

# Tom Ellis Interview

By Dennis Carelli  
Mel Bay's HarmonicaSessions® eZine

August 2005



Tom Ellis (in white pants) blowin' at the final blowout number  
At the Harmonica Masterclass® History of the Blues  
Harmonica Concert

**Part 2** of our interview with Tom Ellis, one of the co-founders of HOOT (Harmonica Organization Of Texas), owner of Tom's Mics, a leading supplier of vintage harmonica microphones to players all over the world, an excellent harp player for over the past 30 years and the author of a series of articles on the music and personal journey of Paul Butterfield.

**DC:** Did Paul Butterfield ever use a bullet-style mic?

**TOM:** Well, I don't think on a regular basis. I have a picture on my wall of Butterfield and Jr. Wells on stage at Big John's and Butterfield is playing through a JT-30. But I don't think that was his choice. I think the first mic he used on the *Lost Electra Sessions* album and prior to that I think he probably used a JT-30 for a bit but he transferred pretty quickly over to an Altec mic which was actually an Electro-Voice crystal mic. But it looked a whole lot like a Shure 545. It had an on-off switch which is something he felt he really needed.

Don't forget back in those days, there were no bullet mics with on-off switches or volume controls. No one was making a harp mic. Then I think in late '64 or early '65 he changed over to a Shure 635 which was a long wand style mic. It looked a whole lot like a Shure SM57. He changed over because [Little] Walter was playing one. Then in '65, certainly by late '65 Shure had started to release the 545 in Chicago. And there is that famous picture of Walter holding one of those. When that happened everybody went to it [545]. I know Billy Boy [Arnold] was playing one. Everybody who was anybody in Chicago, just about, with the exception of [James] Cotton went to a 545. Not long after that, Fender sponsored

The Butterfield Blues Band, Electric Flag and The James Cotton Band. Included in that sponsorship were not only the amplifiers and the PA system but also this full array of Shure microphones. This was the time that Cotton went to the 533 with the volume control. So everybody got Shure mics. I've actually seen and I got to rummage thru Butterfield's kit. His ex-wife let me look at it a couple of years ago when I was out in California. He still had his 3-pin 54PE still in his kit. The microphone he had probably since 1966 or 1967.

**DC:** Refurbishing and customizing vintage microphones is still one of your passions?

**TOM:** We do as much of it as we can. We do a lot of custom work where we put in on-off switches and volume controls. We mix and match mics and elements. Today I sent off a coupe of JT-30's to guys who wanted controlled magnetic elements or controlled reluctance elements. The problem with working with anything vintage including microphones is that the availability of parts just isn't there. The United States government only requires a manufacturer retain parts for products made ten years from the date of their manufacture. So when you get a microphone made in 1965 it's pretty hard to find parts. During the time in the microphone business over the last years, [I] don't even know how long it's been now, we bought up just hordes and hordes of vintage part stocks. From Shure and from Electro-Voice from everybody else. And of course all that stuff has been used up. We still try to do the best we can now. There are a lot of little tricks and little things people can do with their own equipment to fix it up in case it's not working. We try and pass that information along too.

**DC:** Moving from mics, not that mics aren't a topic you are passionate about, to some other areas. Clearly the next topic is one you are very passionate about. All this time you are playing and your interest is heightened if not accelerated when you first heard about and then heard Paul Butterfield. When did you go into it deep, deep, deep in terms of researching, investigating and writing about him? Was that a gradual thing over some time or was there a specific event that launched you into his history and music?

**TOM:** When I first started listening to Butterfield I kind of made this habit of anytime I saw anything about his record or his stuff, I would always cut them out and cram them into the sleeve with the record. So I had gathered that stuff up and of course any time that I could read about him, I read about him. When the blues thing went dead, probably went dead in the 1980 or 1979. I mean it really was dead. It was real hard to find out anything about any of these guys. I got to see Butter here in Dallas probably on one of the last tours, probably was the last tour he made through this area. A night of alternating extreme elation and extreme sadness cause he started off so great and then got himself so messed up at one of the breaks and came back. Man it was almost pathetic. I got to see him and I got to see Jerry Portnoy. A lot of these guys came through town playing these little tiny places. When Butterfield died, I remember exactly where was I. I was driving and I remember hearing it on the radio and being kind of shocked. I had just gotten a cell phone in my car and I picked up the cell phone and called a friend of mine. I said you are not going to believe that Butterfield just died, it kind of re-emphasized how important he was to me. There was a real interesting editorial in, believe it or not, Esquire about him and how important he had been to some of the guys who owned and who were writing for Esquire at the time. That made me think that nobody really knew what he had done and I knew how important he had been to me.

I started doing some writing for a blues magazine called Blues Access. I just queried them one day. I thought nobody had ever written this story before. I was hearing people really running Butterfield down. I talked to people through the mic business almost every day and

if I ever mentioned Butterfield it was like, 'Oh, he didn't tongue block. He didn't do this. Didn't do that.' Always ragging on Butterfield. I just thought these people just don't get it. They don't understand it. Now and then I would meet someone like Rob Paparazzi or somebody... or even Howard Levy who would go on and on about him. So I just queried the magazine and said I would make these guys a deal. If you'll pay for my research costs I'll do the article. I did one article. I had so much information in the first article it was like I need to do another one. And that started the series that ran in Blues Access that ran over, gosh, almost three years. Five parts. It was almost a novella length. I think it was about 35,000 words before we were finished with it. That just really got me going. I got to meet all the guys that had always been the guys on the album covers that I held and looked at as I sat and listened to the music. I got to meet all of them, well not all of them. Some of them were dead and some unfindable. That's what started it.

**DC:** Given the background and that research, how would you describe his impact on the blues music scene?

**TOM:** A couple of weeks ago, [Joe] Filisko and I had a long talk about his on the way to the Harmonica Masterclass in Austin. I think that the problem, well it's not a problem. Let me tell you what I think that most harp players today do. They have a very stilted perception on the harp player as musician. They see the harp player as somebody who if he does not mimic or have great devotion to and play somewhat like, and that's the key phrase, the greats – the Walters, George Smith and all the guys you talk about in your [Masterclass] classes, that if a harp player doesn't show some direct allegiance to them in his playing style they tend to downplay them a lot. They also don't understand, or I think they overlook because I don't think they don't understand it, the fact that in the era when those guys came up there were two kinds of harp players. There were harp player leaders and there were harp player sidemen. And the harp player sidemen were the great people like Walter Horton and primarily people like George Smith. Well I can't say George Smith cause he was more of a leader. [James] Cotton was certainly someone I would put into that sideman category much more so. [Little] Walter is somebody I would put into the leader category. Jr. Wells into the leader category. Butterfield into the leader category. And these were guys that had a very distinct attitude about not only the music they were playing, but the style in which they played it.

Butterfield saw no reason to be beholding to the Walters or Cottons or Wells' of the world. In fact when he was growing up and when he got up on the bandstand and sat in with Muddy [Waters] and sounded like Little Walter that didn't get him any accolades from the audience. He didn't like that. He wanted to hear something new and unique and different. And it was his immediate acceptance by these black audiences and by the Muddys and all the other people he played with back when he was growing up that led him to immediately get the stamp of approval on the way he approached the instrument. So why did he need to sound like anybody else? His own sound was his own sound. He went with it and went with it. And I think a lot of guys today think that if you get up on stage and if you don't sound like Big Walter or Little Walter, you are not going to be accepted by the basic group of harmonica players that are out there. I think unfortunately that in many cases, that's the truth. But the guys who appreciate somebody who has a very unique sound, they tend to be around a little longer and go a little further.

Charlie Musselwhite is a great example of a guy who not only has his own sound but Charlie is just fearless. He is unafraid of 4<sup>th</sup> position or 5<sup>th</sup> position or Cuban music or you name it. He is a guy who has his own distinct attitude about what his music should be and

Butterfield did too. I think people also over look the fact that when Butterfield was coming up in order to be a leader you had to be a good singer. You had to have that emphasis on singing. And there are not many harp players out there today who have the combination of great harp style and great vocal style that you saw from the Butterfields, maybe the George Smiths. I don't know his singing style and if I would put it up there near the top. Certainly Little Walter is an example of that. Cotton I don't think is [near the top]. I don't think Cotton was ever a great singer. I think that what Butterfield was about was not what harp players see as being important today. Which I think is unfortunate because I think they overlook a lot. I mean you can listen to Butterfield's acoustic playing, his 3<sup>rd</sup> position playing and all this stuff. He was fabulous player. Just because he didn't want to sound like Little Walter doesn't mean he wasn't a great player.

Let me add one other thing about that too, the way the harmonica was integrated into the band. Butterfield, at least thru the Better Days era and really all the bands he ever had, always had top flight guys playing with him. He was never somebody who made his band all about the harmonica. He made his band all about the music. You hear that from the very first note of *Born in Chicago* and you hear Elvin [Bishop] playing that slashing slide guitar, excuse me [Mike] Bloomfield playing the slashing slide guitar in there. It was always about the ensemble sound and putting across the ensemble sound. Which not ironically was what Muddy [Waters] was always all about. And what Howlin' Wolf was always all about. It was what Chicago blues was all about in the 1950s. And I think today everybody seems to think that every Chicago blues band was really all about the harmonica primarily because Muddy had that great line that 'the harmonica is the soul of the band.' The soul is only one piece of the body. There are a whole lot of other parts of the body. I think of Butterfield because he was not so harmonica-centric in his band people don't tend to listen to the whole music. If they listen to the music, they see what incredible music was coming out of this incredible ensemble of musicians. The harmonica being just one part. Obviously the part that you and I love the most, but still just one part.

**DC:** It's interesting that just the other day I was digging back into some Butterfield albums for some general listening and in preparation for this conversation and was playing *East West*. *East West* the album but particularly *East West* the song. And that song is so much guitar. It's like 90% guitar. Obviously when Butterfield plays in there he makes an impact but people so much associate that [song] with him and yet there are two killer guitar players in there that are just ripping and creating a whole atmosphere for the song.

**TOM:** It's funny because if you talk to a guitar player about *East West* he doesn't associate it with being a harmonica song at all. I doubt he could even tell you how the harmonica part starts cause it is so guitar-centric.

**DC:** Do you perceive certain phases in his musical career?

**TOM:** I think the first version of the big band, you know what the Bloomfield band was all about, was an attempt to really do the Jr. Parker kind of thing. He really wanted to have a swinging blues band that had a heavy, heavy sound to it when called for. When they did something like "Double Trouble," what I would call a stone blues kind of song. But I think that band morphed into an R 'n B band by the time *Keep On Moving* came out. Certainly there was some blues. He did "Walkin' by Myself" and he did some blues songs. It was still pretty much of an R 'n B band. I think by the time the big band ended they were kind of segueing into kind of a jazzy blues band cause he had some guys who could really blow. He had a bunch of real heavy jazz cats. Some of whom had played with him of a long time and he was letting them run. He was letting them run free. That version of "Love

March” on the live reissue is one example. I have a lot of tapes where he let Sanborn, Dinwittie and Steve Madaio blow free. And even Teddy Harris played piano for him. It’s just pretty heavy duty. What’s interesting to me about Butterfield is that he left that band, but it was still all about the music. When he did the Better Days thing, he kind of returned to what I would call his traditional blues roots but he also returned to his very traditional folk roots.

You know he started out as kind of a street player with a high school friend of his. They were really into Sonny Terry and Brownie McGee and the whole hootenanny thing. He was doing that kind of stuff playing a lot of country blues before he met Elvin [Bishop]. Then he met Elvin and they went off more to the Chicago south side. It was still even in Better Days it was all about the songs. I think in Better Days he thought ‘I kind of incorporated the blues and the jazz, now I’m going to get a guy from New Orleans and put him in the mix. And I’m going to get this guy who has impeccable folk credentials, Geoff Muldaur, and put him in the mix’. Of course he’d known Muldaur for years. So he created a brand new “stew” of music. After that he never really had his own band last a long, long time and he found himself in more of a sideman role. I think he did a lot of really, really, really creative almost unheard of things with the instrument at the time he was playing with the RCO All-Stars with Levon Helm and some of those bands, some of those Woodstock oriented bands. He was putting the harp in places you just won’t think it would go in. And making it really, really work. Then, of course, towards the end of his life he was pretty much back to playing a lot more traditional blues. I think by that time both his physical and mental condition were pretty, pretty severe. Things were pretty rough. His drug problem was rough. I think at that point he was taking a path of least resistance and the path of least resistance was to slide right back into the stuff he had grown up with in Chicago when he started playing amplified. Yeah, he did definitely go through phases but I think what is interesting is that he was able to keep his harmonica a dominant instrument in the “stew” regardless of what the “stew” was made up of.

**DC:** He was also the cook of most of that “stew.”

**TOM:** Well, he was and he wasn’t. A lot of people think Butterfield was this hard-nosed Howlin’ Wolf kind of leader, but he really did let the other guys go. He pretty much let the other guys run. And you look at the last couple of big band albums there are as many tunes contributed by the horn players as there are blues tunes or tunes written by Butterfield. And certainly the Better Days thing, if you look at those mix of songs you can see Ronnie Barron credited. You can see [Geoff] Muldaur credited. Or you can see the direct interjection of things that Muldaur himself wanted to record like the Eric von Schmit stuff or the Percy Mayfield stuff. Those kind of things. I think Butterfield was a great band leader. He was like any good corporate executive. You get the best people and then you kind of let them go.

**DC:** Yeah, that’s what I really mean. More like the executive chef choosing the ingredients. Choosing the players to put in there. And then letting the individuals contribute as each ingredient, letting the players and the band go forward.

**TOM:** Your right. I think that we don’t see a lot of that today. The Butterfield Blues Band lasted the better part of five years, six years. It was basically two ensembles in six years. The first ensemble was wiped away after three years. But the big band ensemble had a number of key people who stayed with that band pretty much all the way through; Sanborn, Dinwittie and Butterfield. They were in it pretty much through the whole thing. And the guys who were new were guys he was meeting when he lived in Woodstock and

playing with on a regular basis, every night at jams on Joys Lake and all these clubs up there. And then there was the Muldaur thing that came back in there. He'd known Muldaur since the first band, the Bloomfield band. And of course he knew Muldaur's wife and they lived up there in Wood stock. They had this tight knit group of people up there who played with each other in all kinds of weird combinations all the time. So there was this amazing sense of familiarity. We don't have much of that today. We don't have music towns like Woodstock was or like San Francisco was in the '60s. Or Los Angeles was in the '60s. Or Chicago was in the '50s. You don't have these kind of towns where you have this high number of musicians all of whom are playing with one another and sparking each other and trying new things all the time and all that. It's a different time today. I don't think people realize how special all that was back then. And Butterfield was trying to keep the whole thing he grew up with in Chicago together.

**DC:** I think a lot of people today are dumbed down a little by the commercialism of a lot of the music.

**TOM:** Yeah. Well everybody wants to categorize everything. I think what Butterfield was great about, there's a line in the liner notes of the Live Reissue that he said something to the effect that blues comes in a lot of forms. Blues is John Lee Hooker and it's Nina Simone and it's King Pleasure. It's all these different people. Everything I play has the blues feeling to it, but it's not traditional blues. It's not Chicago blues. It's the blues. It's the blues with a little 't,' not THE blues with a capital "T." And everybody thinks of the blues with a capital "T" today.

**DC:** Yeah, and thinking about what you said earlier about playing in his [Butterfield's] own style. To pay something note for note from someone like Little Walter, the audience would be playing it in their head as he is playing it. So he would not be giving them anything.

**TOM:** Yeah, exactly. You listen to his playing and you just don't hear many people play with that level of intensity. And you don't hear people play with that level of emotional connection. There was definitely something there. He had a way of ripping people's hearts with his style of harmonica playing. I think he realized that kind of emotional playing that he was interested in and that he worked to develop was very, very different from the kind playing that Little Walter had. I don't think of Little Walter as being an emotional harmonica player. There are cuts where the emotion comes across. But I think Butterfield had this real thing about hitting the audience and touching the audience real hard. I don't think harp players today appreciate that. They're more about the technique and the ability to sound like somebody, play all the licks and that kind of thing. There is a great Butterfield quote; "It's easy to play licks. It's hard to play the melody." I say that to people all the time and I am amazed at how many people tend to, as you say, they are so "dumbed down," don't understand how important that is. Because the melody means you are communicating the whole song. You're not just communicating a lick. And most people today are all about communicating a lick.

**DC:** Yeah, to me that comes back to focusing on the soloist and not focusing on the band and on the song.

**TOM:** Yeah. Blues songs are about lyrics. They are about a message. They are telling you a story. That's the greatest thing about Muddy, it's not his band. It's that Muddy can tell you a story. He made you listen and listen to the words and you got caught up in the story. And today most players are not caught up in any story. They are caught up in getting their solo out.

**DC:** Yeah. How long and how hard they can blow.

**TOM:** Yeah, yeah. It's like the antithesis of music, of vocal music. Not instrumental music.

**DC:** But he [Butterfield] certainly still did touch a lot of people. You are one of the prominent examples of people who became interested in blues music and became interested in the harmonica because they heard him. I've talked to a number of people who said when I heard him or say him, boom... I was hooked.

**TOM:** Listen, I'll say this to you and you can quote me. I'll have people who will laugh at me but, had it not been for the Butterfield Blues Band, the first Butterfield Blues Band, I'm including Elvin in there and I'm including Bloomfield in there, there would have been no awareness, no I won't say no. There would have been little awareness of the blues especially Chicago blues outside of Chicago and there wouldn't be much awareness of it today. It would be just as much a regional phenomenon as Piedmont style blues is today. It would be a hardcore group of people who knew about it who were kind of musicologists at heart. But the Butterfield band, they are the ones that went to California. They are the ones that told Bill Graham to book the stuff. I was looking today at a listing of Bill Graham posters cause there is one of Butterfield I've been trying to get forever and I was looking at the mix of people he put with the [Jefferson] Airplane and Quicksilver, Steve Miller and Moby Grape. All of those people, Muddy and [Jr.] Wells and [Little] Walter and B.B. King, all of those people got exposure because, only because, of Butterfield to white audiences. Sam Lay will tell you that when they started doing their little spins out of Chicago they got real popular at Big John's and got big notoriety in Chicago and then they started getting booked by some colleges in and around Chicago. Then all of a sudden they were going to Wisconsin. And then they were going to Ohio. All of those people had never heard Chicago blues. And it was Butterfield that turned all those people on to that. I'm a classic example of that.

**DC:** I think one of his legacies is that he did help expand the music to a lot of people.

**TOM:** I'm still working at my book on Butterfield and what interests me about Butterfield from a writer's perspective is the musical/sociological implications. Not implications. The musical/sociological impact that that band had on, what I'm going to call the traditional American music scene in the mid '60s to late '60s. I think because of him they started a lot of people on the same kind of search I did. I found out about Butterfield which made me find out about Little Walter which made me find out about Muddy which made me find out about Sonny Boy #1 and then [Sonny Boy] #2. And then [Lightening] Hopkins. Well, it was like dominoes falling over a period of about a year and a half. I just can't think of anybody who had that impact. Maybe the [Rolling] Stones from the standpoint of blues in England. But they are the only ones I can come up with.

**DC:** He was a catalyst for his time.

**TOM:** Totally, yeah.

**DC:** Tom, I very much appreciate your persistence and commitment to having this conversation and sharing your thoughts on something that you are so passionate about. Thank you so much

**TOM:** My pleasure.