



Tom Ball

By Dennis Carelli
HarmonicaSessions.com

June 2004

Guitar player, studio recording artist, singer, songwriter, author of music instruction material, novelist AND harmonica player, Tom Ball is not easily described. A versatile and accomplished musician and author, Tom is probably best known for his acoustic duet with Kenny Sultan. The duo plays blues-oriented acoustic music that brings out the earthy roots of the music. Together for over 20 years, Tom and Kenny continue to blend their talents to keep the music they love alive.

DC: I understand that you started out as a guitar player?

TOM: Yeah, that was my first instrument and I still do quite a bit of guitar work. In fact, I just did a classical record that came out about six months ago. That was my first instrument. I was about eleven. I played guitar for about 2 or 3 years. Then the “folk boom” hit in California in the early 60”s and suddenly there was lot of folk-singing guys that played guitar, sang and also played harmonica through a rack. Guys like Bob Dylan, Eric Anderson, Donovan. And so I started doing that and that’s really how I got involved in harmonica. Initially using it as an accompanying instrument to guitar work. But then I got exposed to Sonny Terry. And suddenly that changed my world.

DC: I was going to ask what put you on the road to the blues (music). Was it Sonny Terry?

TOM: Yeah it really was through folk music. I was eleven, twelve, thirteen and listening to KPFK and all the NPR and Pacifica kind of stations. Listening to what was passing itself off as folk music. It really wasn’t the real thing. It was The Kingston Trio, Peter, Paul and Mary and such. But I was only eleven. I didn’t know the difference. So I would be listening to this stuff and every now and then the DJ’s would sneak on something by Lightening Hopkins, Brownie (McGee) and Sonny (Terry) or Woodie Guthrie. Something a little bit more traditional. That immediately appealed to me. I liked that stuff a whole lot better so I got involved with Brownie and Sonny and that led me to the acoustic players. And eventually to The Ash Grove which was a club in Los Angeles. I pretty much lived at The Ash Grove” throughout my teen years and was able to see everybody that was alive really. That club was a tremendous outlet and you didn’t have to be twenty-one to get in. So I got to see everybody I always wanted to see, just about. From Gary Davis to Doc Watson and everything in between. It was great.

DC: Your first band, was it a folk oriented band?

TOM: I was in a couple of garage bands in junior high school but they didn’t amount to much. The first real band I was in was a blues band, an electric blues band called the “Yerba Buena Blues Band.” That formed about 1966. We played a lot of clubs on the Sunset Strip, places like PJ’s, The Seawitch and Mother Neptunes. And we got to play at the big “love-in” in Elysian Park on Easter Sunday during the “summer of love.”

DC: That's right, that was the era of the "love-in."

TOM: Yeah, it was great. 10,000 people. I was sixteen years old and fronting a band. Scared the hell out of me. But I loved it (Laughs). So we had a lot of fun and that band lasted a couple of years. It was my introduction to playing in public. I'm still in touch with a couple of guys from that band. They're still good friends of mine.

DC: And this was an electric band so you were playing amplified at that time. Was it a gradual thing that you developed the acoustic style that you play today?

TOM: I suppose I was playing amplified at that time but it was in more of an acoustic style. We didn't have any equipment, we were just kids. So we would go around to all our friends and borrow their amps and borrow their guitars. I was supposed to be the singer and I didn't even own a microphone, let alone a PA system or an amp. So I would play through whatever I could borrow. And I wasn't specifically using a bullet-shaped mic through an amp in the Chicago style that everyone thinks about. I was more or less playing right into the PA mic. So I kind of developed an acoustic technique even though I was playing electric music.

DC: Kind of a little Butterfield.

TOM: Yeah (laughs), a little bit. Yeah.

DC: Anyone else in your family play any musical instruments?

TOM: Well they didn't then, but they do now. My brother is a semi-professional bluegrass banjo player and he has a band up in Lompoc (CA). And my father played drums and vibes with small Dixieland jazz groups after he retired.

DC: Did you plant the musical seeds?

TOM: I don't know. I would be reluctant to take credit for that. I think that they were interested all along but finally decided to sink some time into it.

DC: After your teens did you pursue music as a career or did you follow other teenage dreams?

TOM: After college I got the itch to travel and spent most of my 20's outside the country traveling around Asia, South America, Europe and anywhere else I could go. I really didn't come back in to the country until I was twenty-eight. At that point (I) moved to Santa Barbara and immediately met Kenny Sultan and we have been playing together ever since.

DC: Was he doing a solo at the time?

TOM: He was doing a duo act with a female singer, playing backup for her. I was playing in an electric band up here in Santa Barbara called "The Blues Company." I saw his name in a newspaper and it said that he played ragtime and blues guitar. So I figured it was somebody I should meet. So I happened to notice he was playing this little club called The Déjà Vu club the same night I was playing with my band around the corner at the Bluebird Cafe. I couldn't go see him cause I was too busy gigging so I asked my girlfriend Laurie, whose now my wife, if she would go around the corner and check this guy out for me. So she went. Kenny says he still remembers her because she came walking in with a clipboard. He thought she was from the IRS or something. She took copious notes and came back and said "Kenny is a great picker. Has a great sense of humor. And he drinks Heineken." So I figured that's perfect. Cause Blind Blake and Heineken were my two biggest hobbies. I finally connected with Kenny a couple of weeks later. He was teaching

guitar at the university, UCSB (University of California, Santa Barbara). He was asked to be on the local KCSB radio show to plug his classes. He went in there and played and asked me to come along. So I went with him and the first time we played was live on the radio. A little tiny club in town happened to have the radio on and I guess they liked what they heard cause they called us up at the radio station and offered us fifteen bucks and a pizza to play Friday night for an hour. We said, "Yeah. OK. That's cool." So we did it and had so much fun we just continued doing it. Now we have been doing it twenty-five years.

DC: Longer than many marriages.

TOM: Yeah (laughs).

DC: Now when you play with Kenny you are playing into a vocal mic and singing, are you mostly in 2nd position?

TOM: Yeah, I do some songs in 1st and a little bit in 3rd but I would say 85%, 90% is in 2nd position.

DC: Do you play any Chromatic at all?

TOM: No.

DC: Ever tempted? Or is it outside the style (of music) you want to play?

TOM: I've stuck a few in my mouth a few times, but they felt so funny I never pursued it.

DC: It's quite a big thing.

TOM: Yeah, it's a whole different bag and I never really gave it enough time to learn how to do it.

DC: I lot of harmonica players I meet, and I plead guilty to this when I started, know little if anything about music and music theory. I noticed you have done pretty substantial studio work, do you read music?

TOM: Well, yes and no. I can read charts, of course, for harp. I don't read music for harp but I can slowly read music for guitar. When I am recording classical guitar pieces, I learn most of those from sheet music. But I don't sight read. I don't sit down and just play it. What I have to do is convert the classical guitar into guitar tablature. And then read the tablature and learn it that way.

DC: That's probably a better way to explain it. Reading music is one thing; sight reading is another.

TOM: No, never have been able to do that [sight reading]. But fortunately for studio work on diatonic harp, almost none of it is ever written out any way. I mean I've done, I don't now, 150 CDs and I think maybe twice there was sheet music provided for me. And even on those two times when there was sheet music, I just explained to the guy that I can't read this stuff. Just play me what you want me to play and I can learn it by ear. And they did and were patient enough with me. I think that most sessions on diatonic harp you don't really have to learn how to sight read anyway. Not to put down that knowledge. I would love it if someone came along and tapped me on the shoulder with a magic wand and enabled me to be able to sight read. That would be a blessing. But I don't think that it's necessarily something you have to do for diatonic harp for the studio.

DC: But on the other hand, a well developed ear, being able to listen to something and make that happen on the harmonica is quite important; either listening to a record to learn a song or learn a lick. If you don't develop your ear then you're really out in the woods.

TOM: Well that's true too. I think that ideally it would be great if everybody had a little bit of each. It's not really one versus the other. If you can combine both elements you would be better off than your average musician. But most folks that are interested in diatonic harp are probably, by nature, not the kind of people who are interested in learning how to sight read (laughs). I've found.

DC: Now we're beginning the festival season, do you travel a lot each year?

TOM: We do during the summer time, spring and fall. We don't go anywhere in the winter except the ski resorts. Most of our touring season starts right about now (early May). We were in Mammouth [Mountain] last week. We go to Fall Brook (CA) this week. We are not going real far. The "far" stuff happens in the summer because that's when all the festivals happen. So we travel quite a bit, but it's seasonal traveling. In the winter time we stick pretty close to home except we go up and play for the skiers.

DC: When you go out [traveling] for the festivals, do you go out for a couple weeks at a time or do you go for a weekend, return home, go for another weekend and return home?

TOM: It just depends on whether we can fill the dates or not. We're not real big "road dogs". The only times we ever go out for more than a couple of weeks is when we go to Europe. Those trips can last up to six weeks if they can fill them up. Within the states we are probably more likely to fly out, play a festival and fly home. There being only two of us the costs are, of course, much less for transportation, hotels, cars and things like that. We can afford to just fly out play a festival and come on home. And part of that is, we do live in Santa Barbara and it's a hard place to leave (Laughs). So rather than play bowling alleys in the middle of the country to fill in those dates on Mondays and Tuesdays between the festivals, it's not only more cost effective but more fun to just come home. That would be hard to do if we were a five-piece band. As a duo it seems to work.

DC: Do you have any favorite festivals that come to mind as so much fun that you look forward to them more than others?

TOM: Domestically, I would mention the Strawberry Music Festival in Yosemite (CA). That's a wonderful festival and we've been up there, I don't know, a dozen times I guess over the years. That's probably my favorite domestic festival.

DC: Do they do any teaching there as well the musical performances?

TOM: They do have some workshops during the day but it's not oriented specifically toward teaching. Just a big festival. But it's very eclectic in the kinds of talent that it brings. You are likely to hear anything from blues to bluegrass to jazz to world music.

DC: Is that a fair and appropriate word to use with you and your musical interests, eclectic?

TOM: Yes (Laughs).

DC: I didn't want to mindlessly put you in that blues harmonica category given that I've seen you in so many other areas.

TOM: Thank you. I appreciate that. I am very much interested in other types of music and we try to play some of that when we can as well. I think that's part of the reason we like the festivals in Europe so much. Because they are not at all genre specific like they

are over here. You play a big festival in Denmark, for example, you're likely to have a metal band followed by an opera singer. And it's great because even if you don't like somebody there are two or three stages where you can go find somebody else you like better on another stage. And it winds up exposing people to all types of music that they didn't even know existed.

DC: And probably won't listen to if they were on the radio. Just push the button and go on to something else.

TOM: Yeah. It's fun.

DC: As a songwriter as well as player, do you have any role models or people who were an inspiration. Someone who wrote songs in the past that you kind of look to because of certain rhythms or the approach that they have taken with some songs?

TOM: That's a good question. I would say that there's about a million of them depending on what type of music you are talking about. We do write music, but we are not the kind of songwriters that get up every morning and force themselves to write their dreams down. We are not what I would call compulsive songwriters. We wait until its about time to record another album and then we go, "Uh oh, we better get some material." So we sit down and write a half a dozen or a dozen songs and then probably don't even write again for another couple of years. But amongst the songwriters I admire, of course, you've got Dylan, Lennon & McCarthy, Willie Dixon and Chuck Berry. In between those four that just about covers everybody. Hank Williams, too. Then of course there's a lot of new talent around. I think Tim O'Brian is a very talented writer. And in blues I love James Harman's lyrics.

DC: Oh, yes. I look forward to his [James Harman's] albums. His harp playing is wonderful, but it's the songs that he writes that I love.

TOM: Well, he's a story teller. You could sit across the table from him and he could keep you in stitches for three or four hours just talking. He is just a compulsive story teller, very witty and funny and...

DC: Observant.

TOM: Observant. Yeah, exactly.

DC: When you do a recording, do you do a lot of pre-studio arrangements? Or do you go into the studio with an outline of a song and let the song organically happen?

TOM: I guess it would depend on whether it's a Tom and Kenny record or somebody else's record. For our own records we go in pretty rehearsed really. We work out all the details such as who gets the solos, when and where, and where the little phrases happen. Where we are in unison or harmony. We work all that out, and of course we do leave each other free rein during the solo sections of the song to do anything that we want. But the arrangements are all pretty tight before we go in because we record for smaller labels and they don't have the world's biggest budgets. It's a lot more cost effective if you are prepared before you go in. On the other hand I wind up doing a lot of sessions on other people's records and many of them if not most I've never heard the pieces before. So I have to go in their cold and figure out something to plat right away. That's both good and bad as well because it forces you to be creative on the spot and you have to start "shooting from the hip" and hopefully you come with something that works out. But it's fun either way. I like the recording process. And it's become a lot easier now that people have ProTools™ and they can save you with a big net (Laughs). If you hit a "clam" they can do a "clamectomy".

DC: Those famous words, “Well, let’s punch it in here.”

TOM: Yeah, exactly. As much as I try to shy away from that, it sure comes in handy. You might play 90% of the solo is the greatest thing you’ve ever done before and then you hit this terrible “clam.” Who wants to throw the whole solo out and start all over again?

DC: You are a teacher as well? I think you’ve done teaching, although I’m not sure what level of instruction.

TOM: Yeah, I’ve done three or four instruction books but I don’t do a lot of one-on-one teaching any more. A little bit, if it is a student who specifically knows what it is he wants to learn and knows my playing, then that’s fine. But if it is somebody who is new to the instrument and the only harp they’ve ever heard before is on a Bob Dylan record, then I try to send them to somebody else. It’s time consuming and it’s not the easiest instrument to teach and I’m just not patient enough for beginners any more.

DC: I think it’s one of the most difficult to teach. You can’t see what’s happening.

TOM: That’s exactly right. You can’t. Plus it is very difficult to describe what it is that you are doing. That’s why I respect David Barrett so much as a teacher because he is really the best teacher, I think, on the planet. I’ll tell him that to his face. And have told him that to his face. I think that he is the best there is at articulating exactly what it is that we’re all doing. We know how to do what it is we are doing, but we don’t know how to describe it. And you ask a hundred harp players, “How do you do that?” and ninety-nine of them aren’t going to know. Or maybe ninety aren’t going to know and the other nine are going to tell you how to do it wrong. And Dave will know how to do it. And he’ll know what it is he is doing and he can specify what the cheeks are doing. And where the tongue goes and what the teeth are doing. These are aspects of harp playing that I never even think about.

DC: I’ve seen that on occasion when someone is asked a question and this blank look comes across their face. They stop and you can almost hear them thinking, “What am I doing?”

TOM: (Laughs) That’s right.

DC: Then they put a harmonica in their mouth and play. Then they say something like, “This is kinda moving”. This is a difficult thing.

TOM: It is a difficult thing. I’ve found it’s easier to write books about it and actually teach one-on-one.

DC: Another of those “labels” associated with you is blues historian. Have you heard that one before?

TOM: Um. A little bit. I’ve been interested in that kind of music for forty years or more and have been a record collector, discographer and 78 freak. I really enjoy the stuff. I didn’t set out to be any kind of historian or anything but wound up with a whole bunch of fairly irrelevant knowledge just in the course of studying this stuff myself. I think that’s basically what most historians are: you find something you are interested in and you wind up with a whole bunch of knowledge. Then somebody comes along and calls you a historian (Laughs).

DC: In the perspective that you have from your years of playing, collecting records and what not, are there definitive eras of influence? For example, the time in pre-war Chicago is often spoken about as an era. Then Chicago. Then other pieces after that. After about the 60’s it kind of goes blurry.

TOM: Yeah, it does. I'm not so sure it wasn't blurry even before that because some of what we have come to describe as being certain eras had more to do with who was producing records than who was playing on them. I mean everybody talks about the late 30's and early 40's as being a boring era for Chicago blues because so many of the 78s sounded alike and had the same instrumentation on them. But that is not really a reflection of where the blues was at in Chicago as much as it is a reflection on where Lester Melrose who produced all those sessions was at and what he thought would sell. So it's a mistake in some way to think back on certain eras and define them by what the recorded product was like. Because in many cases the recorded product was only the reflection of only one person's idea of what would sell and not necessarily a reflection of what was being played in the clubs. So it is hard to make those kind of leaps. But your right everything does get kind of blurry in the 60's and I think that is probably a reflection of society as a whole. How do I explain this? In the 1920's, for example, when you heard a guitar player playing blues you could tell within one measure if he was from the Delta or from Florida or from Texas or from anywhere else. Because the style of guitar was different. So each region had their own kind of sound and it was obvious to those of us who study this stuff where these guys were from. As the recording industry kicked in and people started to hear music that originated from beyond the frontiers of their own little town, they began to get influenced. The Texas guys started to get influenced by the Floridians. And then people started to hear other types of music and by the time you work your way up to after WW II now you've got African music being played to Eskimos, Indian music being played to Japanese. Now everybody heard everything by now and it all gets more synthesized together and cross-pollinated and it becomes more and more difficult to define any kind of regional characteristics of any kind of music. Unless you go deep into the jungles of Ecuador and find some tribe that has never been discovered before.

DC: Yes, that and the fact that in the 60's rock 'n roll kicked in and that became The popular music.

TOM: Right.

DC: It (rock 'n roll) just sucked in everything. It sucked in blues. It sucked in jazz. It sucked in whatever kind of influences it could because different bands wanted to be distinctive, unique and create their own style. So they listened to what they could, brought their own creativity to it and put it out in their own fashion. If it was available, someone grabbed on to it and played it back in a different kind of form. Some of the smaller genres such as blues got "heaped on" by all this other popular music of which rock 'n roll was the most wide spread.

TOM: Right. You can blame it all on the electric guitar really in a way. Up until the 50's the popular music in America was all horn driven whether it was big band stuff or jazz or dance band music. That was "pop". Once the electric guitar started to click in over the last fifty years that's been the basic instrument of all American pop music. Until maybe now with more synthesizers and rap, electronic stuff. For about fifty years there it was pretty much electric guitar driven music. Whether it was metal (music) or Buddy Holly.

DC: That is probably the main instrument sold in music store. At least the stores around here.

TOM: Sure.

DC: It's usually walls and walls and walls of guitars. Maybe they have a rack of harmonicas, maybe.

TOM: Yeah (Laughs).

DC: Let me ask you for a couple words of wisdom. If someone were just starting out to play the harmonica, not even blues harmonica, what words of advice would you give them?

TOM: Um, the first thing I would tell them is for every hour you spend playing, spend at least two hours listening. Cause I think a lot of beginning harp players are hemmed in by their own lack of understanding of the genre because they haven't heard the greats play yet. And they are not sure where they want to go since their own exposure to the music has been so limited. I think surrounding yourself with that music and listening to it, you learn so much by osmosis. It gets inside you. If you listen to Little Walter, Sonny Terry, Sonny Boy Williamson for three or four hours a day, some of those licks are just going to get inside your spine. You can't get rid of them. They are going to be right there when you want them. The more you understand what is going on with the instrument the easier it will be when you stumble across the key towards playing it yourself. So I always tell people to immerse themselves in the music and listen to it way more than the time they spend playing it. That's one thing I can think of.

DC: Very important I think. You have to know where it comes from before you know where you want to take it.

TOM: Yeah. See you said that in six words and it took me twenty minutes (Laughs).

DC: Well I kind of cheated. I was here preparing for our conversation. What's in the near term for you and Kenny? New CD?

TOM: We are working on one. We are rehearsing every week and writing some new material. We are going to do a new CD this year. Both Kenny and I have new solo guitar records out. He has some new teaching material out and I am working on a book on Sonny Boy Williamson. And writing another novel.

DC: Sonny Boy II?

TOM: Both actually. A little of each.

DC: Good. The original Sonny Boy is often forgotten.

TOM: He is often forgotten. And in some ways he is the guy who laid the groundwork for all the Chicago people. I think. I think his playing is under appreciated today.

DC: Tom, thanks so much. I appreciate your setting aside some time to talk today and share some of your experiences and knowledge. Thank you.

TOM: You bet. See ya.