

“On Knowing Kurt Vonnegut”
by Michael “Hawkeye” Herman:

I attended the University of Iowa in Iowa City, IA from 1963 to 1967 and I was a student in the undergraduate aspect of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Famous author/novelist Kurt Vonnegut was my fiction writing instructor in 1965/66.

All the “artsy fartsy”/beatnik (pre-hippie) types who were in the writer's workshop gathered for post-class evening libations at a local Iowa City bar called Donnelley's almost every evening. Vonnegut and I played a Gottlieb Inc. (manufactured in Chicago, IL) space/rocket themed pinball machine called “Apollo” together frequently.

It was an unspoken ‘rule’ amongst the professors/instructors and students that we did not discuss in-class/school-related subjects/topics when socializing ‘after hours’ at Donnelly's Bar.

In spite of the unspoken rule regarding no discussions about classroom subjects/topics, one night I got my nerve up and I asked Vonnegut an 'out of class' personal arts-related question while we were playing the pinball machine and sharing a large pitcher of draft beer. As I waited my turn at the pinball machine I watched as Vonnegut step up to the machine, take a sip of his beer, and prepare to take his turn to shoot I asked him: "Kurt, do you have any brief advice for a young writer?" As he leaned forward and pulled back the pinball machine's spring-loaded shooter/plunger to carefully measure his pinball shot, without looking up at me, he uttered only four words: "FIND YOUR OWN VOICE!" ... and then he dramatically let go of the pinball plunger to launch his pinball shot, like an exclamation mark/point to what he'd just said to me.

It was the best advice I ever received in regard to writing and the arts. In the years that followed almost every one of the iconic blues master musicians whom I saw, met, and learned from directly (Lightnin' Hopkins, Son House, Ike Turner, Dr. John, Furry Lewis, John Jackson, Mance Lipscomb, Brownie McGhee, Bukka White, Charles Brown, etc., etc.), when I asked each of them, individually, a similar question about writing songs, singing blues songs, and playing blues guitar/music, each of them, in their own way, responded similarly; "Find your own voice." (i.e. “Learn from me, but find and be YOURSELF within the art form.”) All of them gave me the same great, most useful advice.

Nobody can be better than you at being YOU, so find your own 'voice' and be yourself within the art form, whatever art form you choose to express YOURSELF in whether as an amateur/'hobbyist' or as a professional.

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“Be yourself. Everyone else is taken.” - Oscar Wilde

The University of Iowa Writers' Workshop was the first creative writing degree program in the United States, and since its founding in 1936, the program has been home to thousands of remarkable writers. The program claims among its graduates winners of virtually every major literary award, including seventeen winners of the Pulitzer Prize, six recent U.S. Poets Laureate, and numerous winners of the National Book Award, MacArthur Foundation Fellowships, and other major honors. For many years it was the only college/university that had a writers' workshop or serious literary curriculum, and most important, that paid published authors/poets to teach.

The University of Iowa Writers' Workshop: <https://writersworkshop.uiowa.edu>