



Marie and Walter Trout are central to evolving the research on the role of blues as healer.  
Photo by Greg Waterman

# The Blues Prescription

By Don Wilcock

Walter Trout vividly remembers the low point in the hospital. “My son brought me a Strat and said, ‘You need to do this and keep in touch with who you are.’ They sat me in a chair and put the guitar in my hands, and I couldn’t get a note out of it. I just broke down and said, ‘Get it out of my sight. I can’t relate to it anymore.’”

In 2014, Walter underwent a successful liver transplant and was virtually pulled from the jaws of death by the love and caring of his wife, Marie. For nine months, he lay in a hospital bed contemplating his demise. He wrote unflinchingly about his experience on his CD titled *Battle Scars*.

“I get emails all the time from people saying, ‘I’m going through something similar with my health and your album has given me hope.’ Then, I realized the importance of music,” he explains, “but for a while there, I had to literally downsize it in my brain and tell myself ‘what you did was not that important.’ And that was because I didn’t expect to ever come back to it, and how was I going to face life not doing what had been my passion and my entire reason to live since I was like 10 years old?”

How many times have you had friends, family or acquaintances ask you why you go to blues festivals and listen to such sad music? To those of us who love the music, it’s a naïve question. It makes us feel better. Walter’s wife Marie decided to look into why the blues has become like a religion in its ability to improve our outlook on life, and in many cases, save our lives.

Based on her PhD dissertation on modern blues fans, her book *The Blues – Why It Still Hurts So Good* is an exhaustive study on how the blues has served as a healing force in blues fans’ lives. Not only does Marie – now Dr. Trout – make good on proving the validity of her title, she also shatters more than one glass ceiling in the process and gives blues fans the promise of a bright future.

“A lot of people hold things in,” says Grammy-nominated Louisiana swamp blues artist Kenny Neal. “They don’t share [their health problems], and they look at us being artists as different from them. We’re no different from anybody else, and we have our trials and tribulations as well.” Kenny was on the Blues Foundation’s “Blues as Healer” keynote panel that I hosted with him, Walter, Marie and Patti Parks (founder of Nurse ‘n Blues) at this year’s International Blues Challenge in Memphis. The panel was enlightening as we each testified to the palliative



Walter Trout, Marie Trout, Don Wilcock, Kenny Neal and Patti Parks (l to r) discuss the healing power of the blues at 2017 IBC keynote panel Photo by Andrea Zucker



The "Blues as Healer" panel topics resonate with the audience. Photo by Andrea Zucker

effects of the music. "A lot of people are embarrassed by having hepatitis C," said Kenny who almost died from the disease in 2005. "It's nothing to be embarrassed about 'cause you get help to get rid of it."

In her book, which was released the day of the panel, Dr. Trout says, "Ninety-four percent of fans (surveyed) agreed blues music helped them release emotion, and 92 percent stated they felt the healing effects of blues: what is commonly meant by 'hurt so good.' This term, hurt so good, could well be interpreted to mean that one can let go of unresolved distress in a properly distanced ritual, while feeling connected to others."

A native of Denmark, Dr. Trout is able to see the cathartic value of blues from a more objective perspective than many Americans who view this cultural treasure as a forest, rather than appreciating each tree. "Blues speaks an honest and sincere language of the heart," she writes, "and a simple shift in perception from one that is mental to one that is more heart-centered can add a healing perspective (and possibly one that is more inclusive of those perceived as 'different from ourselves') to our busy, fragmented 21<sup>st</sup> century lives. This kind of communal shift 'to the healer' can also partially explain why we emerge from a blues concert – or the personal listening experience it becomes – restored."

"Each day is a new day and there is or can be a better and bright future," says "Blues as Healer" panel attendee Suzan Shaske, a retired psychologist. "And although no one ever wants to experience the trauma each individual [on the panel] experienced, to some extent, trauma can be reframed through the healing power of blues, and music in general, with the potential for some good to come out of it."

"I found the 'Blues as Healer' forum to be very life affirming and inspiring," says Barb Addlespurger, wife of Jimmy Adler, a contestant in the IBC. "As a nurse who has worked in mental health for many years, I found myself drawn to the subject matter. Being a life-long blues lover who has used the music to unwind and recharge my batteries, I found a roomful of kindred spirits who appreciate that music has the power to lift us out of the depths of sorrow. The speakers bravely shared their stories of how the blues had been a balm to ease the pain of great personal tragedy. The search for inner peace is an essential element of the

human condition. The core message I took away from the forum was that we are not alone in our struggles, and music is a gift that unites us. Once we realize we are not alone in our pain, we can begin to heal."

Blues music is honest, cathartic and revelatory in its delivery of a message that tells it like it is in a trance-like delivery that puts the listener and the musician on a shared footing. But you intrinsically know that already, or you wouldn't be reading this Guide. 🎵

*The Blues – Why It Still Hurts So Good* is available for purchase on Marie's website. One hundred percent of the book's proceeds will be donated to the HART (Handy Artists Relief Trust) Fund, assisting blues musicians and their families in financial need due to health concerns. For more information and to purchase the book, please visit [www.marietrout.com](http://www.marietrout.com).

Don Wilcock was host of the 2017 "Blues as Healer" panel, the keynote event of the Blues Foundation's 2017 International Blues Challenge. This year he will co-host the seventh annual Call and Response Seminar at the King Biscuit Blues Festival. He writes for several blues websites and magazines and can be reached at [donwilcock@msn.com](mailto:donwilcock@msn.com).

