



Marking the Graves of Blues Greats

The Killer Blues Headstone Project

Story and Photos by Steve Salter

I grew up in the Midwest in the '50s and '60s listening to AM pop radio, where I heard a broad spectrum of music. Soon my tastes were leaning toward the tough rhythm and blues returning to the U.S. by British invasion bands like the Rolling Stones, the Animals and Manfred Man. It wasn't until the '70s, that I actually started to educate myself on the history of the blues.

I started my part-time business, Killer Blues, to sell CDs and t-shirts at blues festivals. My motto was "All Killer. No Filler." It was my intention to sell only music that I could personally recommend as "killer" blues. The blues festival circuit was a great opportunity to see and talk with fans and musicians who were keeping the blues alive.

I had been exploring the history of the blues in Chicago since the late '80s, but while doing research for my trip to attend the Jazz and Heritage Festival in New Orleans in 1997, I was saddened to learn some of my favorite blues artists were buried in the Chicago area lying in unmarked graves. That was the beginning of my mission to ensure no blues artist or contributor to the music that I love so much would be forgotten in such a way. I spent the next 11 years researching and documenting the gravesites of blues artists and compiled a long list of those lying in unmarked graves.

In 2008, I decided to concentrate solely on placing headstones. I began raising money for the project by putting on the White Lake Blues Festival in my hometown of Whitehall, MI. This fundraiser allowed me to place the first official headstone for Big Maceo (a.k.a Major Merriweather) in Detroit. A year later, I applied for and received 501(c)(3) nonprofit status for the Killer Blues Headstone Project (KBHP), dedicated to providing headstones for blues artists lying in unmarked graves.

In 2011, I received an email from Aaron Pritchard of

St. Louis, MO, concerning the burial location of someone I had been looking for. When we met in person in Chicago, we discovered we had an equal passion for honoring and recognizing the artists that created the blues. Soon after, Aaron became the vice president of the KBHP.

At the St. Louis Blues Festival in 2012, we had a booth where we displayed the actual headstone for Walter Davis, which was going to be placed on his grave the next day in St. Louis. Here, I was approached by a blues fan asking if we would take care of Eddie King's headstone. A few months later, Aaron and I were at the cemetery in Peoria, IL, for the placement ceremony of Eddie's headstone with his family and fans. We were subsequently invited back to the home of Eddie's widow for the wake. An incredible meal of soul food was offered, as well as an impromptu reunion jam of Eddie's band in the driveway of the home.

Also that year, I was asked by blues writer Billy Hutchinson to help with a headstone for Richard "Hacksaw" Harney, who was buried in a paupers cemetery located near a detention center in Raymond, MS, a suburb of Jackson. Through the efforts of numerous individuals and overcoming many obstacles, we obtained permission to place the headstone. Hacksaw's headstone was delivered by Fed-Ex to my front door, and my wife and KBHP secretary, Leslie

Members of Eddie King's band reunite for an impromptu jam at his wake





Two inmates dig a place to hold the headstone of Richard "Hacksaw" Harney at the New Hinds County Paupers Cemetery

Salter, and I traveled to the New Hinds County Paupers Cemetery with the headstone in the trunk of our car, where we met up with Aaron. Two inmates dug out a small plot of land to hold the headstone, and we held a short ceremony attended by local dignitaries and Hacksaw's daughter and grandchildren, under the watchful eyes of the county sheriff and his deputies. Again, it was another humbling and amazing experience for the KBHP.

Although the headstone project has many fans around the world donating and helping us with research, there are only five board members directly involved: Aaron Pritchard; myself; my wife, Leslie Salter; Dave Wright of Champagne, IL; and Hank Mowrey of Grand Rapids, MI. We are grateful for the assistance of many volunteers, especially Matt Lennington of Sugarland, TX, who helps the KBHP in many ways. I came into contact with Matt in 2014 while searching for the grave location of Texas Alexander, and through Matt's efforts, we were able to locate and get permission to place a headstone. The marker was sent to Matt's home and he personally placed the headstone at the cemetery. A new volunteer, Keith Peterson from Americas, GA, has been very instrumental in helping us with a soon-to-be-announced major accomplishment. To date, we have purchased 80 headstones and each has its own unique story.

So, the next time you are listening to the blues, please give a thought to all the artists who have created the music you love and help us continue to honor and recognize those blues greats by making a donation to the Killer Blues Headstone Project. To see the headstones we have purchased to date, help us locate the graves we are currently searching for, or to make a donation, please visit our website: killerblues.net.

Editor's note: Steve Salter received a Keeping the Blues Alive award in February 2017 in recognition of his work with the Killer Blues Headstone Project.

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