



FORT COLLINS COLORADOAN

School time blues



Photos by V. Richard Haro/The Coloradoan

Above, blues musician Michael 'Hawkeye' Herman performs for a group of students at Lopez Elementary School during a special presentation Friday. Below, a student sings along with the music.

Well-known musician visits local school for a soulful music lesson

By COURTNEY LINGLE
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If you asked 10-year-old Devin Spencer what he learned in school yesterday at Lopez Elementary School, he'd have an answer for you in no time.

With a hand on his hip and a tapping toe, he'd tell you, "The blues had a baby and they called it rock 'n' roll."

Interested?

Check out Michael "Hawkeye" Herman in concert at 7 p.m. Sunday at Bas Bleu Theater, 401 Pine St. For information or tickets call 498-8949 or visit www.basbleu.org.

A strange lesson? Perhaps, but one nationally renowned blues performer Michael "Hawkeye" Herman considers an important part of American music history and culture.

In 14 performances in 10 Poudre School District Schools this week, Herman used boogie woogie, well-known work songs and a little rock 'n' roll to give elementary

and junior high school students an appreciation for music of the past and connect those times to their lives in the present.

In a head-bobbing, shoulder-swaying, finger-snapping performance for Lopez Elementary School's fourth and fifth graders Friday morning, students were surprised to learn that "I've Been Working on the Railroad" — a tune they know as a children's song — was actually sung by African-American workers building railroads in the late 1800s.

"I liked that he taught us they weren't children's songs, they were work songs," said Spencer, who described blues as feel-good, uplifting music. "It makes me feel awesome ... It's smooth, but wild."

An Oregon-based musician who travels as a musician-in-residence to schools around the country, Herman was



brought to Fort Collins by the Colorado Blues Society and the Bohemian Foundation for a "Blues in the Schools" tour and a concert Sunday night at Bas Bleu Theater.

"I was lucky enough to learn blues music from some of the greatest blues musicians that ever lived," Herman said, recalling lessons from Son House, Brownie McGee, Lightning Hopkins, Bukka White and Charles Brown. "Somebody has to carry on that tradition. This is my way of paying back African-American culture and carrying on that tradition."

Herman said he also believes it's important to help students see the diversity of careers available to them and

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the different ways that education can be fun.

"Seeing somebody do their vocation up close is part of showing the diversity and alternatives in education," he said.

Lopez fifth grader Meggie Larson and fourth grader Jackson Aldern said they were especially excited by the 71-year-old slide guitar Herman pulled out at the end of his concert.

"It was also cool the way he taught while he sang," Larson said, describing how Herman's fingers plucked an energizing rhythm on his fingerpick guitar, while his soothing voice told stories of cotton pickers in the south and reminded the students that any chore, from cleaning their rooms to raking leaves, is more fun when it's done to music.

"It makes me relaxed," Aldern said.

Unlike a regular classroom teacher who sees his or her students every day, Herman's mere presence and newness commanded attention, giving him a unique opportunity to drive home his lessons.

"I can say something that any other classroom teacher can say, but because I have a guitar they listen," he said.

Herman alters his performance to suit his audience. With junior high or high-school aged students, he digs into discussions on migration and oppression and their relation to music. With younger kids, he gets them singing and thinking about the fact that music has evolved over time.

"It's important that they know the world didn't start when they were born," he said. "Blues music is the watershed of all popular American music. Even heavy metal, contemporary and classical music has been influenced by the blues."

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