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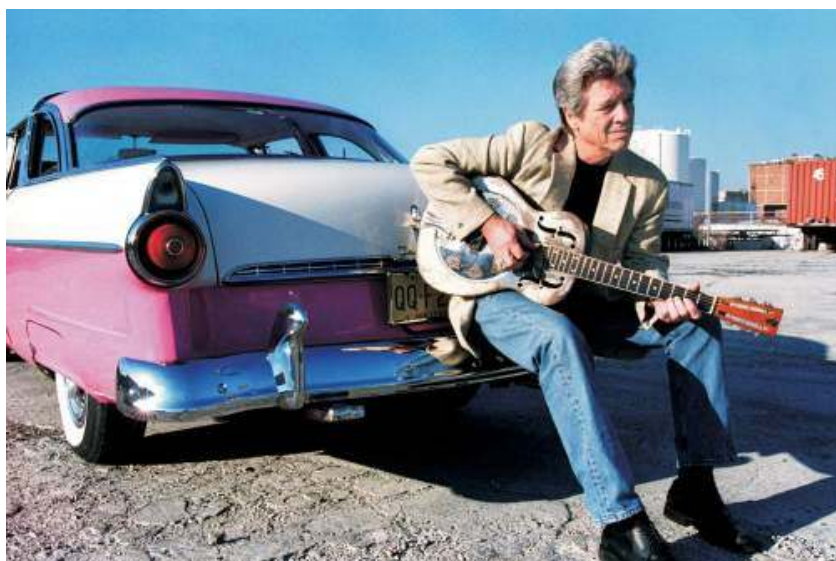
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Gene Myers is a poet & journalist who learned to walk twice. His weekly column is The Joy of Life. Cosby, Steve Martin, Pete Seeger, Wynton Marsalis, Aimee Mann... Interviews that go deeper.

# An interview with blues musician John Hammond

January 7, 2011

By genemyers



John Hammond Jr. was a part of the legendary New York City Village music scene of the 1960s. While his friends revolutionized rock music, he concentrated on preserving blues. It wasn't that he set out to preserve it, he just loved singing the old songs. He still does. I talked with Hammond about that love, the music business's skewing of blues music history, and his famous friends.

Gene: Seeing Jimmy Reed perform made a huge impression on you. I read that it changed your life. Is that right?

John: Well, that was the first time I saw someone play a harmonica and the guitar at the same time, and I was very impressed. I think the first introduction to blues music came in 1949, when I was 7, and I saw Big Bill Broonzy. That made a very deep impression on me. I

## Bio

Gene Myers is a New Jersey poet, music journalist and columnist hoping to chronicle the music and poetry that is life.



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sort of gravitated towards blues music ever since then. I was a huge blues fanatic before I began playing the guitar. So when I did get a guitar when I was 18, I already knew the songs and I kind of knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to be an itinerant blues singer.

Gene: What was it that drew you to blues music?

John: It's hard to put into words. I mean it was the music itself, the history and the great variety of blues artists over the years who recorded and just laid it all down for my generation to pick up on.

Gene: I'm reading a book called "Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the invention of the blues." It talks about how the blues man and even the term the blues was retrofitted for marketing purposes. The actual blues men, instead of being these down-on-their-luck people hanging out in train stations, they were really well-rounded, professional musicians.

John: Well, you have to be professional in order to have a career. There's no way you can just be really talented and be recognized, or make money, have a livelihood at it. You have to have your stuff together, as it were.

Gene: Especially in the olden days, when they were the only entertainment, they had to learn a variety of things to entertain people.

John: I think any entertainer, any artist, whether they be blues or jazz or rock and roll, has to have a variety of tempos, of kinds of music that will keep the audience into it and make the show be dynamic.

Gene: Blues musicians, being as versatile as they actually were, have done so much more material than people realize. But record companies weren't interested in recording the material that wasn't blues by blues artists. So you'd have no idea that people like Muddy Waters also enjoyed and played country music.

John: Yes, right. You know I've always loved a certain kind of country music that's soulful, that has the same message as blues. They're interrelated in a lot of ways. I'm a fan of all kinds of music besides blues. But that's what I do, and that's what I do best.

Gene: Do you think if more people knew that Howlin' Wolf loved country music, there'd be less of that kind of reaction. People wouldn't even have the thought that this kind of person shouldn't be doing this kind of music?

John: Wolf told me that his major influence to want to sing and play was Jimmy Rogers, the Yodeling Brakeman! That floored me. At first I was shocked, but then I thought about it. The passion and the emotion is all there. So, it doesn't surprise me. When you feel that thing, whatever it is, and it gets you, it's real.

Gene: You don't write many songs. But I heard that NPR interview where you said that working with Tom Waits, inspired you to start doing more originals.

John: When you're hanging around a guy who's that talented and has that kind of facility to write songs that really get you, it's inspiring.

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## From reader Don Reed

'Gene Myers' column "Have An Idea?" in the Cliffside Park Citizen was excellent. "No sentence uttered ever matches the spark of its epiphany."

Gene: How did you first come together with Tom Waits?

John: He opened for me in 1974, in Arizona. This guy came out and played a set that just completely boggled the mind. I didn't want to go on [stage after him], but I had to. At the end of my show he came backstage and introduced himself and said, "Man I've been a fan of yours since I was in high school." That floored me right away, and we became friends...My wife, Marla, talked his wife, Kathleen, into the concept of Tom producing an album for me. So "Wicked Grin" came about. That was really dynamic, and the best-selling recording I've ever made.

Gene: Besides "Wicked Grin," you've also done the Waits song "Cold Water" and on your latest record you did "Get Behind the Mule."

John: Yeah, I include a song of his or two just about every night. I love these songs. They nail it and they have a blues base... all the feeling, and Tom's take on life.

Gene: You're connected to so many artists. You were in a band with Hendrix and **Clapton**?

John: Well, I had a little band together. I was playing at the **Gaslight** Café in New York in 1967, and both **Eric** and Jimi, who I knew, were in town and weren't working that week and came down to the club to hear the show. They both wanted to sit in. They came back every night for five nights. So, I had a band with **Eric Clapton** and Jimi Hendrix.

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## About genemyers



Gene Myers is a New Jersey poet, music journalist and columnist who learned to walk twice. His weekly column is called The Joy of Life. He was awarded first place in Arts and Entertainment Writing by The New Jersey Press Association.

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## 2 Responses to "An interview with blues musician

You'd have to go back to the work of E.B. White (of The New Yorker) to match the creativity Myers displayed, in his persuasive admonition to readers that to remain inspired, you have to remain silent.

## From reader Joe Krokus

'I look forward to reading your articles on a regular basis especially as they pertain to the joys of life and your son Owen. You see, my son is almost one year old. It seems that everything you write abœout touches me personally. Topics I can relate to... I look forward to more of your articles as well as the antics of Owen...'

## On The Joy of Life

'Fantastic! Please don't let it get around that you write a damn good mom column or I'll be out of a job!' Columnist, Tracy Beckerman, Lost in Suburbia.

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## John Hammond”



*Angus Lindsay*

April 18th, 2010 at 4:44 am

“The first time I met the blues...” I had a friend, Ian Whiteman, a successful session musician, who had been something a child prodigy as a classical pianist, who told me of how, despite years of study, hearing the blues transformed his life when he was a young teenager in the early sixties. This writer also – it was a voice we recognised, despite our secure middle class background, and we headed for the other side of the tracks. After centuries of developing a highly rarefied sophisticated orchestral music, simple, direct expression of feeling from the heart cut through. Coltrane said, “The way lies back to Africa”, and countless musicians have followed that trail since.

Reply



*genemyers*

April 18th, 2010 at 9:17 am

You always have great comments! Thank you, I appreciate it...and I know exactly what you mean!

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