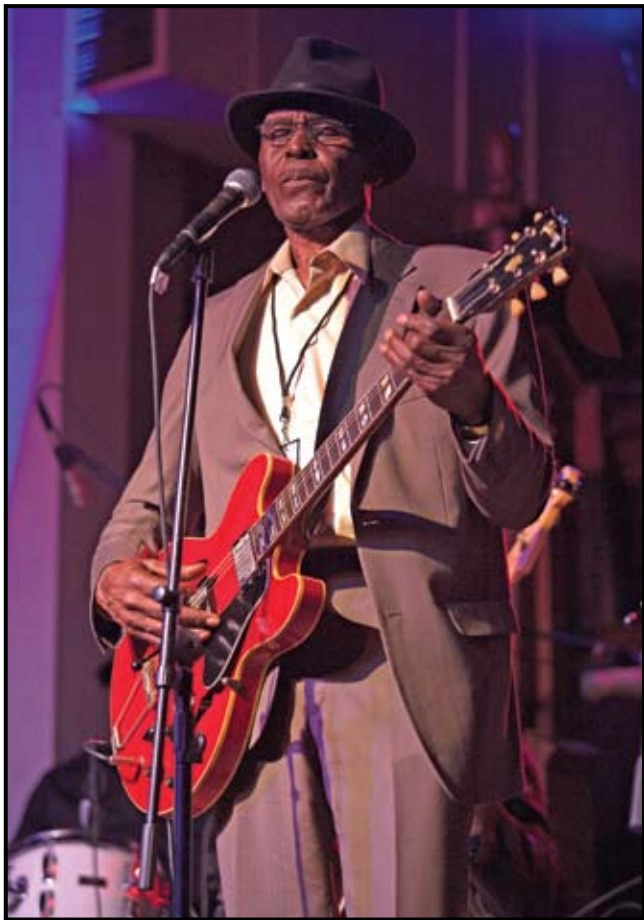


Joe Beard

"Most Of The Fancy Stuff – I Would Pay No Attention To It"

By Scott M. Bock



Joe Beard, *Blues Masters At The Crossroads*, Salina, Kansas, 17th October 2014. Photo: © Gene Tomko.

Bluesman Joe Beard is on the road on a beautiful fall morning and needs a ride from the airport to a gig still more than an hour away by car. He says a quiet hello, shakes hands, and can't wait for a cigarette, so he heads out to a bench by the rental cars with a guitar in one hand and a medium sized black bag in the other. His interview is not scheduled until evening.

After that cigarette, Beard folds his lean, six foot four frame, into the passenger's seat and the trip begins. He speaks just above a whisper but a few minutes into the ride the conversation gets around to the years he spent playing music and swapping stories with Son House. Those stories necessitate a quick (and dangerous) stop on the side of the highway to rescue the tape recorder from the car trunk. His interview has begun and the hour drive ends up feeling like just a few short minutes.

Listening to Beard talk about his life, it is clear that he was destined to play the blues. That music surrounded him and followed him everywhere – from his earliest days in Mississippi to his time in Memphis, a year in Chicago, and then to his adopted home, Rochester, New York, where he was recently inducted into the town's Music Hall of Fame.

As a young boy, Beard led blind guitarist, Nathan Beauregard, around to neighbouring farms. And he grew up with the Murphy brothers – Matt and Floyd. He also hung out with a young B.B. King and went to many of King's early Memphis gigs.

Though Beard found himself in the midst of the post-war blues explosion in his early years, he never thought much about playing music or singing. But, when he finally put his hands on an acoustic guitar at seventeen, it came naturally. Soon, he was an accomplished guitarist and bass player.

Years later, in a storyline that would make a high-priced film seem far too Hollywood – Beard found himself living in Rochester next door to a then, mostly forgotten Son House. Son borrowed Beard's guitar and soon began playing gigs with Beard and performing as a solo act during club breaks.

Beard worked as a janitor, electrician, plumber and apartment building manager. Though he spent nearly a year playing music in Chicago, he

routinely turned down full-time work as a musician. Life on the road never made sense to him if he was going to take care of his family.

Despite his immense talent and a fifty year musical history, Beard still mostly plays locally, even holding down guitar chores at his own Beard Family Picnics. He appears at festivals now and then and, over the years, has played in Europe and India. He has also played many coveted gigs including the 1989 Presidential Inaugural Ball.

Beard also worked with dozens of blues artists as they came through town. In 2016, Buddy Guy asked Beard to join him on stage at the Eastman Theatre in Rochester.

Beard released his first LP for Kingsnake Records and recorded three more albums for Audioquest, working with Duke Robillard and Ronnie Earl. A thirty-minute video about Beard, 'So Much Truth', was released in 2004. His most recent releases have been Direct to Disc, limited edition vinyl for Acoustic Sounds in 2010 and 2011. He also appears on two other Acoustic Sounds releases with Lazy Lester, Big George Brock, Marquise Knox and Sonny Green from 2014.

Lightnin' Hopkins' and John Lee Hooker's music have tugged at Beard since he first heard them on his sister's 78rpm records. His own songs centre stylistically around Lightnin' Hopkins, Hooker and Jimmy Reed, and he routinely plays their songs on stage and on record.

He works his impossibly long fingers across the strings of his red, hollow-bodied Gibson, using his thumb as a pick and grabs the attention, even in a crowded bar.

Beard's quiet demeanour and focus on his family life should not be confused with not caring about his legacy. He knows that the decisions he has made have meant less recognition than his talent deserves. Beard accepts the way his career has worked out, and he is keenly aware, that at eighty, the labels still want him. He just is waiting for the deal that allows him to perform what he wants to play and to hear.

SHARECROPPING IN MISSISSIPPI

"I was born in a place called Ashland, Mississippi, near Holly Springs, in the hill country. It wasn't like the Delta. It was just individuals that we share cropped from – cotton – kneeling and plowing. There was seven boys, four girls. I was the last kid in the family. I'm the youngest of all the kids. I was born 4th February 1938.

There were other families on this particular place where I was born – maybe four families. A professor at the University of Rochester, Daniel Beaumont, author of 'The Life And Times Of Son House', went back to Mississippi in 2000 and he actually videoed the house that I was born in there. There was never another family lived in the house after we lived there – it was like 1949 when we left. It had four rooms – no bathrooms. It had fallen apart.

My mother was very religious – all of my sisters. And, my older brother was a minister. He was a Church of Christ minister. The church has always been first in all of our lives from growing. That belief is still there for me.

My mother died when I was six years old. Her name was Mariah. There wasn't one time that my dad wasn't there for us all. His name was Ishmael.

There was always something wrong with me. I was sickly some kind of a way. I wasn't able to work until I was like sixteen. And, by me being the youngest kid, too, I got away with everything. They expected me not to do much.

I grew up there in the same neighborhood as Floyd Murphy and Matt 'Guitar' Murphy. I'd say within twenty miles was the Murphy family. Matt 'Guitar' Murphy and all them were sharecropping, too. I've known them all my life. In fact, the oldest brother, Dan, married my first cousin and my cousin, married Matt 'Guitar' Murphy's only sister.

Ever since I could remember, Matt was always a guitar player. All four brothers all played guitar. But, Matt is the one that intended nothing but playing the guitar. And, he did just that. I think he just loved the guitar.

When I was like six, seven years old, I led Nathan Beauregard around house parties to play. He was a guitar player. And, he was a relative of people who lived on the same farm we lived on. And, that's how I used to lead him around to these places he played at.

He lived with us for a while. But, he was actually staying with a family a short distance from us. But, he'd come over – it must've been two weeks, a month. He'd sit and play on our porch and he'd take a drink.

At that time I didn't play guitar. When I was young, I didn't even think about playing the guitar. In fact, I'm the only one in my whole family that play anything. I didn't play the guitar until I was like seventeen. Now, I play some things that Nathan Beauregard did.

What really influenced me the most was Lightnin' Hopkins, John Lee Hooker – always loved them. But there was a gentleman named Ernest Scruggs.

Ernest was a guy worked the fields in Ashland, took his liquor on weekends. The man could take a guitar, he could walk to a jukebox and stand there and listen to a song, and then he could go home and play what he heard. There was nothing like him. B.B. King says he was the greatest artist he'd ever seen in his life and the guy never played a professional date. He would never play before an audience. He died and never played a gig anywhere. Ernest Scruggs would come to visit us in Memphis after we moved from Ashland. That's where he met B.B. King."

MOVING TO MEMPHIS

By the time Beard was eight, he and his family members made their way to Memphis. The young Beard liked the city from his first days there and met many musicians and enjoyed the music scene, but the more modern musical styles he heard did not take hold of him.

"I started school in Ashland but the family moved to Orange Mound in south eastern Memphis. I had one brother living in Memphis already. Then my father moved just outside of Memphis. But, my older brother and my older sisters moved into the city of Memphis and that's where I was. I lived with my older sisters.

In Memphis, it wasn't so much Beale Street for me. There was a theatre called Handy Theater – talent show every week. It was on Lamar. B.B. King was there. He lived in Orange Mound. Bobby Bland and I was able to be part of the audience – not so much the music scene – just the audience – just watching. I learned a lot from that – just watching. As far as being a part of the music scene itself, I never was.

I was with all those good guitar players – like B.B. King. I knew B.B. King in 1949. I knew him quite well. He used to come to my house to visit one of my sisters.

Floyd Murphy was staying with us and he could play all that fancy stuff. If some guy played something that John Lee Hooker did or Lightnin' Hopkins did, I paid attention.

B.B. King was down at a club he called the Roosevelt Lake. That was just across the Mississippi/Tennessee line. My sister used to take me there to hear Floyd Murphy. Floyd was like just a kid. B.B. King would invite him up to play guitar. This is how good he was at this age. Floyd was living with us. And, just outside of Memphis where the club was, Floyd would get up and play guitar with B.B. King. B.B. King thought he was the greatest – which he was. He was the greatest guitar player you ever wanted to meet – a kid at that age. He was outstanding.

Most of the fancy stuff, I wouldn't pay no attention to it. I listened so much to Lightnin' Hopkins and John Lee Hooker. I loved that music. That's what I really wanted to do when I picked up the guitar. My first guitar was an acoustic Silvertone.

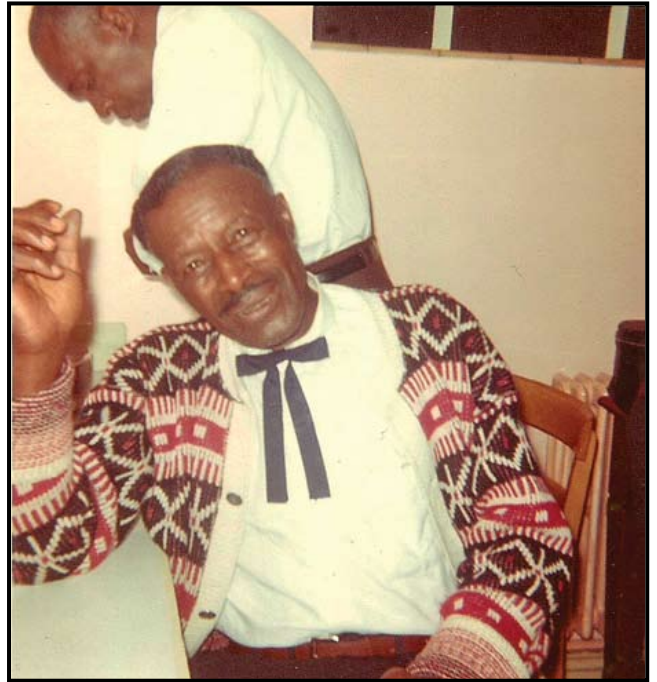
When I was nineteen, I got to talk to Lightnin' Hopkins. I talked to him on the phone a number of times through his cousin in Dallas, Texas. His name was Leon. I met the cousin and he called Lightnin' up at the liquor store and I started talking to him. The last time I talked to him, I told him, I says, "There's nothing in the world I'd like better than to set down and have a conversation with you".

Lightnin' says to me: "How old is you"? I turned around and says: "I'm nineteen". He says: "What the hell you want to be with me for"? I said "I love you. I love what you do". He said: "I'll tell you what you do. Next Tuesday, you come to the liquor store on Grand Avenue. I'll be sitting right there in front at 10 o'clock in the morning".

So, I drove from Dallas to Houston. I get to the liquor store and the guy says: "He left ten minutes ago – going to California". That's as close as I've been to meeting Lightnin'.



Joe Beard, Blues Masters At The Crossroads, Salina, Kansas, 21st October 2014. Photo: © Gene Tomko



Son House, AFBF Tour 1967. Unknown photographer, from the B&R Archives.

ROCHESTER AND SON HOUSE

The move north came for Beard in 1957 when he was not yet twenty. Rochester, New York offered job opportunities and a steady music scene. In the most unlikely coincidence, it also offered the opportunity to befriend a long-lost musical legend – Son House.

"My brothers, they was working on the stone outside of houses. They was working for this company. And, they moved to Rochester and brought me along with them.

I was working as an electrician and a building manager for a while. I started out with Bell and Howell, which was part of Eastman Kodak Consolidated Vacuum. This is where I was working as a janitor. I also did plumbing and heating.

When I first got to Rochester, I started playing the bass with John Ellison of the Soul Brothers Six. John Ellison wanted me to be the bass player for him which he played on weekends. But, he wanted to go further, but I wasn't ready for that. I got kids. We formed a band. Ellison played guitar and sang and I played bass. At that time, John, he never played a lick of blues. He was doing James Brown. We went to Chicago in 1962. I had a brother living in Chicago. So, we went there and we got into a little club there – we played once a week there – the three of us doing all this stuff – James Brown. But peoples come in and they didn't pay much attention to that.

So, Ellison and I decided that we was going to change things around. I was going to play the guitar and sing the blues and get away from this other stuff to see what the reaction would be. So, I went to this club – 33rd and West Madison – and there was a band playing that I knew. I knew the bass player. He asked me whether I wanted to play the guitar and do some of the John Lee Hooker stuff. So, I did. I got on stage. I played 'Sally Mae Blues' and another thing by John Lee Hooker.

And, this guy was standing up with his arm in a sling – this guy with this cast on his arm and he said: "You know John Lee Hooker?" I said: "I love John Lee Hooker". He said: "Would you believe, I'm John Lee Hooker"? He was standing right in front of me watching me play his music. He told me he had his arm broken. I must have been nineteen. He'd always come to my house when he was in the area – around Rochester. I knew John Lee Hooker for a long time – real well.

At that time, I had all the opportunity in the world to be in Chicago. I had all opportunity to do that. I chose not to. In Rochester there was a band called Friends Of The Blues. So, I joined up with them. We start to play around Rochester. And guys like Luther Allison, Buddy Guy, Junior Wells they was always coming into town.

There was a club called Red Creek. The owner brought all the blues artists. He brought B.B. King and Otis Rush and the University of Rochester used to bring all those people – like Koko Taylor and Howlin' Wolf.

Me and this band – we was together for three or four years. They were white guys playing blues. I was the guitar player and I sang some songs in the band. Bob West was the main guitar player. He was good. And, the harmonica player and he had spent some time in Chicago with Junior Wells."

NB: Bob West later owned Arcola Records and released a number of CDs of his recordings of Son House, Sunnyland Slim, Babe Stovall, Henry Townsend and others. He contributed to B&R including an unpublished 1968 interview with Son House. Bob passed away aged 74 in 2016.



Joe Beard, Blues Masters At The Crossroads, Salina, Kansas, 21st October 2014. Photo: © Kurt Swanson.



Joe Beard (left) with Lazy Lester, Blues Masters At The Crossroads, Salina, Kansas, 21st October 2014. Photo: © Gene Tomko.

I was superintendent of a thirty unit apartment building. Son House lived next door – but different buildings. Son was one of the first peoples that really came to me and started talking. Son and I lived near each other for ten years. I lived at 64. He lived at 67.

Son would be on his porch. He didn't have a guitar then. When I first met Son, he wasn't doing nothing at all in Rochester. He wasn't playing any place. He was telling me when he first came there, he was a minister and he worked for the railroad, in Rochester. I guess he retired from the railroad job and then he just continued to live there.

I told him I played guitar. He was thrilled to death. He'd take my guitar and keep it for weeks. And, we'd sit on the steps. He'd come into my house. I had a Robertson reel-to-reel recorder. I used to love to record myself. I had no idea who Son House was. But, he used to tell me all these things and all the things that he had done. Robert Johnson is the only person that I really knew about.

At that time Son would come out with us. The band would take a break and I used to do lots of John Lee Hooker and Lightnin' Hopkins – just me and my guitar. And, then Son would get up and do his thing.

At least once a week, Son would go with me to a gig. The band would get out of the way. He would do his thing by himself. He may do twice a night.

What really amazed me about Son was when he would tell me things – about him becoming a preacher. Son would always tell me the story about the life that he lived. He explained how Robert Johnson died. The more than likely truth about this whole thing would be he was poisoned in liquor. That's what Son would always say.

This was 1964, 1965, somewhere around there. See Son, he asked me, did I drink. Which I didn't. And so, I would take him to get him a bottle of wine, or something. When I first did this for Son I noticed he'd get drunk, and it didn't take very much for him to get drunk.

Sometimes, his wife wouldn't really want him to go. I understood that. I taken him home and that's when his wife told me his condition with liquor. And then she never stopped him from being with me, but she

would ask me not to do this and Son would shy away from me.

I've got tape of us – that was University of Rochester, there was a radio station there. They taped us. The tapes could be okay. I've never really taken them for anybody to do something with them. Son always played acoustic. And, I had to choose what fits with what Son House was doing".

FIRST RECORDINGS

Beard eventually formed his own band, the Blues Union. He also began to travel more frequently. Decades after his start in music, he was in his fifties when he first began to record.

"I got some guys together and formed my own band. Me and my band would tour. We was the band for Buddy Guy and Junior Wells. They travelled with us but I didn't go overseas with them.

Junior was the nicest guy in the world. The nicest thing about him is he'd go home – he lived with his mother. His mother was, to him, she was everything. As much as he drank, he would never get drunk in the house.

We did that a couple of years as Joe Beard and the Blues Union. Buddy and Junior would spend a lot of time in Rochester and Boston. And, every time they would come to the area they would use my band to back them up – Luther Allison too, and Duke Robillard and Ronnie Earl – if they ever came to town, I shared in that gig. If they played Saturday night, instead of going back to Boston where they come from, they stayed over to come to the club where I was. They used to come to a club called the House of Blues, in Rochester. They would stay over to jam with me. That's how I got signed to Audioquest. Duke Robillard introduced us.

My first recording was 'No More Cherry Rose', with Kingsnake Records, in Florida in 1991. There was a club in Rochester called E.K.'s Lounge. Every artist that came to the club, I was the opening act. Kingsnake Records happened because of Bobby Bland. His bass player – he went back and told Bob Greenlee the owner of Kingsnake about this guy in Rochester that he thought was great. So, Greenlee called me up and so I went down to Florida and in one day we had it done. Four, six hours everything was done. We never went back to it again. We just did it – told them what I wanted to hear and that was it.

When I was with Audioquest, Duke Robillard, Ronnie Earl and all them, we never spent just two days in the studio.

I've done a number of tours of Europe with Ronnie Earl and alone a couple of times – Belgium, Switzerland, Portugal. And, then I did a huge tour for like five weeks with Bob Stroger, Lafayette Leake, Odie Payne, Buster Benton and Johnny Littlejohn. I believe that was called 'The First Time In Paris'. We did an album there for Black and Blue. I'm not singing but I'm playing guitar.

I never know exactly what I'm going to do when I hit the stage. I don't write it all down. I've never taken a piece of paper with me of what I'm going to do written down. Like Lightnin' Hopkins says, "The things that I sing about is the life that I've lived". The songs that I write and sing means some more than others. I do Lightnin' Hopkins and lots of Jimmy Reed's stuff. Not that I would do it exactly as Jimmy Reed did it. See, Jimmy Reed did great things. You can't beat Jimmy Reed. You can't beat Lightnin' Hopkins. There will never be another Lightnin' Hopkins."

RELEASES

No More Cherry Rose Kingsnake Records	1991
Blues Union (with Ronnie Earl and the Broadcasters) Audioquest	1996
For Real (with Duke Robillard and Friends) Audioquest	1998
Dealin' (with Duke Robillard and Friends) Audioquest	2000
<i>(The Audioquest discs were also issued by Sledgehammer Blues)</i>	
So Much Truth (30 minute DVD)	2004
Joe Beard Volume 1 APO Direct to Disc (vinyl)	2010
Joe Beard Volume 2 APO Direct to Disc (vinyl)	2011
Joe Beard, Lazy Lester, Big George Brock and Marquise Knox 7th Annual Blues Masters At The Crossroads Festival Acoustic Sounds (vinyl & download)	2014
Joe Beard, Lazy Lester, Sonny Green 7th Annual Blues Masters At The Crossroads Festival Acoustic Sounds (vinyl & download)	2014