

Play It Like You Feel It

By Michael "Hawkeye" Herman

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I spent much of my time as an aspiring blues musician in the late 1950s through the early 1970s listening to blues records, going out to see live performances, and seeking out older blues musicians for advice and lessons whenever the opportunity afforded itself. I was blessed to be able to sit at the feet and learn from many icons of the blues: Son House, Bukka White, Mance Lipscomb, Lightnin' Hopkins, Furry Lewis, Sam Chatmon, John Jackson, Brownie McGhee, "Cool Papa" Sadler, Charles Brown, Yank Rachell, T-Bone Walker, and others. In the course of my blues "schoolin'" and being "brought along" by these wonderful artists, I kept hearing one particular phrase that seemed to permeate and define every encounter with these experienced elder statesmen of the music, and which was uttered by each of them in their own way: "Play it like you feel it, son."

The 'blues process' is not so much about replicating the work of others, it's about adding your own contemporary twist or statement to the body of work that already exists. Yes, you need to learn the form, rhythms, licks, riffs, and songs of those you aspire to emulate. But in truth? You gotta be yourself. Willie Dixon said, "The blues is truth ... if it ain't the truth, it ain't the blues."

An example from another artistic medium would be that if you were studying oil painting at an art school, you would eventually take what's called a master class. In the master class you try to replicate the works of great artists from the past, perhaps the Mona Lisa by da Vinci, Guernica by Picasso, or The Blue Boy by Gainsborough. The instructor has you do this so that you learn how each of the artists used composition and framing, colors, tone, light and shadow, and brush stroke techniques to achieve their artistic goal(s). As a student, you do your best to copy and learn those elements of the masters. But upon 'graduating' from art school and seeking work out in the real world, you may find that nobody is interested in hiring you to paint the Mona Lisa, Guernica, or The Blue Boy. Those works have already been done quite well, indeed, by the masters of the past. So, it follows that you realize that it's your job, as an aspiring painter in search of truth through art, to use the skills and techniques that you learned from copying the Mona Lisa while in art school, to create your own version of a portrait. Not to 'replicate,' but to learn how to express yourself using the techniques and processes of the masters that you studied.

Over the years I have facilitated many blues guitar instructional workshops, and I always tell those attending that replicating a piece of music by a blues master is the

"jumping off place" in the search for your own truth in music, it is not the end goal. I'm not Robert Johnson, Big Bill, Bukka, Son, Charlie, Scrapper, or Furry. They all had enough trouble being themselves, so why should I try to be anybody other than who I am? But I have learned from all of them and play a great deal of the music of those whom I admire. I always try to learn from their techniques in order to give a tune my own personal musical twist. Yes, I use the forms, riffs, licks, rhythms, and techniques that give the nod of respect due to those from whom I've learned, but at the same time making every effort to "play it the way I feel it." The blues process is a process of using the past to push the envelope. The goal is to move the music into contemporary life, and even into the future, by building on the work of others and making your own contemporary blues statement. In this way, you are contributing to the body of all blues music by respecting the past, and at the same time, speaking your own truth.

Lightnin' Hopkins used to frequently say, as he played a particularly hot lick, "You can't touch this!" Some folks think he meant, "You can't EVER do what I'm doing." But in my opinion, I think what he was saying was, "Be yourself, and nobody can really duplicate what you're doing because only you can be you." Only Lightnin' was Lightnin', and he knew it. So go ahead and steal this lick if you can, but find a way to use it (and add or subtract from it) that makes it yours.

None of those blues musicians I learned from ever said to me, "Be like me and play what I play." All of them shared information with me in order to allow me to have more techniques ('brush strokes,' if you will) to build and create my own interpretations and original music. Replicating their music is just the beginning, not the end. Every one of them encouraged me to be myself and find my own voice within the music. Take a song/lick/riff/rhythm, find your own voice in it, and when you do, then you can say, "You can't touch this!"

On the other hand, I once had a guitar student who came to me about 15 years ago and said, "Hawkeye, all I want to learn is how to play Big Bill Broonzy's tune, 'Shuffle Rag.' I love that tune, and if I could play it, my life would be complete. I don't want to know anything else."

I said, "Well, let me show you some blues basics first, some chord progressions, licks, turnarounds, and the blues scales. Once you've got that under your belt and understand the form/genre, we can take a look at 'Shuffle Rag' as composed and played by Big Bill."

He said, "Nope, I don't want to know anything else but that song. That's all I want to do. If I can do that, I'll be a happy man. I don't need to know any other songs. I just want the satisfaction of being able to play that tune, like Big Bill, for my own

enjoyment."

Well, I thought to myself, "It's his life, not mine. If this is his main goal in his musical life, okay with me. I'm here to serve his musical needs. This is certainly not the way I approach music, but he knows what he wants, and I may as well give it to him."

So, I proceeded to write out the music as close as I could in guitar tablature, and over a period of weekly lessons, showed him how to play the tune note for note with a recording of Big Bill for guidance. I tried to show the student other blues songs and interject other ideas based on Big Bill's licks and riffs once in a while, but he'd always just shake me off as if I was trying to distract him from his quest.

It took eight one-hour lessons over a period of about ten weeks, and I could see that the student had the concepts of the tune in his head, how it was supposed to sound, the proper tempo, where to put his fingers, what notes to pick when, and that he could tell when he made a 'mistake.' I said, "Okay, you know what's going on with the tune. You know when you mess it up, and how and why. So my job is done. Your job is to repeat the tune over and over again until YOU are playing the tune and in control the entire time. It might take months, it might take years, but your path is clearly ahead of you. You don't need to come back for any more lessons and pay me for sitting with you while you practice. Let Big Bill be your guide from now on. I hope you accomplish your lofty goal to your own personal satisfaction. May your life be happy and complete." We parted quite amicably.

I never saw the guy again after that. I don't know, even now so many years later, if he can actually play the tune "just like Big Bill." I truly appreciated this guitar student's desire to learn the Big Bill tune note for note, but I never liked teaching blues as if it were 'classical' music, locked in time, and with only one way to do it. After all, what we have on the Big Bill recording is the version of "Shuffle Rag" that Big Bill recorded at that particular moment. A few minutes later on take #2, #3, #4, or on the following day or night, it was most likely different. This holds true for almost all blues players. We play in the moment. We play the way we feel 'now.' Our ability to do this is built on studying the past masters and their music and using those lessons and our own personal outlook to express the current moment, from moment to moment.

The late great blues musician, Michael Bloomfield, made a blues guitar instructional recording many years ago. On the recording he plays examples of country blues, Delta blues, slide guitar, East Coast blues, fingerpicked blues, West Coast blues, Texas blues, Chicago blues, and gospel blues. It's a truly wonderful mix of blues music that illustrates the depth of Bloomfield's knowledge of the music and his understanding and appreciation for it all. While each of his musical examples have 'the sound' that typifies the category of blues he is explaining, each is also uniquely Michael Bloomfield. He

entitled the instructional recording, "If You Love These Blues, Play 'em As You Please." Just another way of saying what Bloomfield had learned early on: that you should ... "Play it like you feel it."