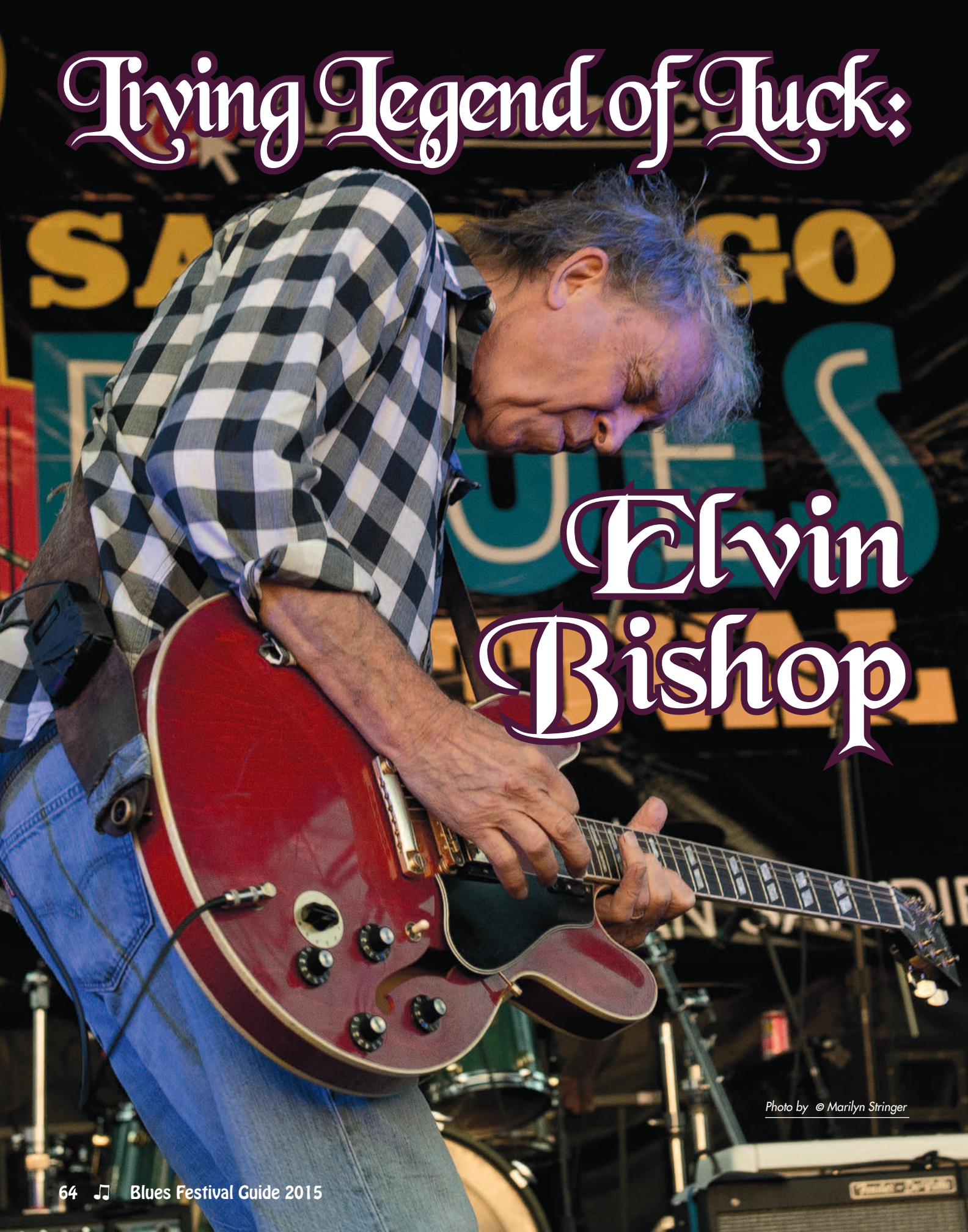
Living Legend of Luck:

Elvin Bishop



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By Tim Parsons

The first blues band Elvin Bishop watched live included Muddy Waters, Otis Spann, Willie "Big Eyes" Smith, James Cotton and Pat Hare.

"I've been in the right place at the right time a lot in my life," Bishop said. "I'm a lucky guy."

The right place on April 18, 2015 for the 72-year-old was Cleveland, for his induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, along with the other surviving members of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band.

Bishop spent just five years with the group, which helped open the eyes and ears of white audiences to blues music. Bishop's influences were blues, gospel, rock and, as a native of Tulsa, OK, country music, too.

After he moved to Marin County in Northern California in the late 1960s, Bishop's sound, which straddles a line between country and blues, fell into the burgeoning genre called southern rock. "Calling All Cows" was a hit song, and Charlie Daniels claimed him for country music when he sang, "Elvin Bishop's sitting on a bale of hay/He ain't good lookin' but he sure can play."

The 1970s were the most commercially successful years of Bishop's career. That's when he had his biggest hit, "Fooled Around and Fell in Love," sung by Mickey Thomas. In the last 35 years or so, Bishop has cranked out records and played shows as an amiable, avuncular bluesman in bib overalls. When he's not playing on the road, Bishop plays on the porch of his rural Marin County home surrounded by his vegetable gardens.

As one of the members of the newest group of Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductees, he remembers a time when the celebrated music wasn't even around.

"For the first 12 to 14 years of my life, the best you're going to do was Frank Sinatra or 'How Much is that Doggie in the Window?'" Bishop said. "There wasn't any rock; it wasn't invented yet. I was born in 1942. And then Elvis, Fats Domino, Chuck Berry and Jerry Lee Lewis came in and it was great. It beat the hell out of Tony Bennett and Perry Como. Then when I heard blues, I went, 'Ahh – this is where the great part of rock 'n' roll is coming from. This is the real deal. This is the pure stuff.'"

Bishop earned an academic scholarship and moved to Chicago to pursue a degree. "That was my cover story," said Bishop, who chose the city because it was the nation's blues hub. He could have picked Northwestern University or the University of Chicago. Bishop didn't know the difference, but as luck would have it, he picked University of Chicago.

Billy Boy Arnold and Elvin Bishop relax backstage *Photo by Kurt E. Johnson*

The self-titled* Paul Butterfield Blues Band *debut album brought blues to the attention of white America

"It was ground zero for Chicago blues," Bishop said. "Within a week, I was in the clubs meeting friends, black dudes that worked at the cafeteria at the college, and they were taking me out to the blues clubs…It's a lot easier to learn how to play something when you can look at a guy's hand instead of trying to listen to a record."

Bishop met Paul Butterfield his first day in town. "I was just walking around trying to check things out, and he was sitting on some steps drinking a quart of beer playing guitar, playing blues," Bishop said. "It amazed me because white people who were interested in blues in those days were extremely rare."

"The rare cadre of blues-loving Caucasians was quite conspicuous," said lifelong Chicago bluesman Billy Boy Arnold, whose career started on sidewalks with his friend who he nicknamed Bo Diddley.

"Most of the people in the clubs looked at them strangely because white people didn't come in the black clubs," Arnold said. "These guys were there because they liked the music and heard the records. The musicians were glad to welcome them. They appreciated them. They let them sit in and play. And that's how it started."

Bishop adds, "Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Magic Sam, Junior Wells, Buddy Guy, Hound Dog Taylor and Otis Rush – all these guys you could go out any day of the week and see them for two bucks. There were literally over a hundred blues clubs."

Bishop was befriended by the bluesman Smokey Smothers. "I didn't have much of a clue and he kind of showed me the life that went with blues," Bishop said. "I'd heard the records and I knew blues to that extent, but I didn't know the life it was sprung out of and what all was really involved in the feeling and the exact meaning of the words."

Bishop played with Junior Wells, Hound Dog Taylor and J.T. Brown before he joined the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, a rare integrated group which included Arnold's younger brother, Jerome, a bass player. The band not only was loved by white audiences, it captured the attention of black listeners, too.

"I was like Elvin," Arnold said. "I always did like the blues. But most black people looked down on blues, and then they'd say, 'You mean white people like the blues?' They'd see Elvin and them in the club and they'd say, 'They like the blues?' Well the blues must be all right then.' And I said, 'Yeah, the blues always was all right.'"

With its self-titled debut album and the follow-up *East-West*, the Paul Butterfield Band inspired new white blues players, including Curtis Salgado, who learned of the songwriters by reading liner notes.

Sugar Pie DeSanto

Porretta, Italy – Sugar Pie DeSanto Headlines the Porretta Soul Festival Again!

As the legendary Sugar Pie DeSanto continues her soulful musical sojourn into her seventh decade of performing, there is no slack in sight.

The film documentary of her life and times, entitled Bittersweet, is in production and scheduled for release at the end of 2015. Her smoldering performance at the 2013 Hell Blues Festival in Hell, Norway, netted her appointment as Ambassador of the event.

In June of 2014, DeSanto headlined a show at Littlefield's in Brooklyn, New York and killed it. Of her performance, Brooklyn based songwriter, cabaret performer and author Sabrina Chap wrote, "I'm really excited to get her story out there more to younger musicians who need to know of their musical heritage. Truthfully, I'm excited to learn more about her myself."

Returning to her homebase of San Francisco in July of 2014, Sugar Pie co-headlined the Stern Grove Festival with Art Neville & The Funky Meters. Between sets, the funky Neville Brother came to her dressing room to pay homage to the Queen of the West Coast Blues.

In July of 2015, the Queen will co-headline the Porretta Soul Festival in Porretta Terma, Italy for the third time!

Jasman Records is proud to announce that the Sugar Pie DeSanto legacy continues. For bookings contact James Moore, Sr. at
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"You're looking at a Butterfield album and you go, 'Who's Walter Jacobs? [Little Walter] Who's McKinley Morganfield? [Muddy Waters] Who's Chester Burnett? [Howlin' Wolf]' I'm 12, 13 years old, and started picking up on this stuff," said Salgado.

"*The Paul Butterfield Blues Band* album pretty much turned white America on to blues. I remember Elvin Bishop. I can't believe Elvin Bishop. Now, I know the guy. But I used to stare at it, and there's Elvin chewing on a toothpick, and there's Sammy Lay with a gold pair of shoes that looked like they were spray painted. That was a killer record. Then I found out where these guys got it from."

"We didn't play it as well as Muddy Waters or Howlin' Wolf or a lot of the other guys, but we played it well enough to make an impression," Bishop said. "Blues was overdue to cross over to the big white audience. After that, it wasn't all our doing, but we helped a little. Muddy Waters didn't used to be able to play anywhere but a black club. Then he would be playing concerts and folk festivals and playing for a week at a time at a jazz club, and I was glad to see that."

Bishop has been prolific in the studio. He has made 20 albums, including 2014's *Can't Even Do Wrong Right*, which led to six Blues Music Award nominations for Album Of The Year, Contemporary Blues Album Of The Year, B.B. King Entertainer Of The Year, Band Of The Year, Song Of The Year (for the title track), and Contemporary Blues Male Artist Of The Year.

"A good thing about blues, or music in general, is that it ain't like football," Bishop said. "You don't pass your prime at 30 and have to retire. Blues is a simple music. You don't need a lot of technique to play it, but you do need to have an understanding of exactly how to place the few notes you do play, and that comes with an understanding of life. And, I don't know, I flatter myself. I have a better feel for things as I go along with more experience, because I am not one of these guys who is gonna recede back into the woodwork with age and sit on the couch. I like to stay busy and just live." ♫

Blues Festival Guide *Editor Tim Parsons compiled this story from a series of his interviews with Elvin Bishop and others quoted here from 2008-2015.*

Bob Welsh and Elvin Bishop share a glance and a song. Bobby Cochran plays drums *Photo by Kurt E. Johnson*