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Michael “Hawkeye” Herman studied theatre in college, and last week he won his first theatre award. There was just a long time in between. The 55-year-old Herman, a Quad Cities native, was a theatre and communications major in college. But it wasn’t until 1994 that Herman returned to the theatre, to score and perform the music in a play written by former classmate Octavio Solis. That led to another collaboration in 1995, with Herman scoring and playing in the premiere of *El Paso Blue* in San Francisco. He reprised that role last year in Philadelphia, and for that performance he just won the critic's award for Best Original Music from the Philadelphia Inquirer. The paper also named the play one of the ten best of the theatre season.

“I’m given the latitude to respond to the actors,” Herman said. Musicians and the other performers, sharing the stage, play off one another. Sometimes they lead; other times he does with what he called “cinematic guitar work” beneath the dialogue. “I’ve seen the show 300 times and I’m not tired of it.”

Herman is better known, of course, for being on stages without actors. He decided not to pursue theatre after college because he wanted to be a musician, and he’s done pretty well at that, with his hard-driving acoustic blues and Midwestern style of storytelling earning strong notices throughout the country. His slide guitar has been compared favorably with blues masters such as Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters.

And now that he’s back out of the theatre, Herman will return to the Quad Cities for the Wells Fargo & Co. Street Fest 2000. He’ll play a set each on Friday and Saturday.

Herman’s stints in the theatre are only temporary gigs, and they don’t mean he’s shifting away from more conventional blues performances. He’s currently on a nine-week tour, including four weeks with a home base of home – his mother’s house in Rock Island.

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And his theatre work isn't all that different than playing the blues, Herman said. "Blues is a spontaneous-feeling music," he said. The songs in *El Paso Blue* stay the same each performance, but otherwise – for about 75 percent of the play – Herman is free to improvise.

That spirit – of making things up as he's going along, of playing off the people around him – also pervades the album Herman is currently mixing. He's still wavering between two quite appropriate titles: *Blues without a Net* ("That's pretty much what we did.") and *It's All Blues to Me* ("It's a disclaimer."). The album was recorded live with guest musicians, and Herman said he hopes to have it out by the end of the year.

And that's not all that Herman has on his plate. He recorded a two-hour performance for radio station in Cedar Rapids, and he's thinking of turning it into another record. "It came off so well that it's already been sent to my producer," he said.

Bo Ramsey, the Iowa City-based legend who will also perform at Street Fest, might have been even busier than Herman lately. The acclaimed guitar player, who is often lumped in with both roots rockers and singer-songwriters, hasn't put out an album with his name on the cover in three years, but he's been putting out other people's records. Ramsey performed on and produced or co-produced three albums coming out in August, including two by frequent collaborator Greg Brown. He also recently produced a track by Lucinda Williams for a tribute to Brown by female singers.

"I've had a lot of people asking me [about a new Bo Ramsey record], but I've been so swamped," Ramsey said. "It was nonstop there for about a year and a half."

And the 48-year-old Ramsey – whose long pauses can be an invitation for a question or a rest stop between sentences – doesn't need to stoke his own ego to be happy. "I love playing a good song," he said. "I love the process, whether it's my record or someone else's."

But a follow-up to Ramsey's *In the Weeds*, which garnered some of the most gushing praise ever heard, could be in the works soon. "I write the songs when they come in," he said. "I have to kind of clear things out before I'm good to write. I'm kind of in the clearing process right now. I'd love to get something on tape by the end of the year."

One of the sad ironies in our homogenized and pre-packaged entertainment economy is that somebody as respected and revered as Ramsey has to scrape by. "Lucinda Williams sent me a gold record" for his studio work on an album, Ramsey said, "and I told her, 'That gold record looks good on the wall of my trailer.'"

That bit of humor aside, our conversation got downright depressing at this point. "It's just really a tough business," Ramsey said. "I've had to diversify on a certain level just to maintain my position of playing music. This is a strange and hard time for working musicians."

Ramsey sounds as if he might be forced to leave the music business for money reasons. I ask him. "It's always knocking at my door," he said. "It frightens the hell out of me." That sounds

## Busy Times for Renaissance Bluesmen

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more true than what he said next: "You never know, if the opportunity presented itself, I might try to bow out gracefully."

For his fans, it's an unthinkable prospect. And for somebody who loves playing a good song as much as Ramsey, it might be just as difficult to fathom. *Hawkeye Herman will perform two sets on the main stage of Street Fest 2000: Friday, July 21, from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., and Saturday, July 22, from 10 a.m. to noon. Bo Ramsey will perform on the same stage Friday evening from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. Cobalt Blue, The Neons, The Blue Band, Big Al and the Heavyweights, and We're Late and Smell Like Beer are also scheduled to perform on the main stage. The festival runs from 9 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday.*