



# THE MUSIC MAGAZINE AND RECORD LABEL WHERE THE BLUES STILL MATTERS!



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(Oct/Nov)



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**Earl Klatzel** - Issue 40 (Oct/Nov) 2007

2 page colour layout of blues paintings and on-line Interview!

INTERVIEW: RICK LACEY

A native of Calgary, Alberta, Earl Klatzel was originally a student of the Alberta College of Art And Design. He has an impressive collection of paintings that have been entitled "Bluesworks By Earl", reflecting Earl's take on life in the 20th century. A lot of his artwork is based around strong characters, and these are usually the central theme of his paintings, but not exclusively; there is also a significant portion of the artwork that concentrates on the architectural heritage. The main characters that Earl uses are based in music, in the context of the origins and development of Blues and rock, from pictures of Skip James, Muddy Waters, Bessie Smith and Buddy Guy to Jimmy Page, Eric Clapton and Tina Turner. With his work having been used to front the Monterey Bay Blues Festival, Blues Matters! caught up with another Blues master...



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**BM: Tell us a little about your background, why you chose Art as a career, what influenced you to take this route and which artists you draw inspiration from?**

**Earl:** I was into drawing figurative characters at a very early age, this stuck with me through out all my school years as art was bringing in my highest marks. After graduating high school, I was accepted into the Alberta College of Art in 1976. At that age I did not have the finances or the dedicated focus it took to become a full-time artist, so I packed up and began a full-time job with a local steel plant. My passion for creating art never subsided at all; I constantly produced drawings at work as well as at home.

Buying and listening to records was the only thing that surpassed my interest in making artwork at the time. I have been buying records since the age of 13, all the rock'n'roll from that time - Led Zeppelin, Jimi Hendrix, Cream, Country Joe & The Fish, Black Sabbath, Deep Purple, etc.

Led Zeppelin were the biggest influence on me out of any band. After seeing them live in Seattle 1977 I was in awe - the concert was so powerful and overwhelming in talent that it took me over two years to quit talking about that concert. It turned me into a fanatic over collecting their music and memorabilia. This obsession worked into my artwork as well, taking me 70 hours to re-create their very 1st North American concert poster. It was one of my favourite posters because of the line-up of Taj Mahal and Country Joe & The Fish on the same bill. I knew it would probably be impossible to find an original to go with my collection so I had to create one. The four members of Led Zeppelin were a music phenomenon together, they created a sound that was like no other; the energy and mood they produce inside you when listening to their music, can only parallel with the feelings you get from listening to some soulful Blues out of the Deep South. I am Zeppelin's biggest fan.

I really only began buying actual Blues records in the '80s, sparked by a fantastic new musician on the scene by the name of Steve Ray Vaughan. I could not believe what I was hearing, talent that could only compare with a Jimi Hendrix or a Jimmy Page. Stevie's music triggered my interest in pursuing all the Blues. The music of Willie Dixon, Albert King, John Lee Hooker, Buddy Guy, Muddy Waters, Koko Taylor and Howlin' Wolf - this I found was the heart and soul to all my rock'n'roll. The more I listened and learned, the more interested I became, which lead to Skip James, Charlie Patton, Sunnyland Slim and Robert Johnson's music. My record collection now has grown to 1300 albums over the years, a lot of rare and obscure Blues, rock and psychedelic stuff.

After 14 years at the steel plant I decided to return to the Alberta College Of Art in 1991 and pursue my interest to be an artist. In 1995 I sold my first painting of John Lee Hooker from a local gallery here in Calgary and the Blues has been my focus as an artist since. I found that when I put my two biggest interests together, music and painting, it started a passion in me to express the mood in each painting that I feel from the music.

**I understand that John Lee Hooker was one of the first musicians that inspired you to paint Blues artists. Can you tell us about that moment when you felt this?**

John Lee Hooker was a big influence to me because of his music, his boogie rhythm, the unique pickin' style he used, and the sound of his deep raw voice had so much feeling. His hard life look and style of clothes was the true look of the Blues. I attended a concert he did in Calgary here on New Years Eve just before I started the Art College in '9. He really rocked the place - I was amazed the band and him created so much energy that lasted the whole night. That show still amazes me when I think about it. Three friends and I were lucky enough to get invited to party with the band at the hotel, if we gave one of the band members a ride back. I took the opportunity to get John Lee to sign the rarest JLH album I owned, "Live At Soledad Prison", he was amazed when he saw it, and said, "Even I don't own a copy of this record." It was great evening and it probably had lots to do with my inspiration to paint him first. I have painted him twice from photos of that night.



**Why do you choose the artists that you have painted?**

All the famous personalities I have painted have influenced me through listening to their music, as well as the stories behind them. Inspired from Robert Johnson myths or the raw sound of Hound Dog Taylor or the stories and music of Son Thomas. I can see no end to this series on Blues musicians for many years to come. I feel it will be many more years of painting to cover a fraction of the musicians that inspire me.

**Music and its history are your main themes. It is good to see the gritty reality of the early days of Blues music showing that those days were hard. How do you research these periods and then decide to paint, for example, a shack on the edge of a cotton field?**

Believe it or not, it took the internet, a modern tool, to allow me to paint from the past. I have viewed thousands of archived photographs from the Great Depression looking for images that reflect the atmosphere and mood that comes across in the early Blues music. I

have painted from photos as far back as 1887 - very poor photos. With my painting of "WEL\*\*\*\*\*", circa 1900, the photo was a nightmare, the instruments looked abnormally different in the worn-out photograph - research led me to find that they were home-made. It was so nice to bring that photo to life.

I sometimes combine a few photographs to build my compositions for the Blues History paintings. I do research on the details of the photos such as colours of the old signs, details on old gas pumps - that the photos don't clearly show - endless research on so many guitars like Dobro's, Stella's, Martin's, I have even had to find and string how to string the open face piano that's in my "An Evening In New Orleans" painting, because every wire shows. The beer bottles in that painting even have the correct labels for time and place as well, even though they do not show any details of that nature in the photograph. The big Jax's beer sign on my "Roadhouse" painting took me a week to find anything on the Jax's colors. I really feel my paintings are an actual window in time.

**Please could you also tell us why you use the colour schemes that you have chosen?**

My palette is made up of rich muddy earth tones which help reflect the mood of the 1930s and '40s - as well as reflecting the hardships of the worn people of that time. Most people think in black & white when they reflect back on that era because of only seeing black & white images, so I find my audience quite intrigued when they see my paintings in colour and still feel the nostalgia within them. My colour palette is one of the qualities that many of my clients are drawn to.

**So as an artist, what mediums do you use? Do you always paint on canvas or do you use anything else?**

I always use canvas on paintings larger than 24"x 30", and I stretch all the canvas myself. I use masonite (hardboard) on paintings 24 x30 and smaller. My paintings do show a change in style approach from when I use these two different supports. When I paint on masonite I use only oil and like to use a more impressionist style to the painting, my use of oil paint is much heavier with showing less image detail overall. These paintings are more about feeling and mood; they have more room for the imagination.

When I paint more photo-realistic, I paint on canvas and mix my mediums. I use heavy acrylic washes for the backgrounds on portraits and some of the history landscapes because acrylic paint does not possess the life in the medium like oils do. This allows my portraits or foregrounds that are in oils to emerge from the acrylic. I feel it gives the dimension in the painting that extra kick. My canvas paintings are highly detailed and more realistic in appearance.

**And tell me, why choose these styles?**

I find that there are two major types of painting styles that people tend to like, either high realism or very painterly, most art enthusiasts will not cross over on their preference, so fortunately I have been able to offer both styles to capture both audiences.

**I'm also impressed at the level of detail you put in to the portraits. Do you study a lot of images of these artists first or do you derive them another way?**

I study many images of the person that I'm going to work on. As a painter of famous personalities I feel I have to be perfect in every aspect of their portrait. People know what they look like so unless you're up for some unpleasant criticism, you better nail it. It also takes a lot of searching for that perfect pose that shows their overall look and also speaks their style of music. I've went years putting off certain portraits because I could not find the right pose or the certain photograph was too well known. Like my "Koko Taylor" painting, I looked for years until recently I acquired her image from a Blues photographer in California. He saw my website and e-mailed me with a generous offer of using any photo in his portfolio. There are some wonderful people out there. He had a great shot of her from the Monterey Bay Blues Festival in 2004, which I did paint.



**Which is your personal favourite portrait?**

When I put the time, work and concentration into painting a portrait there is always a deep personal connection to it, so all I can say is they are all really special to me. If I did not have to earn a living, I would have loved to just show them all as a travelling Blues History Exhibition. Considering I have done 143 Blues paintings in this series, it would have made quite a unique show.

**Where do you normally sell your paintings and are they available in the UK?**

All my original paintings can be viewed and purchased worldwide through my website ([earklatzel.com](http://earklatzel.com)). I also offer canvas giclee's on some of the more popular paintings - my website gallery will explain all about giclee's and which paintings are offered. Also, I show paintings on a full-time basis out of a gallery in Calgary, Alberta, listed on my website. Purchases can be made through them as well.

**You obviously have a good knowledge of your Blues history, but which bands or musicians do you listen to yourself?**

I find that a very tough question with having such a large collection of Blues and rock music, but music like Stevie Ray, Peter Green, Chicken Shack, Killing Floor or Coby & The Blizzards are just as hard to keep shelved as Otis Spann, Sonny Boy Williamson, Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee and all the others I've mentioned today.

**Do you have a real favourite?**

I can't really say that I do, some days I have to hear Muddy, other days its John Lee, lately it's been Son Thomas. I listen to so many different artists when I'm painting. I have taped endless cassette mixtures of various musicians from a local Blues radio show. I'm always listening to a bit of variety like Tommy McClennon, Big Bill Broonzy, Memphis Mini, Gloria Spivey, the list never ends...it's all so good.

**How has the public's overall reaction been towards your work?**

It has been better than I ever expected. The public's reaction has been the best surprise, I enjoy it when I'm at the gallery and I see the peoples expressions as they view my work for the first time, they really seem to be amazed. I have had Blues festivals in Germany, France, Finland and Belgium contact me about showing my work at their events. I have also been contacted by some very well known musicians with great interest and admiration for my work. I see these as the fringe benefits from the focus of my work.

I'm proud to announce too that I was contacted last fall by the Monterey Bay Blues Festival in California about using my "Skip James" painting to represent the 22 Annual Monterey Blues Festival (taking place between 22nd-24th June, 2007). Monterey is the 5th largest Blues festival in North America. It's really a great honour they approached me for my work, they usually ask for submissions from artist I hear, but this year Will Wallace (Chairman - RL) phoned me personally and asked if they could use something from my portfolio because they just absolutely love my paintings. It's pretty much the same way I heard from Blues Matters!

My work seems to affect all people in a similar way; a lot of my clients do not even listen to the Blues but have a great interest in my painting style, quality, and the accurate history content. I just sold a full size (giclee) portrait of Charlie Patton to a couple for their dining room and they know nothing about the Blues.

**Earl, many thanks for taking the time to chat. Good luck with artwork!**

Thank you Rick, and thank you Blues Matters! for the interest in my work. **RL**