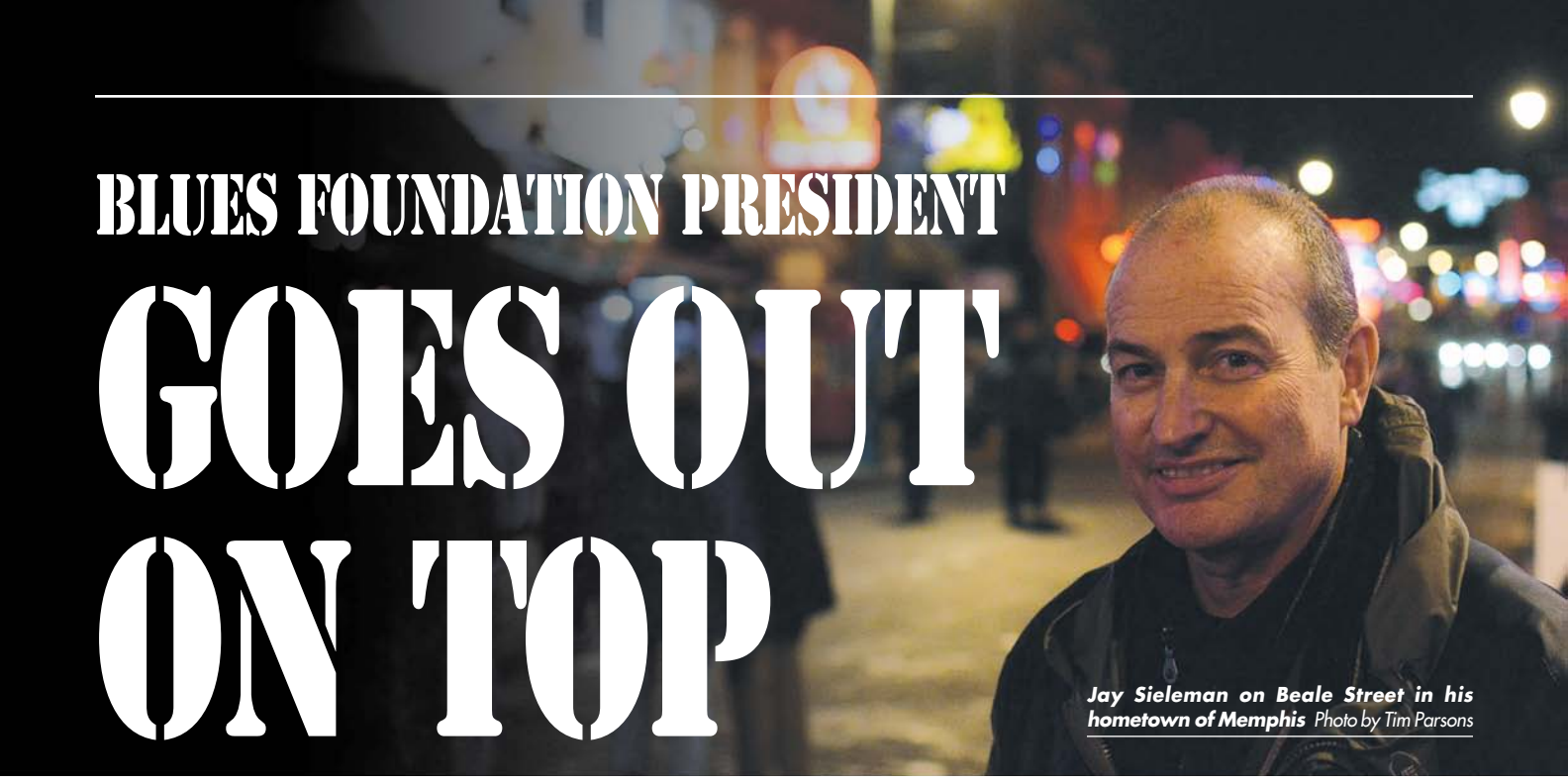
BLUES FOUNDATION PRESIDENT GOES OUT ON TOP



Jay Sieleman on Beale Street in his hometown of Memphis *Photo by Tim Parsons*

By Tim Parsons

After he received a law degree, Jay Sieleman served nearly five years as a juvenile court attorney for the state of Iowa. Upon paying off his student loans, he mulled over his professional options. Would he become a career prosecutor? Should he join a firm? Maybe start his own law practice? An altruistic man, he elected to join the Peace Corps and served as a legal adviser to the government of the Solomon Islands. Sieleman eventually discovered the blues, and after returning to the U.S., he helped blues societies get started and assisted nonprofits with legal advice.

The Blues Foundation was on the brink of closing in 2003 when he assumed the role of president and CEO. Today, it's a million dollar business. Major achievements include the growth of the organization's two major annual events, both held in Memphis: the Blues Music Awards (BMAs) and the International Blues Challenge (IBC). 2015 will see both the unveiling of a Blues Hall of Fame and Sieleman's retirement from the foundation. A national search for a replacement is under way.

Sieleman spoke with *Blues Festival Guide* Editor Tim Parsons in January before the start of the 2015 IBCs. The following are excerpts from their conversation:

You are stepping away from the job the same year the Blues Hall of Fame opens. Did you want to go out with a bang?

Going out with a bang is not the way I think, but there's a combination of age and ability to move on. It's been 12 ½ years in September, and maybe it's time to give someone else a chance to do things their way and work on some things that didn't happen in my time. It's good to hand over the reins in times of strength. I came in at a time of weakness – I always joked that I got the job because no one else wanted it. This time, there are plenty of talented people who want it. I think the timing is right.

Blues lovers, it seems, either grow up with the music or have an epiphany. Which was it for you?

I've always been a music lover but the big epiphany, or big step, was when I went on a blues cruise in 1994 and spent a week on a ship with other blues fans. After that, it was sort of like, "I'll put away all the false gods and false hobbies."

Will you continue to live in Memphis after you step down as president?

I have no plans to leave. Memphis is a very fun place to live. I live, work and play downtown. It's a small town with a lot of things to do.

Is it true The Blues Foundation nearly moved from Memphis? I read a report it considered relocating to Baton Rouge.

No, but there was a state of uncertainty. The question was if it was to close its doors. No place was offering real money. It was nice some people were interested, but there were no real strong offers. A couple of key people in Memphis kept the doors open and the place alive, and over time we were able to make the foundation strong.

The International Blues Challenge has grown considerably during your time.

When I came along, there'd maybe be a couple of acts from Canada, a couple from Australia, and perhaps an act

from Europe at the IBC. This year, we've got acts from 19 countries and probably 14 of them are from Europe. We helped midwife the European Blues Union, and in March they are having their fifth European Blues Challenge. We've treated them with a lot of respect and over the years a lot of Europeans have received Keeping the Blues Alive (KBA) awards. It's a two-way street. When you show them respect, they want to be part of the organization.

The Blues Music Awards historically were called the W.C. Handy Awards. Why did that change?

The quote, unquote "histories" will differ a little bit. I can look at early programs and posters and see that they were called the Blues Awards, and then sometime in the '90s, posters and programs said W.C. Handy. The first award was a statue of Handy and [later] it was a flying 16th note. I wasn't here and maybe my history isn't good, but it appears to me that it has been called a number of things over the years. And many people don't know who W.C. Handy is. He's considered the father of the blues, although a lot of people say he didn't really play blues music. The biggest reason is that it was going to be a bronze model of our logo and we wanted a name that reflected what we were. It's the Blues Music Awards just like it's the Country Music Awards. No one has to guess what the BMAs are.

Are there any things you failed to achieve which might make you reconsider retirement from The Blues Foundation?

If I had a list of things that weren't done yet that I thought I was capable of doing, I might stick around – even though age-wise and financially it is time to move on. But I don't really have a list of things, so I'll let someone else come in and do that. ♫

Blues Foundation President and CEO Jay Sieleman hands out the hardware for the final time at the 2015 Keeping the Blues Alive luncheon *Photo by Tim Parsons*

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