

Written by Jeff Ignatius  
Thursday, 27 June 2013 05:54

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John Primer grew up loving the guitar, but it took a while for him to have his own.

An uncle made one on the side of the house in Mississippi with nails and wire when Primer was two or three years old, in the late 1940s. “I liked the sound,” he said in a recent phone interview. “I loved it.” He’d lie on the floor, looking at guitars in catalogs.

By the time he was five, he said, he was playing the side-of-the-home guitar, “when they go to the field or something.”

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At about that time, he said, he ordered one for \$7 or so, but “I never did get it.” It was at the post office, cash on delivery, and “I didn’t have no money. My mom, she was out of town, working ... . She didn’t come back in time to get it, so they sent it back. That broke my heart.”

But he learned the instrument from a cousin, and when he moved to Chicago in 1963, he finally bought one at a pawn shop – for about the same price as the COD version he never laid hands on.

But a music career, he said, was not something he considered at the time.

“I came here to get a job,” he said. “I didn’t think I could be professionally playing.” Plus, he added, he thought his blues idols – B.B. King, Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, Lightin’ Hopkins – came from a bygone era. “That wasn’t on my mind, ’cause I thought all those guys was dead. I didn’t know they was alive.”

Living in Chicago, though, he discovered that the blues were alive and well – and he learned the music well, although a certain ignorance of the specifics of its history never hurt him. When he was laid off from a hospital in 1974 – his last day job, he said – he began a regular gig at the fabled Theresa’s Lounge.

It was there that Willie Dixon heard Primer playing Willie Dixon songs, although Primer wasn’t aware of their origins: “I didn’t know he wrote all those songs.”

In 1979, Dixon recruited Primer to play guitar in his band – including in Mexico City, where Muddy Waters first heard him. (“Young man know my music,” Primer recalls Waters saying.) He was in Waters’ band from 1980 until his death in 1983.

He said he knew Muddy Waters was big, but “I didn’t know it was a big scene. I just said, ‘Yeah, okay, man.’ ... I didn’t know he was *that* famous. *Lot* of people.”

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And after that he played in Magic Slim's band for more than a decade, and Primer said that period remains the favorite among his three gigs as sideman to legendary blues artists. "I was in the Magic Slim band longer than I was in either one of those bands," he said. "I went more places."

But with all three of those mentors, he noted, "it wasn't no different in the way they treat you. They had a lot of respect for their musicians."

Those collaborators also stressed one thing that Primer still carries with him. "I learned the road from Muddy Waters and Willie Dixon, but Slim helped show me how to be original and don't try to change the blues; just play it like he did. Magic Slim was that way. Muddy Waters never changed his style of music. He changed the lyrics, but never changed the style or sound. ... I think I'm in that same line. ... I don't change my style. You can hear me anywhere; you know it's John Primer playing."

All his teachers, he said, offered a key lesson. "Learn what I play, but don't try to be me. Always try to be yourself.' ... I stick to that all the time."

For that reason, Primer's mostly acoustic CD from last year, *Blues on Solid Ground*, wasn't a departure in his eyes, even though he's always focused on the electric blues. "Actually, it's just another recording for me, just putting together and do something different," he said. "I hadn't did acoustic. ... There's no change in my direction, because I'm solid. I'm just producing music that's something that I love to do – that's blues."

With four decades under his belt as a professional musician, the 68-year-old Primer will be awarded the Mississippi Valley Blue Society's RiverRoad Lifetime Achievement Award prior to his Friday tent performance.

But he's not slowing down. He and harmonica player Bob Corritore released *Knockin' Around These Blues* in April, and Primer said he'll start recording another new album later this year.

## 2013 Blues Fest – In That Same Line: John Primer (Friday, July 5, 10 p.m., Tent)

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ChicagoBluesGuide.com praised his 2008 CD *All Original* by saying that the singer, songwriter, and guitarist “possesses a depth of understanding of the genre’s subtleties and nuance that only a handful of artists can lay claim to. Primer is truly world class ... .”