

Heavy Breathing

Charlie Musselwhite Pushes the Limits

BY KATHLEEN FAIRWEATHER

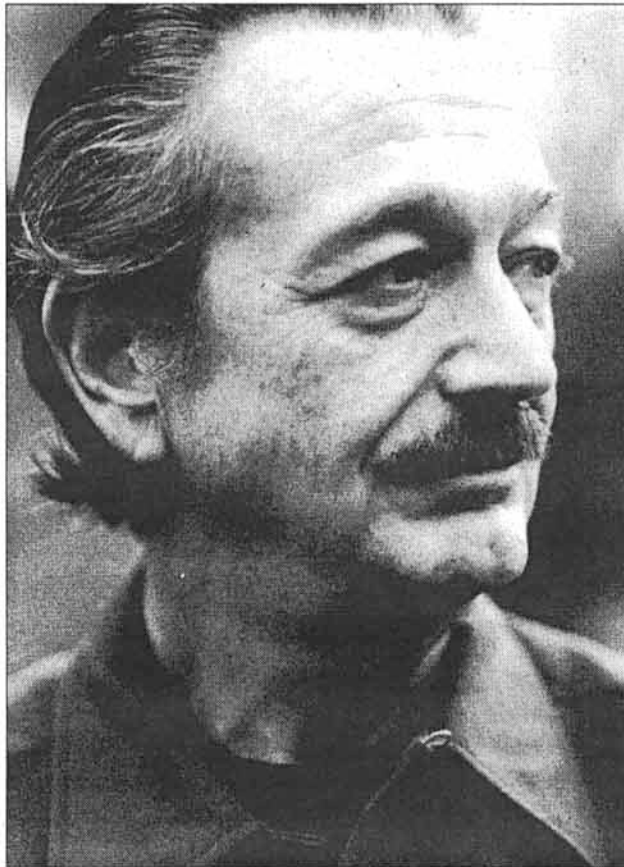
Call a man a "blow hard" and most likely he would take offense. To Charlie Musselwhite, harmonica player extraordinaire, that word is both a compliment and a way of life. Musselwhite, who has established himself as one of the living legends in the blues world will be demonstrating his prowess as part of the *Sings Like Hell* series tonight, Thursday, June 4, at 8 p.m. in the Lobero Theatre.

In more than 40 years of performing, Musselwhite has appeared with the likes of John Lee Hooker, Bonnie Raitt, INXS, and Jimmy Witherspoon. As befits a bluesman, Musselwhite incubated his talents in Memphis—that same southern town richly steeped in music culture and the home of some of the best bluesmen such as Johnny Burnette, Slim Rhodes, and, of course, Elvis. A move at 18 to Chicago led him to jam sessions with Muddy Waters, Sonny Boy Williamson, Howlin' Wolf, and both Little and Big Walters, whom Musselwhite cites as among his major influences.

Musselwhite is now backed by a group of veteran musicians consisting of bass player Felton Cruz, David Rokeach on drums, guitar player John Wedemeyer, and Steve F'Dor on the piano. Members of this band named appropriately enough, the Charlie Musselwhite Band, have backed luminaries such as Ray Charles, Miles Davis, and Aretha Franklin, to name a few.

It was difficult to pin Musselwhite down on a list of songs for this show. Musselwhite described this concert as a mixture of "old stuff, new stuff, and stuff that nobody's heard before." He explained his spontaneous approach, "I have a set list, but any moment I may break into something else. I figure the main focus is to have fun. If I'm having fun, and the band is too, most likely the audience will enjoy themselves. We try to have fun, and I like to see people enjoy themselves. We take chances with the music, to keep the show interesting and spontaneous, but I keep a set list just out of anxiety."

Musselwhite's musical approach is simple and somewhat mystical. "Tunes always change with every performance. Every tune has a form. I can record a tune, and as the years go by, the same tune grows into something else. I call it 'following the will of the music.' You start out playing something, and it seems like the music shows you where to take it." Musselwhite paused, and added with a chuckle, "That is, if it's a good tune. If a



Musselwhite has been playing harmonica for more than 40 years.

tune just lays there and never comes to life, you get rid of it. It's dead. It's fun to experiment."

Musselwhite will be playing and experimenting on both the chromatic and diatonic harmonica for this performance. He compared the difference between the two as something "like the difference between an organ and piano—they're kind of alike, but they really are two different things." He himself has no preference for one or the other, but some tunes sound better to him on one as opposed to the other—however, don't be surprised if he plays both kinds of harmonicas on one tune.

Musselwhite himself is developing a new kind of harmonica that will be radically different from anything currently on the market. He was hesitant to describe the concept as it is still in the patent stages. "It's not like anything ever made before—except it's still a harmonica. More people now than ever before are playing the harmonica, and they are better players. People are pushing the limits. For example, Howard Levy plays the diatonic harp chromatically using overblows and overdraws."

Citing his most recent foray into Cuban music as an adventure in music experimentation, Musselwhite's voice softened as he described this experience and the

Cuban music as "really from the heart." Musselwhite said he has always loved Cuban music—especially the music of Quartetto Patria, a band from Santiago de Cuba that blends the exotic sounds of the congas, maracas, and bongos, with traditional instruments, and, of course, harmonicas. "Most folks don't know that the harmonica was once really big in Cuba," Musselwhite explained. "Unfortunately there were no recordings made that I know of."

Musselwhite had hoped to see the Quartetto Patria in Cuba, but both tourist visas and his trip were canceled by that nation because of the Pope's visit. Fortunately, Musselwhite was able to hook up with them later in Norway at the Bergen Blues and Roots Festival. While performing in Norway, Musselwhite was able to set up a recording session with the Quartetto Patria. This will be featured on an upcoming CD to be released in early 1999. Significantly, Musselwhite's experience as an American bluesman playing with a Cuban group in Europe underscores the fact that the harmonica is played and loved worldwide—and so is Charlie Musselwhite.

You can learn more about Charlie Musselwhite on his website at www/charlie-musselwhite.com.

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