

Gary Primich

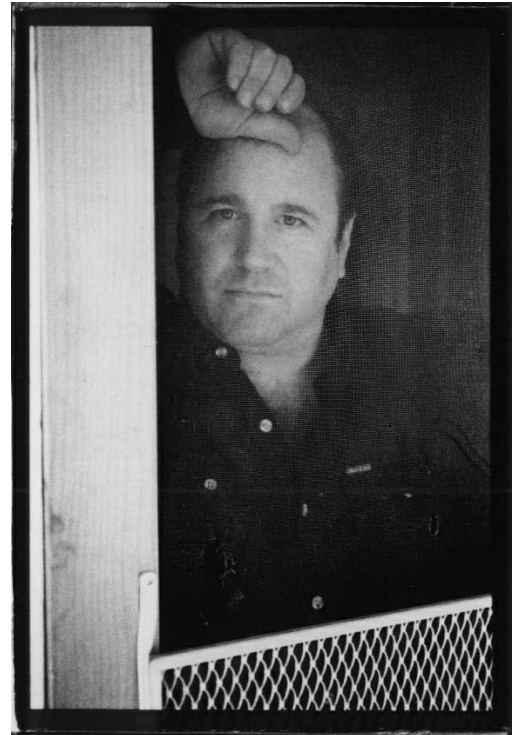
Yeah, they say you have to suffer if you want to sing the blues. And yes, blues singer, harmonica master and songwriter Gary Primich wasn't raised in a shotgun shack in the Mississippi Delta or a tenement on the South Side of Chicago. Nor does he try to sound like he was. Yet his blues music still brims with the stamp of authenticity, albeit an authenticity to what constitutes blues music here in the 21st Century. And as CD Review once pointed out, "If you're a newcomer to Primich's work and are expecting another boring white guy doing either blues Nazi rehashes of Little Walter's "Juke" or some Blues Traveler oodles of noodles fest, forget it."

Rather, with Gary Primich what you get is "one foot in the old school and the other in modern blues," says Jazz Times, along with "songwriting [that] has some fresh melodic twists and modulations that take that tradition to some other places." And then there's his harp playing, filled with fat, rich and sassy tones, marked by tricky melodic twists, and as powerful as a locomotive barreling along at full steam. As well, notes Down Beat, "Primich is that rare harmonica player who actually knows how to sing." And do so damned well to boot.

Primich's talent and feel for the blues has won him praise from the likes of blues harmonica legend Charlie Musselwhite, who notes, "He's not just playing the same old stuff we've all heard way too much of." Instead, Primich stretches and enhances the blues with the touch of a modern master. Jazziz says he is "easily the most syncretic [harmonica] player on the scene today," while Spotlight magazine hails Primich as "one of the best harp players alive." Chicago's New City declared his album Mr. Freeze as one of the 20 best blues albums of the 1990s.

Gary Primich was in fact born in the capital city of the blues, Chicago, and raised in an industrial suburb of Gary, IN. Yes, his family was middle class, but the milieu he grew up in could certainly give anyone the blues. "My high school was in the business of cranking out people to go work at U.S. Steel, Bethlehem Steel and Inland Steel. Nobody went to college, for God's sake," he says. His first exposure to blues music was when he heard the Dave Edmunds version of "I Hear You Knocking" on the radio. At the same time, Chuck Berry's last big hit "My Ding A Ling" led Primich into the rock'n'roll pioneer's catalog and the legacy of Chess Records.

And even though he wasn't weaned on the masters, once Primich picked up the harmonica in his teens, he went straight to the sources to master his craft. He studied and absorbed the styles of Sonny Boy Williamson I and II as well as Little Walter and Big Walter. He started hitting the clubs on the West and South Sides of Chicago, and was soon playing in bands along Maxwell Street, the main drag of urban blues, while getting his college degree from the University of Indiana.



It took one visit to Austin for him to decide to move there after finishing college. "I went to Antone's nightclub and heard the house band backing Otis Rush, who I'd heard a lot of times in Chicago, but he never sounded as good as he did that night." In the late 1980s, he started The Mannish Boys with former Mothers of Invention drummer Jimmy Carl Black. After two albums with the band for Amazing Records, Primich struck out on his own. Over two albums on his own for Amazing, another two for Flying Fish Records, and then two more for Black Top Records, he has consistently racked up critical kudos for his mastery of the tricky and elusive mix of tradition and innovation. As Blues Revue notes, "A new disc by Gary Primich has always been something to look forward to."

Like Paul Butterfield, another white harmonica player who honed his chops on the Chicago scene and left his indelible imprint on the music's progression, Primich filters his blues roots through his own consciousness to create something that's true to himself and his own vision. "I really see myself more like playing music like the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, which was hearing what they loved and doing their own version of it as opposed to trying to reproduce the wheel."

Even if Primich isn't about to parlay himself as a down and dirty bluesman who's seen hard times and troubles all his days, make no mistake about his devotion to the music and the fact that he plays it from deep inside his soul. "It's important that people understand that I started playing this music when I started playing music because I love this music. It wasn't because I heard Stevie Ray Vaughan or saw something groovy on TV. I play this music because I fell in love with it. And I play blues harmonica because I fell in love with the sound of it. I started playing blues when it was the most uncool thing to do, and it's never been the 'cool' thing to do, but that doesn't matter to me."

And in the great blues tradition, Primich is a working musician who plays upwards of 200 dates a year across North America and throughout Europe. "When I was 18 years old, if you told me that when I was 43 years old that I would have my white Ford van, and my own band, and I would be going out and playing gigs all over the country, I would have said, dream come true. I am doing what I've always wanted to do, which is to go on the road and play my own music the way I like to play it wherever it is that it takes me. And I love doing that."

In the process, Primich has established himself as one of the modern masters of the blues. And for proof of that, just slip Dog House Music into the CD player, and see if you don't heartily agree.

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Photo: Todd V. Wolfson