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Interview: Harpdog Brown

Harpdog Brown needs little introduction to Victoria blues fans. He's played here many times over the years. A personal favourite of mine, I've had the pleasure of backing him up several times, and it was through a memorable performance at Harpo's in the mid 90s that I met Edmonton blues guitarist par excellence Jimmy Guiboche. Harpdog has had a plethora of blues talent in his band over the years, not the least of whom is the man himself, a triple threat on vocals, harp and songwriting.

This interview was done in anticipation of his forthcoming show at the Tally Ho Sports bar on Fri Mar 28th. Don't miss Harpdog Brown and his great Victoria band (Jordie Edmonds, John Hunter & George Fenn – formerly Haro Strait Blues Band). They have just released a great new CD – What It Is..., a dynamic collection of originals with a few choice covers, featuring solid rhythm and classy solos by Jordie and Dog. These guys are as close as it gets to the real deal around here! Don't miss this show!

Dave Harris: What are your first memories of hearing blues? Recordings? Live shows?

Harpdog: I guess my first memory of live blues concerts were James Cotton back in 78 at The Sub Theater in Edmonton at The U of A... I still blame James, it's his fault I chose to play harmonica. I also saw Dutch Mason that same year at a cool venue called Lucifer's downtown Edmonton. He was still playing guitar and running the band with Ricky Jeffries on harp. Soon after that I found myself digging into the credits of my old Stones records and researching who the writers were... James Moore A.K.A. Slim Harpo, Chester Burnett (Howlin Wolf) McKinley Morganfield (Muddy Waters) Jimmy Reed and more. After listening to the source I found myself drawn closer to the original cats rather than the British take on them. I don't want to take anything away from the Stones, they are truly a great band, but not even close to the real deal, when it comes down to the core.

DH: Was harmonica your first instrument; I've seen at least one fairly old photo of you with a guitar? Why don't you ever play guitar?

HD: No, harmonica was not my first instrument. I started with a flat top Fender guitar when I was 15, however I remember when I was a young lad, say around 5 or so, my mother, who raised me, (I was adopted) had what she called a Hawaiian guitar, which really was just a flat top guitar she had slack tuned to the key of D. She played it on her lap with a hand held slide..... anyway, she would get me playing it on the couch keeping me busy while she did what most mothers did back then.. run a house hold. I was so young I couldn't say guitar, so I called it the Wee Waaah I mean, that is what it sounded like when I sat there playing the slide keeping out of her hair.

I ended up playing guitar in a basement band back in high school, but all we did was practice, never actually did a gig back then. Now, I guess I can say my first paid gig was as a guitar player, as I had a duo with a buddy, and we opened up for comedians at a comedy club downtown Edmonton back around 1980 or so... we got 30 bucks each, a steak dinner and were allowed to watch the show from the back booth. It was great as we got to open up for the likes of Harry Anderson, before he landed the gig on Night Court, Andrew Dice Clay, before anyone ever heard of him, and a few well known comedians, like Phyllis Diller, Jerry Van Dyke and the guy who played Benson back then Robert Guillaume. I followed that run with a short solo career as a singer/guitarist playing lounges around the city, but as it would happen, my guitar playing seemed to stay the same, but my vocals started to get better. I decided the next step would be for me to hire on to a road band. So I did, turned out I noticed an ad in the classifieds in the Edmonton Journal that read, "working road band looking for vocalist, must be able to travel."

Now that is all I needed to see, as it turns out, that really was the main reason I became a musician, to travel.

After 6 weeks on the road in northern Alberta, and in a middle of the road rock band, singing songs I never even listened to when they were hits; I gave my two weeks' notice and planned on putting together my first blues band. Yesterday's Papers was created out of my short stint at Grant MacEwan College with a bunch of players studying Jazz there...

Me I was thinking of taking vocals there but changed my mind after watching the progress of the students there. Personally I was and will always be a student of life, more than a student of school and books.

I took that band on the road, but found the hardest thing was to find a drummer and bassist to work well together.

DH: How did you meet John Hunter, Greg Kennedy and Dr Boogie?

HD: That's a good story, it was a guitar player/rounder buddy of John's and Greg's that saw me with the Yesterday Papers band playing at The Ambassador Tavern in Edmonton, the blues joint in its day, and this pre-dates the Blues on Whyte and the Side Track.. In fact it was the first real blues joint in Alberta from what I know, bringing Chicago based bands up for a six night stand 52 weeks a year... well except when they would have a Canadian touring act in... Anyway, I was playing there and Rodney has his girlfriend approach me and tell me her boyfriend wanted to buy me a drink.

I followed her to his table and sat down with them both. He told me he liked what I was doing, and he liked the piano player, but the rest of my band sucked. You can imagine how I reacted to that... however he told me I should be playing with his buddies, and that the bass player and drummer shared one brain on stage, never had to speak, as then just did what they did, with no effort. That interested me, but I had a 6 week tour booked with my guys and took this guys phone number and went back to work....

After the 6 weeks and all the crazy shit I had to deal with, I pretty well was ready to dig up that piece of paper with that phone number on it when I got home. Made the call, went down to audition with these old dudes, as I was all of about 21 and they had anywhere from 9 to 12 years on me then. It was magic, I have never felt a pocket like Johnny and Greg laid down, so I shut down my band to join these guys, and learn from some seasoned pros. I will never regret that decision except one thing shook me, when it came down to it, they

wouldn't let me even play the harp, as I was just not good enough back then. Personally I was only about 2 years old on the harp and they were right, I sucked, and not in the right way back then. Greg was like the bad cop, the one I couldn't seem to ever satisfy, but John would make me cassette tapes of 12 bar solos and heads from easy tunes, tell me to learn this and that, and where I might use it as a solo in a song in our book.

Over time I became the harp player I am today. I met Boogie through them but about three years later, never did much work with him in the band, but I do recall being on the road with him and his two piece baby grand Yamaha, it was moving furniture every gig we did. It took four men to do one job. ha ha ha.

DH: You've spent a lot of time in Vancouver, as well as Edmonton. Why do you pick those places? Possibly Toronto would be better for a blues career?

HD: I was born in Edmonton, so that is where I began; now I was raised in a good God fearing family with two older sisters, a strong mother and a hard working blue collar father, low- mid income, and really never went without the needs but had no excess of any frills so to speak. When my oldest sister moved out to Vancouver, got married, started making babies, we pretty well always took our summer vacation out west visiting her and for the first years to see the new baby. She brought six children into this world, anyway... I remember the first time I saw Vancouver, I was 8 years old, and truly something resonated with me about this place. I knew I would live here one day. 15 years later I moved west to Vancouver, and lived here for about ten years. I didn't move out here with plans of making music my life though; I had pretty well had it with the business as I saw it back then. Now, looking back I think it most likely was more of me being young, and well there was a woman involved, an older one who for some reason convinced me I didn't need to be a musician.... hold on, I think I convinced myself of that, I remember now, she only told me she didn't think she could live with a musician. I do remember believing I really didn't need to be a musician, so we moved out west. I don't want to bore you any more on the details I recall about that time in my life, maybe hold out for the book someday huh... so in a nut shell, Vancouver is the place I love to be when I can be where I wanna be.

I love touring and have plans on going further than I have ever gone with this new band. I have always thought that here in Canada we pretty well have three main cities that have the best potential to springboard into the global market. Vancouver is the one I choose. I should also mention that technically it was while living in Vancouver back in 1989 sitting in with friends in a Kitsilano club when I was named "Harpdog"

Another story, but hey, more for the book huh! Oh btw my legal name is Harpdog Brown.... just dropped the adopted name I was raised with after my divorce went through last year... YES I am a free man!

DH: Being as the interview relates to Blues in Victoria, share some memories of time spent here in Victoria.

HD: Just as Vancouver hit deep with me as a youngster when I first visited Victoria, it was amazing! My uncle who was a motorcycle scout in Germany in World War II lived there, of course he was bigger than life for me, but I really loved the ocean, the mountains and all that salty air. Maybe I was a sailor in a past life. Musically I have loads of great memories playing Victoria, starting back in the late 80's when I was playing in a Blues Brothers Review called "Wired", we played Harpos at least three weekends per year. I only survived that band for about two years, getting hired and fired twice... lol, but in that time I had the Kits

scene happen and I put together Harpdog Brown & The Bloodhounds, using some of the players who played in the Blues Brothers act. The first gig we did in Vancouver was at The Commodore Ballroom, opening up for the Wired Blues Brothers Review. That was after being hired the second time, and before the final firing from Wired. No hard feelings! Fact is it was Wired I was playing with when I did my first Vancouver gig, and yes, it was at The Commodore Ballroom as well, so I got to debut twice at The Commodore.

Not many can say that huh!

Back to Victoria, I got booked in Harpos as Harpdog Brown and The Bloodhounds back then and became a regular there. Of course all good things or in this case good clubs come to an end, but throughout the years I have always managed to frequent Victoria playing pretty well any real blues bar there was at any given time. From Steamers Pub, to Victoria's House of Blues, The Central, damn even some places I forget the names of. Now these days, I see more rooms opening their doors to blues and blues related live bands in Victoria. Now that I have my new band, that all live in Victoria, I have had the pleasure of coming over and playing more often. We have played two shows at The Upper Deck last year, and have a show celebrating our new CD release Friday March 28th at The Tally Ho. This is the newest addition to blues friendly venues in Victoria. This excites me to no end! So I guess with all the history I have with Victoria, I really look forward to the future playing all over the island and islands.

DH: Over the years you've recorded extensively. Can you share a discography? Which recordings are most representative of your career?

HD: Well I guess I started in the cassette world, back in '90 with a live recording at The Sidetrack Cafe in Edmonton, we were on the road with the first lineup, sax, electric bass, guitar, drums and me. Actually we were really just recording everything we did, so we could listen to it in our rooms seeing what was working and what wasn't, ya know, trying to tighten up the band, the set lists, were songs working with others, that sort of thing. The thing is we were pretty tight, wrote songs, rehearsed, and played a lot, so when we did a five night stand at The Side Track, and the sound guy told me he could record on HiFi VHS tape, I went shopping and bought him what he needed to record the last three nights.

When we got back home from that tour, and listened to the recordings we decided we had something worthy of releasing. That is where and when and how it all started.

'92 I did my first studio recording at Blue Wave Studios, Tom Lavin helped me get 24 hours of free time from F.A.C.T.O.R. Hence "Beware of Dog"

'94 I signed a little deal with a small family blues label in Portland, OR called Candlelight Records

We cut "Home is Where The Harp is" live at The Candlelight Cafe. That album won the coveted Muddy Award for best N.W. Blues Release of the year.

The next thing I accomplished I would say was making a boy, my son was born March 19th 1997 and well that pretty well changed my life as I knew it then. I decided I wanted to take the time off the road and play this hand I was dealt; "fatherhood". I didn't make it as a husband, as she also didn't make it as a wife, but together we did the best we could separate but still trying to work together. In the course of those years, I did what I could,

tried to do the day job thing again, but hey, we all know you can only ignore your own needs so long.

I didn't release anything officially until 1999 with another live release from a club in Red Deer Alberta on Friday, Oct 13th, under a full moon. I had piano man Willie MacCalder on tour with me then and featured him on this album. Once in a Howlin Moon on Vat Records, recorded Live at The Vat. Was released in 2000.

Now, 10 years later I started working a little duo with an Edmonton piano player and took it into the studio, just the two of us, he on a grand piano, me with just voice and acoustic harmonica, I wanted to show the world I had some crooning in me, so we did a take of some of my favorite old school jazz numbers, and covered Steve Pineo's "Canadian Man"

Above and Beyond is what I called that 8 hour recording session, I didn't press a lot of this album, as it was primarily for off stage sales. It was a good honest album that people seemed to enjoy.

2011; Naturally, was a 12 hours session at the same studio in Edmonton with the same piano man, Graham Guest, but this time I added a local clarinet player on two tracks, covered four Canadian song writers and well it did much better. It was voted #1 Canadian blues album of the year, by the people on the Blind Lemon Survey in 2011.

2014 What It Is this is me getting back to my roots, and for that matter I say my best album to date. Recorded live off the floor at Oakstone Studios, this is what I have always been shooting for.

DH: I'm just listening to your latest album What It Is..., which sounds great. This sounds like your most traditional band since the days of your Jimmy Guiboche/Pete Turland/Andy Graffiti/Willie MacCalder outfit. Anything to say about the two bands?

HD: Actually Jimmy never played with the band when I had Andy and Pete. That was Ben Sures, (Little Charlie Trouble) and Curtis Scarrow. Jimmy hired on in 96 for a short while, and then again I had him return to the Bloodhounds in 99 for another short run. We never cut anything that was official.

Yes this band, The Harpdog Brown Band, is like I said before, the band I have wanted my entire career. Gutsy blues from the marrow not the surface. We're writing and touring and living the life I have always loved to live. Truth in the blues.

DH: Thanks Harpdog!