bookstore Bob Marshall's Books used to be, and so on.
At some point Michael Potter, currently the CEO of Eden Foods, came into the picture. Potter is a piece of work, and that's a compliment. To use macrobiotic terminology, Michael Potter as a person is very "yang," something macrobiotic folks seem to prefer. He is tough, bright, and not about to be pushed around by the exigencies of life. Michael has been a leading force at Eden for many years. I am proud to call him a friend.

Somewhere around the fall of 1974 Potter made his first trip to mainland China, one of at least a dozen trips he has made, something that American businessmen just didn't do back then. That was a brave move, to actually go over to Communist China and connect with the Chinese, eyeball-to-eyeball, and he did the same with the Japanese. Potter has always had real vision and stick-to-it-ness.

By the early 1970s, there was a core group of us that were all about macrobiotics. Teachers like Mishio Kushi and Naburo Muromoto would come to Ann Arbor to teach, and examine us. I can remember having a consultation with Mishio Kushi in his room at the Bell Tower Hotel. When he was all done, about all he said was “Don’t eat squash!”

Keep in mind that there was no tofu back then. Sure, you might find some overly-processed soy curd at an oriental grocery, but who knows what was in it or how it was made. We learned to make tofu ourselves, at home, and it is quite a process, boiling the
soy beans, mashing and straining them, pressing them into curd, and all of that. And we pounded sweet rice into Mochi too.

We also made our own pickles by fermenting daikon and all kinds of vegetables. There was no tamari in the stores, so we had to import it in little wooden kegs and casks and store it in the basement. Once again, Eden got it for us. In fact, our damp Michigan basement at 1041 N. Main Street in Ann Arbor was full of all kinds and sizes of wooden tubs from Japan. There was Mugi and Hatcho miso, and other kinds too, plus tiny kegs of omeboshi plums, twig tea, and so on. We were our own bulk-food store. My wife reminds me that I also had a little touch of the survivalist back then, and tended to hoard food.

And we made our own Tekka, a macrobiotic condiment. Raise your hand if you know what Tekka is? We would go out in the yard and dig up Gobo (Burdock root), and so on. We still make Gomasio, roasted sesame seeds with seaweed, about once a month. And we would import seaweed from the east coast and then dry it in the side yard like clothes on the line. See insert.

The takeaway here is that the above foods were not all that we ate. Maybe at first, when we were purists, but today we eat almost everything, but with an attempt at least to balance the foods we eat, so they work together to keep us healthy. That's macrobiotics in a nutshell: balance.

Of course, personally, I have found myself dropping certain foods from my diet in order to stay alive, so to speak. I gradually realized that certain foods make me sick, like sugar. I don't eat sugar in anything but
natural fruits at this point, and dropping sugar was one the best choices I ever made. I immediately felt stronger and better, because every time I ate a bunch of sugar my body would go into a kind of swoon or shock until I recovered some hours later. I don't mean I would pass out, but I could feel my body struggling with the sugar-high, and that didn't seem worth it. Easy solution: stop eating the stuff. I honestly believe refined sugar is a poison.

And caffeine too. If I drink coffee or eat chocolate, I don't sleep, etc. And in my house we don't eat processed foods anymore. We make everything we can from scratch. I could go on, but you get the idea. What we do eat are whole foods that we like and that are nourishing too. I probably eat too much popcorn these days, but it is relatively harmless. "Relatively" is the operative word.

As mentioned, Eden is something that The Sixties brought us, and it blessed Ann Arbor first of all, and then the rest of the country. However, the one thing I most remember is the little Eden Foods store and eatery at, I believe, 330 Maynard Street, up near Nichol's Arcade, tucked away in a little cul-de-sac that almost looked like an alley. I believe maybe Tim Redmond ran the place. It was there that they made the one food I have never been able to forget, Eden's fresh-made chapatis.
I would go in there around Noon and they would hand me a large warm chapati that was lightly scorched on the outside from an open flame, but still soft within. And inside would be various steamed veggies (onions, carrots, cabbage, broccoli, perhaps parsnips) bathed in a sesame-tahini sauce, with a touch of salt. This much of the recipe I know from an old friend, Steve Sailor, who actually got up at 5 AM in those days and began to chop veggies in 5-gallon buckets to prepare for lunchtime at Eden.

I can't think of any meal in my life as wonderful as those Eden chapatis. I wish they were available or that I could make them. I have tried, but it was not the same. As they say, we are lucky if we can step in a river even once!

And before I end this, I should say something more about macrobiotics. I owe you that. In the late 1960s, I was all about Macrobiotic food balancing, and still am today for that matter. Unfortunately, the macrobiotic diet has gotten a bad rap over the years, something to the effect that if you are macrobiotic you only eat brown rice until you die from malnutrition, and yada-yada-yada. What a bunch of baloney that is.

Macrobiotic foods and diet is not about any particular food. It is all about balancing foods to stay healthy. Brown rice often comes into the picture when we are unwell, as a way to stabilize and stop force-feeding ourselves with junk, at least until we can see where and just how we are out-of-balance. When I overeat and get carried away with food or life, I find the best thing is to just stop eating for a couple of days and let the smoke clear. After fasting (at least for me), brown rice (especially short-grain brown rice) is a good food.
to begin putting back into my system.

For me, Lundberg short-grain brown rice is like the air I breathe or the pure water I drink, a common staple (and stable) food, almost like a wrapper, to which other foods are added. Brown rice is a basic life-food for me, something I always go back to, especially when my health gets sketchy.

Anyway, a macrobiotic diet refers to how we balance foods, and not what foods we eat. The actual foods depend on our locale and the climate, like when it is cold outside I eat more roasted root veggies, oatmeal, etc., and when it is hot outside I eat more yin foods like fruit, and so on. That is the balance I am referring to here. That is macrobiotics; it's not just about eating brown rice, although fresh-cooked short-grain brown rice, if you know how to cook it, is mighty special.

In fact, I am eating some right now as I write this and the high temperature today looks to be a balmy 12-degrees out. On a plate in front of me is fresh-cooked Lundberg short-grain brown rice, steamed broccoli and cauliflower, with small pieces of marinated (and lightly fried) tempeh with a dribble of South River organic tamari over all. I can already feel it counteracting the out-of-whack-ness I have been feeling lately. Is food medicine? Actually it is, and we can learn to be our own doctor, at least preventively.

What do you remember about the natural food movement in Ann Arbor?
[Here is the Eden Foods logo I designed, on an early poster advertising Eden Foods. And no, the photo of stuff drying in our yard at 1041 N. Main Street are not baby diapers, but various seaweed from offshore the coast of New England. This must be in the early 1970s. ]