



The Blues Stalker

By Monte Adkison

A Quarter of a Century of Mississippi Heat



25 years and 11 records of Chicago style blues....that's real staying power in an ever-changing industry. I recently caught up with bandleader, songwriter and harp player Pierre Lacocque as his band, Mississippi Heat, was preparing for the release of "Warning Shot." This recording, their eleventh, is on the Delmark label and the release date is set for September 16th. The CD release party will be held at Buddy Guy's Legends on September 13th. To get a feel for this group's dynamic groove, also check out the 2009 Mississippi Heat documentary movie directed and produced by Jonathan Lacocque and John Severson on YouTube.

BS: I know you have answered this question many times in detail but for my new readers and fans, can you tell me how a Belgium man born in Jerusalem, who has resided in Germany, France and Quebec, and holds a Doctorate in Psychology came to Chicago and embraced the blues genre?



PL: Coming to Chicago opened unforeseen doors for me. I discovered the true purpose of my life: playing Blues music. Until then I thought that my career was going to be found in the intellectual realm, though I had doubts I had the smarts for it. As far back as I remember I saw my father reading, writing and publishing books on the Old Testament. His father too (Pépère) was heavily steeped in philosophy, literature and Judeo-Christian Theology. Both knew how to read Aramaic and biblical Hebrew. My father was better trained than Pépère, though whenever they saw each other the two would talk for hours on end about the bible.

We had lived in 4 countries before immigrating to Chicago. My father had received a scholarship to study biblical literature in Jerusalem. We stayed there for 2 years (1950-1952). My brother Michel was already born (March 12th, 1951), and I was born on October 13th, 1952. We then moved to Germany for my father's military requirements (he was an Army Chaplain), then to the Vosges mountains at Neuviller-La-Roche (c. 1954-1957, Alsace, France) as a Minister, before arriving in my parents' country of origin in Belgium in 1957. My ancestors on both sides of my family hail from Belgium. All the way back to great-great grandparents, and probably beyond!

We stayed in Belgium about 6 years, and then in 1964 we returned to Jerusalem for one year. Our father ("Papa") again received a scholarship to continue his biblical research and brush up on his Old and Modern Hebrew. We return to Brussels in 1965, and we eventually immigrated to Chicago in 1969. Michel had finished his High School at the Athénée Maimonide, in Brussels. I had 2 years left, and my sister Elisabeth about 6 years.

BS: Did you study music or have any classical music training?

PL: I learned the harmonica by ear. As I became a band leader, I also started to learn my notes on my harmonicas so I could guide my band with bass lines and melodies. I also bought instruction books on the harp that taught me how to play it. To this day, I do not compose with musical notes. Only which holes I draw or blow on a particular harmonica. Then I translate these notes into letters, such as G B E D F#G, for example, which happen to be the bass-line notes for our MOANIN' AND CRYIN' song [recorded in the key of G on LEARNED THE HARD WAY (with Deitra Farr), and again on our

live DVD, ONE EYE OPEN: LIVE AT ROSA'S LOUNGE (with Inetta Visor)]. Over the years I always ask my guitar and bass players what notes or chords they are using on a particular song. This helps me know what notes I have on my harps which, in turn, help me to better harmonize with them. I always start with learning the exact bass notes before contributing to a song.

BS: You have recruited some incredibly talented musicians who have contributed to your sound over time such as Lurie Bell and Carl Weathersby. Can you tell us some of the others that you have been joined by especially any that are no longer with us? We seem to be losing so many of our national treasure.

ROBERT COVINGTON
(AKA Robert Lee Travis, 1941–1996)

Robert was Mississippi Heat's first drummer/singer. In December 1991, we started MH as a quartet with Jon McDonald on guitar/vocals (he eventually played 12 years with Magic Slim), the legendary Bob Stroger on bass, and me. Robert had an amazing voice. His stage name was "The Golden Voice". He had a record out under that name which was released on the Red Beans Label (Chicago, 1988): THE "GOLDEN VOICE" OF ROBERT COVINGTON. Carl Weathersby and Jon McDonald appear on it. The label eventually folded, and the CD was reissued in 1989 as BLUES IN THE NIGHT: THE GOLDEN VOICE OF ROBERT COVINGTON, on Evidence Records).

Robert was a charismatic man, witty and always in a cheery mood. He had drinking problems, however; and that eventually cost him his life. He had received one (maybe two) kidney transplant(s) but returned soon after to drinking. Robert died in 1996 from kidney complications.

He had a mesmerizing stage presence, and fans adored him. The Chicago Tribune described his voice as "... a buttery baritone that recalls such classic blues singers as Bobby "Blue" Bland and Little Milton". I wrote a song for him after his death, called "Golden Voice" (of course). I lost the music but I remember that it had a Reggae feel. As it was left unfinished, I never shown it to his wife Ernie (Ernestine). Here is a glimpse of some of them:

**FANCY HAT AND SUIT ON
YOU JUMPED ON STAGE EAGER TO SING
AND WITH YOUR GOLDEN VOICE
WHAT A MAGICAL SPELL DID YOU BRING**

**"GOOD TIME BOB"
COULD HAVE BEEN YOUR NAME
YOU LAUGHED YOUR WAY THROUGH LIFE
NOW YOU'RE GONE AND IT'S A SHAME**

**GOD GAVE YOU NINE LIVES
AND YOU USED THEM TO THE FULL
YET THROUGH ACHES AND PAINS
YOU REMAINED CALM AND COOL**

**MESSENGER OF GOOD NEWS
YOU NEVER HAD BAD THINGS TO SAY
YOU ALWAYS LOOKED AT THE BRIGHT SIDE
AND FOR KIND STROKES TO GIVE AWAY
GOODBYE , GOODBYE GOLDEN VOICE
AND MAY YOU REST IN PEACE
FAREWELL MY FRIEND
AND THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES**

Robert's death took a heavy toll on me. I remember one of his last trips with us to Quebec, Canada, C. 1995. Deitra Farr, James Wheeler, Billy Flynn and Bob Stroger were still part of the band. I believe he was standing in for our then full-time drummer Allen Kirk who had a family situation to take

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care of. Robert's health was already failing, but as always, he kept a positive attitude. He may even have travelled against medical advice. During our road trip, he told us an abundance of jokes, as well as stories about his adventures and misadventures. Often related to women. His stories put us in stitches! We couldn't stop laughing. For hours! He died shortly after that trip (early January 1996). A wonderful human being.

GEORGE BAZE(MORE)
(c.1942–1998)

I had met George Baze in October of 1992, at Shades, in Deerfield (near Chicago), where Mississippi Heat opened for Junior Wells. Before joining MH in 1997, George had led Junior's band for numerous years. As with Junior Wells, George was fond of my harmonica playing. We kept in touch, and he eventually joined our band in October of 1998. He had been weary with the intense traveling demands with Junior, but also possibly becoming aware of his failing health. He recorded *HANDYMAN* with us (Van der Linden Recordings in 1998, and reissued with 2 extra tracks on CrossCut Records in 1999). Unfortunately he died before it was first released in 1998. My brother Michel brought the mastered version to his Hospital bed for him to listen. He had a big grin of approval. He died 2 days later, on October 9th.

George was a Vietnam Veteran. While on duty he contracted bone cancer due to Agent Orange. He was a quiet man, and to my recollection, he never talked about his war experiences. Carl Weathersby, too, is a Vietnam veteran (1971-1977). He, on the other hand, tends to talk freely about his Vietnam nightmare years. They still haunt him today, though his music heals him. His guitar playing, while at time "war-like" can also be incredibly soft and soulful. I have heard amazing guitar players live and on recordings before. But when Carl is on fire, he is jaw-dropping, full of blue notes that wonderfully shake you to the core. George was not as skilful with his guitar, but his charm and wit on stage were irresistible!

George had a stuttering problem. A speech impediment that, to me, made him even more likeable. However, he NEVER stuttered when he sang! He had a strong stage presence, would hold a single long note on his guitar, and look at the audience with a delightful grin. He loved performing. He was a kind soul. As with Robert Covington, George was an upbeat man, always looking for a good joke.

Towards the end of his life, George's body got weaker and weaker, so I hired a second guitar player to help him rest when he got too drained on stage. In spite of quickly losing his battle with cancer, George's voice was still strong enough to sing three songs on our *HANDYMAN*; one of them being his delightful "Dog in My Backyard". That song was his signature tune and a crowd pleaser. I composed a song for him after his death in 1998. We recorded it on the next MH CD, *FOOTPRINTS ON THE CEILING* (CrossCut Records, 2002), and I play it live every night. It is called "BluesFor GeorgeBaze".

I decided not to put lyrics on it, perhaps because I was too sad to do so. We added a church, choir-like touch with a 2-voice background vocal section to the song. No words spoken by the choir, only soulful "hums".

SPURLING BANKS
(1949 -2011)

Another loss for Mississippi Heat was our dear Bass Player, Spurling Banks. Spurling recorded 2 CDs with us, all on the Delmark label: *ONE EYE OPEN: LIVE AT ROSA'S LOUNGE* (2005, also on DVD), and *HATTIESBURG BLUES* (2008). I spent hours talking with Spurling. We spoke about life, people, politics, music, his relationship with his fiancée Robin, his love for his stepson David, and so on. The topics never went dry. A delightful man to travel with as well. He died from severe complications with diabetes. He was one of my dearest friends.

During the years other family members passed away such as both James Wheeler's and Bob Stroger's daughters, Calvin "Fuzz" Jones, Lawrence "Sonny" Wimberly, and our dear mother, to mention but a few .

BS: Introduce us to the current members of Mississippi Heat.

PL: Inetta Visor on vocals, Michael Dotson on guitar/vocals,

Kenny Smith on drums/vocals, Brian Quinn on bass, and me. Our Festival line-up also sometimes includes Giles Corey on rhythm/lead guitar/vocals, and finally, Neal O'Hara on piano and B-3 organ.

BS: How do you define Chicago style blues?



PL: If you talk about Chicago blues, you cannot define it apart from the specific Afro-American cultural and historical context. While steeped into the acoustic Delta and Mississippi blues, including work songs, the electric Chicago sounds changed the sound and feel presentation. Same music, different "power" due to the amplification of the instruments. The pioneers of that new sound were Willie Dixon, Muddy Waters, Otis Spann, both Little and Big Walters, Jimmy Reed, Howlin' Wolf, Otis Spann, Fred Below, S.P. Leary, among others. Chicago Blues has a unique style. It may swing at times like the West Coast blues bands do nowadays, and yet it has shuffle and lump beats that belong specifically to the Windy City. Any blues aficionados will tell you whether a band has a Chicago sound or not. Much like an R&B song influenced by Detroit, or a Jazz coming out of Los Angeles.

BS: Could the band's success have taken place in any other great bedrock of the blues other than Chicago? Has the rich talent pool and environment nurtured your latent talents?

PL: Destiny brought me to Chicago. It is here where many legendary figures lived and worked. While there are wonderful blues bands world-wide (Europe and South America, for example, have many of them), Chicago remains Chicago. Some here are keeping the flame going like Lurrie Bell, Billy Flynn (from Green Bay, Wisconsin, but often performing in Chicago and heavily contributing to its vintage sound), John Primer, Kenny Smith, Bob Stroger, Buddy Guy, Billy Boy Arnold, Billy Branch, Matthew Skoller, Barrelhouse Chuck, and others. They are the Chicago "mentors", those that fans and critics alike follow and appreciate.

BS: Your drummer Kenny Smith and yourself seem to simply "get it." Do you have a special musical bond?

PL: When Kenny plays with me I feel his presence. I KNOW he is listening. When I take musical risks on stage he always brings me back to where the song is. I trust him. It is a joy having him as a musical partner. We also have an uncanny personal relationship that goes beyond music proper. We have formed a friendship that will last forever. And that despite the fact that he is 22 years younger than me! He reads me well. I enjoy listening to his insights about people we know, about business ideas, about songs he is writing, etc. We also share private feelings and thoughts about our lives, our families, and about life in general. "Pierre, I am with you till the day you die", he often tells me. We talk regularly, "hellos" and what not, even when he is traveling abroad. I love his two daughters, and his wife Holly. Our two families socialize in spite of our fast professional paces.

BS: You have performed in festivals all over the world. Do you have any tour plans with your upcoming release that you can give your international fans a heads-up on? Have you ever played down in Florida or in the South and could you work on that?)

PL: My agent Jay Reil tells me that we have dates lined-up

for Florida for this December (Tallahassee, among other cities). I will place the dates and info on our website, www.mississippiheat.net. We have a couple of Canadian tours, such as festivals in Edmonton, Alberta (in August), and within the Quebec Province (in October). We will also be headliners at the Lucerne Blues Festival this November (10 days of concerts!). We are also in process of negotiating tours in Belgium (possibly with Lurrie Bell as guest), in Switzerland, and in Brazil (Sao Paulo).

BS: Have you ever personally done the blues pilgrimage to Mississippi and the Delta region?

PL: My wife Vickie has planned trips to these regions but my band schedule eventually interferes! It is a dream of mine to visit there, so I know we will do it. Besides, we have friends waiting to go with us when we are ready.

BS: I see where Big Walter Horton was a major influence on you as well as the 50's style of Chicago blues. Describe the current atmosphere and state of Chicago blues. Is it still drawing on the influences of that decade?

PL: I think that tourists from Europe, Asia (Japan & South Korea, for example), and South America come to Chicago with an expectation to hear vintage Chicago Blues. Our City is known for that musical genre. So there will likely always be a strong interest in the traditional blues music genre. However, many so-called Chicago Blues Bands nowadays play more funk or Rhythm & Blues than vintage, Delta-based blues! Be it a sit may, I continue to meet new players in Chicago that play vintage blues. For example, 2 days ago we performed at The House of Blues. The solo artist opening for us was someone I had never heard of. He sounded amazing! Fantastic vocals and Delta guitar-playing. His name is Mississippi Gabe Carter. I also have enjoyed Diamond Jim Greene. So there is hope. The pressure really is too high for Chicago to lose its blues identity!



BS: Chromatic or diatonic? Do you have a sponsorship from one of the manufacturers?

PL: Yes. I am a Hohner endorsee. I have been for many years. I mainly play their Golden Melody harmonica, but also record with Marine Bands (especially on straight Chicago tunes like "Sweet Poison", "Swingy Dingy Baby", or "Alley Cat Boogie". All of which were recorded on our WARNING SHOT CD).

BS: The first time I heard your harp playing I was instantly reminded of Junior Wells and how his harp "talked." Was he ever a mentor to you?

PL: You are the first interviewer EVER to link our harp styles. Thank you! Yes, yes, yes. At first sight (sound), my style may appear unlike Junior's. After all, I love amplified harp playing more than he did, and I also have been heavily influenced by both Little and Big Walter.

Technically, creatively and tone-wise, Little Walter is my ultimate Master. Yet, I am inspired and moved by Junior Wells' "less-is-more" approach. I too look for a statement, a phrasing, a melody that captures a soulful meaning. Junior was wonderful at this. A few notes of his, and all is said! Each note has a feeling.

BS: How did you meet your singer Inetta Visor and form the incredible musical connection that you two seem to possess?

PL: Around the year 2001 Katherine Davis's career was taking off nicely for her, so we knew that we had to find a singer who could commit full-time to Mississippi Heat. My brother and I knew the great Gospel singer Sue Conway well; so we asked her to refer someone to us. We loved Sue as a potential candidate, but she was too busy to join forces with the Heat. She referred Inetta to us, and once we heard her Etta James-like voice, we were sold. Her first CD with us was the 2002 FOOTPRINTS ON THE CEILING (CrossCut Records). It received wonderful critical responses, and is still one of MH most appreciated albums.

Inetta is a delightful and unassuming person. The maxim "still

water runs deep" fits her perfectly well. She is musically gifted, and is adored by our fans. She and I go back a long way now, close to 14 years. We respect each other, and I enjoy her friendship.

BS: The media world today with the ever-changing technology certainly has to be a challenge, both a blessing and a curse to every artist. What new technologies and resources do you embrace? How do you feel about the growth of digital streaming on sites such as Spotify and Songza and with many artists now releasing new material on vinyl do you have any thoughts on that?

PL: I happen to enjoy recording on "Pro-Tools" for instance, as it gives the mixing person huge possibilities to present a song. You can add a myriad of tracks and fix mistakes easily. In the olden days, as with the recording of all our CDs before 2005, we used analog tapes. Great sounding tapes which we still often use in the final stages of mastering. In the pre Pro-tools era we had to cut-and-paste the tapes to fix performance mistakes. Tedious work and time consuming.

Funny you mention vinyl. Delmark Records will launch a selected number of their new releases on vinyl. I believe it is Dave Spector that began that trend with his beautiful new album, "Message in Blue". Delmark will eventually do so with WARNING SHOT as well (Vol. 1 and Vol.2, with 8 different songs on each).

BS: I know that for me personally that the blues has often helped me cope during troubled periods. As a practicing Psychologist, do you believe in the therapeutic value of blues and music in general?

PL: Of course. I just returned from a week-long series of professional seminars on Creativity & Madness in Santa Fe, New Mexico. There were many varied presenters each day, from Jungian analysts, to Neuro-Psychologists, to Literature experts, Musicians, Psychiatrists, and so forth. It was exhilarating to hear about Chopin's life, Rainer Maria Rilke, Edgar Allen Poe, Eminem, and so forth. Everything I heard WAS applicable to my life as a musician: The search for meaning in a chaotic world, the need for introspection to find a path in life, the need to create and to master one's inner demons (like the mythical heroes fighting monsters), and so forth. The older I get, the more at peace I am with these two worlds.

BS: Tell me about your upcoming release "Warning Shot" and what we can look forward to?

PL: I love the recording studio. I live for it, and look forward to writing new material. Yet after our 2012 DELTA BOUND CD (Delmark DE 823) reached #1 world-wide (as reported by Living Blues Radio Charts), I didn't expect to feel this excited about WARNING SHOT. I am impressed with the musicianship of everyone involved; from our rhythm section, guitarists, to our keyboardist Neal O'Hara. I am particularly fond of our 3-voice "choir" arrangements made by Mae Koen, Diane Madison and Nanette Frank.

We recorded 16 songs, and all of them will be on the CD. We never released as many songs at once! Delmark Records liked them all. Each song has its particular "personality", its unique melodies and, to me, exciting tempos. In addition to the Chicago Blues tunes that I love so much, I am continuing to explore different rhythms within that genre. In all, there are 14 original tunes, 10 written by me, Michael Dotson has 3 delightful original tunes of his, Inetta Visor once again wrote a sweet ballad, and our GRAMMY AWARD WINNER drummer Kenny Smith wrote a great tune as well, named "Whatcha Say?" We also recorded two covers: The soulful "I Don't Know" (made famous by Ruth Brown, not to confuse with the Willie Mabon's song with the same name), and an instrumental bluesy version of Hank Williams' "Your Cheating Heart".

For this new project I invited the fabulous Ruben Alvarez to provide Latin percussion on three songs. Finally I wanted to have a horn section with a 30's, 40's, even '50 blues feel. That is, a horn section without a trumpet. Only old fashioned saxophones: Baritone and Tenor. I had met Sax Gordon (Beadle) in 2012 at a Master Class we both conducted in Southern France. For a whole week we taught our respective seminars, and I got to hear this amazing talent.

Sax Gordon sounded like King Curtis on steroids! Blue notes after blue notes. Jungle beats, swings, Delta and Chicago blues, he plays it all masterfully. There are not too many saxophonists that supposedly play "blues" sounding like him. He's got "it", plain and simple. He worked on 8 of the 16 tunes here. The harp and horns can clash at times, but not here!

Pierre, your passion and feel for the blues is very evident in your playing. I wish you all of the best for you and your band with your new release and hope to get to see you down South in the future and I know your fans in Spain will be hoping for tour dates there. Thanks for the "Warning Shot!"

Thank you for this interview. I enjoyed your questions.
All the best,
Pierre