Smoky and the blues: one DJ’s labor of love

by Warren Ayler

Chronicle staff

Smoky knows the blues. You may not see the blues written all over his face—no characteristic weather-beaten, pull-tiden face of a thousand sorrows like a secondhand album cover. Rather, he appears shy and gentle, more Celtic than Mississippi Delta-dweller. Yet, though he has not been living the blues, he has been living with the blues some 20 years now. Smoky knows the blues.

"Smoky's Blues Hour" (currently on KRLC 90.9 FM Saturdays, 7:30 p.m. to 9 p.m.) has been broadcast weekly without interruption in Salt Lake City for the better part of six years. No record achievement, perhaps with regard to longevity, yet certainly noteworthy in that Smoky has always been a non-salaried volunteer. It’s a labor of love.

"My association with blues music comes originally from feeling dissatisfied with music back in the early 1960s when rock ‘n’ roll started to get real bland—like the Beach Boys and Lesley Gore. I was hitting puberty hard and the junior high hop wasn’t helping. I discovered ‘Mimms’ when the urban/folk/blues revival was happening. Young, white college kids were discovering Moreland & Gentry, Rocking Horse, Pippen & Terry, Mississippi John Hurt, Skip James. We were on the western fringe of that movement which at the time included Bob Dylan, fresh out of Harvard, playing at the Schottor Coffee House. Koerner, Ray and Glover were on the move. "Hidden Valley," a movement. Turning 21 in the Triangle Bar, where you could smoke, drink and grab a cold bottle of beer and recall the muss and moving experiences of my life."

"Being a blues fanatic and playing harmonica got me elected ‘most unusual’ in my senior high-school class—a distinction for which I campaigned really hard.

"I moved into the music of the time and the folk and blues revival of the 1960s, the issue wasn’t one of a catchy beat or new dance step. Smokey asserts, "I wasn’t born with the blues, but I adopted it as a personal statement. While the blues started out of a black context, its audiences these days are largely white. Muddy Waters, along with many other musicians, at first rejected the white audience. Now he has come to accept it, seeing the blues as universal. The blues has been a worldwide phenomenon. It doesn’t just look at the sad side of life. It’s a release of a sad feeling to justify for something better. Even traditional white folk music is more accessible with despair and death than blues ever was."

"The original "Smokey’s Blues Hour" goes back to the fall of 1974. I was Smokey of a small clique in Salt Lake who were enthused about the blues and followed a local radio show called "The Smoke Blues Band. At that time Rick Thomas was one of the only DJs then ready to produce a progressive rock and jazz show. Iaro, a local night time at KROM, an AM station in Murray which had its studios in an old auto showroom. I suggested he play some blues music and was a guest to bring in some records since he was willing but not very familiar with it. Before long I had my own house of time with his show, and I even landed him another show in the Cosmetic bl. Spike (Smookey’s current sponsor). The phone kept ringing with groups and people who were running the station deciding the kind of audience Rick and I were appealing to.

"That was the spring of 1974. From that time until late 1976 "Smoky’s Blues Hour" by dormant but not forgotten, at least among a select few. Smoky had left town later that year. He got back again in the fall of 1974, in to hear about plans at KURL to reestablish the program with its original title, led by fellow blues clique friends and, most of all, by Smokey himself."

"I just happened to come straggling into town about two months before this show was to come on the air. So Smokey gave it to me. He said, "Here it is. You’re going to be on the air. It’s going to be a half-hour show, 5:30 p.m. It’s great. Go meet right back into Salt Lake. So I hit the road and got right back into it."

"This was the beginning of a long and legendary collaboration between Smoky and the Rev. Willis on KURL, with Willis initially acting as producer for the Blues Hour, six months later, in the spring of 1975. "Smoky’s Blues Hour" in tandem with "The Rev. Willis Eat-Your-Heart-Out Revue" took over every Saturday evening’s prime time."

"We started back on the air with Junior’s Tavern underwriting the show. At that time Junior’s was just starting up and they needed something to get noticed, so they hitched on to the "Blues Hour". And then the tradition started, cheap beer and "Smokey’s Blues Hour" at Junior’s. We used to tape the show for about the first year and all go down to Junior’s to hear it. Later, on the Cosmic bl. Spike, I came back and underwrote it."

"In the spring of 1976, KURL knocked the Rev. Willis off the air, but Smokey’s show was left intact. The collaboration was soon back together, however, after an ultimately fairly short period, I was lodged with the station’s management. Everything was back to normal for another year and a half. Then, "Unfortunately, KURL decided to narrow their focus," Smokey’s evaluation of the "Saturday Night Massacre" of June 1966. Though Smokey and the Rev. Willis had established not only a tradition but also a loyal and vocal following, the management wanted to move them both to Sunday. It was the last straw for both."

"My audience has been used to tuning in to my show early on Saturday evening—before going to a party, or at a party just getting started or the tradition at Junior’s. Even though they don’t understand us anymore; they still play my show and tell others about it the next day."

"July 5 found Smokey one notch to the right at KRLC. "We switched without missing a Saturday," I got a few phone calls a day later, the show saying: "Hey Smokey: You’re on the air!" So I said, "No, I’m not. I’m on the right station!"

"The switch hasn’t been completely smooth. It’s been a few hurts, but we’re doing well in the new location. Smokey has been on the air since then, "I’m in the connection with Rev. Willis’ show because often we would combine shows and do interrelated things. The audiences became exposed to other kinds of music." But in many ways the switch has been a help to the program with a new life."

"My audience response has grown since I changed to KRLC. I think the audience was always there but they weren’t as vocal as they’re becoming. In the last six months, he thinks the wake-up at KURL woke up a lot of people. Plus KURL’s own audience has been more vocal and involved from the beginning. KRLC just put people together. It has always had a sleepy program schedule in general with nothing to shock people into realizing that this was a real radio station that’s really bringing an alternative. I think it’s coming out in the air. It’s really presented itself as an alternative. It’s gearing right now with all kinds of innovative ideas, a potential which never existed with KURL."

"I feel more at home here—more loyal to KRLC, than I ever did at KURL. I always have been trying to help people become more aware of blues music, and both stations have not met my needs as a program in this respect. But KRLC also serves the community in a more consciousness and direct manner, and it involves me directly in that process. It enhances the educational aspect of my program."

"I think there’s a growing blues consciousness in Salt Lake as evidenced by the Blues Festival last spring with 5,000 people at the concert, with Muddy Waters, B.B. King, and James Cotton each playing his own brand of blues. Smokey said, "I’m sure my show has had an influence on making the audience aware of this music. After all, until the advent of KRLC, what there was of blues programming Thursday nights, to be further extended in March, Smokey was the only blues show in town."

"Neither Smokey nor Willis has looked back and counted his accomplishments. He has a very relaxed, pleasant attitude. It would be nice if he would have like to have something to with forming a blues society to keep the idea of the blues alive. There are some interesting things going up all over the country, and, in fact, all over the world. I think that Utah’s appreciation of the blues has expanded to the point where a blues society could be formed. Whether it is that a full-time or part-time occupation remains to be seen. It would be like a fraternal organization of people who feel a bond for the music and for each other. It would be like a common interest for the community’s benefit; with respect for a particular form of music."

"It’s important that audiences take everything with a grain of salt. It can open one up to different styles in a way more associated with blues like jazz, folk, and even rock."

"I’ve been offered the chance to host an all-blues society on a special dream, as a culmination of his efforts to make sure all of the music is heard. What has been his audience, he wishes to mold into a creative force."