Commentary

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Pinetop Perkins, finding joy in a life of the blues

Pinetop Perkins, 91-year-old blues pianist and recipient of the 1990 National Endowment for the Arts Lifetime Achievement Award, still moves his long elegant fingers like marbles across the keys of the upright piano in his modest apartment in South Austin. He nowlarına our city's musical culture because Clifford Antone, Austin's patron saint of blues music, has invited a visiting lecturer at the University of Texas at Austin, cares to see some small justice done for largely unrewarded blues music. Pinetop's voice and playing resonate with a near century of African American musical genius. There are echoes of Thomas Dorsey, Muddy Waters, radio broadcasts in Arkansas, juke joints in Chicago and the hollow-stage side Lincoln Center. His first performances for white folks were at plantation cook fests. The white owners heard that he could play and paid him to provide side entertainment. He lived at the age of nine, already smoking cigarettes, which he said was the last thing he wanted to do to curb his hunger.

Pinetop traveled like Odysseus. He has worked behind mules in the Mississippi Delta, 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 song is "Barrel of Blues," a favorite song, despite vivid memories of plantation life, is "Down in Mississippi." His favorite vegetable is sweet potatoes. His piano in his modest apartment in South Austin, is "Down in the shadow of the refinery, I'm ten years burning down the road."

Song brings joy and heals personal sorrow and collective pain. Song testifies to what it is to be human. Enough people listen, song can be a tool of justice and freedom. It can be the aspiration of a nation and a poem of our loss. 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:

"Freedom" forum

For details on Wednesday's "Instruments of Freedom" forum, go to www.instrumentsoffreedom.org or call (512) 380-9021.

From Detroit down to Houston and New York to LA, there's pride in every American heart. And it's time to stand and say: I'm proud to be an American where I live. I'm proud of 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 shadows 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 poor." Maybe we were sincere, and it was good. But let me tell you, I believe, it wasn't that good. At least you got a right today to say you won't do it. If we'd said we didn't dig it, we'd've been dead. I don't blame nobody, cause 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 I A hand set the spark. Two eyes took the aim Behind a man I Two eyes took the aim Behind a man. But he can't be blamed I 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, number, number, But they never did call mine. They said: "If you were white, you'd be alright." If you were brown, you could stick around, You was back's black, hhm, hhm, brother. Get back, get back, get back. --Big Bill Broonzy, 1948-1961

The "Instruments of Freedom" forum will concentrate on the experiences and perspectives of the prominent musicians who gather for it. The forum was organized by Lyndon B. Johnson's strong commitment to social change. But it also acknowledges any songster who has ever sung truths to evil and injustice. When you don't dig it, you don't dig it, you don't dig it. --Pinetop, this forum's for you.

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