

## Blues in Schools

Blues In The Schools / Glen Oak Primary School, Peoria, IL - 2/25/08  
K, 1st, and 2nd graders create and play 'homemade' instruments.



### **Hawkeye Herman Blues Education More Important Than Ever**

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By "PROFESSOR" BONNI McKEOWN

Michael "Hawkeye" Herman, acoustic guitarist, mandolinist and historian, has been doing his Blues in the Schools programs for 33 years now. Today he says blues education is more important than ever.

Just as students in Spain learn about Miguel de Cervantes who wrote the first European novel, *Don Quixote*, in the early 1600s, and students in France learn about Impressionist artists, Americans young and old should learn about, and be proud of, the blues, he says.

"Students need to be informed that the world didn't start when they were born. Everything has history and roots in the past," says Hawkeye. He notes that blues has influenced today's popular music--rock, country, bluegrass, folk, rap/hip-hop, jazz, and even contemporary classical.

"Blues music developed from work songs/field hollers and sacred/spiritual music as a result of the experiences of oppression and disenfranchisement of African Americans," he states. Blues has deeply influenced many aspects of American culture, even world culture. "In my humble opinion, this original American art form, blues music, is the greatest cultural gift of the USA to the world. Blues music is what I refer to as the watershed of American popular music."

Hawkeye has found his own ways to keep the attention of today's easily distracted youth. He tells them the origins of blues in work songs of the cotton fields and levee camps, and points out music can make any of their own chores go faster. He gets them to sing his original ditty to remember the blues is the root of American popular music, and makes people happy, not sad: "The Blues had a baby and they called it rock and roll! It makes me feel good from my head down to my toes!"

Born in the upper Mississippi River valley in Davenport, Iowa in 1945, Herman tuned in to blues on the late night radio: Memphis, Shreveport, Dallas, New Orleans, Little Rock, Chicago, Detroit. He got his first guitar in 1959 at age 14, and two years later was performing. Moving to the San Francisco Bay Area in 1968 to broaden his musical horizons, he sought out and studied with blues icons including Son House, Brownie McGhee, Bukka White, Mance Lipscomb, Furry Lewis, Lightnin' Hopkins, John Jackson, K.C. Douglas, and Sam Chatmon. He became a staple in the Bay Area blues scene as both a solo artist and a back-up guitarist and worked with Charles Brown, Haskell "Cool Papa" Sadler, Sonny Rhodes, Jimmy McCracklin, Buddy Ace, Charles Houf, Little Joe Blue, Boogie Jake, and many others.

Hawkeye began touring outside California in 1984, and has won a following at blues and folk festivals and concerts throughout the US, Canada and Europe. He performs traditional blues, ballads, swing, and original tunes on both six- and 12-string guitar, slide guitar and slide mandolin.

He first started doing blues education in 1978: "It's my way to repay the many iconic blues artists who took the time to teach me, personally, how to play the blues, for giving me the skills to make a living throughout my life via blues music, to repay African American culture for this greatest of gifts, and to bring more visibility and recognition to blues music and to those who went before us."

Hawkeye studied theatre and communications in college, and his sister Ellie Herman, education professor at the University of Iowa, has helped him design teaching methods to share his love of blues history and music. His programs have reached over 500 schools, over 500,000 students from elementary through college level in 29 states and in eight foreign nations. In 1998 he received the Blues Foundation's "Keeping the Blues Alive" award for education. He served six years on the BF board of directors, chairing the education committee, and was inducted into the Iowa Blues Hall of Fame in 2004.

He has also designed and presented a "Teaching the Teachers" master class to help other blues educators use their talents to reach students for the Blues Foundation in Memphis, for seven blues societies in the USA, and for four years at the Blues sur Seine Festival in France. These workshops have trained 200 regional blues educators who are now working in all levels of education in the USA and in Europe.

Now based in Oregon, Hawkeye returned to his Iowa turf this year to give a blues-in-school residency for the Mississippi Valley Blues Society. He also did a residency in Reno, Nevada, and blues guitar workshops at the American River Acoustic Music Camp in California, as well as performing at the Willamette Valley Blues and Brews Festival in Springfield, OR, and Tumbleweed Music Festival in Richland, WA.

Hawkeye's experience has paid off. Even with today's cuts in arts funding, he says he is able to get teaching gigs with the help of blues societies around the world. He recognizes such societies for diligently pursuing corporate, government, and private grants to sponsor blues education.

Hawkeye adjusts each presentation to fit the age and ability of his students. He comes into each class not as an everyday teacher, but as a "stranger with a guitar." He says it's a special event for the students, and they tend to give him their undivided attention.

He keeps up with the latest education buzz words. "Cross curricular studies" is a good one. Hawkeye has been invited to use blues music and history to help teachers in English and literacy, history, geography, social studies, science, art, math, band and chorus. This makes students aware of the blues and its impact on history and culture. He also finds educators growing more aware how right-brain creative thinking and training can help in cross-curricular problem solving. They welcome artists to help out in this process.

Hawkeye takes a dim view of the "No child left behind" concept instituted in American schools in the last few years: "Due to this concept, we are teaching students how to pass tests, not how to study, learn, think creatively, problem solve, and be prepared for adult life," he says. "Students deserve diversity and alternatives in education, far beyond what is currently available to them. We should be providing students with the knowledge and skills that will give them abilities to create a bright future for themselves and everyone on the planet."

To Hawkeye, that includes the appreciation of American blues music and the life-lessons that blues can teach us today.

Michael "Hawkeye" Herman  
[www.HawkeyeHerman.com](http://www.HawkeyeHerman.com)