

# Bluesmen Smokin' Joe Kubek and Bnois King Are Soulmates

By [Don O.](#) Thu., Sep. 13 2012 at 9:30 AM



Courtesy of Delta Groove

Face off: Smokin' Joe Kubek (left) and Bnois King

It's a strange commentary on the state of the music business that Dallas blues artists Smokin' Joe Kubek and Bnois King will play more gigs in Turkey this year than Texas. That's the blues for you. Musical partners for more than 20 years, they have played in all 50 states, dozens of countries and released 15 fine albums on multiple labels.

They are best known as a two-guitar band that somehow manages to meld blues, rock, jazz and even a little soul into their unique sound. However, nothing they've done before compares with their new acoustic album, *Close to the Bone*, which will be released on Delta Groove Records on Tuesday. We asked them a bit about their long careers and unplugging their amps.

## **How do you feel about the state of the blues world?**

**Smokin' Joe Kubek:** To me, the blues is the most important music there is. Everything else sprung from that. Through the last 23 years on the road, I've watched a lot of things fizzle. In the summer of '96, our royalty checks went from about \$70 to over \$4,000. One day I woke up and it was different. I don't know what happened, but it started going down before 9/11. Radio on the right end of the dial used to take a chance on spinning your stuff. Now it's impossible, except for stations like KNON or little one-hour specialty shows. That goes back to Clear Channel and other big companies buying up stations. Now everything is programmed by computers with music they think will attract the listeners to help them sell ads. When I drive around town, if I listen to commercial radio, I usually get where I'm going and never hear anything but commercials. Radio took a turn, then the record labels got on board with it. They all want a formula with a cookie-cutter sound. There will never be

another Sgt. Pepper's, or another White Album, or another Jimi Hendrix Experience. If the great blues artists from the '50s were coming up today, people like Howlin' Wolf or Muddy Waters wouldn't have a chance.

**Bnois King:** Seems like the further away we go from here, the more chances we have of working. We can't play here and that's sad. Texas is a huge state, but we have to get completely out of state to find work. There is no Dallas blues festival. We go to a little town called Fort Dodge, Iowa. They have a blues festival and a blues society. Omaha, Nebraska, has a huge blues society. They are crazy about us in Lincoln, Nebraska. Here, if it ain't Saturday night or New Year's Eve, no one is going to show up. We play in Nebraska on a Wednesday evening and the place is packed. Once we get out of the country, even more people come out. It ain't right. This is American music. We're Texas musicians.

**Why do you think that is?**

**Kubek:** There's a lot of changes in the law and that might be a part of it. It's hard to have a nightclub or music venue. Back in the day you didn't have to pay to park or get your blood tested after every drink.

**King:** Still, you can go other places and people show up, Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday night. You can't do that in Dallas, and never could! It's not something new here.

**Kubek:** People ask us all the time about the music scene in Texas. I don't know what to tell them. They think it must really be slammin'. To me it's all about playin' for burgers and beer. You can't really make a living here. Austin is the same. It has this great rep, but you play for pocket change. A lot of the scene here is about open jams. If that's the way it is, that's the way it is. We'll just hit the road.

**How did you first start doing the acoustic duo?**

**Kubek:** The first time we did the acoustic duo was on one of Wanda King's shows at Deep Ellum Blues. She asked us to do a 20-minute segment. We decided to do it acoustic and it was really weird. We had no idea how it would go over. It was nerve-wracking. That 20 minutes seemed like about three hours.

**King:** What really made us realize we had something was later at a KNON blues benefit. All the other musicians were hollering. Then last year we did a blues cruise and everybody went nuts. The word got out and all the other musicians came down to sit in. Elvin Bishop, Eddy Clearwater, John Nemeth, Jimmy Thackery, Mike Morgan and a bunch of others stopped what they were doing on the boat, and came down to sit in with us. The room was so packed people were sitting on the floor. That's when we knew this was real. People really did like this stuff. We started taking it serious after that.

**Tell us about the new album.**

**Kubek:** This is our 15th disc. We have been wanting to do this acoustic album for awhile, just to do something different. That goes back to the radio and record company thing. In earlier years we'd just go in and roll tape. We got some of our best songs on the first take. Some were written on the spot. For this album, we just could not get anyone to get on board with us. The record company would put us off, and delay and make excuses. They just wanted us to "keep doing what you're doing." You sign a three or four-album option with these guys and you're coming up on the last record. So we ask again and get the same old excuses about "what the market wants." They want to box our artistry into our previous catalog. That left us in a jumping-off spot with our last label and we decided to just

move on. We called Delta Groove with this idea and they said, "Hell yeah!" I almost dropped the telephone. We took the songs that we were going to cut, with a very contemporary sound, trying to meet everybody half way, and just cut them acoustically. When I say acoustic, I mean with no amps. Just microphones and box guitars. That was a first for us, no amps in the studio. Recorded direct to tape in a 24-track studio in Hollywood. The funky part of Hollywood.

**King:** No amps or band made you really have to go for it. You have nothing to hide behind.

**Kubek:** We had 12 original songs ready to go, that we had busted our butts on, and we added two more. We pulled out a Ramblin' Thomas song from 1928 or '29 and a Texas Alexander song from the same era and ended up with a 14-song CD. We have a lot of other guitar players on this album, all playing acoustic: Kirk Fletcher, Shawn Pittman, Paul Size, all under the watchful eyes of the amplifier police. We have some light drums with Jimi Bott. Willie C. Campbell is on acoustic bass. There's some harmonica and piano on a few cuts, but for the most part it is just duo, maybe duo with some harp. This is different from anything we've done before.

**You guys are such road dogs, you seem to burn through rhythm sections pretty quick. Any idea how many you have had in the past 23 years?**

**Kubek:** We lost count long ago. There have been a lot. We just had to let our last rhythm section go. We had this one cat who had been playing with us for two years. We found out he didn't know who Willie Dixon was! People are going to think I'm acting like Albert King or something, but I had to let him go!

**King:** We were in New York state. We were setting up for the gig and I brought up something about Willie Dixon. He said, "Who?" Everything stopped dead. Even the club owner, who was setting up the sound, stopped what he was doing and looked around. I asked him, "Are you for real?" He really didn't know. A guy in a blues band who doesn't know who Willie Dixon was. Even most rock and roll musicians know who Willie Dixon was! That was the last straw.

**Kubek:** That broke my heart. I asked him a week later if he ever looked into it and he hadn't. I found out he was listening to everything but blues. I just had to let him go.