

# Sugar Blue:

*The Harmonica Wizard*

by MARGIE GOLDSMITH

Grammy Award-winning harmonica virtuoso Sugar Blue was born James Whiting and raised in Harlem, New York, where his mother was a singer and dancer at the Apollo Theatre. He spent his childhood among the musicians and show people and decided that he wanted to be a performer. He would win the Grammy Award in 1985 for his work on the Atlantic album, "Blues Explosion", recorded live at the Montreux Jazz Festival.



**B**lue, as he is known, recorded on Willie Dixon's Grammy-winning *Hidden Charms* album in 1989.

He often performed live with the Rolling Stones and can be heard on *Some Girls*, *Emotional Rescue* and *Tattoo You*. He has performed on festival stages with Muddy Waters, B.B. King, Art Blakey and Lionel Hampton, sat in with Fats Domino, Ray Charles, and Jerry Lee Lewis for the Cinemax special, *Fats Domino and Friends*, and has appeared on screen and in the musical score of Alan Parker's acclaimed 1987 thriller *Angel Heart*, starring Robert De Niro.

Blue has played and recorded with musicians ranging from Willie Dixon and Stan Getz to Frank Zappa, Johnny Shines and Bob Dylan, but is perhaps best known for his signature riff and solo on the Rolling Stones' hit "Miss You" from their *Some Girls* album. Blue performs his own version of the song on his 1993 Alligator debut *Blue Blazes*, and with his second release, *In Your Eyes*, emerges as a profound songwriter as well as a harmonica wizard.

Appearing at prestigious festivals throughout America, Europe and Africa, in 2008 following the release of *Code Blue*, he received two nominations as Best Instrumentalist - Harmonica at the Blues Awards and as Outstanding Performer at the Junior Wells Harp Awards. He is featured in the film *The Perfect Age of Rock 'n' Roll* along with Pinetop Perkins, Willie 'Big Eyes' Smith and Hubert Sumlin. He was in the tribute video *We Are One* that played before the all-star Inaugural Concert at the Lincoln Memorial at the presidential inauguration on Jan 20, 2009.

It has been said that Sugar Blue "bends, shakes, spills flurries of notes with simultaneous precision and abandon, combines dazzling technique with smoldering expressiveness, gives off enough energy to light up several city square blocks, and sings too!"

We caught up with him in Chicago where he lives.



*Sugar Blue with Eric Clapton and Buddy Guy*

**Your mother was a singer and dancer at the Apollo, and you spent your childhood among musicians including Billie Holiday?**

Yes, but I met Billie when I was maybe three months old. And the fact that I remember that has nothing to do with my memory. It's got to do with my mom telling me about it. When I grew up and I realized who Billie Holiday was, you could've knocked me over with a feather.

**You decided you wanted to be a performer early in life?**

By the time I was about four or five years old, I knew I had to play some kind of an instrument, and I knew I had to be a musician. That's one of my earliest memories.

**What made you decide you wanted to be a musician?**

I fell in love with a song on my mother's record player called "PC Blues" by Billie Holiday's favorite classical saxophonist, Lester Young. I asked my mother to play it over and over and over and when she didn't, I learned to do it myself. And she said, 'Boy, if you scratch my record, I'll kill you.' And that was in the days of the diamond stylus and high fidelity. It predated stereo.

**How did you end up with your first harmonica?**

I got a saxophone from my sixth-grade teacher, Mr. Nagle. He was also the band director. He gave me a saxophone and I took it home and I'd play that thing from the time I got out of school till the time I went to bed. And that was my mother's breaking point. She disallowed saxophone in the house. So she took it from me, and my aunt, seeing how miserable I was, bought me a harmonica.

**Was it one of those little toy Hohners?**

Hohner doesn't make toys. Hohner builds instruments.

**That's true. Are you a Hohner endorsee?**

But of course. It's not a harp if it's not a Hohner.

**So how old were you?**

I was about 12 or 13 years old.

**And were you self-taught?**

Yes.

**So you played along with Dylan and Stevie Wonder when you heard the radio?**

Oh yeah. Dylan and Stevie Wonder and all of the cowboy movies. I loved cowboy movies because they all had harmonica in them.

**And then you also became influenced by Dexter Gordon and Lester Young?**

I'd been listening to Lester since I was about five or six because my mother was always playing the Billie Holiday-Lester Young duo things. She was a big fan of Billie as well as a friend. I didn't get into Dexter until later in life and actually even got to meet and play with Dexter.

**What was that like?**

It's like when the littlest angel meets God. It was really fantastic because I had been listening to him since I was in high school, and I am not a jazz harmonica player by any means. I played blues and R&B and rock n' roll but Dexter played a helluva blues.

**Would you say that listening to Dylan and Stevie and Dexter and Lester helped you create your style? You've been described as having an ultra-modern blues style.**

Wow. That makes me feel like one of the Jetsons.

**How would you describe your style?**

It's just me. It's what I do. It's the way I play. I mean I listened to a lot of big bands and I listened to all of the great blues harmonica players: Little Walter, Sonny Boy Williamson, Big Walter, James Cotton, Junior Wells, Billy Boy Arnold. I listened to everything I could get. When I finally got into blues and blues harmonica, I listened to all of those guys and tried to style myself on Sonny Boy and Little Walter. One day I was playing with a guy named Larry

Johnson, a great guitar player, and he was playing like bebop style blues. That night I thought I had come close to playing like Little Walter as anybody could get, and he said, 'You know, that was really good, you sounded like Little Walter.' And I was radiant. And he said, 'But this is not what you want to play with me, this is Piedmont style and it doesn't go like that.' And at that point I realized I had to find a way to play my way. He gave me a record he wanted me to listen to of a clarinet player and he said, 'Now try and do what this guy does.' And so I started trying to understand this guy's way of playing and what he was doing. Eventually I understood that I was never going to be any of these people. I had to be myself. So I started playing the way I played.

**You began your career as a street musician. Were you playing solo or were you playing with a street band?**

I was playing solo. I was playing with a washboard player, a guy by the name of Washboard Doc, and playing with people that I met in the park, I mean, with anybody and everybody. That was back in the early '70s.

**And this was in Harlem?**

No, but I met with a guy in Harlem, one of the incredible experiences that I have really had in Harlem a long time ago. I can't remember his name. But this guy came walking down the street with a guitar and he was playing the blues in Harlem. That was unheard of at the time. James Brown and Stevie Wonder and all of the Motown people—that was the grand epoch of Motown. I had heard very little blues and I had never heard any live blues and to meet this guy on 126<sup>th</sup> and St. Nicholas Avenue blew my mind. So, I sat there with him for the whole day and he talked and he played and we played. He talked about all of these folks that he played with in Mississippi and I hoped to see him again but I never saw him again. Just a wander-

ing minstrel. What was his name? Steep Papa Stoke Pipe! It was a wonderful day for me. But I never saw him again, I looked for that old gentleman for the entire summer but he never came back. And I had to [inaudible phrase] into Bob Dylan and Buffy Sainte Marie and folks like that. I started playing that stuff and started hanging out in the West Village. The West Village is where I really started busking.

**Where did you meet Dylan?**

I met Dylan in the Village through a wonderful lady, Victoria Spivey. She was a classical lead singer from back in the day. We were all there listening to Willie Dixon and she took me around to the back in the VIP section and introduced me to this guy and said, 'I want you to meet my son.' She said, 'This is my son, Bob.' And I am saying to myself that looks like Bob freaking Dylan. And she introduced me to him and said, 'Well, this is my son and he's the greatest harmonica player in all of New York City and he's going to be on your next record.' And Dylan looked up at Victoria and said, 'Yes. Ma'am.' And I ended up in the recording studio but the track that we did was not included on the record. It did not come out until years later on *The Basement Tapes*. That's how I met Dylan.

**You made your first recordings in 1975 with Brownie McGhee and Roosevelt Sykes? How did that happen?**

Actually, my first recording was with Victoria Spivey. I recorded on her label and she introduced me to Roosevelt Sykes and I was also playing with Louisiana Red. My God, that was really an incredible year. We went up to Canada and we recorded with Roosevelt Sykes and there were a bunch of really great players on the record. At the moment, I can only think of Roosevelt and Louisiana Red. That was Blue Label records. I will never forget that because we used to call it Red Labor.

**In 1976 you contributed to recordings by Victoria and Johnny Shines before moving to Paris on the advice of Memphis Slim. Why did he tell you to move to Paris?**

I actually met him at The Top of the Gate, an extension of The Village Gate in New York City where he was doing a three-nighter. I went to see him the first night and I was enthralled because after all, it's Memphis Slim, one of the greatest piano players in the blues. And then the second day I got up the nerve to ask him to sit in and he said, 'Yes, come on. You can sit in, but if you mess up my set, you see this shoe?' And boy, did the man have some big shoes. He said, 'If you mess it up, I am going to put it where the sun don't shine.' And so I started and he liked it. And after, we sat down and talked. I asked him who do they like to hear play in Paris? And he said, 'Well, they like Sonny Boy Williamson, why don't you give it a shot.' About three weeks later, I was on a plane to Paris.

**When you were in Paris you hooked up with members of the Rolling Stones. How did that happen?**

Actually, Keith had heard me play before on a record that I had done with Louisiana Red at the 100 Club in London. I was playing at a party where there were some close friends of Keith and Mick and they said, 'Well, hey man, we're in the studio and you can play great harmonica and they could probably use you.' And I said, 'Well sure, why not.' I thought the guy was pulling my leg. So I gave him my phone number and soon enough I got a call from Mick Jagger and the next couple of days I was in the studio with them.

**What was that like?**

It was pretty fantastic, because I had been listening to them and I liked them a lot because they were really going after [inaudible]. For me to be playing with them was something I can't describe, but it was an incredible, fantastic opportunity.

**You then appeared live with the Stones quite a few times and they offered you the session spot indefinitely but you turned it down. Why?**

Because I wasn't going to be a Rolling Stone and I had my own record, my own tunes, and my own ideas. I wanted to get them recorded and I wasn't going to be able to do it with them. All of a sudden, Keith was saying, 'Would you like to record?' You know, yea, definitely. I took that opportunity to go record my first CD under my own name. Actually, it wasn't a CD back in those days – they were still making records.

*"I thought the guy was pulling my leg. So I gave him my phone number and soon enough I got a call from Mick Jagger and the next couple of days I was in the studio with them."*

**So before returning to the States in 1982 you cut "Crossroads", and "From Paris to Chicago". Who were your sidemen in those two albums?**

On *Crossroads* mostly expats like me, Longineu Parsons, an incredible jazz trumpet player who's now teaching at the University of Florida. There was Sweet Pops, an incredible saxophone player. Cecile Savage played bass with me for years. And a guitar player, his name was Tenko Slavov, I believe, he was Hungarian. I remember at the time, we had been looking for an electric guitar player who could do what I was trying to do and there were some great jazz guitar players but no R&B, rock 'n' roll, electric guitar sounds. I met this guy the day before we had to finish our recording. So you know, it was kismet. And Mike Zwerin who played trombone. He was also a writer for a newspaper that was somehow hooked up with *The New York Times*.

**You wanted to work with and learn**

**from the blues harp masters so you went to Chicago and sat in with Big Walter Horton, Carrie Bell, James Cotton and Junior Wells. What was that like and what did you learn from each of them?**

My God. What didn't I learn is more like it. These guys were all masters of the instrument in their own ways; I listened to them and I tried to internalize as much of their artistry as I could. I think James Cotton and Big Walter had the greatest influence over me. And I loved Junior, I just loved his stage presence, just his mastery of the stage, never seen anybody on the stage like that guy before.

**What was it about him that was so appealing to you?**

That he surprised them to the point of astonishment. He would take the harmonica out of his mouth and start making gestures that somehow enraptured the whole audience. You could hear a pin drop. And there was no music being played. And Junior was just there, making gestures with his hands and his body and the audience was enraptured. It was like, 'How does he do that.' I mean it was like magic to me.

**You spent two years touring with Willie Dixon who was your friend and mentor as part of the Chicago Blues All Stars before putting your own band together in 1983. What did Willie Dixon teach you?**

He taught me to be patient, he taught me to be quiet. He said, 'Well, you're going to learn a lot more from listening than you will from talking, so be quiet.' I loved it. He was something else. I mean the man is a genius; songwriter, A&R, a life guide, and very much a father figure too. He taught me things that I didn't even realize he taught me. Years later, I'm going like, 'Wow, Dixon said that!'

**Can you give an example?**

We were cutting a live record overseas.

And he had been telling me, 'Okay, you do this and you do that' and I was thinking to myself, 'Hell, I'm the harmonica player. I know what to put where.' And so I ignored his teachings and went on with my own ideas as how I should proceed, and after it was finished we sat down and I was like 'Oh my god, what have I done? I made a mess of this.' At that point I realized this guy knew what he was talking about and I had no freaking clue.

**Of all the famous players with whom you've played, who's had the biggest influence on you? Is it Dixon?**

Well, I guess it's got to be Dixon. I mean you know, he talked about writing songs and how to write songs, and what to write about and why one should write about these things, and he gave me a lot of insight about writing songs and how to create a musical muse.

**In 2010 you recorded "Threshold"?**

I had a bunch of different songs, some very eclectic tunes, even some love songs. So I was in a quandary as to whether I should actually record this stuff or not. And Rico McFarland is like, 'It's kind of stepping over the threshold of the blues, you know,' and I was like, 'Yea, but it all comes from the blues. So *Threshold* is the name of it and we're going to record this anyway.' Some people liked it, some people didn't but I am glad I did use the material.

**The album "Raw Sugar", is that with your present band members?**

Except for the drummer, James Knowles, who passed away.

**Who's your present drummer?**

His name is CJ Tucker and he is related to James.

**Was "Raw Sugar" your last album?**

No. The last album that we recorded was called *Voyage*.

**And when was that?**

About a year and a half ago, maybe two.

**Are these covers or your original songs?**

Original songs except I did one cover of a Ray Charles tune.

**You're playing Hohner harps. Are they custom?**

They're straight from the factory.

**Do you ever get nervous before going on stage?**

Sometimes. I remember I was getting ready to go on stage with Fats Domino and Ray Charles and Jerry Lee Lewis. I was very nervous then. I was like, 'Oh my god, Fats Domino and Ray Charles.' Ray Charles is one of my favourites, for me, one of the greatest voices in recorded history of rhythm and blues. So to get the opportunity to play with them, I couldn't believe it. I think I was a nervous wreck.

**Do you have any Ray Charles or Fats Dominos' stories?**

No. My only story is that I was completely starstruck and I remember just walking around in the green room and pinching myself.

**And you played on the road with Prince for a while? What was he like?**

That was a hell of an experience. He's like Dixon and Ray Charles, you know. The man was a brilliant song writer, vocalist and instrumentalist and quite a curmudgeon for such a young man. He was very wrapped up within himself. He was sweet one minute and bitter the next. He was quite something. A brilliant, brilliant, musician. I felt very honored to be able to play and work with him.

**Do you think that personality change was due to drugs?**

I would say the man was in a great deal of pain for much of the last few years of his life. So he was sweet and nice when he wasn't feeling pain and when he was in pain, he was snappish, which is understandable. And unfortunately, or fortunately, drugs that he took to suppress his pain were his downfall.

**Do you ever get up on the stage and think this is the same, I've been playing this before? I'm tired of it?**

No. Because I don't care how hard you work at it, you are never gonna play the same tune the same way twice. So you just play. A lot of times the audience influences what you're doing and the other guys are behind you. No, I don't worry about that.

**Do you practice?**

Of course. You can't play if you don't practice.

**Do you practice scales?**

I practice scales. I practice songs. Sometimes I just take the instrument and just play around and do stuff, you know, just let the instrument do what it does, you know.

**What do you want to be known for?**

Well, I don't know. I guess the same things that people like about what I do. The songs that I write and the things that I play. Just basically, I'd like to be known for being a musician that knows and cares about the music. It's been said before by a much bigger musician than me but I will repeat his words. As Duke Ellington said, 'Music is my Mistress.' Actually, he wrote a book under that name. If you haven't read it, maybe you should.

**What does music mean for you?**

Music is my life. 