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## Harmonica ace Charlie Musselwhite plays Cambridge, Fall River

By Jay N. Miller



Bluesman Charlie Musselwhite

If there is such a thing as blues royalty, Charlie Musselwhite is surely in the front rank.

The singer and harmonica ace has a biography that reads like it was concocted by a Hollywood scriptwriter, he's widely believed to have been the inspiration for Dan Aykroyd's Blues Brother character, and his long recording career has earned six Grammy nominations, and 24 W.C. Handy (or Blues Music) Awards – the blues equivalent of the Grammy.

Through all those decades of excellence, Musselwhite, now 68, has never stopped creating and performing unique and innovative music. One of the classic “road dogs” who tours relentlessly, Musselwhite has also always been fearless about trying new wrinkles on the blues. How many blues artists can you name who've covered songs by Ben Harper and Randy Newman? Who else could turn the true life child-in-the-well saga of Jessica McClure into a compelling and inspiring blues song? Is it any wonder the jazz magazine Downbeat proclaimed him “the undisputed champion of the blues harmonica.”

Musselwhite swings through the area next week, performing Friday at The RegattaBar in Harvard Square and the next night at The Narrows Center in Fall River.

Local fans will also want to note that Musselwhite's touring band is still anchored by New Hampshire native Matt Stubbs, the hot guitarist who plays the area regularly with his own band at such clubs as The Next Page in Weymouth. Stubbs also hosted weekly blues jams at Quincy's late, lamented Holy Ground between 2004-2008.

"Oh, I'm still on the road all over the place," said Musselwhite, during a short break at his home in northern California. "I'm just back from Japan right now, which was a great tour, but it has left me with some serious jet lag. But we always love coming to New England, and that Boston-Cambridge area has always been a good blues area with lots of knowledgeable fans."

Musselwhite agrees with the formula John Mayall told me years ago, that selecting people for your band should be predicated on how well you'll get along with them in the 22 hours a day you're NOT onstage.

"Second, it's nice if they can play well," Musselwhite said. "But you're not just looking for some guy who can play rings around everyone else, you want someone compatible with the rest of the band. Matt, for instance, has a real good sense of humor, and that's really important on the road. We have some great belly-laughs together."

Musselwhite was born in Mississippi, but mostly raised in Memphis. As a young man he wasn't getting ahead working as a common laborer, or helping run moonshine, so he lit out for Chicago. For a while, the lifelong music fan lived in the cellar of a record store in the Windy City, while exploring the city's nightclubs in his spare time.

Before long, he was friends with such blues icons as Muddy Waters, Junior Wells, Buddy Guy and Howlin' Wolf, and often sitting in with them. Musselwhite became especially close with John Lee Hooker, a friendship that lasted decades.

By 1966 Musselwhite made his own recording debut, and has released thirty-odd albums over the years, as well as doing guest shots with everyone from Bonnie Raitt to Eddie Vedder to the rock band INXS.

His 2010 album, "The Well," includes some tunes with heavy autobiographical themes, and also other tunes written from real episodes Musselwhite read about or witnessed. The title cut concerns the ordeal of little Jessica McClure, trapped in that well so long before being rescued in a story that captivated the nation.

"Having watched that story of Jessica McClure on TV, it really touched me," Musselwhite said. "Blues is food for the heart, and that song is a good example."

Another tune on that album concerns the tragic death of Musselwhite's mother, slain at the age of 93 during a break-in at her home. That song, "Sad and Beautiful," features r&b legend Mavis Staples singing with Musselwhite.

"Blues is your comfort when you're down, and your buddy when you're up," said Musselwhite. "On that song particularly, I wanted it to have a healing quality, so it is not a dirge – there's a good beat to it. Mavis was just great on that tune, and it was such a kick to have her do it with me."

Musselwhite has always been an insatiable music collector. That's one of the reasons he can fit so effortlessly with artists as widely disparate as a bunch of Cuban folk musicians, and pop singer Cyndi Lauper, with whom he's toured extensively in recent years.

"I'd end up buying some records out of curiosity, so I ended up with all sorts of strange stuff like flamenco, Greek, folk, early jazz," he said. "A lot of it has surprising depth to it, but every culture has its own version of blues – everybody goes through hard times. Even if you have a record in another language and you don't know the words, you can recognize the feelings."

"Blues is a language of the heart," Musselwhite said, "as my experience with those Cuban musicians proved. Even if we can't speak the same language, we can always play together, because the music, and the feelings in it, are universal."

For more information on the RegattaBar show check [www.regattabarjazz.com](http://www.regattabarjazz.com), and for information about the Narrows Center show, check [www.ncfta.org](http://www.ncfta.org).

**LEVON HELM:** One of the most singular voices in American music, the drummer and main voice on some of The Band's most memorable songs like "The Weight" and "The Night They

Drove Old Dixie Down,” has passed. Every Americana band out there right now hopes to be half as good as The Band was in its heyday, and a big reason was Helm’s spare vocal style.

He was never about the big dramatic effects, the histrionic excess we see so much today, and his voice was not remarkable for range or power. But as for simple honesty, and ability to connect with an audience, he had few peers.

**CHILIHEAD OPEN AGAIN:** The Chilihead BBQ in West Bridgewater, closed for major renovations after a pipe burst in a January cold snap, re-opens this weekend. R&B singer Shorty Billups gets down tonight, while Bagful of Blues jams on Saturday.

**HOT DATES:** Don’t forget retro rocker J.D. McPherson tonight at the Brighton Music Hall, with his new album just out this week. Saturday night neo-soulman Mayer Hawthorne tears it up at The Paradise in Boston. Counting Crows at the House of Blues on Wednesday.