



UNL CHEMISTRY PROFESSOR Bob McLaughlin plays the harmonica and teaches chemistry. Outside of the classroom, he has performed at the Zoo Bar and The Fine Grind, just to name a few.

RYAN SODERLIN/DN

Chemistry professor gives students blues

By SARAH BAKER
Senior Reporter

After taking their first Chem. 109 exam, Bob McLaughlin's students might feel like playing the blues.

What those students might not realize is their professor already does.

Play the blues, that is.

McLaughlin, who has been teaching in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Department of Chemistry for just over a year, uses his hobby of playing the harmonica to get on the same level with his students.

"When I started to play the harmonica about a year and a half ago, I took a risk," he said. "Many of my students, who are college freshmen, are also taking a risk by coming to the university. New experiences aren't always an easy thing."

McLaughlin only has been a "blues man" for a little over a year, and he said getting into the music scene was an unexpected thing.

"I have always enjoyed the blues, the music has such powerful lyrics and is so imaginative. I have been intrigued with music for a long, long time, but I just never learned about it," he said.

McLaughlin was first approached by his friend Jim George, who is now his partner in the group Blues Therapy, about playing the

blues.

"I was feeling kind of sad one day, and my friend suggested maybe I should learn to play the blues," McLaughlin said. "I said I thought I wanted to learn to play the harmonica. He said if I bought one, he would help me learn. So that is where this all started."

McLaughlin said he can't read any music, and instead goes by what he hears in his mind, and listens to the other people he is playing with.

"I listen to the beat and try to play with the mood," he said. "I go with my feelings."

McLaughlin said the band's name, Blues Therapy, originated because playing the blues for him is therapy.

"One thing I love about the blues is if you are feeling bad, the blues can make you feel good again."

McLaughlin said the first time he played was on an open stage night at the Zoo Bar. He

said it took a lot of courage to get on the stage.

"That experience was completely hilarious for me," he said. "I just kept thinking 'this is so fun! I love it!' the whole time."

Blues great Junior Wells, who died Jan. 15, was someone who McLaughlin said was an inspiration to him.

Junior Wells knew the blues," he said. "One thing I like to think is that even though the man is gone, his music continues to live on and make people happy. He still influences people like me."

After McLaughlin got more involved in the local Lincoln blues scene, he decided to try and include his students in his love for music.

"I started a tradition in my Friday chemistry classes, the ones which always have the lowest attendance," he said. "I ask my students to bring in a cassette and whatever one I

get first, we listen to it at the beginning of class," he said. "It can be country, rap, whatever."

McLaughlin said to continue the tradition, he brought in a tape of the blues for the class, because it is the kind of music he enjoys.

"I noticed some of the students were really enjoying the music, so I told them they could come and check out some free live blues and I told them where I would be playing with my band," he said.

McLaughlin said he gets an indescribable feeling when he is up in front of people, whether when playing or teaching.

"When I look into the audience and I see I am making people feel good, I can't describe the uplifting feeling I get," he said.

"I have seen it happen in students when they are really learning something, at that moment when things come together in their mind, and I have seen it when people get up and dance when I am playing in front of them. I see how I'm helping them to feel free."

And if McLaughlin has any regrets about his blues involvement, it's only that he wished he had brought music in to his life earlier.

"I am 50 years old, and all my life I have missed out on having this kind of joy," he said. "I am incredibly fortunate to be able to give the pleasure of music to so many others."

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BOB McLAUGHLIN
UNL chemistry professor

Music

Hum
"Downward Is Heavenward"
RCA Records
Grade: A

Champaign, Ill., based rockers Hum offer sophisticated and melodic new material in their fourth full-length album, titled "Downward Is Heavenward."

Though the record has fewer hard-edged tracks than the previous two records, 1995's "You'd Prefer an Astronaut" and 1993's "Electra2000," the band shows they can succeed by just being itself and not

conforming to what everyone else is doing.

Hum's lineup consists of singer/guitarist Matt Talbott, guitarist Tim Lash, drummer Bryan St. Pere and bassist Jeff Dimpsey.

"Downward" begins with the song "Isle of the Cheetah," a sonic world of fuzz guitars and spacey vocals. The song clocks in at close to seven minutes, uncharacteristic of Hum's prior recordings. But the song works for them and fits well alongside the rest of the songs on the album.

The second track, "Comin' Home," is the album's first single and also the first

video from the album. By far the fastest-paced song on "Downward," it is a reminder of the Hum of the past, but also of the older, more mature Hum of the future.

The most polished song on "Downward" is the sixth track, "Green To Me." The song's lyrics do not make much sense and are nothing out of the ordinary, but neither is Hum.

The band members play music that means something to them, whether it is tales of innocence corrupted, lost love or the past mourned. Their songs allow room for interpretation, and "Green To Me"

makes one think about blue skies and the green tones of summer.

The band is made up of self-admitted perfectionists, and sometimes that can be a good thing.

Talbott said the band was democratic to a fault.

"We barely function sometimes because if one guy doesn't like the part, even if the other three do, we'll rework the idea until we're all happy with it," he said. "That's why it took so long to finish this record."

- Jim Zavodny