

The Art of the Blues

From the Editor: The blues is all-encompassing – it's a music, a culture, a history, a community, a mode of expression, an art – which is why it's so satisfying to dive in deep to the blues, there's so much to submerge yourself in. In this ocean of the blues, I keep coming across incredible art from a wide array of mediums that all reflect the deep essence of the blues.

Art – I should say, good art – has the ability to reach each of us in our core, helping us understand just a bit more about the human condition. And the blues, originating from the collective sound of the disenfranchised seeking salvation and comfort from the weight of their existence, has the ability to connect to our raw emotions and directly to our soul. As such, the blues is perfectly positioned to prompt other art forms. Here, we share just a few perspectives of artists whose creations are inspired by the blues. Enjoy!

61_49. © Stan Street, 2013



Scott Cawood

I've loved the blues for years. I'd say the blues is, far and away, my favorite music – what I've always come back to over the course of my lifetime. It's very similar to the feeling I get when coming home after a long absence, I return to feeling comfortable, happy and complete. It's the musical destination on the map of my being where I feel known and loved like nowhere else, the place of unconditional acceptance and understanding. That sounds weird I know, but it provides me an inner comfort by soothing me in the one place that other music, try as it might, simply is unable to reach... and that place is my soul.

I got into the blues in the 1970s, and in those days in New Orleans, it was still possible to see many of the old blues musicians live. I had the good fortune to see Muddy Waters, Lightin' Hopkins, Earl King, James Cotton, B.B. King, Bobby Bland, Big Mama Thornton, Roosevelt Sykes, Buddy Guy, Junior Wells, Etta James, Champion Jack Dupree, Furry Lewis, Clifton Chenier, Gatemouth Brown, James Booker, Professor Longhair and countless others, almost always in a local bar or other small venue. Each performer had a dynamic impact on me, and witnessing them perform live cut deep into my inner being.

Fast forward to the present. I became an artist – a metal sculptor. My present work incorporates steel as my medium,



Skip James by steel sculptor Scott Cawood

and mostly scrap steel at that. Over the years, I've created sculptures small enough to fit into the palm of one's hand, right on up to large public commissions – some over 20 feet high. My work is the physical extension and creative outlet for my rather lively imagination. I believe I was blessed, probably by my dear mother's prayers, to walk down this path in life and do it long enough to tell about it. And that is a common thread I've come to believe I share with surviving blues artists.

At one point, I realized the need to bring a large presence of human emotion into my work. Steel by its physical nature is rather linear, cold and impenetrable, so transforming it into an understanding of human emotion was quite a challenge. I thought about it for a long time and finally figured out that deep emotions inside are quietly telegraphed to the outside world by the expressions worn on our faces, often without realizing it. It's a human thing, something we project to other humans; a silent but universally understood communication.

My next hurdle was exactly whose faces were going to get me as deep as I wanted to go. I was listening to the blues one night while thumbing through *Blues Who's Who*, and all of the sudden it hit me like a brick in the night. The emotion I saw in the faces of those blues artists was what I had been visually searching for all along.

Even though I love them all, the Delta blues spoke to me more than other blues styles, largely because of its uncluttered rawness and honesty. What I saw in their faces and heard in their music was the language of despair of the human soul, addressed the only way it could be – through the invention of their own art form. They had nothing to work with, so they reworked or reinvented the few scraps left to them by an unjust white society. They created it solely out of the human need to express it and find immediate relief from it, if only temporarily. It's in that emotional turmoil where I found the human dynamic I was seeking to be the visual voice for my "Blues Portrait" pieces – each speaking strongly to the creation of an art form birthed out of the ashes of despair from nothing but need and scraps.

I believe my "Blues Portraits in Steel" series of sculptures on exhibit at the Delta Blues Museum owes much of its effectiveness to the elements I just discussed, in combination with the fact that I was able to personally experience many of the old blues artists perform live and incorporate how each artist's music influenced me. So, in some small way, each one of my "Blues Portraits" becomes a kind of self-portrait. It's my wish that everyone who sees them in person come away with some feeling of that personal dynamic, and hopefully through the magic of art, recognize some small part of themselves in each piece. I think that the bluesmen themselves, as true artists, would smile favorably upon that. *Scott Cawood is a self-taught metal artist and sculptor*

from the historic village of Antietam, MD, former site of the Antietam Iron Works. He utilizes scrap steel in his work as an environmental statement. His popular national works include: "Blues Portraits in Steel," Delta Blues Museum, Clarksdale, MS; "Siren Of TI," Treasure Island Casino, Las Vegas, NV; and "Lingerie in Steel," MTV's Real World New Orleans. Gallery Rep: Galleryat105.com / Artist: CawoodArt.com

Stan Street

I have always loved blues music – I developed a love for it from an early age. My dad and uncle were percussionists for the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, so I learned drums first, and when I got older, I developed some skill on the harmonica and tenor sax. When I started a blues band, I eventually started singing also. I've always enjoyed drawing, and my father used to tell my mom that I would be an artist one day. I started my family at a young age, so I had to put my two loves, art and music, on the back burner in order to start a tree and landscape business down in southern Florida and support my family. But the music, of course, found me.

After years as a recognized blues musician in Florida, I visited New Orleans and was inspired by the art and music there. I started painting portraits in bold strokes and colors



"Baptized By The Blues" by musician and artist Stan Street. © Stan Street, 2014

on found wood, of bluesmen like Muddy Waters, Elmore James and Robert Johnson. I eventually started selling my work from a blues bar in Ft. Lauderdale, FL, and since then have also done festival poster artwork and t-shirt art for over 60 festivals.

I am a self-taught artist and always experimenting with different styles, including techniques from the Impressionists and Expressionists, but my art almost always relates to the music and blues culture that I love. It will always have a primitive feel to it, and I try to give it movement and life.

In 2005, I opened The Hambone Gallery in Clarksdale, MS, home of the blues, in a building that I also live in. It's a venue that welcomes art lovers, artists, musicians and storytellers from around the globe, and has become a must-stop when visiting Clarksdale. I am proud to say that we have live music in Clarksdale seven days a week, 365 days a year, and Tuesday night is my night at the Hambone Gallery.

Music and art are similar in that they both elicit emotions – whether light or dark, there is a process involved in the creation of a song or a painting. I always have music on when I paint, the music depends on the mood. People have said that they could hear the music in my art. Pretty cool.

Stan Street – artist, musician and owner of The Hambone Gallery in Clarksdale, MS – has been called an ambassador of the blues. He has played across the U.S., Canada and Europe, and his artwork is known and valued throughout the global blues community. In creating both blues music and art, he readily acknowledges that one art form supports the other, leaving open the question, “Does the music support the art or does the art support the music?” To the fans of Stan Street, that question will hopefully never be answered! For more, visit stanstreet.com

William Wise

Painting for me, as a portraitist, is all about telling a story and relaying feelings and emotions. My watercolors of blues musicians challenge me to capture a moment when the musician is at one with the performance. Whether the moment is during a riff, singing a lyric or interacting with the audience, I find their expressions captivating and want to translate that onto paper.

Live music provides me opportunities to capture and convey performers' oneness with music. Sketching during live performances is fun for me. I engage most of my senses. The music guides my hand to gesturally draw what I see and feel, and a simple sketch is helpful if I choose to develop a painting or just recall that moment. Whether my art is a small gestural sketch or a more formal studio painting, my goal is to produce art that tells a story.



Dawn Taylor Watson by watercolor portraitist William Wise. © Williamwiseart

For example, I took a photo of Dawn Tyler Watson looking at the crowd and holding up her hand, and asked myself, “What story is there?” Is the captured moment telling us she's happy to be here, she's happy the audience is there or is it an expressive part of the song? My hope is that people who view my paintings pause and imagine the moment for themselves.

Sketching and painting people in the crowd is just as fun and challenging as the performers. Audience members express their sheer enjoyment of the music through their smiles, dancing and overall appreciation of the music – becoming just as intriguing to capture.

I take and use photographs for reference when painting. The ability to combine multiple photographic images is part of my process in creating an interesting painting. I can move the microphone or raise an arm; I can interchange a guitar or change colors. This manipulation helps create a lively and compelling painting of the musician.

I like to listen to the particular genre of music while I am painting to help me reconnect with it. The type of music directs how I produce my art. Blues can be upbeat and fast, or slow and mellow; the same is true for classical and folk music. The tempo and sound have an effect on my brush strokes and the colors I use. High energy, fast tempo music generally results in bright colors and bold brushstrokes, compared to softer colors and gentler brushstrokes with slower music.

Every performer and audience member tells a story through their actions and expressions. Music brings all of us pleasure and, in the end, I aim for my art to evoke a sense

of joy in the music and its energy, and to create a story in the viewer's mind.

William Wise of Duluth, MN, is a man of many interests and trades, including painting watercolor portraits and teaching others to draw and paint at the Duluth Art Institute. Focusing on face and figure allows him to capture emotion and story, while painting in watercolor provides both control and accuracy of the drawing, as well as the freedom, spontaneity and luminosity of the medium. WilliamWiseArt.com

James "Super Chikan" Johnson

James "Super Chikan" Johnson is one of the last of the original Delta blues musicians – born with the blues in his blood, tracing back to his uncle Big Jack Johnson, grandfather Ellis Johnson, and the infamous Robert Johnson (a distant cousin). He grew up listening to front porch jam sessions with musicians we consider today to be blues legends, picking cotton in the fields with his family, minding the chickens and making his own toys and instruments out of recycled objects as a kid.

By his early 20s, Super Chikan played bass in local clubs with Big Jack's band, and went on to play bass and guitar for a number of Delta blues bandleaders like Frank Frost and Sam Carr. In his later adult years, Johnson wrote his own songs while he worked as a truck driver, and eventually released his first album, *Blues Come Home to Roost*, in 1997. Since then, he's toured the world and released eight other albums.

Super Chikan is an artist, not only when it comes to playing the guitar, but also in the making of instruments into functional pieces of folk art. Reminiscent of his childhood, he uses repurposed items to create guitars, diddley bows and banjos with names like "Chi-kan-tar," "Cigar-gantar," "Bow-Jo" and "Shot-Tar." A Chi-kan-tar, for example, is made from discarded guitar parts and an old Army gas can, hand-painted in a custom design with acrylic paint. A "Gui-Jo" is made from a ceiling fan motor casing and a guitar neck. His one-of-a-kind instruments have become coveted by collectors, and garnered him an Artist Fellowship in 2005 from the Mississippi Arts Commission. As one of the last original Delta blues musicians, Super Chikan's music and art have become his legacy.

James "Super Chikan" Johnson shared the following with the *Blues Festival Guide*:

I was born February 16, 1951, in Darling, MS, in the house of my grandparents, Ellis and Pearl Johnson. My mom was young and still in school, so my grandmother raised me, during which time I became my grandfather's favorite grandchild. Grandpa Ellis Johnson talked about his cousin, Robert Johnson, whom he called Robert Lee, which was not interesting to me at the time because I was so young. But I remember some things he said when I was

older and discovered who he was talking about, and he would look at me, rub my head and say, "I made Robert Lee a promise I did not keep."

When Grandpa wasn't fishing or on the road, he played a fiddle. I'd sit and watch and listen. One day, he made me a diddley bow with broom wire and a stick of wood. Later on, I copied it and built one on the wall of the house. One day he heard me plucking on it, and he was amazed at the sound it made resonating on the wall. He smiled and said, "I wish Robert Lee could see this."

Grandpa often had his front porch parties, and I loved to listen to him and the other musicians. They called each other "Bro" with their last names, like "Bro Reed," "Bro Williams," "Bro Morganfield" and so on. At least once or twice a month, he had a front porch party with lots of men playing guitars, fiddles, buckets and harmonicas. Some of the songs they sang on the front porch, I also heard in the cotton fields.

That makes me feel a part of it all – those days will never be seen again unless you paint a picture of it. Black men and cotton fields – it's just black and white until you add the blues. It brings color to life.

Writing a song is just words until the words are put to poetry. It takes the right words to add color to a song. You can paint it blue, you can paint it happy or sad or angry. And in your artwork, the wrong colors can make a happy picture look sad. Music and art have voices and they will guide, lead and speak to you, after all is said and done. The art of blues is forever. Find Super Chikan at riggsentertainmentllc.com/entertainers/james-super-chikanjohnson



Musician and artist James "Super Chikan" Johnson playing one of his creations, the "Gui-Jo," a guitar resembling a banjo, using a ceiling fan motor cover

Photo by © Marilyn Stringer

For more blues art, check out the [Blues Festival Guide online archives](#) – in the past we've featured artists including Kreg Yingst, Dane Tilghman, Sharon McConnell, Grego Anderson, George Hunt and Phil Chesnut, among others!