

MILWAUKEE BLUES TODAY!

Part One

By Mike Stephenson

Milwaukee, Wisconsin, located ninety miles north of Chicago, is known as one of the brewing capitals of the U.S.A. It has traditionally had a very active blues scene, which continues today, with a variety of clubs presenting blues on a regular basis. It is also home to some fine blues musicians who told their story to Mike Stephenson.



Mississippi-born Harvey Westmoreland, Milwaukee 2013. Photo: Mike Stephenson.

The state of Mississippi has been the original home to some of the blues artists who have since made Milwaukee their home. Harvey Westmoreland is originally from Mississippi with Kosciusko being his home town. "I started playing music and singing when I was about five years old, beating on pots and pans around the house and stuff like that. Then when I got to Milwaukee I sang in the choir at the Baptist Church. I also sang at Mount Zion and I'll never forget that, as every Sunday you'd put your clothes on and get in the back of a pickup truck and drive to church. But I hated church back then because I didn't know how dusty you'd get in that pickup, and my grandmother had a little towel and as soon as you got to church she would take the towel and knock the dust off you, and I was scared because I thought I was going to get a whooping.

We came to Milwaukee in 1958 and got in the choir. It was a little bitty church that started in the house and it grew from that, from maybe thirty or forty members, to about 1500 members and we then we moved to a new location. I sang in the choir called Voice Of Jordan Choir, and the choir director was Andrew Jackson; he's out of Chicago now and he comes back to the church every now and then to have a special event. I'm still in church but not the way I want to be.

I always wanted to be in a band, so in the early '60s they had like a talent show at Garfield Park and I got up there and sung and I was about sixteen then and I got hired by this band called The Soul Entertainers and then we had Alon Butler And The New Breed Band. This band released two 45s on the PKC label in the late 1960s. 'It's Got To Be Something'/'Please Give Me A Chance' and 'Getting Soul Pt 1 and 2'.

They were young bands that came up when I was a teenager and some of those guys went on to play with Sam and Dave and some went with me to Little Milton. A lot of the musicians that were here in Milwaukee, horn players and stuff, left and ended up playing at Stax Records, so we had a lot of good

talent here in Milwaukee and we still have a lot of talent here. I wouldn't change this life for the world. I got locked up, and me and the keyboard player got a gig with Little Milton.

I was still singing then and I knew how to play drums, but I didn't know how to sing and play drums at the same time, so that took me a while to get right. I kept losing drummers because they would keep switching bands and a girlfriend of mine told me to get a drum set of my own. I came home one day and she had bought a set of drums and I learned how to keep the beat and the time and then I had to think about the words I was going to sing, and after a whole year I learnt the key to that was just relaxing. I finally learnt how to do that and I've since taught a lot of drummers that the main thing is keeping the timing and just relax. That's how I got with Little Milton, as he was looking for a keyboard player and a drummer. My stepfather was a good friend of Little Milton's, so he sent me and the organ player up to Chicago, and then the next week he needed a bass player, so me and Hump, the little guy who is a bass player, and Bobby Joe went to play with Little Milton. This was in the '70s. After that we started out at \$75 a night and two weeks after that I ended up being Little Milton's band leader and that \$75 jumped up to quite a bit of money so I hung with that for as many years as I could. I was with Little Milton for about ten years and then I was having family problems so I had to come home and check things out. After that I got



Harvey Westmorland played on these 45s. Aalon Butler also had a brief association with U.K. singer Eric Burdon and in 1976 he signed with Arista Records. A year later he cut a debut album called 'Cream City' on which Butler played guitar, took lead vocals and did much of the writing. From the B&R Archive.

on the road with Johnny Rawls for about four years, playing drums and singing. I hooked up with Marvellous Mack and then got my own group and we've been doing it ever since. My group is called Knee Deep Two. The first band was called Knee Deep before I went on the road. We have a female vocalist named Barbara Christian and we are doing pretty good and we are working on a CD which will be my first CD by myself without accompanying anybody.

Over the years I've recorded with Little Milton and Johnny Rawls. I've done some live recordings with George Stancell. I've recorded with Gerome Durham as well. I did a lot of studio work back in the day, just laying down drum tracks and they just used the tracks and I don't know who used them. Now I know the name I want to put on my CD, which is going to be called 'My Turn To Win' and that's what I'm working on. People call you up if they need a drummer, like Mary Davis and I've played drums with Stokes and a lot of other musicians like Gerome Durham. Me and Mack have been trying to get like a production agency company so if you needed a musician and you had to hire one for the night you could call Mack or me and we would have a list of musicians that we could call on. We are also doing another thing called Musicians Against Violence and that's working out quite good. We got to make sure our kids get the right influence because if it wasn't for music I would probably have been messed up too and I thank God for that."

James Cosey is a well respected guitarist in Brew Town. "I was born in Vicksburg, Mississippi, right off the Mississippi River and most people when I was coming up, played music there. I used to sit around and play little box guitars and hang out on the corners and play them with my friends, so that's where I got my start. This was in the early '70s. I first started on guitar when I was in Vicksburg when I was around twelve years old. We got a little band together back then, I didn't know too much on the guitar back then. The first club I played back then was called The Garfield and we played there off and on and we were playing blues, as everybody loved the blues there. Back then I was playing with local bands. My father, he was a musician, he used to play with Little Milton, Gladys Knight, Bobby 'Blue' Bland, B.B. King, Buddy Guy. His name was James Green and he played with Otis Clay as well. He is on some of their records and he was a bass player. I didn't see too much of him. We moved to Milwaukee in 1975 when I was about fifteen and that's when I saw more of my father. Then I went into the military and spent two and a half years in Germany and I played in Germany in a band. I was playing guitar. When I got to Milwaukee I continued with music, playing the guitar, but got off into gospel and then r&b.

Me and Greg, who is Johnny Rawls' bass player, we used to have a gospel group, we went from church to church and even played at churches in Chicago. One of the r&b groups

I played with, we called ourselves The All Star Show Band that had Robert Taylor, who was a stand up vocalist, and he was a friend of Little Milton. We also had Lolita on vocals, they are both dead now though. Lolita was a real good singer. We played at local cubs in Milwaukee like Big Man's and Mr. Parks Place, Jean's Supper Club. I've played with most of all of the local bands back in the day like Pete Scott, Gerome Durham, and me and him have been together for years.

I connected with Johnny Rawls back in the 1990s, we had Fast Eddie on drums and Gregory White was on bass back then. I was the guitarist and every now and then I used to play bass. I went out on the road with Johnny playing Ohio, Minnesota, West Virginia, St Louis, Chicago. I still play with Johnny now. I did a show with Johnny Rawls at Buddy Guy's in Chicago a few months back and Otis Clay was there and he sat in. I used to be on shows with Little Milton and Marvin Sease, we opened for them with my band The All Star Show Band and also with The Turner Band. I've played with The Misfits as well, I've played with Marvellous Mack too and his All Stars. I'm an on-call guitarist for a lot of the local musicians here in Milwaukee and I've played for most of the local groups around here. People like Johnny Mills, Deucy Rogers, I've played on stage with Harvey Scales one time. As well as playing guitar I can play bass and a little piano and I can sing some.

I'm working on my own CD, which should be out this year it will be some r&b and blues. I'm doing all the parts myself, guitars and singing and I'm writing my own songs and I'm recording it here in Milwaukee. Over the years I've done some recordings with other artists like Gerome Durham and Marvellous Mack and I've played on one of Johnny Rawls' CDs. My influences on guitar are B.B. King, George Benson, Buddy Guy. I work a full time job in auto body repair but I'm going to let that go because of nerve problems in my hand, carpal tunnel, and I have to be careful to protect my guitar playing talent.

Some of the clubs here are gone, like Big Man, it was a small club and I used to play that club with Marvellous Mack and we helped make that club and we used to get such a crowd that people were waiting outside to get in, then the club expanded and started getting main artists coming in. We played that club about six years straight, this was during the '90s. We used to play Ruby's as well but that's closed. More recently I've been mostly playing out of town, in Chicago and Minneapolis, Ohio, mostly with Johnny Rawls and I have to give it to him, he got me travelling around more and I have learnt a lot about the road and travelling from him. Around here in Milwaukee I've played the Summer Fest, The Garfield Road festival most every year. I used to perform seven days a week, then it got down to maybe four days a week, and then I started travelling from state to state about four months out of the year. I used to work with the singer Jeannie Holliday a lot. I've also played with the singer Charles Wilson for about a year, he is Little Milton's nephew, we played around Chicago and then did a show in Memphis.

Singer **Gerome Durham** is originally from Durant, Mississippi and moved to Milwaukee in 1965, getting employment as a machine operator for the same company for a thirty-nine-year period. He has loved music and been a singer from his Mississippi days where he won a talent show, although it was not until he got to Milwaukee that music became a more serious interest for him.

"I met Johnny Rawls in about 1980 and he is the one that really got me started in music, both him and my wife. He took me out on the road with him and I learnt a lot of stuff from that. I was with Johnny for about three years, opening shows for him and stuff like that, and it was Johnny who



James Cosey, Milwaukee, 2015. Photo: Mike Stephenson.



Above: Gerome Durham, Milwaukee 2013. Below: Steve Cohen, Milwaukee, 2014. Photos: Mike Stephenson.



told me I was ready to go on my own and so I've been on my own since. I opened a bar in Milwaukee in 1983 called Brother Two and Johnny used to perform there on Sunday evenings. I had that bar on Eighth and Ring for three years and we used to have the Harvey Westmoreland Band playing there often. It was Johnny who encouraged me to write my own songs and to put out some CDs, so I put out a single in 1992 called 'A Woman Is A Strange Thing'.

They wouldn't play my songs on the radio, and I was getting disgusted and I told my wife I was going to leave music alone, as I was spending too much money because I put my songs out on my own money, but I stuck with it. I've also recorded with Johnny Rawls and he has been on some of my songs on my CDs. I know Barbara Carr and I've performed with her and Johnny. I have six CDs out, most on my Gerome Durham Promotion Company and they are sold off the bandstand at my shows and on CD Baby and I Tunes. The sequence of my CDs are 'Walk In' from 1997, 'Stepping Out' from 2000, 'Gerome Durham' in 2006, 'I'm Not That Strong' from 2008, 'Blues After Dark' from 2010 and 'Old Dog Just A Hound Dog' which I put out in 2014. I record my CDs in Milwaukee, sometimes at Johnny Rawls' studio, and he has been involved in the production of my CDs and he has done a lot of writing on my releases. The title track to my 'I'm Not That Strong' CD has been really hot for me. I have my own band called Gerome And The All Star Band and have one of the best guitar players in the city called James Cosey and Harvey Westmoreland is my drummer and I also have a bass player, keyboard player and a girl singer, and most of these folks have been with me for 25 years or more. I do a lot of work in West Virginia, Minnesota and I've been to New York and Chicago. I play a lot of the clubs here in Milwaukee and I get to Mississippi at times to play as well, and most of my career has been out on the road. I'm a singer. I don't play any instruments although I play keyboards a little. I'm also a songwriter as well and I record original material and I'm writing new material all the time.

One of the harmonica players on the Milwaukee blues scene is **Steve Cohen**. "I was born in Duluth, Minnesota in 1954 and then moved at an early age with my family to Milwaukee. When I was a kid they

used to give you aptitude tests and I scored high in music so they encouraged me to do that. In fourth grade we moved to Whitefish Bay and I took violin lessons and I was learning how to read music and playing ok for my age but I just wasn't interested, so my folks asked me what would I want to play if not violin and I was interested in guitar, as here it was in 1962. So my dad came home with a \$12 guitar and I learned how to play that and I took classical guitar lessons. In the neighbourhood there was a girl who was teaching folk guitar and I was starting to have a consciousness about, and interest in, guys like Bob Dylan. So she taught me some chords and picking patterns, and it wasn't until a few years later that I started on my main instrument, which is harmonica. I did start playing guitar again, and when I started playing guitar the second time around I was already a pretty good harmonica player and the picking patterns that that girl had showed me are the ones and the way I play to this day. I play like Gary Davis, the thumb picks bass notes and one finger, and that's my guitar style. In seventh and eighth grade I met this guy Bill Stone and his parents were liberal types. When I grew up my dad was a trumpet player and he was wild about Stan Kenton and The Four Freshman and that kind of stuff, and that was the hippest thing we had around the house. So in Bill's house they had some blues records and that was my introduction to blues. Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, Lightnin' Hopkins, Lead Belly and more and that piqued my interest, and also at that time we had the British music invasion here. Bill's mum took us to some venues to hear this music. There was a Mafia controlled club downtown called The Scene where we heard Jimi Hendrix, Cream and John Mayall and she also took us to the Avant Garde coffee house which was also at the time of the folk blues revival. So all the guys like Skip James and you name them, all came through. We saw Magic Sam, Big Walter Horton with Johnny Shines and local bands like Knu Bluze, the band that Jim Liban was in.

At this time Dave Kasik was part of our group, and Dave and Bill and I ended up starting a blues band and one of the ways we learnt was that at the Avant Garde the guy who owned the place had a reel to reel and they recorded everything that came through there. Recently that live Magic Sam recording from there was released on Delmark. We got hold of a copy of a reel to reel of Knu Bluze so that was really a training ground for us. We worked up those arrangements note for note that we were capable of doing, and that's one of the main places we learnt about playing blues.

We called ourselves The Stone Calling Blues Band We did that band throughout high school, and after high school we started another band which became known as Leroy Airmaster, this started in about 1978. It is the name of a company that used to make jack hammers in Milwaukee. That name continues to work for us. Our drummer Vodie who is part of our musical family died unexpectedly in June 2014, he was 57. I've loved jazz and other types of music and Leroy Airmaster's repertoire is wide ranging. We do r&b, swing, a lot of blues, jazz, and we have all been in other bands over the years. We have some recordings out. At first we put out an EP and then there was interest from a label and the guy who had the label paid for our next record 'Taste And Compare', which we recorded at a state of the art studio in Chicago, and that album did well for us but we were not that available to tour. Stokes was on that album as well and we helped him get into the white blues circuit here in Milwaukee. With Leroy Airmaster we also put out an all original cassette tape called 'Feedbag' and that was well received. After 'Feedbag' we did 'The Up And Under Presents Leroy Airmaster And Friends' that was another cassette and Stokes was on there too. In about 1990 things were tailing off and I got an offer to go work on a show in Nevada and I thought it may be a springboard to the West coast but that didn't happen. When I came back after a couple of years, I re invented myself as a folk blues guy and that's when I started playing guitar a lot more. Leroy Airmaster got back together about five years ago and we recorded a live album called 'Leroy Airmaster Live At Turner Hall'. One of the other things that has been working well for me is there is a music publisher in town and they publish music instruction books called Hal Leonard, who are the largest music book publisher in the world. I had an opportunity to do an instruction book for them in a series called '101 Tips'. I did the harmonica project for them and it has won awards. They also have a series of play along books for different instruments where you can emulate the playing of the world's best harp players etc. So I did about ten books for them such as 'Classic Blues', 'Chicago Blues', a Little Walter book, a Dylan book and a bunch of them, including 'Country Classics' etc. I make royalties on the three instruction books."

In Part Two of this series Mike digs deeper into the Milwaukee blues scene interviewing Silas McClatcher (aka Milwaukee Slim), Charles McCurtis (aka Marvelous Mack) and harmonica player Jim Liban and his son Matt Liban. Many thanks go to Jim Feeney for all his help and support in making these articles happen.