

AN INTERVIEW WITH GREG BURGESS

By Bonnie Tallman



BT: Charlie and I first remember you playing with the Impromptu Blues Band, with various configurations; often with Jamie Earnest drums, Joey De Christopher bass, George Laird harp, JP Peterson guitar, Doug McMinn on sax , with vocals shared by Doug, JP, Beverley Conrad and you. What is your recollection of how that first local (to my knowledge) blues band came about?

GB: The Impromptu Blues Band was the result of an open mike at Franco's that never happened. This was back in the late 80's. The guy who was supposed to host the open mike never showed up. We were all there, looking around, shaking our heads, wondering where the mikes, the PA, and the host were. Someone said he had fled the state to avoid being busted for drugs. (I knew the guy from the Scarlet D in Mifflinburg; he had lived there in a room for years and had sometimes crept down to jam with me whenever I played there.) So we were standing around, staring at the empty stage. Bev and I thought there was nothing to do but turn around and drive the 35 miles back home. But Doug, who lived nearby, said he could go back to his house and pick up a PA and a small keyboard; Jamie must have had drums in his car. When Doug got back we set everything up and the seven of us crowded up together on the small stage. After a few songs we realized we had gotten something together, and I announced over the PA that we were the Impromptu Blues Band.

After that evening, Franco's hired us to play regularly, with always a great crowd in attendance. And the Impromptu Blues Band was in the line-up at the first Billtown Blues Festival, when that was held down by the river. I understand that the Impromptu Blues Band contributed to the inspiration for the formation of the Billtown Blues Association.

BT: Later on I saw you play at Mike and Dot's in Mifflinburg. I commented on your playing, enjoying your style, and you said you weren't sure you were "worthy to play the blues". Those words have stuck with me all these years. What did you mean?

GB: Well, that was a while ago, and I'm not sure I remember what I meant. But that would've been not long after I had played as a sideman with Joe Beard up in Rochester, NY, for a number of years. Joe was born in Mississippi and lived in Chicago for a while playing bass before he moved to Rochester and played guitar and sang as frontman for his own band. Although you can detect influences like Lightning Hopkins and John Lee Hooker in his guitar playing and high inflections in his voice like many earlier singers, he has a distinctive, very original style. You hear a few notes, a few words, and you say, "Oh, that's Joe Beard." It's in comparing myself to someone like Joe where I think my remark came from.

BT: It is obvious to those who follow you, you are proficient in several styles from ragtime, jazz, blues, country blues....is there a common thread that draws you to these genres.

GB: The blues informs all types of popular music. Jazz is just blues and something else. That something else is quite a lot. But still, without the blues, popular music in America would sound quite different.

BT: When you think of the masters of traditional blues piano Otis Spann, Roosevelt Sykes, Boogie Woogie Red, Leroy Carr, Jimmy Yancey, Pinetop Perkins,is there one you are drawn to more than the others; one who has been the strongest influence? And if so, why?

GB: I've listened to a lot of blues over the years and my playing is drawn from many sources. I've picked up things from many different styles, hokum and vaudeville blues, Chicago blues, Kansas City swing, New Orleans R & B, West Coast blues. But when I first started learning the blues....(see below)

BT: When did you start playing piano? When did you start playing blues piano?

GB:as a teenager in the early 70's, I managed to get a hold of some solo albums by Spann, Sykes, Memphis Slim, Champion Jack Dupree, Little Brother Montgomery. I could hear the piano parts there better than on a band album, so I remember studying these recordings really hard. Also did the same with some anthologies of the boogie-woogie players that would include performers like Pete Johnson, Meade Lux Lewis, Pinetop Smith. Plus, from the beginning I played a lot with guitarists, like Art Renkel and Augie Rodola, who derived their style from country blues.

BT: You worked for a while touring with the great Joe Beard. Any special memories with that experience?

GB: Certainly an obvious highlight was being hired as a pick-up band for Big Joe Turner. This was just a year or two before he died, and he performed in a wheelchair, voice as great as ever though. I remember we had no idea what song he was going to do, except he counted out the tune, and told us everything was in the key of C. Another highlight was playing with Buddy Guy and Junior Wells. Joe knew them from Chicago. One weekend when they were in town for a concert, they decided to check out Joe, and we played the whole night with them. But every weekend was a highlight -- especially for someone like me who grew up in a small town in rural Pennsylvania -- playing at the city clubs, places like the Palm Gardens, Zett's Bar and Grill, BK's Lounge, Ruth and Irv's Astrological Fish and Steak House, where the men often dressed in their best suits and the women wore their hottest red dresses.

The latter place was especially interesting, a downtown place, informally called a salt and pepper club, halfway between the Eastman School of Music Theatre and Buddy's Casina. For a while it was a hot spot for blues, with every blues musician in the city coming by to sit in, including two guys I was told worked North Street as pimps. They would sing endless choruses of "The Thrill is Gone."

Irv, the owner, was a nice man, a former teacher who liked to argue politics with his customers. But seems to me he was a penny pincher when it came to business. Maybe when it first opened up you could get fish and steak at his place, but when I started there all you could get were chicken wings. They were great wings, made by a guy who once cooked for Dizzy Gillespie, but still that's all you could get. Then to save on costs, Irv fired the cook and just offered hamburgers and hot dogs. Later he cut out the hamburgers and just offered hot dogs, on a rotisserie. Eventually he even cut out the hot dogs. If you went to Irv's fish and steak house, all you could get to eat was bar popcorn, if that.

When the newspaper did a retrospective on the racial turbulence in the city in the 60's, Irv posed for a photo showing where he had thrown a brick through an appliance store window. A lot of people thought it was foolish to pose for the photo and ribbed Irv about it.

Irv's wife, Ruth, worked for the city. The city hired Taj Mahal for a concert, and in the weeks before Irv started telling all his customers that Taj was going to perform with Joe Beard afterwards. I knew someone else who worked for the city, and he said no such arrangements had been made. In fact, on the day of the concert, he said to Taj, "I hear you're going to sit in with Joe Beard at Ruth and Irv's," and Taj had replied, "What are you talking about?" We usually had a good crowd, but that night Ruth and Irv's was packed to the gills, everyone expecting the popular blues musician to appear. John Mooney (a well-known blues guitarist from Rochester) even came by to sit in. The first set went by -- no Taj Mahal. The second set -- still no Taj Mahal. I was sitting behind the piano thinking Irv's much-touted big event was not going to happen. Then in the middle of the last set, a tall man in a white suit walked in, strolled to the bar for a drink, then moseyed up to the stage and, with a borrowed guitar, played one tune with us, "Stormy Monday Blues. Afterwards I talked to the guy who worked for the city. He said that if he hadn't asked him about Ruth and Irv's earlier, Taj Mahal would never have shown up.

When I played with Joe, he hadn't yet made any recordings, though he was in his 40's. It wasn't until after I moved back to Pennsylvania that he made his first album. Also, we never played much outside the city. Joe had a

family, worked as an electrician, and I think he just liked playing for the people he knew. (Though he was an electrician, I remember the wires on his Fender amp flaming up a couple times on stage). We made one trip to Stowe, Vermont, ski resort, several times ventured to Niagara Falls, NY. Then there was one weekend we played in Detroit, all five band members piled into Joe's station wagon, with the equipment stacked up in back. On the way there I mentioned to Joe that maybe we could look up Son House. Before he moved to Detroit, House had lived in Rochester, NY, for a long time, and Joe knew him well. He and John Mooney (this must have been during House's "rediscovery" years) used to get together with House to play. This always upset House's wife, because House would always end up getting roaring drunk when he played. One time she found him passed out in a closet. But we never looked up Son House. It was a long trip to Detroit. We couldn't go through Canada because at the border the guards pulled us over and demanded that we post a bond for our equipment. So we had to drive the long way around Lake Erie. And all the way there and back, the gas tank on Joe's station wagon was leaking.

BT: Even though you are proficient in many styles of piano and genres of music, you are always active in the local blues scene. What specifically pulls you to stick with the blues as part of your repertoire.

GB: In 1979, I lived for a short time in the East Village in New York City. At the time the big popular music was punk and new wave. I didn't play out when I was there, but one day I decided to audition for a new wave band. The leader said he would have hired me, but I played too syncopated, too bluesy. I guess I just can't help it.

BT: You are now in your 15th(?) year of leading the Sunday Morning Jazz workshop at the Bullfrog – an incredible accomplishment. What do you attribute the survival of that iconic happening for so long? What makes it so special?

GB: It's 17 years. Well, it helps that the Bullfrog Brewery is just a great establishment, which has presented good live music since its inception. The workshop, or jazz brunch, is basically a jam session open to musicians, with the trio of Burgess, Mitchell, & Stetz as the core group. We focus on improvisation on jazz, blues, and other popular types of standards, even do original compositions. With a varied mix of musicians, it's a time of discovery. I'd just like to thank the Bullfrog and all the musicians who have come by over the years for making it happen.