

Tom Ellis Interview

by Dennis Carelli



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

Part 1 - The Start: Iron Butterfly, Microphones, and of the love for Paul Butterfield

Tom Ellis, one of the co-founders of HOOT (Harmonica Organization Of Texas), has been playing harmonica for over 30 years. From bluegrass music, to rock and finally to the blues inspired from hearing the legendary Paul Butterfield, Tom has been involved with the harmonica and his love of music in many forms: as a player in various groups; as a student studying with Jerry Portnoy; and as a teacher teaching a program that helps establish the key elements to become a good harmonica player. He is known to many as the owner of Tom's Mics, a leading supplier of vintage harmonica microphones to players all over the world including many professional players. To many more harp players he is thought of as a well known and knowledgeable writer who authored a series of articles published in the late 1990's about the music and personal journey of Paul Butterfield, the harp player that forever influenced Tom and countless others.

DC: Let's start at the beginning. Tell me, how did you get involved in music and particularly how did you get involved with the harmonica?

TOM: Well, I don't come from a musical family but my dad was a pretty big "jazz hound." So when I was growing up I was introduced to everybody from Frank Sinatra to Mel Torme, from Tony Bennett to Carmen McRae. I probably heard all the great jazz singers when I was growing up. When I was about sixteen, the summer I turned sixteen

actually, a friend of mine who I was working with at the time had gone to San Francisco and brought me back a copy of one of the very first issues of Rolling Stone magazine. There was a story in that issue about [Paul] Butterfield. I read that story and was pretty intrigued. I had never listened to blues prior to that time. I had grown up in a beach in Florida with the Beach Boys and the pop music. There was a DJ who was running a small AM station in the beach community where I grew up who was playing a lot of the mid-1960's rock sound. He was playing everything from Quicksilver [Messenger Service] to Janis Joplin to Steve Miller to a lot of Lovin' Spoonful and the Byrds. All that music that was coming out around then. Kind of an alternative approach to [radio] programming at the time. So I was hearing a lot of that music, but I hadn't heard any blues. So this issue of Rolling Stone intrigued me because there were some things I didn't know. I knew the names of the groups and I had heard some of their music. And I actually went out not long after that and bought a copy of the first Butterfield album. And that is what introduced me to basically everything. And from that album I think the next thing I bought was probably "Stand Back" by Charlie [Musselwhite]. And then after that I just started haunting some record stores and buying up all the Chess [Records] stuff I could. I can remember the first Little Walter album I got, the [James] Cotton stuff on Verve [Records]. And I just kind of jumped into it from that point forward.

DC: But at that time were you playing harmonica or just getting into the music?

TOM: Well, no I wasn't playing harmonica. I didn't start playing harmonica until late in my sixteenth year. Actually, one of my closest friends in Florida where I grew up, his mother had been a very successful jazz singer in San Francisco after World War II. So we would hang out at his house a lot. He was a really good guitar player. And another one of my closest friends was a drummer. They had a group together and I was always trying to figure out a way to wiggle my way in. I can't remember where I saw this picture of Butterfield, it might have been in Rolling Stone. But there was this picture of Butterfield back around that time and he was holding a Koch [harmonica]. You know one of the little ten-hole diatonic tuned harmonicas that looks like a Chromatic. And I bought one of those things because I was so intrigued with his music. I spent the next year incredibly frustrated, unable to figure out exactly how he was able to get the sounds he got out of that Koch ten-hole harmonica. About that time, right around when I was mid-seventeen or eighteen, I discovered Tony Glover's book by accident in a music store. And kind of opened a lot of doors and helped me figure stuff out. And from that point forward I was playing regularly in what you would call rock 'n roll bands. Although by this time, '68/'69 we'd integrated a lot of stuff. The Allman Brothers are from where I grew up [in Florida]. You heard that and you heard a lot of the early Jay Geils Band stuff we were into. They were on the set list. And the band I played with when I went to college, the drummer had played with the Allman Brothers in Daytona Beach when they were the Allman Joys. And the guitar player had played with Ted Nugent, believe it or not. He was a bass player then and had played in the original Amboy Dukes. Both those guys were pretty tuned into blues so we did a lot of blues music. Of course we also did a lot of Iron Butterfly. We crossed a lot of music types. I was playing out pretty regularly by the time I was eighteen

or nineteen. In the summers when I wasn't in college I played in a blue grass band. And I played harp almost exclusively in that ensemble. It was banjo, guitar, bass and harmonica. And my brother would sometimes play guitar and I would play bass with them. So I was going back and forth between bluegrass and blues regularly.

DC: Playing as much as possible.

TOM: Yeah. During the summer we did the folk festival circuit in the southeast which still exists. And we would go out on the road in the summer for the better part of two months. We could go out and play the folk festival circuit. And I got introduced there to a lot of what I would call country blues and Piedmont blues. I heard a lot of those kind of guys like Sonny Terry and all those guys. So I got exposed to a whole different slice of blues that I was listening to in my record collection.

DC: I'm still trying to digest the idea of In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida on harmonica

TOM: (Laughs) No we didn't play In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida on harmonica. I sang. I was basically the lead singer in all the bands except the bluegrass band. I sang the tenor harmony parts in that. In my college bands we weren't playing exclusively blues. We were playing everything we kind of liked. It tended back then to be a lot of Jay Geils stuff. We did some Crosby, Stills and Nash. Back then you kind of played across a wide range of music. Things weren't so quite as specified as bands are today

DC: There weren't as many musical "pigeon holes" as there are for bands today

TOM: Yeah, there aren't. And then I got to see Muddy [Waters]. I saw Muddy, I guess it was in '69. It was either in '69 or '70 right after Paul Oscher joined the band. We went to Daytona Beach for a touring show. It was one of these package deals that had Muddy with Oscher. He just blew my mind. With Willie Dixon and Lightening Hopkins. I think Freddy King was on that show too. A great show. That was like my first introduction to the real honest to god thing. Later that same summer I saw Buddy Guy and Jr. Wells. They were playing in the South. Back then a lot of bands didn't come to the South. After Martin Luther King was shot most of the bands that were from north of the Mason-Dixon line, especially the integrated or the black bands, they just didn't come south very much after that point. As a matter of fact, there is a real famous interview with Butterfield where he said after Martin Luther King was killed, 'We (The Butterfield Blues Band) never play south of the Mason-Dixon line.' Matter of fact they only did one date south of the Mason-Dixon line and that was in 1969 when they played at the Miami Pop Festival. And I sat right in front of the stage, right in front of Paul that whole set. I think that was

the only time they played in the South, the Butterfield big band never played in the South. So I did get to see "Butter" around that time. That was of course an eye-opener.

DC: Now was that with Mike Bloomfield and Elvin Bishop?

TOM: No, it was the first big band ensemble with Elvin and [David] Sanborn had just joined the group. The first big band did not have Dave in it. He had just joined the group and I think, I am trying to remember if they had released Pigboy Crabshaw, I think they just released Pigboy Crabshaw. They, of course, killed everybody that night. And Paul was right up there at the peak of his form. It was real interesting cause after the Miami Pop Festival we were staying in Miami with my guitar-playing friend's grandmother and we went into the camp grounds afterwards where Butterfield and [Gene] Dinwiddie went out in the camp grounds. Butterfield had his flute and Dinwiddie had his mandolin on him and they went and sat in with people. People were playing music all the time in the campgrounds. So we got to sit in and listen to that too.

DC: You played in bands throughout college, did you ever think of taking it up professionally?

TOM: Well, we kind of played semi-professionally in the bluegrass band. We had done pretty well. I got out of college and played a little bit, but then I moved. I relocated from Florida to Houston. I was kind of getting into jazz in a really serious way, not as a musician but just as a listener. And I put the harmonica down while I lived in Houston for about two and a half years. Although I started doing a lot of music writing while I was in Houston and in fact got to interview Butterfield then and saw, not the original Better Days ensemble, but the second-generation Better Days ensemble. I just didn't pursue my harmonica playing much. Subsequently moved to Atlanta in '78 and started playing a little bit again, more for myself than anything else. I didn't really start playing again really seriously for about ten years. It wasn't until I actually moved here that my wife, tired of me bitching and moaning about not playing any music, went out, bought me a mike and an amp and said get out of the house and go play.

DC: She bought you a mike and amp so a lot of your earlier playing was acoustic? Or through the vocal mic?

TOM: A lot of the bluegrass stuff was. No, in the college bands and afterwards I had always played amplified. I never actually played through the PA or acoustically. And had used as my first mic I remember a little Kent DM25 I think. It was a little tiny thing. It was a piece of crap. And then I got a [Shure] 545. I was playing a 545 which in a round about way is how I got into the microphone business

DC: Great segway into the next topic as to how you got involved with microphones. Did the little Kent prompt you to open it and try to fool with it and start experimenting? Or did you start looking for vintage mics?

TOM: No, it was when I saw Butter. When I saw him playing a 545 I walked into a music store and bought a 545. I played that microphone a lot. Then I lost it moving around. It was my search to find another one in 1985 that led me into the microphone business.

DC: With no eBay back then where did you find old mics? Flea markets and places like that?

TOM: I'll tell you the short story. Or the short version of a long story. When I started playing again, my wife had bought me a JT-30 which I was not very fond of and I wanted to find a 545. So I bought a 545 at a music store. I took and played it and was playing harp in a house band here in Houston doing a Sunday night jam. This 545 was just a piece of junk and it was a new one from the mid 80's. So I boxed it up and sent it back to Shure. This is an honest to god story. I sent it back to Shure with a letter that said I'm sending this back to you. There's nothing wrong with the microphone but it doesn't sound like the one I used to have back in the late 60's and late 70's. You can have it back. I don't care if you send me money back or not. It's of no use to me. About three weeks later I get a call from a guy named Michael Peterson at Shure, who has [subsequently] become a friend. He said 'I have some good news and some bad news.' I said 'What's the bad news.' He said, 'The bad news is we can't give you any money for the microphone you sent back.' I said, 'what's the good news?' He said, 'We have one in a red and blue box that was made probably back in 1969 or 1970 and it's on the way to you right now.'

That kind of piqued my interest. I thought, 'wait a minute, now there have got to be guys like me that aren't happy with what's out there,' cause what was out there then really was the Blue Blaster and the JT-30. So I picked up the yellow pages and I looked up microphones. There was one listing in the whole yellow pages for Dallas/Fort Worth and I found a guy who had a shop in Fort Worth. I went over there. The guy that owned the company was my age. His dad had started the company right after World War II, which was the beginning of the big boom in microphones, PA's and sound systems in the United States. The company was in the same location it had always been in. I got to know this guy really well. He took me back into the shop where there were about ten workbenches. I told him what I was looking for. He started pulling these boxes out from underneath these workbenches which were completely covered in dust and spider webs. There were parts and everything in the boxes. He would pull out a controlled reluctance green bullet and he would say, do you want this? And I would go, yeah. And he would give it me. He gave me, honest to god, he gave me probably fifty microphones. All of which are the basis of my inventory today, but they were all fabulous harp mics. Everything from JT-

30s to T-3s to Shure's. You name it. I mean everything. This was all junk to him because, of course, these are all high impedance mics. Some of them had been in the boxes for twenty, thirty years. I got to be really good friends with this guy, his name is Ronnie Orlando... still good friends with him.

He then turned me on to all this literature. So I had all these microphones and I knew harp players here in Dallas complaining about their mics and how they hated the JT-30s and the Blues Blasters so much. So I started just kind of messing around with them and giving them out to my friends to try. I thought, 'hmm, maybe this is a business that will work.' In the early days, thinking back to your question, yeah what I did was I went out to the ham radio shows. I probably went to twenty ham radio shows a year. Get in the car at 4:00 in the morning and drive to Oklahoma for a ham radio show that started at 7:00 a.m. Stay there all day and buy mics. Those days are kind of long gone now. But that's how I found them all. And what I did was, anything that looked like a harp mic I bought. And I tried it. And I tried it myself. I had a band going at the time, a fully amplified band that I was fronting. It was a straight ahead kind of a swing/blues band. Harp playing was all over it. I tried everything on stage. The ones that I like I kept in my inventory. The ones that I didn't like, I didn't [keep]. So that's kind of the genesis of Tom's mics.

DC: Personally what are your favorite mics that you would use?

TOM: I'm always going partial to the standard 545 cause I think it's the greatest all around harp mic ever made. What I've been playing over the last couple years depends on the gig. A 545 pretty much cuts across all bases for me. I use and still like the 533's a lot especially for lower volume gigs. The controlled reluctances are great. It's more of a low volume microphone. The controlled magnetics are really good. Of course we're talking vintage here across the board. The controlled magnetics I find to be a lot better for a louder band situation especially if you've got a drummer who likes to ride cymbals a lot. Or a keyboard player in the mix. I've screwed around a lot with different microphone elements in different shells but I think I pretty much fall back on the dynamic style microphone.

I've never been a crystal microphone guy. Simply because to my ear, which is just my ear, they are very one dimensional and I've always wanted a microphone that gave me a little more character, a little more coloration than that standard crystal sound. Matter of fact, when I had my amplified band together, I usually took out three microphones because I found that for my own ear, and I'm sure the audience's ear if you have the same amplified sound all night long, it tends to get a little bit old. I think people lose a little interest in what you doing if you sound the same on every single song.

DC: I agree. I think that's true. Even playing through the vocal mic, opened or cupped, can create a little change. Doing the same songs over several gigs can be repetitious. I

think you have to keep yourself fresh because if you are not energized and interested in what you are playing, the audience certainly won't be interested.

TOM: I think harp players are like all musicians in that they are constantly refining and redefining the sound that they want. They hear a sound in their subconscious mind and that's the sound they want. And that changes on a fairly regular basis. I think a good example of that is Kim Wilson. He is constantly changing mics and amplifiers, even when he is out on one tour. He might change from one night to the next. He is trying different things because as you said you can get bored with the same old sounds and it makes it a lot more interesting for you too.

To Be Continued...