

# Jus' playin' the natch'l blues

This is the first of a two-part series on the Blues by Fine Arts writer Bart Becker.

by Bart Becker

"I do not play no rock 'n' roll. I jus' play the natch'l blue."—Mississippi Fred McDowell.

Without a long sociological discussion, let it suffice to say that life for black and white Americans has been largely a separate experience. As the two groups adjusted uncomfortably to the separateness of their experience, each developed its own popular song; the blues became to the black musician what conventional popular music became to the white.

The white parallel to the blues lies in mountain folk music, rockabilly and/or bluegrass.

Since the audience for the blues—and for popular song—is often a young audience, its most persistent theme is an overwhelming concern with heartbreak and the sudden consciousness of sexuality. There are other themes, but the despair of love is the most dominant.

As the Mississippi singer J.D. Short expressed it in Samuel Charters' *The Poetry of the Blues*: "Well, the blues first came from people being low in spirit and worried about their loved ones."

It is not essentially in its subject matter, however, that the blues differs from conventional American pop music. It is in the strength and vitality of its imagery and expression that the blues becomes a more poetic language. And it is in the raw vigor of presentation that the blues shows its contrast with the weak-kneed quality of white pop music.

Many early blues singers were travelling men, moving from place to place on a whim. But many of the performers were playing only to local audiences in areas where they lived and worked.

The earliest blues recordings, in the early 1920s, opened up a new audience to blues performers. It spread their reputations so that they could go on the road, playing from town to town.

Both the poetic and musical language of the blues reflects an immediacy of experience. It is a terse experience. Blues often has as few as a dozen lyrical lines—often arranged in three-line verse—built around an unsophisticated musical framework—often a

simple three-chord progression.

The earliest blues verses developed from the shouted work songs of the field and prison yard. One of the workers would call out a line like, "My woman up and left me." The men would respond with a rhythmic phrase that emphasized their work movements, such as "Hammer ring!"

Some field hollers and prison work songs are preserved on records, particularly the Folkways and Everest labels. For the inexperienced listener, they may be too far removed from pop music, and, therefore, relatively unlistenable. But they are the roots of the blues.

Some of the earliest blues performers available on records include Blind Lemon Jefferson and Charlie Patton. These artists, and others, are available on the Biograph, Arhoolie and Yazoo labels. The recordings are sometimes subpar, but they give a good indication of the feeling these men had for their music.

The blues singers have always felt a direct emotional relationship with their audiences, and it is that feeling that is behind their insistence on the blues as "truth." As Memphis Willie B. implied when he said the young men can't sing the blues because they don't know about the emotions that go into the blues, it is necessary to be involved with this life to reach the most intensely creative level of the blues.

Lightnin' Hopkins, despite his years as a successful performer for audiences in universities and consciously artistic night clubs, used to return to Houston between jobs to work weekends in the local juke joints.

In 1962 Big Joe Williams, after a number of successful recordings and two or three years of touring the universities, dropped out of sight. He finally turned up playing five hours a night for \$10, with a rough three-piece blues band in a dance hall in St. Louis.

For the blues novice, listening to any of the artists mentioned or any artist on one of the labels mentioned will provide a good introduction to the beginnings of the blues.

Unfortunately the history of the blues can't be covered by a short series of articles in a newspaper. People have written books on the subject. Luckily,



photo by Bill Ganzel

Blues artist Sun House... appeared in the Union last spring.

some of them are available.

*Blues Line* is a \$20 book of blues lyrics. Samuel Charters has authored a number of books, including the aforementioned *Poetry of the Blues*. Another good book is Leroi Jones' *Blues People*.

*Living Blues* magazine is published quarterly. It includes some information on festivals and blues performances. In addition, it runs record and book reviews and some excellent interviews with blues performers.

## Berg criticizes Thone's policies, refusal to debate

by Steve Arvanette

Democratic first district congressional candidate Darrell Berg, at a press conference earlier this week, blasted his general election opponent for refusing to debate him.

Berg said Congressman Charles Thone "is so insecure about his record that he is afraid to defend it in public."

Thone's administrative assistant, Robert Palmer, said that no debate could be planned until it is known when Congress will adjourn.

Thone, according to Palmer, "has told Berg several times that until Congress adjourns he will be in Washington."

Speculation is that Congress will adjourn Oct. 14, Palmer said. However, until a firm decision on adjournment is made, Thone will be unable to schedule a debate.

Berg has criticized a tax reform plan offered by Thone as fiscally "irresponsible" and of having no chance of getting through Congress.

Berg said Thone had admitted he didn't know how much his plan would cost,

although it might be as much as \$16 billion. Since the present federal deficit is \$20 billion, Berg speculated Thone's proposal "will be laughed right out of Congress."

Berg also called for an immediate congressional investigation of the "favoritism shown the big wheat exporters."

"I am finding that this is the No. 1 issue on most farmers' minds," Berg said of the recent sale of wheat to Russia.

Berg quoted *Farmers Union* figures that rated Thone's record on agricultural issues at 53 per cent and said if farmers knew that fact they would support him (Berg) instead.

Palmer, in response, said Nebraska has four farmer's organizations. "If you get 100 per cent with one, you may get zero per cent with another," he said.

Berg said *Field and Stream* magazine has rated the congressman at zero per cent on environmental issues.

Palmer questioned what issues were used in the magazine's rating, and pointed out that during his term in office Thone opposed President Nixon's request for continued federal support of the supersonic transport (SST) project.

The project was strongly opposed by environmental groups.

Berg also criticized Thone for voting seven times against amendments that would end financing the Vietnam war.

Palmer said Thone has fully supported President Nixon's attempts to end the Vietnam conflict.

## Bidding opened for library addition

It literally took years to accomplish, but the addition to Love Library is finally solidifying according to Library Director John Heussman.

Bidding on the new structure began yesterday and will continue until the last week of October. The lowest bid will be presented to the Board of Regents at its November meeting for approval, and "hopefully" ground breaking for the structure will be in mid-November, Heussman said.

The two-story addition will be constructed north of Love Library on what is now a mall, Heussman said it is scheduled to be finished in "a year or a year and a half, although we don't know for sure."

The addition, funded with a \$3.5 million appropriation from the Legislature, will house 700,000 volumes and seat 400 students. It will be connected to Love Library's central structure by a second-floor walkway. The card catalog, currently located in the second floor lobby of the main building, will be moved to the walkway, Heussman said.

"The addition will take care of our needs (storing books) for, oh, five to seven years," Heussman said. "It's hard to estimate, but I would say we're going to be faced with a problem after that."

The library shelves have been overflowing with books for several years. New libraries like the one at Nebraska Hall have been created on both UNL campuses in the last five years to house the overflow from the main library.

The \$10,000 collected last year from contributors and students in their "Make Love No. 1" campaign is resting in a special fund in the University of Nebraska Foundation to be used at a later date, Heussman said.

## Probasco . . .

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"Reporters are still unable to treat unorthodox, unconventional people objectively," he said.

However, Probasco ventured that if he would have known how much student interest his editorial would cause, he'd have written it the second week of school.

Not because he wanted to make an issue, he said, but because of the way it brought the campus alive in times when "you almost had to create issues."

One showing of the film on the UNL campus was nearly empty; the next one was full.

"I was concerned at the time—not wanting to embarrass the University," he said.

Probasco said he feels he's become even more radicalized in the 12 years since his editorship.

After he graduated, Probasco forgot about journalism for awhile, he said, because he wanted to be involved in the movements at the time, not report them.

He applied for and received a conscientious objector draft classification. Between bits of graduate school he spent 20 months as a Peace Corp volunteer in the Philippines. This interested him in Asian studies, and in 1967 he received his masters degree in Asian history from the University of Hawaii.

Probasco participated in a Pentagon march in 1967 and somewhat in the dump-Johnson movement in 1968.

After marriage, he traveled in Asia, especially in Indonesia and the Philippines, before coming to work for the *Herald* two years ago.

The Vietnam war still concerns him.

Probasco is aware that some say the cycle from apathy to protest to violence has turned full face and that campuses are apathetic again.

And he admits there have been great changes on campuses within the last three years.

He blames much of this on the Vietnam war not winding down, and credits Nixon with cleverly making the war a non-issue. There is no leadership on the other side of the fence, he said, and there is

nothing radical at all about George McGovern.

Probasco credits consumer champion Ralph Nader for redirecting the attitudes of some kids who found dropping out was not rewarding and came back to find their role within the system.

And while now there seems to be a certain calmness and apathy in the country, Probasco said, it's not like Eisenhower and the fifties.

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