

COMMENTARY

Palaima: Pinetop Perkins, finding joy in a life of the blues

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Pinetop Perkins, 91-year-old blues pianist and recipient of the latest Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award, still moves his long elegant fingers like marvels across the keyboard of the upright piano in his modest apartment in South Austin.

He now enriches our city's musical culture because Clifford Antone, Austin's patron saint of blues music and distinguished visiting lecturer at University of Texas at Austin, cares to see some small justice done for largely unrewarded blues musicians.

Pinetop's voice and playing resonate with a near century of African American musical genius. There are echoes of plantation work in Mississippi, radio broadcasts in Arkansas, juke joints in Chicago and the hallowed stage at Lincoln Center. His first performances for white folks were at plantation cock fights. The white owners heard that he could play and paid him to provide side entertainment. He left home at the age of nine, already smoking cigarettes, which his mama first gave him to curb his hunger.

Pinetop traveled like Odysseus. He has worked behind mules. He played with the great Muddy Waters. He has been knifed and swindled. He has been hit by a train. And he still sings blues that people know and feel.

Pinetop knows he brings joy into people's lives as he plays. He does not seem to know how great a man he is to have transcended the blatant and latent prejudice that he has lived through from 1913 to 2005.

Ask him questions, and he answers straight. The hardships and joys of life and the spirits of the great blues artists he has known would have him be nothing other than honest. His favorite vegetable is sweet potatoes. His favorite song, despite vivid memories of plantation life, is "Down in Mississippi."

Song brings joy and heals personal sorrow and collective pain. Song testifies to evil and injustice. When enough people listen, song can be a tool of justice and freedom. It can hymn the aspirations of a nation and tell us when our country has lost its way. But we have to lend our ears and truly listen.

On Wednesday at 7 p.m. in the LBJ Library at the University of Texas at Austin, a forum of notable musicians, including Jerry Jeff Walker, Marcia Ball and Texas gubernatorial candidate Kinky Friedman, will discuss how music and musicians have long influenced major social and political issues. Please come and listen.

Right now try to hear the echoes of our musical past. Really hear them. When Woody Guthrie sings "This land is your land, This land is my land," he is railing against those who would buy up our country's resources and keep poor people poor. When Bruce Springsteen sings "Born in the USA," he cannot understand how we use and throw away the young people who fight our wars.

Please listen:

From Detroit down to Houston and New York to LA,

Well, there's pride in every American heart,

And it's time to stand and say:

I'm proud to be an American where at least I know I'm free.

And I won't forget the men who died, who gave that right to me.

- Lee Greenwood 1996

I had a brother at Khe Sanh fighting off the Viet Cong

They're still there, he's all gone

Down in the shadow of the penitentiary

Out by the gas fires of the refinery

I'm ten years burning down the road

Nowhere to run, ain't nowhere to go

Born in the USA . . .

- Bruce Springsteen 1984

Some people say, "I think about the good things."

Maybe we were sincere, and it was good.

But let me tell you, / Believe me, it weren't that good.

At least you got a right today to say you don't dig it.

If we'd a said we didn't dig it, we'd a been dead.

I don't blame nobody, cause ignorance, see, ignorance get everybody.

But it makes you want to sing the blues. It makes you want to sing the blues.

- James Brown ca. 1969

A bullet from the back of a bush took Medgar Evers' blood.

A finger fired the trigger to his name.

A handle hid out in the dark / A hand set the spark

Two eyes took the aim / Behind a man's brain

But he can't be blamed / He's only a pawn in their game.

- Bob Dylan 1963

I went to an employment office, / I got a number and I got in line,

They called everybody's number, / But they never did call mine.

They said: "If you was white,/ You's alright,

If you was brown,/ You could stick around,

But as you's black, hmm, hmm, brother,

Get back, get back, get back.

- Big Bill Broonzy, 1949-1951

The "Instruments of Freedom" forum will concentrate on the experiences and perspectives of the prominent musicians who gather for it. The forum celebrates President Lyndon B. Johnson's strong commitment to social change. But it also acknowledges any songster who has ever sung truths that our society did not want to hear or sustained the spirits of people whom we did not want to see.

And, Pinetop, this forum's for you.

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