



Blues Boy Hubbard courtesy of Todd Wolfson.

Henry 'Blues Boy' Hubbard

"I Just Fell In Love With T-Bone Walker Licks"

By Scott M. Bock

Blues Boy Hubbard has helped anchor the rich Austin music scene for six decades. Now, eighty years old, he talks about his career without regret despite the fact that he never gained much notice outside of Austin. While many musicians he taught or worked with were busy recording and touring, Hubbard made a living for years leading a band that backed national artists and, when times were lean, worked day jobs to take care of his family.

Hubbard is a confident man who laughs easily while sitting in his comfortable apartment. He wears large glasses, a cowboy hat, and smiles often while recalling his experiences in the heyday of blues in Austin. He reels off story after story about Austin's eastside where music was played all night – every night.

His honey-colored, hollow-bodied Epiphone guitar is perfectly polished and sits on a stand in the centre of the floor. A poster from a festival in Europe and an award hang behind him.

Piano was his first instrument and Hubbard helped his mother learn to play well enough so she could lead the choir in their congregation. But, once he had the opportunity, T-Bone Walker riffs pulled Hubbard deep into the guitar. Early on, he began to earn a living in music and says he even recorded a few times – though he believes only one 45 was ever released. Then the military came calling and he joined the Air Force where he became a jet mechanic.

After discharge, Hubbard took on the role of bandleader at Austin's famed, Charlie's Playhouse. 'Blues Boy' Hubbard and the Jets worked the Playhouse for nearly sixteen years, backing an incredible number of touring artists as they came through town. Hubbard reels off name after name including Freddie King, B.B., Joe Tex, Z.Z. Hill, and dozens of others.

Hubbard says, somewhere in his apartment, he has a copy of a 45 he recorded in the 1960s called 'My Angel'. He plays guitar on a hard to find CD called 'Texas Blues Boys' issued on Blue Spot in 2005 which brings together long-time musical collaborators James Kuykendall, Donald Jennings, and Dickie Bennett.

Hubbard counts guitar heroes W.C. Clark, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Bill Campbell, and Derek O'Brien as former pupils. In 2007, long overdue for the honour, Hubbard was inducted into the Texas Music Hall of Fame.

Hubbard says that he stopped leading his own band when he hit age 75 and his second guitarist left town. He works with the East Side Kings when he feels like playing. Today, he sits on a chair while on stage but his hands still run the fret board with ease.

"My real full name is Henry L. Hubbard. I was born 16th February 1934. I'm from La Grange, Texas – born and raised. It was just me and my brother. That's it. I went from the first grade to the twelfth grade and finished high school there. La Grange is east from Austin on Highway 71. The first town is Bastrop, the next one is Smithfield, and then La Grange. From La Grange you can get on Highway 10 and go to Houston.

It's a small town. When I grew up, it was Black and White but it was segregated. They had signs and things – 'colored this' and 'colored that' – colored water fountains – all that kind of stuff. Not only La Grange – in Austin and Houston – everywhere else.

I started playing piano when I was eight years old. My mother – she sang and played piano. She could play guitar and her brother was a guitar player. She could play harmonica, too. But, when me and my brother was born, she never played the harmonica and she never picked up the guitar again.

She bought a piano and she played piano when I was first born. There was a piano in the house. And, she did all of this by ear. And, I'm the one that taught her to read music. She never had a lesson. My mother, she could play anything that she hear. She played spirituals. I never heard her play a blues song.

And then after I was eight years old I was just sitting around the house one day and they played a song from Houston – the programme on the radio I think, was Dr. Daddy-O (likely, New Orleans-based Black D.J.). And, he was playing boogie woogie by Sugar Chile Robinson.

That was the first time I ever heard that kind of music. When that record ended I got on the piano and was trying to find the key it was in. It was in the key of 'C'. At that time, I didn't know 'C' from 'L'. I figured out what he was playing. I just kept at it.

I could hear the changes. I tried to find it. I knew what he was doing wasn't what I was doing. But I figured out what he was doing. My ear is good. I don't really know why. I was just born like that. It's the same reason that some people can do this or that and some people can't. I just figured it out. My mother came in there and said, 'What are you doing?' I said, 'I'm trying to figure out exactly what he did on that record'.

My mom didn't care that I was listening [to secular music]. She played spirituals but she didn't care about me learning the blues. She didn't care at all – just as long as I learned to play. That's what she wanted me to do.

What happened is when I was listening to the radio – Dr. Daddy-O – there was another station that would come on after that – Dr. Hepcat on KVET, Austin. And, these people were playing the same songs. After I got old, I found out why. Every radio station was playing the same song because they were trying to push that song to Number One. When I came to the next station and they played it that was all I needed because I got a chance to listen again. So, I was lucky that way.

They would play John Lee Hooker and Muddy Waters. They would play all those guys. But that wasn't my thing. I listened to Duke and Peacock recordings. I loved that style of music.

I didn't buy records right away. I didn't have any money to do that. But, after my mother saw that I was going to have that talent, she would put aside a few nickels and send to a place in Nashville, any record I would want she would order it for me. It would be 78s.

My mom said, "You're going to have to learn to read music". There was a lady in La Grange named Miss Cook who went to college. Her husband was the doctor. And, she had majored in music and something else. The two of them, if you would see them, you wouldn't know they was black because their daddys' was white and their mothers' was half white. So they looked like two white people but they wasn't. But, only the people in La Grange knew that.

So what happened was, Miss Cook had about five or six girls she was teaching. I was the only boy. And the guys would mess with me all the time for learning piano.

So, I went there and you go in books – one, two and three. When we were in book one she said: "Tomorrow this is going to be your lesson". Well, I went home and I'd get tomorrow's lesson and the next day and the next day. So, she'd say: "Henry you're moving fast". Now, these girls weren't doing this. That wasn't their talent. Those girls wasn't musically inclined.

It started off easy. It got to where I was playing classical stuff. But, that wasn't me [laughing]. I didn't get excited about it. She would put stuff up there where she would have all five fingers working. And, I would get into that.

The church where she went and played was right in front of our house. And she would come by there on Sundays and stop and her and my mother would talk and she said, "I appreciate you sending Henry to me to learn to read because he's really smart".

I played piano at eight and I played until I was twelve and that's when my mother sent me to school to read music. At fourteen I picked up the guitar. I got started the same way. I heard T-Bone Walker and Gatemouth Brown and I said man I got to learn how to do that. I just fell in love with T-Bone Walker's licks.

My mother invested in me to learn to read music so I would teach her how to read. She was singing in the choir and the choir director was a man and he was a lot older than she was so she was anticipating him dying before she did. She was going to take over the choir when he died. What happened was it worked that way. She took over the choir and she played piano and sang.

When I was twelve years old my cousin had a nightclub out on Highway 71 going to Houston. It was in La Grange. There was two juke joints out there. They just called them, 'Out cross the creek'. And my cousin was running one and another guy was running the other. The road went



Blues Boy Hubbard, circa late 1950s. From the B&R Archive.

between the two joints. The gravel road that went between them went to the Chicken Ranch – that was the whorehouse.

My cousin found out that I could play piano so he asked my daddy did I play good enough to play out on the patio in the summertime? I went out there and I played twice and my mother stopped that right away because there were a lot of women, they would come up and wipe the sweat off me.

There was a fence around the patio and you could just drive right up there and see through there so my dad and mother drove up there to watch me and my mother – what she saw – she didn't like it. My dad didn't care but she did. She said, "You're not playing there no more".

Back then, I went to church with my mother all the time. My mother was a Baptist and my daddy was a Methodist. Me and another girl, we used to do duets together. So, I been singing for a long time.

My daddy was like a cowboy. He broke horses and things for the guy he was working for. He worked for a white guy that had a couple of ranches and that's what he did every day. He did a lot of different things. The white guy he worked for had a house near us but he often stayed out of the city limits. So, my dad could just walk to his house and get in a truck and go somewhere and pick up a cow or a horse or whatever.

When I finished high school my daddy got tired of me waking up at ten a.m. He got me a job working at a veterinary hospital in La Grange. When I finished school, I didn't leave La Grange. At that time they was drafting you into the service. So, I knew my day would come. By the time I was nineteen or twenty they would call me. I got away with it until I was 21.

What happened when they called me for the service, I was playing with the House Rockers – a group from Florida. I was playing guitar for them. I was in Columbus, Texas on the bandstand and a guy from La Grange came to the band stand and said: "I've got some papers for you". I knew what it was.

So, that next morning they took me back to La Grange and that Monday they took me to the Post Office. They had a recruitment centre there in the basement and I volunteered for the Air Force. This was 1955.

I had been called for the Army. So, they told me, 'You got to take a test to get into the Air Force'. So, I took the test and I passed it. He said when they leave next Monday on the bus you get on it. And, that's what I did. That was the saddest day of my life leaving La Grange at 21.

When I went in the Air Force you took tests pretty much every week to see what you excel in. I never left Texas. I was a jet mechanic. When I went into the Air Force some General had just integrated the Air Force. I was in for four years.

When I got out, I had to play and sing. I loved it. That's when I started playing music for a living. I switched to guitar in 1957. I was playing piano but I was tired of banging on them out of tune pianos. I started a job playing guitar with my own band. So, now I'm not Henry Hubbard anymore. I'm 'Blues Boy' Hubbard and the Jets.

I had quit singing when I came to Austin. I was playing guitar and had my own group together. I had some guys in the group who could really sing. So, I shut up. Being a musician I can tell who is good and who is just mediocre. And, my singing compared to two of the guys in the band was mediocre. They could sing as good as Bobby Bland – wasn't no getting around it.



Label shot from the B&R Archive.



Blues Boy Hubbard, Utrecht, 1995. Photo: Paul Harris.

This guy was a disc jockey in Taylor, Texas – Tony Vaughn. And, he came by my house and he said: “Hubbard, I need a band”. His band – the bandleader he moved to California. I said: “Yeah, I can get back on guitar”. I went that next day and went to the music store and bought a Fender Stratocaster in 1957 or 1958 for \$299.

From 1958 until 1974 I never did anything but play music – just played music. I was playing at the Show Bar. The Show Bar was a club that was a pretty good size. It was right over on 11th street. It could seat about 350 people. Everybody was coming to the Show Bar to see Hubbard and the band.

We went into studios for Don Robey at Duke/Peacock Records. We went down there and we won the ‘Battle Of The Bands’ – it was fifteen bands. And, I won first place and they gave us a recording contract. But it wasn’t the kind of contract that Capitol would give you or something like that. Capitol would record you and promote you and push your stuff. This other stuff was a bunch of jive. You weren’t going to make a whole lot of money out of it. All they did was give us a recording contract with a local company and we could go in the studio and record every weekend and we did.

I think I still got a 45 somewhere. That’s how I eventually got to Europe. They knew that recording. It got all the way to England. That’s how we got to Amsterdam. We went there twice.

When Charlie Gilden bought the Show Bar in 1958, he renamed it Charlie’s Playhouse. His wife’s mother in San Antonio had money. Her mother would give them a loan for \$10,000 or \$20,000 and he fixed up the Playhouse to a point where it would seat 500. They fixed up the whole area and they bought Ernie’s Chicken Shack and they played music there late at night.

We were the house band. Everybody would come to the Playhouse and we would play the Chicken Shack. The University of Texas would pack that place every Friday and Saturday. White kids started integrating the Playhouse but the whites and blacks sat at different tables. That’s what put us in the know right there. It got to where we played every fraternity house at the university.

I always play a hollow body. Now I play an Epiphone. I was playing the Strat and we opened up for Jimmy Nolen and Jimmy Nolen had a Gibson Switch Master. That’s the guitar T-Bone always played with the big hollow body and everything. We got on stage to open up for Jimmy Nolen and when he come up with the big body and everything, I said: “I’m going to buy me a Switch Master”. Then Bobby Bland’s guitar player, Wayne Bennett, he heard me playing that thing and he said, man the next time you see me I’m going to have a Switch Master.

In those days, Tony Vaughn was a black disc jockey and he would call touring musicians and they would come to Charlie’s Playhouse. Tony would call me and say I got Albert Collins coming and I’ll pay you all to play behind him. Me and Albert Collins played together a month before the day he died. But, we were getting paid anyway. Charlie was paying us for five nights. I did this from 1958 to 1974. And then on, from 1974 I did more until Charlie died in 1979. I did nothing but play music.

I backed Z.Z. Hill, Johnny Taylor, Little Johnnie Taylor, Dakota Staton, Clarence Carter, all those kind of people – Joe Hinton and a lot of more people – Freddie King, Albert King, Albert Collins. I played with Freddie King a lot. He lived in Dallas but he was here all the time. I traveled with him.

I got to know all those guys from Chicago. I knew the guys from Houston – Joe Hughes, Johnny Copeland, Pete Mayes – I knew all those guys.

In those days, I was just playing. I hardly ever went and just listened to anybody.

We were doing everything that was a hit. If it was a hit we learned it. I was always able to teach the bass player his part if he wasn’t smart enough to get it – the piano player, the trumpet player, the tenor player. Whoever was in my band, I would teach them their part.

I would go see Hank Ballard and the Midnighters years before. But, then we started playing behind Hank Ballard – going out of town to play. We backed The Five Royales, Gatemouth Brown, B.B. King and we would play behind these guys when they came to Austin. I played with Gatemouth for a whole month. He hated me after that. He was something else. We played at Charlie’s Playhouse on 11th Street.

I really liked Bill Doggett because the guitar player was Billy Butler and he was really nice. I would go and talk to him. What blew me away was the first time I heard Jimmy Smith. I learned to play the Hammond B-3 after that.

When Charlie died, the phone was ringing off the hook. Every club wanted me. Steve Deane called me from the Austex Lounge. Clifford Antone called me – all these people was calling me.

Steve Dean gave me every Saturday. It’s the Magnolia Bar now. Antone he just sucked me up. He had the club on Guadalupe. He tried to get me to be the house band. I told him I wasn’t going to quit my day job – I was too old now.

I had started working for the State in 1975. I was a maintenance man for 21 years for the State and retired. Most of the people I worked with knew I played music.

I’d still play a gig because I liked it. If it’s a little money in it, I’m not greedy. Me and Stevie Ray Vaughan had a gig together every Sunday down on East Sixth. We would get together and pack the place every Sunday.

W.C. Clark was my bass player for years. The first time he ever left and got to be on his own on guitar – he had watched me play all the time. He started singing when he was playing with me. I gave him his first guitar lesson and he moved and started playing on the West side and then he started playing with Stevie Ray. And, I taught the guitar player, Derek O’Brien. He plays real good. I taught Bill Campbell, too.

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