

## Jokin' On The Harp Player

By Michael "Hawkeye" Herman

One of the hardest working members of the Oakland/San Francisco Bay area blues scene from the 1960's through the 1990's was Haskell "Cool Papa" Sadler. I was honored to be taken under his wing in the late 1970's, and he became my musical mentor and good friend. I performed and recorded with him for many years in his band. In honor of "Cool Papa's" memory, I'd like to share some good natured "Cool Papa" pranks that always kept most of his band on their toes and in the mood for fun.



Haskell "Cool Papa" Sadler and Michael "Hawkeye" Herman

"Cool Papa," (b. 1935, Denver, CO; d. 1994, Berkeley, CA), was a pillar of the of the San Francisco / Oakland blues community and he and his band worked all the time, from little dives and wine bars to larger clubs and outdoor festivals. "Papa" called all of the tunes off the top of his head, and we never had a set list no matter how big or small the gig. Over the many years that I played in his band I became, like many, one of his 'sons,' as well as a friend and band member. He was a father, friend, and mentor to all who approached the music and life with sincerity and humility.

The first time I played with "Papa," I nervously scribbled a set list on a small scrap of paper and taped it to the microphone stand just before we were to start playing for the evening. "Cool Papa" joined the band on stage, strapped on his guitar and stepped up to the microphone. He looked at the scrap of paper taped to the microphone stand, a playful smile on his face, and without looking at it, pulled the piece of paper off the microphone stand and tossed it to the floor. I leaned over toward him and whispered, "Papa, that was the set list, what are we gonna do?" Without hesitation he responded, "The blues. This first one is in the key of A." I've never forgotten that lesson. It speaks volumes about the importance of creating music, blues music, live, right now, for real. I played with that man in front of 10 people and in front of 10,000 and the band never knew what the next song was going to be until "Cool Papa" called it right at that moment. It was all real and all fun.

"Cool Papa" liked to keep his harp players loose. He didn't like anyone taking themselves too seriously, and if a band member did get too uppity, "Cool Papa" found a way to "get them down off that high horse" without saying anything cruel or hurting anyone's feelings. As a guitarist and band leader, he felt that his harmonica player needed these kinds of reminders more than most. Whenever he felt that the harp player was getting a little too full of himself, "Cool Papa" would "go jokin' on the harp player." And he never failed in getting his message across.

At the end of the band's first set of the evening, "Papa" would linger on stage putting his guitar away until the entire band had gone off into the crowd for their 15 minute break. "Papa" would then slip over to the area of the stage occupied by the harp player's equipment. Unbeknownst to the harp player, "Papa" would pick up one of the harmonicas, look at what key it was, and then hide it somewhere on stage — under the edge of the bass drum or behind the guitar player's amp — but never too far from the harp player's designated area. When we would return to the stage

and prepare to start playing again, "Cool Papa" would turn to us and say, "Let's do an instrumental in the key of E and feature the harp player. One, two, you know what to do." And off the band would go into a tune meant to feature the harp player... who is now frantically searching the stage for his E harp. The rest of the band is having a great time, digging a deep groove, having fun taking solo choruses, and the harp player is sweating, on his hands and knees looking on the floor and everywhere for his E harp. Finally, after what probably seemed like hours to him, the harp player finds the E harp, having realized while searching for it that the "joke" is on him, joins in for his share of the fun with the appropriate harmonica with a renewed sense of humility, all the while receiving big grins from the band members, especially from "Papa."

If the harp player didn't get the message from this lesson, "Cool Papa" would wait a few nights and do some more "jokin' on the harp player." This usually consisted of sneaking over to the harp man's equipment as in the previous scenario, but this time instead of taking one of the harmonicas and hiding it, "Papa" would rearrange the orderly fashion with which they were lined up by key, alphabetically from A to G, on the top of the harp player's amplifier. Like before, when we returned to the bandstand "Papa" would immediately call a number featuring the harp player. The harp player turns to his harmonicas on top of his amplifier and confidently picks up what he thinks is the correct harp, places it to his lips, cups his microphone close to the instrument, and blasts out his music..., in the wrong key. And as a result, sounds absolutely terrible. In that brief, horrifying moment of realization that "Cool Papa" is "jokin'" on him again, he quickly regains his composure and fumbles through the disarranged harps in search of the right key, finds the correct harp, and steps back up to the microphone, with a new found sense of humility and sense of "place" within the group.

These pranks were never done in anger, but always with the idea of bringing the victim "back down to earth with the rest of us," as "Cool Papa" liked to say.

"Papa" and I had a verbal routine that we liked to go through that exemplifies this idea of the need for shared love and equality amongst band members and people in general.

"Cool Papa": "Hawkeye," what kind of bean are you?

"Hawkeye": Well "Papa," I ain't no lima bean.

"Cool Papa": Well then "Hawkeye," what kind of bean are you?

"Hawkeye": Well "Papa," I ain't no kidney bean.

"Cool Papa": Well, what kind of bean are you?

"Hawkeye": Well "Papa," I ain't no green bean.

"Cool Papa": Well, what the hell kind of bean are you?

"Hawkeye": Well "Papa," I ain't no pinto bean.

"Cool Papa": C'mon "Hawkeye," tell me, what kind of bean are you?

"Hawkeye": Well "Papa," I guess I'm a plain old human bean.

"Cool Papa": Just like the rest of us.

I have taken the lessons of that man with me throughout my life and music. He's been up in Blues Heaven for some years now, but I think about him and thank him every day.