
Saved by the blues
REBECCA PILLSBURY
36 STORIES OF TRANSFORMATION THROUGH BLUES MUSIC AND DANCING

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BY THE
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36 Stories of Transformation through Blues Music and Dancing

By

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INTRODUCTION

Melancholy. Despondency. Depressed spirits.

These are the words you'll find if you look up *blues* in the dictionary. Whether pertaining to someone having the blues or someone playing the blues, the believed common denominator is sadness. But go beyond knee-jerk response to the word and think about the times you've actually listened to the blues. Did the music make you feel sad? Or did it release some of the tension inside of you? Playing the blues, listening to the blues, or dancing to the blues is used as a means to *overcome* sadness.

The blues isn't about self-pity; it's about empowerment. It celebrates ownership of anguish, rather than avoidance. It recognizes that to feel pain is to be human and that only by fully experiencing the intensity of this human emotion can the pain be transcended. Sadness—and the coming together in community as a result of that sadness—is not seen as tragedy but as beauty.

This is part of what makes the blues therapeutic—it distracts us from all of our desires, including the desire for our suffering to end. To cease desiring relief is to find relief. But don't take it from me; read the thirty-six stories in this book from people all over the world—people who have found healing through playing, singing, or dancing to the blues.

This book is divided into six sections, with each section dedicated to a central theme. The reader will notice some crossover within many stories that means that story could just as easily belong in a different section—one aspect of the human experience affects another, which affects another, and so on.

As much as our individual facets are interrelated, there is a variance of personal experience and culture. One contributor may have a very different perspective on the same topic than another—including the appropriate name for the dance style this book is about, or the characteristics that define it. I've chosen to let each contributor use the definition most relevant to him or her, be it *traditional blues*, *alternative blues*, *fusion*, or simply *blues*.

This book is not to serve as an academic study of the dance itself or dance therapy but rather to offer various personal experiences throughout each individual's journey of transformation.

But before we talk about the powerful end results blues music and dancing has had on so many individual lives, let me share a bit about how the music and accompanying dance forms began.

The Roots

Traditional blues music originated on the plantations and in the cotton fields and gin houses of the Mississippi Delta in the late nineteenth century. It evolved from the spirituals, work songs, and field hollers

of African Americans enduring slavery and sharecropping. However, we could trace its roots back even further—to two distinct strains of music from West Africa.

One strain, from the Senegal-Gambia region, was more rhythmically complex and incorporated the Arabic propensity for long, tortured melodies. The other strain was that of the Congo-Angola region, which was more vocally rich and refined, involving call-and-response singing, or field hollers. Field hollers would begin when a lead worker chanted an opening line and the chorus of workers answered, falling into a regular pattern to match the task at hand. These chants made the work day go faster and brought people together in community.

The vocal expression of distress was joined by stringed instrumentation, introduced by traveling musicians of West Africa known as griots—a hereditary caste responsible for maintaining the oral history of their tribes and villages through stories, poems, songs, and dance. In both West African regions, music played a communal and often dance-driven role, serving as the focal point at religious rituals, during planting and harvesting, while dwellings were built, and for celebrations.

Upon being brought to America during slavery, the musical traditions of Africa mixed with Western classical and folk traditions, including instruments such as piano and guitar, and becoming what is known today as blues music. Much of this original blues music, unfortunately, followed these early musicians to their

graves. However, their influence and legacy can be heard in the recordings of some of the first well-known blues musicians of the 1920s and '30s, including Son House, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charley Patton, and Robert Johnson. Listen to a recording of Blind Willie Johnson's "Dark was the Night, Cold was the Ground" and not only will you be brought back to the early blues era but you will be powerless to its ache.

The adoption (by force) of the Christian faith by newly arrived slaves led to a deep influence of the gospels on blues music. Many of the legendary blues musicians have some connection to the Christian church. Son House was himself a fallen preacher—a teenage pastor who became a prison inmate ten years later—and Robert Johnson is famous for his encounter with the devil at "the crossroads," where he supposedly sold his soul in exchange for his ability to play the blues.

These musicians typically performed solo with just an acoustic guitar, although they would occasionally team up with fellow bluesmen, or blueswomen—the 1920s and '30s also gave rise to female vocalists, including Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Mamie Smith.

In the post-slavery era, racism, extreme poverty, and devastating natural disasters led to the massive diaspora of African Americans from the South to northern cities such as Chicago, St. Louis, and Detroit. During the early to mid-twentieth century, the blues continued to grow and evolve, reflecting the changing circumstances. While the guitar remained the central instrument, it became electrified by blues musicians such

as John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters, and Howlin' Wolf and was accompanied by instruments such as the drum kit, piano, harmonica, and a variety of horns.

In the 1950s, B. B. King introduced a sophisticated style of guitar soloing based on vocal-like string bending and left-hand vibrato, which has influenced countless electric blues guitarists and rock guitarists alike. King and his style of electric blues contributed to opening blues music to a wider audience, especially white listeners, narrowing the gap between the African American community and mainstream American culture. The performers themselves also grew to include white guitarists and vocalists, like Stevie Ray Vaughan, Eric Clapton, and Bonnie Raitt in the 1970s and '80s.

The urban blues scene began to enthrall listeners who were black and white, young and old, rich and poor, and every possibility in between. What made the music of one group's struggles and strife so universally appealing?

The blues sings of the universal themes of love and loss, work that is often repetitive and unsatisfying, and trying to find strength in misfortune. It reaches out to all, naturally drawing people together during times of hardship. The narratives build mutual solidarity, creating a space that is communal and intimate. Its listeners are provided safe opportunities to be vulnerable—to share their most authentic selves. The blues says, "This is all of *me*, and I see all of *you*. Let's take our individual

stories—our own blues—and create something of beauty together."

The Church

Not everyone saw the emotional cleansing, self-expression, and sense of community that blues music and dancing evoked as positive, however. The Christian church was less concerned with overcoming adversity and improving the quality of everyday life than it was with salvation of the soul after death. Trials and tribulations were, after all, meant to be endured in accordance with the will of God. The blues musician's ability to generate joy and merriment through methods other than the teachings of the church was considered sacrilege.

The music was referred to as "devil's music," for church elders and ministers believed that its expression led to behavioral temptation in conflict with the scriptures. To them, to play blues music was to call the devil to come forth and reign upon earth. Internal and external conflicts tormented members of the community who participated in the Saturday night ritual of music and dance and the Sunday morning ritual of worship. Their Saturday night practice was one of purification, just as was their Sunday morning practice. Both experiences purged the heart and mind of sadness and strife. But the dance hall remained, to church elders and ministers, a house of sin and folly and eternal damnation of the soul.

Of course, some churches were not void of their own style of good-time music. Spirituals often ignited eruptions of clapping and shouting, rocking and rolling, foot shuffling and ecstatic revelation. However, the dance style that the spirituals evoked was different than the style evoked in the dance halls, or juke joints. The dancing in the juke joints had an added element of sensuality—not an expression in congruence with the Christian church.

It wasn't in agreement to incorporate religious elements into blues music, either, but it happened nonetheless—sometimes through lyrical arrangements but other times because the deep power of the blues lament naturally invokes an experience of the divine. The ability to call forth the divinity within us—to generate our own source of healing—gave rise to fear in the church. If we didn't rely on the church for community building and healing, church leaders perceived a loss of control—not only of parishioners' individual lives but in the whole structure of society.

The Transformation

So, what is unique to the blues that allows for such a powerful emotional response that the depths of one's soul can be accessed and healed? In a word: tension. Emotionally expressive music tends to create a degree of tension, such that finally experiencing its release is cathartic.

One of the ways tension is created in the blues is through pitch bending. The vocalist or musician slides his or her voice or instrument up or down pitches of a key, such that the notes "bend" to create a sense of uncertainty and anticipation. The exquisite timing of a "blue" note seems to be capable of activating an inner space in the listener where emotions such as loneliness, sadness, separation, and fear are stored. When the target note is eventually reached, the tension is released, and often a state of euphoria is experienced.

We aren't necessarily conscious of this delicate interplay, but blues lovers nonetheless experience it. For the keen ear, that bent note on an electric guitar has the potential to take your breath away. Around that note, the wailing cry of a harmonica can make you want to cry out yourself—in pain or pleasure—and the solid rhythm of the drum beat can bring you back home as it reverberates in your soul and reminds you of your roots.

The intricate musical techniques used in the blues are, therefore, capable of turning negative emotions into excitement, and by doing so transform trauma into ecstasy. The blues performs a cleansing of the soul. The song builds up tension, seeks and finds release, only to build and seek release again—just like the human experience of life itself.

Nowhere is the intensity of musical potential more profoundly felt than while listening to a live performance. Unlike a classical musical performance, which is celebrated for its exact rendering of the score, a blues performance is revered for being different every

time. Just like life, the song is ephemeral, ever changing, and nontransportable, and therein lies its beauty. Let's celebrate *that*—this experience we're having *now,* because it's not going to last.

The great musicians of the world are able to evoke such powerful reactions in their audience not simply because they're able to effectively express their own pain and sorrow—it's because their listeners are suffering too. With all its "blue notes" and overtones of sadness, blues lyrics feature the most harrowing hardships, anxieties, and misfortunes. If listeners pay them heed, they are sure to find commonality in experience. In a sense, their attention is being drawn to their own fears and insufficiencies.

Despite the dark themes that blues music encompasses, its nature and function remains a form of entertainment—its purpose is to make people feel good. Even when the vocalization and instrumentation express the most miserable moaning and groaning, and the lyrics depict pain and suffering, blues music often serves as the conduit for the high point of a festive occasion—offering a dimension of down-to-earth sensuality that makes people want to get up and move.

The Dance

I've spoken of dance halls as venues for blues music and dance revelry, but the shacks in which the blues began its transformation from a form of self-expression into a form of entertainment were more

often called juke houses, or juke joints. The word "juke" originated in the West African Congo and means "evil, disorderly, wicked"—in many traditional African societies, close couple dancing was considered immoral. Since absorbing into English, the word has come to refer to sinful pleasure. Juke houses often doubled as brothels and were places to drink, gamble, wreak havoc—and dance the blues. It is no wonder, therefore, that churchgoers associated the blues with sin.

The dancing itself was no less free of "inappropriate" behavior, by church standards. All that slow dragging, belly rubbing, hip grinding, and flirtatious strutting became synonymous with the blues, and synonymous with sin. The more lowdown and dirty the music, the more sensual—and sexual—the dance moves.

Apart from being more sexual, the dance was known for its unique combination of spontaneity and improvisation, while still maintaining a sense of control. It shook off the more stylized versions of ballroom dance and became more rhythmic and fluid. Although often practiced with a partner, the dance was more an expression of the individual's personality and soul. The music allowed the soul to access not just its primordial sensuality but the joyousness, exhilaration, and delight in human existence. The dance was an opportunity to symbolize and stylize one's own perceptions and feelings in response to that music.

A dance-beat-driven personality cannot *not* dance when a blues song is played. Once phonograph records

were created and radio networks began to broadcast dance music, there were more blues-oriented bands on the road than ever before. Even when blues music was performed as a vaudeville act, the audience was foot tapping and hand clapping and doing whatever other dance-inspired movement the facility's space allowed.

W. C. Handy, who wrote some of the first published blues songs, described what happened when he played "St. Louis Blues" for the first time in 1914: "When 'St. Louis Blues' was written, the tango was in vogue. I tricked the dancers by arranging a tango introduction, breaking abruptly into a lowdown blues. My eyes swept the floor anxiously; then suddenly I saw lightning strike. The dancers seemed electrified. Something within them came suddenly to life. An instinct that wanted so much to live, to fling its arms to spread joy, took them by the heels" (Handy, 305).

For black or white or rich or poor, the blues has the universal ability to recreate the emotional landscape of life and to help relieve the weight of its daily burdens. Whether a person was dancing at juke joints alone or with a partner or taking in a musical performance of the blues at a variety show, the emotionally and rhythmically charged lyrics and melodies of the blues offered a release of tension that would carry that person through the week…until it was time for the next fix.

The contemporary blues dance scene looks decidedly different than the scenes in the juke joints and vaudeville venues of the twentieth century. The blues dance scene—and even that term—as we know it today

evolved out of the swing dance revival of the 1990s and early 2000s. All across the United States, and also in Europe, multiday swing dance events—Lindy Exchanges—catered to the new, primarily white, aficionados of the black vernacular dances of the 1920s–1940s. The organizers began hosting late-night "blues rooms"; after the exhausting physical demands of a full day of Lindy Hop dancing, dancers would migrate over to the slower, smoother style of dance that blues music inspired.

Another style of partner dance has recently evolved from the contemporary blues dance scene, referred to as "alternative blues," or "fusion." Although related to blues in its improvisation, the music is not necessarily that of traditional blues, and the dance movements themselves may draw from outside the blues aesthetic to incorporate elements of tango, Lindy Hop, contact improv, and even ballet. This dance style has grown in part due to Blues Recess dance events being held around the world in both rural and urban locations. These community-driven gatherings lean more toward experimental movements and alternative lifestyles than does the traditional blues dance community, although the magic in dance connection is much the same.

Blues dancing, therefore, is difficult to define; just as the music itself is constantly evolving and being influenced by what is popular of the day, the dance movements are adapting to influences from different cultures, new adaptations of blues-rooted music, and

each dancer's own personality. Blues dances as a genre, however, tend to share an aesthetic that includes: a grounded body posture where the weight is held on the balls of the feet, the knees are bent, the hips are back, and the chest is forward; an asymmetric and multirhythmic movement among body parts; improvisation on an individual level and between dance partners that may incorporate call and response; and dancing in the space between the beats—creating a sense of tension in the body while remaining loose and relaxed.

And one key trait defines these dances—that is intimacy. Danced most often in close embrace, the dance is raw, vulnerable, and exposed. Like the music itself, the intention is not to hide or avoid who you are and what you're going through but to face yourself and your partner fully—and by doing so transcend time, space, and fear. No matter if what you're dancing is a variation of traditional blues or alternative blues, there is healing that takes place.

Exposure to the healing power of the blues is no longer limited to the United States and Europe. Modern-day blues dance scenes are developing around the world, as a result of individual dancers and instructors traveling between local and international communities and hosting blues dance workshops and "blues exchanges." These events serve the purpose of not only familiarizing communities with dance styles evolving in other parts of the world but offering a sort of cultural and social exchange.

Local dancers host visiting dancers, and non-dance events are often held throughout the day that provide an insider's view of the local culture and an opportunity to connect in a meaningful way with people from all socioeconomic, generational, and racial backgrounds. Thus, healing doesn't just take place on the dance floor—as human connection is made across cultures, our similarities are recognized, our differences are celebrated, and a new level of acceptance is achieved.

The Book

I've outlined a brief history of blues music and dancing to offer a context in which readers can better understand what is to come. But this book is not actually about what blues music or dancing is or where it came from; it's about how it feels—which is something different for everyone. Despite the variance of experience, however, there are commonalities to be found. The blues experience is, again, within the larger context of a shared human experience.

The idea for this book was born at the Rose City Blues dance event in Portland, Oregon, in November of 2013. I had just written my first book—*Finding Ecstasy*—which is a memoir that details my own journey of healing through blues dancing. There was a moment during the headlining performance of the night by the legendary Curtis Salgado when something in the music—perhaps now I could distinguish it as a

particular display of vocal tension—caused an emotional and physical, and I'd say spiritual, reaction in the audience that led to newly partnered dancers separating, rushing toward the front of the stage, and breaking down in solo movement, reminiscent of a down-home church gathering during revival time.

I was in the midst of the revelry myself, having my own transcendental moment—but something caused me to turn around and take in the experience of the room. Hundreds of dancers faced me, eyes closed, arms raised, clearly feeling something very powerful. I knew what I was feeling. But what were they feeling? What were their stories? I wondered. Through the writing of my memoir, I knew how therapeutic it could be to reflect on one's own journey, to shed the veil of anonymity and publicly announce, "This is who I am, *fully*." By doing so, so much inspiration can be found in one's challenges and triumphs.

I suddenly had a driving impulse to offer others that experience. I began writing this book, therefore, as a platform to explore and honor people's personal stories and to inspire readers through their journeys. However, amid the interview process, a dear friend—who was going to be a contributor to this book, and to whom this book is dedicated—experienced a fatal heart aneurism after an assault. While processing my own grief of her loss and the circumstances around it, I realized this book was really about something else—or rather, something more.

Tragically, the world is becoming increasingly one of fear, isolation, competition, and repression—emotions that lead to such human behavior as theft, assault, rape, and even murder. How can we attempt to heal such a world? Global healing has to begin within each one of us—and here's why I believe we can begin by dancing.

Throughout the more than forty interviews I conducted for this book, a theme recurred: the importance of human connection, the experience of oneness with other human beings. Within each dance, there is an exchange of the purest form of love. When we truly *see* the person in front of us, we can't possibly hurt him or her. When I go dancing, I look around the room, and I see dance partners spanning all faiths and cultural, racial, and economic backgrounds. They are smiling at each other, holding each other, *seeing* each other. In a dance, you're simply two human beings exchanging something pure, fulfilling the need for human connection—a sense of belonging, of contribution.

My hope is that this book will inspire more people to dance—to step outside their comfort zones, to shed not just their anonymity but their own beliefs about how human differences set us apart. If dancing can provide an opportunity to be fully seen and *still* loved…can you imagine the effects on humanity?

I'm not saying that dancing is going to solve all the world's problems…but wouldn't it be a great place

to start? So, what do you say? Let's transmute tragedy into beauty. That is the essence of the blues, after all.

Let's dance.

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.

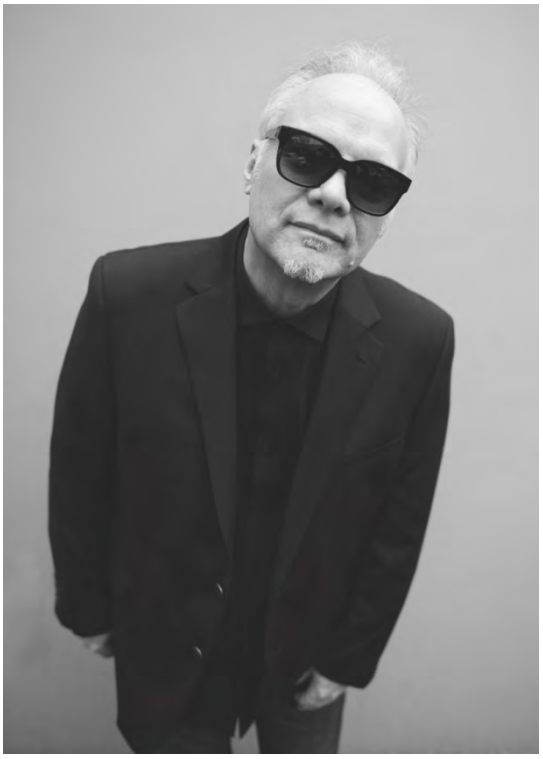
"A great practice is to try dancing without music. Maybe give thirty seconds of a groove, and then turn the music off and continue dancing to it, keeping the beat in your head. Or play the song once all the way through and then take the music out. You'll learn to keep time. Time in music is it, it's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



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