

Otis Taylor brings his stories and songs to Snowmass
Southern roots, without a doubt
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Boulder's Otis Taylor performs Thursday, July 21, in the Snowmass Free Concert Series on Fanny Hill, in Snowmass Village.

Stewart Oksenhorn / Aspen Times Weekly

SNOWMASS VILLAGE — Last August, when I saw Boulder musician Otis Taylor perform for the first time, the setting was Southern through and through. The occasion for the gig was the Big Aspen Barbecue Block Party, which featured pit masters predominantly from the South — North Carolina, Alabama, Texas. Taylor's band that day featured a fiddler and a pedal steel player, both strongly associated with Southern music.

And yet the association that kept coming to mind for me was Africa. Taylor — who was born in Chicago, raised in Denver and lives in Boulder — and his band weren't playing what I think of as African music, but the connections were strong. And when I mentioned this, it came as no surprise to Taylor.

"In the '60s, people would say" — and here the 62-year-old Taylor slips into an voice that effectively mocks hippie culture — "I discovered the Yardbirds.' They'd say, 'I discovered Clapton.' Then Buddy Guy. Then Robert Johnson," Taylor continued, running down the blues-music chain from the British Invasion back to the Mississippi Delta. "They'd stop there; everybody stopped at Robert Johnson. But where did Robert Johnson learn from?"

Taylor had a somewhat unique perspective on that question. While most of his contemporaries were — like Johnson, like Guy, like Clapton, like the Yardbirds' Jeff Beck and Jimmy Page — exploring the guitar, Taylor had gotten hooked first on the banjo. And since the banjo had its origins in Africa, Taylor dug a little deeper on the musical genealogical chart.

"I go back further, that's all," Taylor said from his home in Boulder. "Everybody else stopped on Robert Johnson. But I had a banjo, so I went further back, to the African roots. And Robert Johnson was probably learning from African musicians."

Banjo has come and gone for Taylor. It was his first musical love, but after learning of the association between the banjo and the American South, he got spooked away from the

instrument, and turned his attention to harmonica, guitar and bass. In recent times, Taylor has rediscovered his affection for the banjo. His 2008 album “Recapturing the Banjo” was intended to connect the instrument to its African and African-American traditions. These days, Taylor is enamored of the electric banjo, which doesn’t evoke the instant association with bluegrass like the acoustic version does: “It looks a little like a Stratocaster – people don’t know I’m playing banjo,” he said. “It’s psychological, mostly.”

African roots, however, are fully embedded in Taylor; unlike the banjo, there’s no putting those aside. For Taylor, that means the blues are also a part of his fabric. “I’m a black man. So my relationship to the blues is genetic. It’s African roots,” he said. But Taylor has also made those African roots something of a course of study: Aside from “Recapturing the Banjo,” his discography includes 1997’s “When Negroes Walked the Earth” and 2001’s “White African.”

Blues music is associated with not only with particular sounds – call-and-response patterns, the bending of strings to approximate the human voice, and the one-four-five chord progression – but an emotion – a yearning, a pain, a cry for release and justice – that stems from the black American experience.

Taylor’s first brush with blues music, as it happens, came with a tinge of blues feeling. When he was 3, his father would bring him to the barber shop, set him in the chair, and make Otis perform “Hambone,” a children’s blues that involves singing and slapping body parts. “I’d be so bummed out because the bigger kids could do the slapping across the chest, and I could only do it on my lap,” Taylor recalled.

Not so bummed out, though, that Taylor got turned off to music. In his early teens, his daily walk to school took him past the old Denver Folklore Center – although, to be more accurate, Taylor rarely managed to pass the shop.

“I just never walked out of the store,” Taylor said. “It was a special place, more a hangout than a store. You could see the Rev. Gary Davis sitting there, Tim Hardin, Mike Seeger.”

The most eye-catching part of the center were the banjos. Infatuated with the instrument, Taylor worked for six months to save money for a banjo and, in 1964, went to see a concert by the Dillards, a renowned bluegrass group from Missouri. Witnessing Taylor’s attraction to the banjo, the members of the Dillards suggested he go down South, to see more banjo-centered music.

“I freaked out,” Taylor recalled. “I wasn’t going down there – forget it, man. They’d lynch me. You might last a day and a half. I wasn’t a hero-type kid.”

The experience helped chase Taylor away from the banjo, and towards the guitar and harmonica. But Taylor also got chased away from the guitar when he fell in with what he calls a “clan of guitarists” that included Tommy Bolin, a legend in Colorado music. “Hanging out with Tommy, seeing him play guitar, didn’t make me want to play guitar. Maybe just in my living room,” said Taylor, who contented himself by taking the bassist position in Bolin’s band, Zephyr.

In 1976, the same year that Bolin died of an overdose, Taylor stopped performing. For 19 years, he gave up music and became an antiques dealer. In 1995, he sat in at a musical benefit for a friend and enjoyed playing enough that he re-started his career, announcing his return with 1996’s “Blue-Eyed Monster.” His Swedish wife told him there would never be a second album, but Taylor, 46 at the time, was just getting started. Between 2003 and 2008, he released five albums; four earned the Blues Album of the Year title from Downbeat magazine.

While so much of the blues, or at least the most popular blues, has become white guys playing

flashy, Stevie Ray Vaughan-inspired licks on electric guitar, Taylor has earned acclaim by creating emotionally deep, groove-oriented music that is short on predictability. “I’m more jazz than the jazz musicians,” Taylor – who had just returned from the North Sea Jazz Festival, a top-tier music fest in the Netherlands – said. “I leave it open so it can go different places. There’s no one telling you what chords to play. It’s all a pocket.”

While Taylor allows his songs to breathe, he also keeps the bigger musical picture open. His albums can feature banjo or cello; they burst into Hendrix-style explosions; they touch on African highlife. His next album, still untitled, features trumpeter Ron Miles and steel pedal player Chuck Campbell; Taylor says the album “is full of surprises.”

Much as he likes the unexpected turn, though, Taylor knows his limits. He attempted Irish music; his friend, the late Gary Moore, an Irish musician, told him it was terrible. He has tried many times to play flamenco guitar, and failed badly.

“They looked at me like I was a bad white guy playing the blues,” he said. “I know that look.”

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