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## THIS MONTH'S FEATURE

### Blues Unlimited - The Radio Show

with your host, Sleepy Boy Hawkins

Blues Unlimited is a two-hour program that explores the wonderful world of the blues, its history, heritage, and rich cultural traditions. Each week, listeners get to connect to an authentic and vibrant part of American musical history, as we examine some unique topic or aspect of the blues universe.

Topics include profiles of important independent record labels; tributes to influential or unheralded musicians; homages to ground-breaking festivals, like Ann Arbor and Newport; revisits to the glory days of the 1960s Blues Revival; legendary field recordings from Chris Strachwitz, George Mitchell, Alan Lomax, and David Evans; ongoing series, such as "Desert Island Classics," "The Legends of Bluesville," and the "Vintage Travelogue Series;" plus, specials galore — Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Halloween, not to mention the widely-anticipated annual gospel show.

#### About the Creator:

Producer, host, and creator Steve Franz (a.k.a. Sleepy Boy Hawkins) first got involved in broadcasting when he was in graduate school at Memphis State University, where he studied Ethnomusicology under renowned scholar, Dr. David Evans (*The NPR Curious Listener's Guide to*

*the Blues*).



Ever since the late 1980s, when he hosted a blues show on a local community station, Franz has continued to remain active in radio, volunteering his time at community stations, serving as a Program Director, and also as a local host of an NPR affiliate station in his current home base of Tucson, Arizona. After earning his master's degree in 1994, he authored the critically acclaimed book, *The Amazing Secret History of Elmore James*. It was translated into Japanese in 2006, and recently named as one of the 100 books every blues fan should own.

## Q & A

SHOWCase spoke with Blues Unlimited creator Steve Franz.

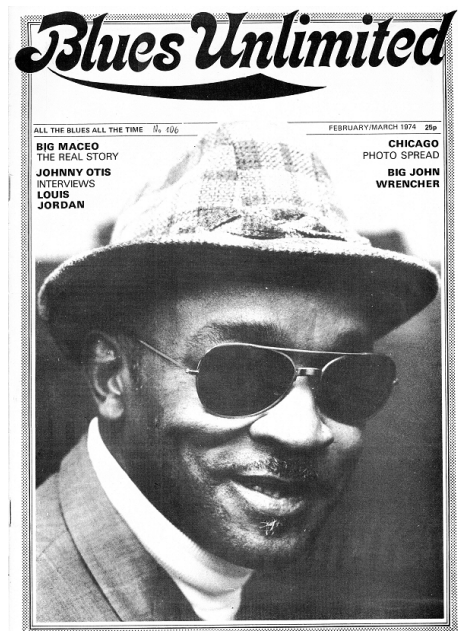
### How did this show come about? What was the impetus for creating it?

The idea of doing a blues show, for me, first came about more than 30 years ago, when I was a freshman and became a regular listener to Peter Aschoff's "Only Blues." The show originated out of KUNI in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and was carried on an NPR affiliate station nearly 60 miles away from my college. While all my friends were out having fun on Saturday nights, I was glued to the radio, learning about Muddy Waters, Magic Sam, Lightnin' Hopkins, and Little Walter. I loved it. I remember mentioning it to a friend of mine — what it might take to do a show like that on NPR — and we both laughed and he said, "Oh, you'd probably need a master's degree at least."

The name of the show, Blues Unlimited, pays homage to a pioneering periodical of the same name, founded in England in 1963 by two enthusiasts, Mike Leadbitter and Simon Napier. Their magazine was truly ground-breaking in every way, and had it not been for these two gentlemen, a lot of what we know today might never have seen the light of day.

Sadly, they both passed on long before their time. But if I had to sum it up, their editorial policy was that no blues artist is unimportant. They were tireless champions of the underdog, and to them, musicians like Baby Boy Warren and Boyd Gilmore were just as important as people like B.B. King, John Lee Hooker, and Muddy Waters. For me, being able to focus the radio show in a direction that pays homage to that editorial directive has become my own small way of saying "thanks" for their enormous contributions to the field.

It's also one of the reasons I decided to use a pseudonym, "Sleepy Boy Hawkins," when I launched the show. I wanted it to be about the men and women who made that music and lived that life — and not about the host.



## **When was it launched?**

The kernel that bore the idea for the show had already been planted in my mind by 2005, when I had the chance to ask Mike Rowe and Bill Greensmith — the editors who took over Blues Unlimited magazine after Mike Leadbitter's untimely death in 1974 — for their blessings. True to form, they told me that the blessing wasn't really theirs to give, but they agreed to give it anyway (laughs).

It took another few years before the radio show was officially launched, in early 2009. It has been nationally and internationally distributed since the fall of 2010.

## **Who is your primary target listener? Who is going to appreciate the show the most?**

Typically, blues has been thought of as "adult oriented" music with adult themes running through it, but truth be told, I think it has a broad appeal to a very wide audience.

While it's true that I'm always trying to sneak a miniature history lesson into each episode, it's also true that people wouldn't tune in if the show weren't entertaining. That's the primary target for each and every show; it can certainly be educational, but it *has* to be entertaining. And while I'm inclined to throw in a few rare cuts from time to time to please the die-hard fanatics and collectors, I think the show also has a fundamental appeal to newcomers, who may not necessarily know about Lightnin' Hopkins, Furry Lewis or Son House. I've had comments from new listeners saying, "I had no idea what I was missing out on," and old-time blues fans — some of them for more than 40 years — who told me they were blown away when I played something they'd never heard before.

So really, I think the show has a widespread appeal to many listeners across the spectrum. Anyone who appreciates 20th century American "roots" music (and that includes rock 'n' roll, by the way!) will definitely enjoy the show.

## **Why should stations be interested in running your program?**

Well, I might be biased, but I think just about every NPR station ought to have a blues show (laughs). When I was kid in high school, the general landscape of NPR was much more diverse. And when I was in college, the NPR station that carried Peter Aschoff's "Only Blues" also ran folk music programs all Saturday night leading up to it. That became a huge part of my musical education, and I honestly can't tell you how grateful I am for all of that.

When I look around at the schedules of NPR stations in some of the smaller markets these days, I see that diversity in their programming is very much a part of the picture. Either it never left in the first place, or it's finally coming back around again. And — speaking as a former Program Director here — I hope to see that trend continue with NPR stations in the larger markets too. For those cities who are lucky enough to have a full-time NPR jazz station, running a blues show on Saturday or Sunday night is not only a perfect fit — it's also a time-honored tradition.

The bottom line for me, however, is this. I think Blues Unlimited gives the listener a chance to connect to a real and authentic part of American musical history, each and every week. I think that's something people crave nowadays more than ever — authenticity. For me, the power of the blues is that it's not only genuine, but also alive and vibrant, that it has somehow managed to transcend generations of time and vast cultural boundaries. Music that *still* has the ability to speak to our lives, 30, 50 or even 80 years after the fact. I think it's also one of the reasons why the show has such an established and fiercely loyal cult following. As I'm often fond of saying, "Nothing is ever watered down on Blues Unlimited. It's the real deal." And I think the listeners not only appreciate that, they've come to expect it as a hallmark of the show.

### **Can you give an overview on one particular show that you thought was especially good?**

There have been shows that I worked really hard on that received almost no comments, and there have also been episodes that, for one reason or another, were loosely thrown together — and sometimes those are the ones that receive the most comments! One episode that garnered a lot of praise was a show devoted to Pete Lewis, who played guitar with the legendary Johnny Otis from the late 1940s to the mid '50s. I spent more than a year toying with the musical selections and the running order before I was finally satisfied enough to start production on it.



**George Barnes**

Another in particular that really stands out is an episode I did on a guitar player named George Barnes. I was vaguely familiar with the name, which mostly comes up on certain blues records made in the mid to late 1930s, until one of my colleagues pointed out that George Barnes was a white kid from the suburbs of Chicago who became one of the first people at the age of 16 to play an electric guitar on a blues record! It's really an incredible story, so I decided to do a whole program centered around George Barnes, giving a brief mention to some of the other early adopters of the electric guitar as well. A few weeks after the episode was published, I received a message from the daughter of George Barnes. She thanked me, and told me that she and her 90 year old mother had just listened to the show, and had really enjoyed it. It was one of those moments I don't think I'll ever forget.

### **What are some topics or issues you plan to address in future episodes?**

The more episodes that get done — it's been about 180 now, give or take — the more the ideas keep flowing. All the time, I find myself saying things like, "Well, I haven't done a show on this yet, or a show on that record label yet, or I really need to profile this artist...." For the immediate future, I really want to revisit a four-part series I did on the legendary Newport Folk Festivals of the 1960s. It was one that came out during the first season that the show was being nationally distributed, and since I tend to be my own worst critic, one that I really want to re-do, completely, from top to bottom.

The Bay Area is another city I want to focus on, which had a richly satisfying blues scene in the 1950s. I also want to pay tribute to those classic 1920s recordings made in Memphis by Furry Lewis, Frank Stokes, Gus Cannon, and all those great jug bands. Plus, I might be doing some interviews in the near future — something that's never been done before on the show. Hopefully, we'll get to some of these ideas sometime later this year, but for all of our fans out there in radioland — not to worry. We've got enough ideas to take care of the foreseeable future, for sure.

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