

Smokey and the blues: one DJ's labor of love

by Warren Ayler
Chronicle staff

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

"Smokey's Blues Hour" (currently on KRCL 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 Smokey 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 Fleetwoods and Leslie Gore. I was hitting puberty hard and the junior high hop wasn't helping me any. I grew up in Minnesota when the urban/folk/blues revival was happening. Young, white college kids were discovering Brownie McGhee and Sonny 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 Hibbing, playing at the Scholar Coffee House. Koerner, Ray and Glover were also at the center of this movement. Turning 21 in the Triangle Bar, where 'Spider' John Koerner was playing, and grabbing a cold bottle of beer was one of the most moving experiences of my life," Smokey recalls, half tongue-in-cheek. "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."

Like most of the music to come out of 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 assimilation. Now he has come to accept it, seeing the blues as universal. The blues has become a worldwide phenomenon. It doesn't just look at the sad side of life. It's a release of a sad feeling to prepare for something better. Even traditional white folk music is more preoccupied with despair and death than blues ever was."

The original "Smokey's Blues Hour" goes back to the fall of 1970. "I was one of a small clique in Salt Lake who were enthused about the blues and followed a local band called The Smoke Blues Band. At that time Rick Thomas was one of the only DJs in the valley to produce a progressive rock and jazz show. He worked midnight to 6 a.m. at KMOR, an AM station in Murray which had its studios in an old auto showroom. I suggested he play some blues music and was invited to bring in some records since he was willing but not very familiar with it. Before long I had my own block of time within his show, and I even landed a sponsor: the Cosmic Aeroplane (Smokey's current sponsor). The show lasted about a half year when the people who were running the station decided they didn't like the kind of audience Rick and I were appealing to."

That was the spring of 1971. From that time until late 1974 "Smokey's Blues Hour" lay dormant but not forgotten, at least among



Chronicle photo by Karen Vercell

Smokey's Blues Hour has been broadcast weekly on Salt Lake City radio for nearly six years without interruption. Smokey does not get paid for his work. To him it's a labor of love.

a select few. Smokey had left town later in 1971, but found himself back in the valley in 1974, just in time to hear about plans at KUER to resurrect the program with its original title, led by fellow blues clique member, the Reverend Willis.

"I just happened to come strolling back into town about two months before this show was to come on the air. So Rev. Willis gave it to me. He said, 'Here it is. You're going to go back on the air. It's going to be a half-hour show, 5:30 p.m.' It was great! Got me set right back into Salt Lake. So I settled down and got right back into it."

This was the beginning of a long and legendary collaboration between Smokey and the Rev. Willis on KUER, with Willis initially acting as producer of the Blues Hour. Six months later, in the spring of 1975, "Smokey's Blues Hour" in tandem with "The Rev. Willis Eat-Your-Heart-Out Revue" took over 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 out and they needed something to get noticed, so they latched 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 Aeroplane came back to underwrite us."

In the spring of 1978, KUER knocked the Rev. Willis off the air, but Smokey's show was left intact. The collaboration was soon back together, however, after an unusually large listeners protest was lodged with the station's management. Everything was back to normal for another year and a half. Then: "Unfortunately, KUER decided to narrow their vision," is Smokey's evaluation of the "Saturday Night Massacre" of June 1980. 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 become 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 underwrite us anymore, they still play my show and sell cut-rate beer on Saturday night."

July 5 found Smokey one notch to the right at KRCL. "We switched without missing a Saturday. I got a few phone calls that first show saying: 'Hey Smokey! You're on the wrong station.' I told them, 'No I'm not. I'm on the right station!'"

The switch hasn't been completely without injury. The Rev. Willis has been off the air since then. "I miss the connection with Rev. Willis's show because often we would combine shows and do interrelated things. The listening audience became exposed to all kinds of music." But in many ways the switch has infused the program with a new life.

"My audience response has grown since I changed to KRCL. I think the audience was

always there but they weren't as vocal as they've become in the last year. I think the shake-up at KUER woke up a lot of people. Plus KRCL's own audience has been more vocal and involved from the beginning. KUER tended to put people to sleep. 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 that when KRCL came on the air it really presented itself as an alternative. It's grappling right now with all kinds of innovative ideas, a potential which never existed with KUER.

"I feel more at home here—more loyal to KRCL than I ever did to KUER. I always have been trying to help people become more aware of blues music, and both stations have met my needs as a programmer in this respect. But KRCL also serves the community in a more conscious and direct manner, and 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 3,500 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 in making some part of that audience aware of this music." After all, until the advent of KRCL (which has additional blues programming Thursday nights, to be further extended in March), Smokey's was the only blues show in town.

Neither is Smokey one to sit back and count his accomplishments. He has a very adventurous ideal for the near future. "I would like to have something to with forming a blues society to keep the idea of the blues happening. There are societies like this springing 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 I make that a full-time or part-time occupation remains to be seen. It would be like a fraternal organization of people who feel a love for the music or a bond for it. The purpose would be to share a common interest for the community's benefit with respect for a particular form of music which has had an influence on the music world at large. The organization would try to further appreciation for that music by having regular meetings, perhaps maintaining a tape library of out-of-print material, and helping to book blues acts to perform in the area. It doesn't need to limit itself to a purist idea of blues, either. It can open itself up to different styles in some way associated with blues like jazz, folk, and even rock."

Smokey speaks of this blues society as a special dream, as a culmination of his efforts to make the blues a vital cultural force in his community. What first began as a clique, he has helped build into a sizable audience. What has become his audience, he wishes to mold into a creative force.

KMOR RADIO

1230 KHz

1230 KHz



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SATURDAY NIGHT

1-2 A.M.



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The Blues Hour is Part of NIGHT SONG
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Smokey's Blues Hour was first broadcast on KMOR in 1970. Today Smokey appears every Saturday, 7:30 p.m. to 9 p.m., on KRCL 90.9-FM.

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