

# SPAGHETTI & Blues

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**Chicago Beau, il viaggiatore del Blues.** interview by Gianni Franchi.

**You've toured constantly around the world , which was the reason you never stopped?**

The popularity of Blues goes in cycles. There has always been a kind of base audience that are true Blues Lovers, and fans of highly visible Blues artists like Buddy Guy, BB King, Koko Taylor and others who have been around for years. And those performers have often experienced periods with less work. So, a Blues artist must keep busy, and play wherever in the world, whenever. Unfortunately, Blues is the least promoted music. So, as Sonny Boy Williamson said, 'You got to catch it while it's hot, if you let it cool, I won't be worth a damn!'

And so, I'll only stop when too old to perform.

**Which is the country where you found yourself most at ease and why?**

Each country has something different to offer. I have a great appreciation for warm climates. I think that is naturally in my DNA. I like Quebec, and Canada in general because of the diversity. I had great experiences in Iceland, recording, and live performances. As you know I lived in Italy for five years primarily because of the beauty of Italian people, their rich cultural heritage, and their appreciation of Black Music and culture. You know the expression, 'different reason, different season.' Seasons can be, metaphorically, a person's age. Where you are in your life. Things are always changing.

**And from the musical point of view which one did you think was the best?**

Italy, Quebec, Senegal, Iceland, Kenya. All great seasons for different reasons. But I lived in Italy because of a certain kind of magic.

**What was the reason, in your opinion, that many Afro Americans at one point seemed to want to snub the blues while in Europe long-haired young boys began to play just by referring to the great American masters of this music?**

First, it must be understood that Blues as a genre, like Hip hop, Jazz, R & B, etc., is a part of the continuum (*continuo*) of the Black experience in the Americas, and elsewhere. Keep in mind that Black people in the United States own almost no big media / information networks (rete). Blacks in America are segregated residentially, socially, and economically. Information about Black lack of interest in the Blues is perpetrated by those who own the media. Blues is a community based artform which is accessible by anyone who is interested. That means that Blues, and other traditions, are often not commercialized by those who LIVE THE EXPERIENCE DAY AFTER DAY! Unfortunately, those who control the commercial aspect rarely have something positive to say unless they are making money. Gianni, Black people in America are not snubbing the Blues. I do wish we had a more curatorial role, and the financial power to go with it. But believe me, Blues, Jazz, Dance, and all of the arts are alive and well in Black America...the Black Community. And that includes, Canada and Mexico (Blaxicans).

**What do you think, sincerely, of the blues played by Europeans?**

I think there are many talented musicians in Europe and elsewhere who love Blues music, and respect its origins, and recognize the struggle endured by 400 years of enslavement by White America, and certain Europeans. Most that I have met in Europe are not trying to OWN ANOTHER PEOPLES' CULTURAL EXPERIENCES, which is not the case in the United States, where many White promoters have been trying to diminish the value, and historical significance of the Black Blues Experience. In the United States, there are so-called Blues Festivals with little or no Black representation.

Playing the Blues or any music because of love and respect is one thing, trying to fraudulently claim the experience is another. It is that love and devotion by many European musicians that I have witnessed and experienced as a performer. The Blues format, along with poetics, life messages, literary metaphors, and universal acceptance, is a natural vehicle for expression by anyone who chooses to use it.

**Is there is some anecdote that you want to tell our readers about the great masters of the blues you've meet such as Pinetop Perkins?**

Well, Pinetop was a great person and performer. He had a tremendous sense of humor and told many stories about women and crazy situations. You know after Muddy Waters' half-brother, Otis Spann died, Pinetop became piano player in Muddy's band. Once they had a terrible accident on the highway, and a

guy named Bo was driving. Bo was a kind of bodyguard, and valet for Muddy. Here is a little bit about how I got my name, Chicago Beau.

Back in 1968, Muddy was playing at a club called the Jazz Workshop in Boston. Whenever Muddy needed something he would shout: 'Hey Bo!' When I heard the call, I would go to Muddy because I was young and wanted to be of help. But at the same time, the other Bo would block my way and tell me to get away from Muddy. This happened a few times, so Muddy said, 'Enough of this shit. Young Beau, I'm going to call you Chicago Beau; and old Bo, I'm just calling you Bo.' From that point on I've been called Chicago Beau.

**11 know that in Chicago you tried to create a sort of Syndicate musicians, an interesting initiative that even here, with poor results we tried, you want to tell us how it went?**

I what follows is my best reply. This is taken directly from my recent memoir,

*Too Much UnConvenience.*

*Beau: Anyway, another thing that happened was that Valerie Wellington and I decided to form an organization that could serve the needs of blues artists. We called it The Chicago Blues Artists Coalition. The focus of the organization was healthcare, fair wages, education, family support, business counseling, event planning, fundraising, and more. We had nearly thirty musicians come to the first meeting. Now, Valerie Wellington, she was young and inexperienced when it came to understanding the nature of the club owner plantation mentality, and generally the nature of business. Chicago club owners claim ownership of the musicians who work regularly in their clubs. At that time there were several. I told Valerie the same thing I'm saying today: keep your business away from anybody that's in business on the Chicago blues scene. That means club owners, the record label owners, booking agents, promoters, and others. For musicians to coalesce is the last thing they want to happen. They have been exploiting musicians' lack of literacy, business sense, lack of self-confidence, and fear of reprisals for independent thinking for decades. I told Valerie, but she didn't listen. She didn't understand the nature of the beast. She wanted to have meetings at Rosa's Lounge, in my opinion, the belly of the beast. First meeting, lounge owner, Tony, was taking in all that transpired. In actuality, even though he provided the space, he should have not been present at the meeting. And I believe the only reason he was there, or offered his place for the meeting, was so that he could go and report back to the other club owners what was up. It hurts me to say this, one by one, tired-ass shuffling blues artists withdrew their interest in the coalition. Some of the Kingston Mines regular performers said that they had been warned by Doc Pellegrino that if they stayed in the coalition, they'd lose their jobs. Some other club owners told the musicians that they would take care of their needs; they didn't need to belong to any kind of organization. These meetings should have been held privately and completely away from the people you going to try to negotiate with. I said it then, and I'm saying it now. Keep*

*your business secret in Chicago until the time is right, and only release info through official channels that are part of your team.*

***J. Labosse: That's a shame– that blues people just were not ready for, and lacked the courage to, bring about a change.***

*Beau: Exactly. And we had good media coverage. George Papajohn at the Chicago Tribune did a great story, as did Ebony magazine. But fear is a motherfucker. The syndicate of blues business people struck fear in the hearts of some of Chicago's blues people with the same old tactic used to prevent slave revolts: turn us against each other. The collective imaginations of those against the coalition couldn't envision how they could benefit. I think that a successful Blues organization could be a benefit to everyone involved because the more people you reach, the greater the possibility for new business and expansion across the board.*

**Another of your initiatives was Original Chicago Blues Annual, what exactly was it?**

The Blues Annual, a magazine, was a means for the Blues/Black community to have their own voice. The Blues Annual combined music, literature, photography, and more. It was also a resource for musicians to connect with each other, promoters, fans, and music industry related businesses. This was before the Internet was well established. We never had reviews, only praises for artists and their works. I think the covers and feature interviews represented the direction of the magazine. We had elders Sunnyland Slim, Pinetop Perkins, Junior Wells, and Billy Boy Arnold. We had a Tribute to Blues Women cover. This was a cover with me, and the last was the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Great Black Music innovators, and torch bearers of all Black music traditions. We published for seven years, and had other publications and projects to compliment the magazine. We often published articles in different languages including Italian. In fact, Alitalia was a major sponsor for five years.

**Can you tell us something in particular about your experiences in Italy? In particular I would like to know how the collaboration with Roberto Murolo was born and how did you find yourself with Neapolitan music?**

The idea for a collaboration with Murolo came from our old friend, Isio Saba, and a producer, Rocco. Murolo agreed that a bluesy harmonica could be a nice shift from his usual style. And so we did a number of tracks in the studio, and his 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday television show in Viareggio.

**A rather delicate question. In Italy, unfortunately, we are experiencing a difficult period where for the first time, due to the migratory flow of Africans to our country, we begin to see the first episodes of racism against people from Africa. One thing that unfortunately in the US you have already experienced. Which is, in your opinion, the best way, beyond specific laws, to fight this ugly phenomenon culturally?**

For many people everywhere, facing the truth is extremely difficult. Africa for many European countries was the land of treasures: gold, precious stones, oil, cheap and free labor, and on and on. And quite naturally, as time goes by, those people, many who have nothing but their families and the clothes on their backs, are going to turn to face the source, and primary reason for their situation; the former colonial powers of Europe. It doesn't matter really what anyone thinks. In 100 years, the face of Europe will have changed. No one can change that. Evil and insecure racists will always find people to hate. Think about this: some northern Italians would like to separate from the darker people in the south. When Italians came to the United States, they were considered by many to be less than human, and many were lynched as were Black people. And today, the amount of baseless hatred for minorities, immigrants, and gay people in the United States has not diminished over the years, it has increased, because of fear of change, and fear of self. There is no fighting ignorance with violence, only time and patience will bring about a change. But if the ignorant attack, resistance is justified.

**In Chicago you created Straight Ahead Production, to produce albums of blues artists. What was the criterion for choosing artists and producing CDs?**

Actually, Straight Ahead Productions was created to produce concerts, books, special events, cruises, and recordings. For the GBW Records project, my idea was to pay Blues artists more than they had

been paid by any Chicago Record company. One thing that's sad about being repressed for centuries, is certain people, when an opportunity comes along, are afraid to accept it. Some who I approached to record were afraid that they may offend local record labels. After a while, I was able to convince artists to take the money, as much money as I could get them up front, because they weren't going to sell thousands of CDs and make a lot of money. I told them, they may see some publishing royalties if they register their songs, but money from sales was unlikely. Take the money! Use the situation! And for criteria, GBW, the executive producers, made suggestions, and I agreed, or disagreed.

**In the current music scene do you see any artist who is carrying on the great tradition of blues?**

Oh, there are many. Too many to mention. Jus Blues Foundation, a Black owned organization, has an awards ceremony in Mississippi every August. Check their website for new names. But so many of the older artists are still going strong. Deitra Farr, John Primer, Billy Branch, Billy Boy Arnold, Sugar Blues, and many, many more. And the creole bands, Jean Francois Fabiano, is a major force in Canada, and the Caribbean.

**Can you tell us something about your recording experience in Paris with Archie Shepp?**

Well, Shepp heard my friend Julio Finn, and me playing at a club in Paris in 1969. He approached us and said he thought that two harmonicas, in opposing keys, would fit with music he wanted to record. The next day, we went into the studio and made history. I was in paradise, music Shangri-la. On the session were the great musicians and revolutionaries: Lester Bowie, Jeanne Lee, Philly Joe Jones, Malachi Favors, Dave Burrell, and Archie Shepp. Smokin! That album is called Blasé and has been reissued several times. The original label was BYG, France.

**And about this new experience, tell us what it is Chicago Blues Experience?**

Gianni, CBE is an idea I've had for quite some time. In 2012 I found amazing partners, Sona Wang, and Bill Selonick, who became cofounders, and together we are moving forward to make this dream a reality. What follows is the official statement from our website, [www.chicagobluesexperience.com](http://www.chicagobluesexperience.com). We will be making an official announcement to the press shortly. The Chicago Blues Experience will be a world-class cultural attraction for the City of Chicago. The Museum will feature state-of-the-art interactive technology that takes visitors on an eye-opening, immersive journey into the past, present, and future of the blues. Exhibitions, memorabilia, a live music venue, and restaurants will reinforce the history and culture from which the blues emerged. Through community outreach efforts, the Chicago Blues Experience Foundation will help play a vital role in providing positive experiences for youth through music education and immersion, creating sustainable and enriching activities for young people. The Foundation's overall objective is to use the blues and related popular music genres as an educational gateway to inspire and cultivate creativity, critical thinking, and self-expression.

**You have done many things, books, CDs, cultural initiatives, which is the thing you're most proud of?**

It's difficult to pick one over the others. And so, I'm equally pleased with everything.