

“BLUES FOR DEMOCRACY”



Harmonica
virtuoso
Smoky
Greenwell
takes on
today's issues
in his songs

By Dean M. Shapiro, Senior Editor

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SARA ELLMORE

More than half a century ago, a musical genre known as “folk music” was in vogue and it enjoyed widespread appeal among those who were activists for various causes. The purveyors of this musical style focused their lyrics on controversial issues like war, racism, nuclear disarmament and other significant national and world events.

Today very little folk music is being composed and performed and there are fewer broadcast media outlets from which to convey these messages. However, one New Orleans musician and songwriter is keeping that “protest music” tradition alive through the genre he does best: the blues.

William “Smoky” Greenwell, a New Orleans transplant from Delaware with 12 CDs to his credit (and a new one in production), has picked up the ball from others of his generation who once made their protests heard through their music. Now he is carrying that socially conscious folk tradition into the third decade of the 21st century. An accomplished singer, saxophonist, harmonica player, bandleader and songwriter/producer, many of Smoky’s contemporary lyrics decry the injustices he sees in the world around him.

“I’ve always been concerned about what’s been going on in the world but I didn’t start putting my feelings into my music until later in my career,” Smoky explained. “What really did it for me was the way I felt about New Orleans being neglected by the federal government after Hurricane Katrina while they were spending billions of dollars on the war in Iraq. I expressed my feelings in my song, ‘Between Iraq and a Hard Place.’”

On the title track of his eponymous 2008 CD, one of the key rhyming verses of “Between Iraq and a Hard Place,” proclaims, “Houses are in shambles. Crime is on the rise. Why do we waste billions on a war that’s based on lies?” The other verses express similar sentiments.

That was only the beginning for Smoky and his quest to encapsulate, into his lyrics, some of the injustices happening in today’s world. Four years later he was back with



his next release, titled “99% Blues,” which described more than the major genre content of the record. Its double meaning refers to the 99 percent of Americans who are not in the highest income bracket.

“Its inspiration stemmed from the Supreme Court’s decision in the ‘Citizens United’ case that allowed unlimited campaign contributions to be made anonymously to political candidates,” Smoky said. “When it went down, there was the ‘Occupy’ movement of the 99 percent. So I wrote a song called ‘99 Percent Blues’ which was the title track of the album. I gathered up a group of musicians to perform and sing the lyrics and we also did a video of it.”

The video, which is still viewable on YouTube, features various local musical artists, including Smoky, taking their turns reciting grievances from the lyrics. After each verse Smoky asks, “What can we do?” and the group replies in unison, “Occupy Wall Street!”

His latest CD, released in 2019, “Blues and the Power of Peace,” continues in this vein with tracks titled “Common Ground,” “Get Out and Vote” and “Slow-moving Coup.”

Smoky’s forthcoming release will have two new democracy-themed blues songs (co-written with Johnny Neel) plus his previous ones. He plans to title it “Blues for Democracy.”

“Some people write books about what’s going on. Others do podcasts about it. I’m writing songs about it,” Smoky said. “It doesn’t seem like many musicians are doing that these days.”

“I’ve been accused by some people of being obsessed,” Smoky continued. “But they don’t accuse me of being obsessed with music. I think a more accurate word is ‘passionate.’ I’m passionate about democracy.”

But, above all, Smoky is a hardcore, dyed-in-the-wool bluesman and that’s where the primary focus of his work will always remain, he is quick to emphasize. His idols and inspirations include such

stellar harmonica-playing blues artists as Little Walter and Paul Butterfield. Many of the cuts on his CDs are covers of songs originally written and performed by some of the most renowned performers of the American home-grown blues genre. Many others are his original compositions.

Prior to his arrival in New Orleans in 1989, Smoky lived in Memphis and Nashville and played alongside some of the greats of the blues, country rock and R&B genres. After graduating from Memphis University, he performed alongside such Beale Street legends as blues guitarist/songwriter Furry Lewis and pianist Piano Red. He was also occasionally called upon to do session work at Sam Phillips' legendary Sun Records recording studio. Then an opportunity arose that resulted in him moving to Nashville.

As he described it, "I had a friend there whose parents were like country music elites. Her father (Kenny O'Dell) wrote 'Behind Closed Doors' for Charlie Rich, 'Mama He's Crazy' for The Judds and a bunch of other songs that were recorded by popular country singers. And her mother (Corki Casey O'Dell) was a famous session guitarist."

During his time in Nashville, Smoky made some other valuable connections that guided him further into his musical career.



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High among those connections were lead guitarist Warren Haynes who later joined Gov't Mule and the Allman Brothers. Another was renowned keyboardist and songwriter, Johnny Neel, who also went on to the Allman Brothers and with whom Smoky has collaborated on some of his most recent CDs and in live performances.

Smoky also performed with the R&B funk group, War, subbing for their regular harmonica player Lee Oskar. More recently, he played tenor sax in a Frenchmen Street club while Oskar played his widely recognized riffs on "Low Rider" and "Cisco Kid."

Here in New Orleans, Smoky

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has performed with at least two or three dozen of the city's top names and even recorded with some of them over the 30-plus years he has lived here. When he arrived in New Orleans he was holding down a five-night-a-week shift at the Old Absinthe House Bar on Bourbon Street and he became a Frenchmen Street "regular" from the late '90s through to the present.

A longtime French Quarter resident, Smoky sells music-related merchandise in the French Market and, very briefly in 2005, he owned a blues club on Frenchmen Street that he wrote a song about for his "99% Blues" CD.

At present he is holding down a late Saturday night gig at the Apple Barrel on Frenchmen Street with his latest blues quartet whose members include Tony DeFelice on guitar, Jack Carter on bass and Willie Panker on drums.

Summing up a long and eventful musical career, Smoky reflected, "Music has been good to me. I've enjoyed most of what I've done and I've learned from the things I could have done better. In terms of what's going on in the world right now, I'm staying vigilant and hoping for the best. I believe we can do better and that, eventually, we will."

To learn more about Smoky or to order his CDs visit his website www.smokygreenwell.com



Smoky with Lee Oskar from War at Cafe Negril on April 26, 2009.

PHOTO BY DEAN M. SHAPIRO.