

I'll Remember This Night the Rest of My Life

Curtis Salgado, Portland, Oregon, USA

If it weren't for Curtis, this book might not exist. As described in the introduction, it was his performance at the 2013 Rose City Blues dance festival in Portland, Oregon, that led to a moment of inspiration. It was a night I'll always remember.

It was clear the night was a powerful one for him too; I'd seen him perform many times before, but I had not seen him react so emotionally at the end of his set, nor with such gratitude. He was grateful for the audience's awareness and appreciation of his music but even more so for our offering him hope that blues music had a chance. It might not die out with the last remaining members of the generation that had seen the original blues legends perform live.

A friend introduced me to Curtis after another of his performances, and I told him about this project. I didn't have to convince him to be a part of it; he wanted nothing more than to share his passion and perspective—one that emphasizes we know the history—with the blues dance community. It's a topic that gets Curtis riled up, for good reason.

"Blues dancers need to know the history. Where this music came from. I'm telling you, *everyone* should know the history. Is it going to make a difference if they do? Is it going to make them dance better? I doubt it. No. But I just think it would be nice, because otherwise it's going to disappear."

I told him I wanted to share his message, but I needed more information. We agreed to meet for an interview a couple of weeks later. Since the interview would be recorded, I needed a relatively quiet place to meet. I picked a teahouse that was within the neighborhood we both lived in. The Tao of Tea had resided there as a thriving business for nearly twenty years; however, it was Curtis's inaugural visit.

We were the first customers of the day; I wondered how the sweet, pixie-like waitress may have perceived our joint arrival. He walked in slowly, his neck twisting this way and that as his eyes took in the wall of cascading water, the rock formations, and the wooden and bamboo furniture. The ambience was tranquil, the music classical Chinese, and I suddenly wondered if I had chosen the right place. As if reading my mind, he began to nod and said, "I like it. I should bring my girlfriend here."

I sighed in relief. I would have another scare, however, when we sat down and he saw the menu. Nearly twenty pages of tea options. "You're going to need to help me with this," he began. I told him I was happy to. He paused before adding, "You know, the Beatles were into this stuff." He started warming up to the idea of tea over coffee, or any other beverage.

At that point, the waitress returned and offered him the help he needed. "Do you have any questions?" she asked.

“Yes, I need something for my stomach.”

She looked at him warmly and asked, like a patient nurse, “What is the issue you have with your stomach?”

“It’s upset. I went to the casino last night and ate something I shouldn’t have. I was up all night.”

She referred him to the herbal infusions section of the menu, and the one that promised to taste of licorice sold him.

I asked him if he could recall his earliest exposure to blues music. His memories of blues were mixed with jazz—genres he considers almost one and the same—and like himself, were birthed through his parents. “My parents grew up in the swing era; they were born around 1918, so by the time they were teenagers, the music that came through their lives was jazz. When I was growing up, they had these old records; they’d play Count Basie, Fats Waller, Ray Charles, and boogie-woogie piano players. That music would hit my audio nerve, and you know, you start to listen to that stuff and pretty soon you become attached to it. One of the biggest albums that blew me away was Benny Goodman’s *Live at Carnegie Hall*.”

At this point, the waitress came back with our tea. He tried a sip of his and was pleased. My tea caught his attention more, however. The flowers floating around intrigued him, and he asked, “Do you mind if I try some of that?” I offered him a sip, and his face relaxed. “That’s fantastic.” I smiled at his delight, and he continued.

“So, on the back of these records were descriptions written by music critics and liner notes. Those liner notes, they’d put me onto things. There was a song where they’re jamming, and then it breaks into piano and this whole other approach; that struck me, and I read more about it in the liner notes. I’ll never forget that.”

When he was thirteen years old, Curtis had the opportunity to see Count Basie live, at the University of Oregon’s basketball arena in Eugene, where he grew up. “It was an all-black big band; I was like, *wow*. The finest jazz musicians were on stage. I was hooked. I can still picture it. It changed my life. I remember saying, ‘I want to do that!’”

Curtis initially worked toward his dream by taking guitar lessons, but his lessons didn’t last long. “I had a mean guitar teacher who kicked me if I didn’t hit the right note. The other reason I quit is because I didn’t want to learn the technical side of music—how to read and how to practice my scales. I had a very good ear; I could hear something and then play it.”

The technical side of music never impressed him much, which is why he gravitated toward blues rather than jazz. But Curtis will tell you that within jazz music, you can find the blues—in the form of a feeling. “The blues is a feeling. It’s something you can hear and pinpoint in the music. Miles Davis is a blues player; he has all this technical ability, but he plays blues—you can hear it. And the same with Charlie Parker. You hear the blues in Billie Holiday; you hear the blues in Dinah Washington. What they sing is just more technical or sophisticated, for lack of a better term.”

Curtis credits that “mean guitar teacher” with leading him away from jazz and his mother for leading him to blues. “My mom brought me home a harmonica book called *How to Play Blues Harmonica*. For probably thirty years, it was the only harmonica book that existed on how to play blues.

“At that time, my older sister and brother were starting to buy blues records—this was the ’60s, when folk music was coming in, and a lot of the folk-era movements were also discovering black blues masters who had recorded forty years earlier and were still alive. They started putting these guys on the college circuit, and with that, record companies started making these old songs available—Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, Little Walter, Lightning Hopkins—all these collectors started going out and buying them, along with young college kids. And I was one of them.”

A couple albums in particular inspired Curtis to continue with his harmonica study—and his dedication to blues performance. His brother passed him a Paul Butterfield record that blew him away. Who was this “twentysomething-year-old white kid playing the shit out of harmonica?” he asked himself. He was incredulous. Once again, he turned to the liner notes.

The song that most struck him was written by W. Jacobs. Further research revealed that was Little Walter—so he got his hands on one of his albums. “Once I heard Little Walter, that was it. It changed everything. It was the deepest low-down blues and the nastiest harmonica playing.” He’d never felt more inspired to play.

Of course, Curtis didn’t just play harmonica. He was an extremely talented singer; a trait his kindergarten teacher made sure others took note of. “In kindergarten, a teacher pinned a note on my chest. This teacher, I can still see her in my mind’s eye, she says, ‘Make sure your mother gets this.’ So when I get home, my mother reads it and says, ‘Your teachers says you can sing—that you have a nice voice and that you’re going to learn these songs.’”

Luckily for Curtis, his mother was a piano player, and she immediately set about teaching her son the two songs the teacher requested: “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad” and “Jesus Loves Me.” “One day at school we went to the auditorium, and we practiced it. I didn’t make any connection that I had been rehearsing for an assembly—I was just doing as I was told—but one day all our parents were there in the auditorium.

“So I’m up on stage along with this other little boy next to me—the two of us are to sing together. So I start singing ‘Jesus Loves Me,’ while he stays stiff as a board. I can still see him in my mind, I remember looking up at him—he was taller than me—and I’m going, ‘Jesus loves me, this I know...,’ and he’s not singing at all. So I continue, ‘Cuz the *BIBLE*’—I poked him with my elbow—‘tells me so...,’ and the audience starts laughing. I went on, ‘Little ones to *HIM* belong’—another jab, more laughing. And he just stood solid with stage fright while I sang both songs by myself. I was hooked because the audience adored me. I knew I had won the day.”

He played his first professional gig at sixteen and by eighteen was a known name in his local community's bar scene. When Curtis joined forces with others to form the Nighthawks, he gained popularity throughout the Pacific Northwest.

Things really started to take off when, in 1973, he met Robert Cray. The two became friends and began jamming together and sitting in with each other's bands. A few years later, he gained additional notoriety when comedian and actor John Belushi was in Eugene filming *Animal House*. Belushi was fortunate enough to catch one of Curtis's performances. Another friendship ensued, and partially due to Curtis's having taught John about blues music and history, the idea for the motion picture *The Blues Brothers* was born. The record album released in collaboration with the film, *Briefcase Full of Blues*, is dedicated to Curtis.

The more exposed Curtis got to the national blues community, the more he realized he had outgrown his own band. It was then that he was invited to join the more dynamic Robert Cray Band, which quickly grew in prestige. Curtis got to share stages with blues legends such as Muddy Waters, Bobby Bland, and Bonnie Raitt. When he parted ways with the Robert Cray Band in 1982, he formed his own band—Curtis Salgado & the Stilettos. He released his first solo album a decade later and began touring the country, forming a strong following. He would later go on to tour and sing with Santana and Steve Miller.

As Curtis was telling me about how it felt to share the stage with such legends, the waitress returned to check on us. "How's the tea?" she asked Curtis. He replied sincerely, with a hint of humor, "Perfect. I'm healing," before continuing his story without missing a beat.

"I mean, Muddy Waters! Muddy changed the course of music, and I was in a room with him, let alone playing and singing with him? I got to play with all those guys. It's just mind-blowing."

Curtis paused for a moment before bringing us back to the initial, critical point he wanted to make to readers of this book.

"That's why I think it's important that the blues dance community knows the history. I think they would enjoy their dancing better. The idea of two bodies connecting and moving together—it's very beautiful, but you know what? This music isn't just blues. It's also bluegrass and roots and Irish music; it's Scottish music and mountain music and the mixture of all of those. It's like if you're a chef, you have all these ingredients sitting out there; you have Spanish ingredients, French ingredients, Caribbean, African, all these things—that is what America is. That is why this music is so special, because it's all those things in a gumbo. That's what brings out a more exotic, sexy flavor—those African and Caribbean spices in there; throw in some cayenne red pepper, and now things start to get syncopated. Blues is the whole world blended."

I asked Curtis if Rose City Blues was his first exposure to the contemporary blues dance scene; it was certainly his first time playing a show specifically for dancers, but he'd noticed blues dancers before, without knowing about the existence of the scene. The first dancer he saw was, interestingly, a fellow musician friend—Dean Mueller.

To listen to Curtis share his reaction had me in stitches. “I was at a bar and Dean starts dancing with this woman. He’s doing this smooth, sexy thing, and I thought, ‘Who’s *that*? She’s fine! This dude is such a player—I didn’t know that!’ Then he starts dancing with another girl, and *she’s* fine, and then *another* one...I’m like, ‘*Three* of them?!’ I went up to him and said, ‘Dude, you *rock*! What are you, a pimp or something?’ And he goes, ‘No, I do blues dancing.’ So that was when I first heard of it.”

Curtis’s second exposure to a blues dancer was at one of his shows; he’d noticed Brenda Russell solo dancing toward the front of the stage for the entire duration of his gig. At the end of the set, he leaned over and asked her, “Who are you? You’re a great dancer!” “And she says her name and tells me I was going to be playing at one of the dance community’s events. I said, ‘That’s cool...I am?!’ It didn’t really sink in.”

Since booking for Curtis’s shows was done through his booking agent, he was not always aware of the particulars of each gig. As it turned out, no one had succeeded in telling him what kind of music blues dancers dance to. Curtis had just released an R&B album, and his shows were focused on promoting that style of up-tempo funk and soul music. When he learned—just before the gig—that blues dancers only dance to slow- or moderate-tempo tunes, he panicked.

“I only play one slow song per show. I love playing slow blues, but in my experience, an audience wants to pop! So I thought, ‘Aww, man, what am I going to do?!’ So I go to the venue, and I tell my band, ‘Listen, you guys, we can’t play our show. Our show goes *bang bang bang*, and we can’t play that. We’re going to have to jam blues, or they’re going to laugh us out of this house and never have us back.’”

Kevin Selfe—whose story is earlier in this section— was at the show, and Curtis approached him to discuss his predicament. Kevin invited him upstairs, where a smaller studio was playing deejayed music for a group of blues dancers. “This is what they dance to,” he told him.

Curtis’s reaction was distinct. “We walk in this room, and the deejay is playing ‘Nineteen Years Old,’ by Muddy Waters—the *original* low-down, rotten, recorded-in-1949 version—and there’s twenty-five youngsters in there dancing to it, all dressed to the nines, right out of the ’30s. I thought I was in heaven!

“It was not my typical audience—everyone was half my age or younger, and that was refreshing. Two things hit me—one is that there is hope that this music can stay alive. I don’t know if this music will stay alive in terms of Muddy Waters or Howlin’ Wolf, because they don’t make ’em like that anymore. It’s all been done, and you won’t see it again. That’s why the history is important to know...so you can hand your kid a Little Walter record. Maybe it will hit them like it hit me.”

Curtis went back downstairs and took the stage with his band. He knew he had the first song ready—the one slow song he plays in his set is the opening song. His band kicked it off,

and after the first few beats, he was amazed to see the dancers instantly respond with sheer joy—raising their arms and cheering. Curtis was in shock. “I don’t have much hair, but if I did, it would have all been standing up straight. I was like, ‘What?! No one does that!’ It was wonderful. So then I turned around to the band and said, ‘Okay, I want you to do this, and you to do this.’ So we played another slow song, and everyone danced to it...very happily—at the end the dancers went, ‘Yay!’ So I just kept thinking of slow songs. We played slow blues all night with my band, which had never done that before. My drummer thought it was boring. *I loved it.*”

The show hit its peak toward the end of the night; Curtis launched into “Hoochie Coochie Man”—a Muddy Waters song—causing the dancers to turn from their partners and come to the stage. “I held this long note—that got people to start listening; I held it indefinitely, and the audience went wild. When the song ended in its entirety, I looked down, and there were *roses* at my feet. I was like, *wow*. When you’re in a room with people who are half my age who are picking up on what I’m throwing down—who *get* it—that made me extremely happy. I was stunned. It gave me hope. It was one of the best experiences I’ve ever had. I will remember that night the rest of my life.”

Curtis’s euphoria did weaken slightly, however, when he learned after the show that a lot of the dancers in the community don’t know the history behind what they dance to. That fact accentuated his fear that awareness of the historical importance of blues music could fade with his generation. “I’ve been in the business a long time. I’m *extremely* passionate. I love roots music, and I love the history of music. That’s my life. So to play this music my whole life and then watch it disappear...” Curtis’s voice trailed off, perhaps imagining how different his life would have been without blues.

His suggestion to young dancers is to do what he did. “I learned the history of the world through music. Reading and researching. ‘Why this? Who invented that? Where’s this come from?’ Know the history. Listen to the lyrics and learn where it comes from. If it’s moving you, you should know its history. Why is it moving you? What’s behind this?”

Clearly, Curtis is passionate about learning musical history—but not in an archeological manner. “Don’t study the blues from the perspective of ‘He traveled here, and they came down and migrated...’ As if talking about a dinosaur. Life just isn’t like that. Don’t try to make sense of it all. There is no *definition* of blues music—or blues dancing. It’s however it makes you move.

“When you’re dancing to blues, you have music you’re listening to and steps that you’re doing, but somebody’s creating something new. There can be nobody saying that what you’re doing isn’t blues dancing. If someone says, ‘That’s not blues dancing,’ just tell him, ‘Different streaks for different freaks. That’s great for you. This is blues dancing to me.’ Music is in the ear of the beholder. Who’s to say what is or what isn’t in *any* situation? If you had a rule in

blues music, tell that to John Lee Hooker. He just went with what he felt. The blues is a feeling. There are no rules.”

Curtis had one other piece of advice he wants to distill to blues dancers. “What I noticed—what I loved—is that you dancers are keeping time in your head, with no bass or backbeat. That’s *really* good for you. When there’s only two people playing, a singer and a guitar and a harmonica, where is the pulse? It’s in the guitar, and it’s in your head, so you’re making the very most out of the limited amount of what’s happening.

“A great practice is to try dancing without music. Maybe give thirty seconds of a groove, and then turn the music off and continue dancing to it, keeping the beat in your head. Or play the song once all the way through and then take the music out. You’ll learn to keep time. Time in music is it, it’s the pocket.”

At this point, we had been talking for over two hours. I wanted to respect his time—he had a gig to prepare for that night. But I had one more question. It was obvious to me that blues music had been transformational to Curtis’s life in many ways, but I considered there may be additional elements of healing below the surface. And there were—literally. Curtis lifted his shirt to show me a broad scar stretching across his abdomen.

“It’s a liver transplant. I’d been playing music all my life and had no health insurance. So musician friends of mine held a benefit. It had Steve Miller, Taj Mahal, Robert Cray, Everclear, Little Charlie and the Nightcats, and myself. We split the Rose Garden Arena in half and filled it up with like five thousand people. Everything was donated to me—the building, over three hundred volunteers; the *Oregonian* put two full-page ads in the newspaper; Kink radio pushed it; and we had the most incredible concert with this oddball mixture of people. We raised the money we thought we needed, and then at the last minute, the hospital said we needed \$100,000 more in order to do the transplant. So two more people stepped up and gave me their life savings.

“How has blues music healed me? I owe the universe. How do you pay that back? I can’t keep a straight face. I am *so* blessed.”