

# CATFISH KEITH

## Mid-West's Acoustic Blues Treasure

by Dan Stevens

No, the U.S. Midwest is not a blues desert. Although far from the more renowned blues haunts of the Mississippi Delta, New Orleans, Chicago, and bicoastal metropolises, there are bastions of the blues in Ohio, Michigan, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and yes, Iowa!

Catfish Keith is a master acoustic bluesman purveying his talents from the Hawkeye State, his home since his formative years in Davenport. Over four decades he has released more than two dozen lauded albums, toured the world repeatedly, and received impressive plaudits, including multiple Blues Music Award nominations. His current record, *Mississippi River Blues* (reviewed in *BMM* #16), is 2018 Blues Music Award nominated for Acoustic Album of the Year.

A true polymath of the blues, he writes his own songs, headlines festivals, leads guitar workshops, and does his own booking and album production (with his wife, Penny Cahill), while keeping alive the memories of some of his venerated predecessors with innovative covers of their tunes.

Catfish graciously consented to answer some of my questions and discuss his opinions about the current state of the blues, and acoustic blues in particular.

**Blues Music Magazine:** My presumption is that Catfish is not the name that your parents gave you.

**Catfish Keith:** When I was 19 years old and crewing on a sailboat in the Virgin Islands, one of the islander crewmen told me, "You ain't nothin' but a catfish." I still don't know why he said it, but the nickname stuck.

**BMM:** Was blues the first music that interested you? At what age?

all very valuable when I became a solo fingerpicker.

**BMM:** Have you played in band formats as well as solo?

**Catfish Keith:** Many years into my solo career, around 1996-97, I had an electric trio for a very short time in Iowa City. We did a handful of gigs, and it was real fun, but it made me realize how much my musical vision, really, was more for playing solo. I've developed a unique style, probably by virtue of the way I learn and absorb music. My approach has always been to listen deeply to a song until I'm obsessed with it, and then record my own version. In essence, I am re-creating and in a way, recomposing and newly imagining songs.

**BMM:** You use bent harmonic notes and note bending. Where did you come up with that style?

**Catfish Keith:** As I continued to develop, I kept experimenting with open tunings and lower voicings on the guitar. I eventually arrived at tuning my acoustic guitar a whole step lower. I love the sort of rubbery, percussive, deep, bendy quality of low-tuned guitars. I've also been working on new ways to expand the voice of the guitar, and when I was 19 or 20, and lived for awhile in Santa Cruz, there was a guitarist named David Winters that played jazz there, and he would take whole choruses just using harp harmonics, like Harpo Marx did, on the harp, except you can do it and bend the notes on guitar. This made me do backflips, and I dove in and tried those for ten or twenty thousand hours...I discovered ways that these could be played in quite a few genres of music, and applied it to my music, based mostly in blues and ragtime.

**BMM:** You are also a pioneer of the National Baritone guitar. How did that come about?

**Catfish Keith:** I had been attempting to tune my regular-scale National lower and lower, but it was sort of bottoming out. I met Don Young and McGregor Gaines at National in 1997. They saw what I was doing and said, "You need a baritone guitar." They had just begun to make the first Baritone-scale tricone prototypes. They got me one of those and it changed my life in a big way. I had found my voice for bottleneck slide guitar, but with extra gonad-rattling power. I've been a Baritone addict since then!

**BMM:** Don't rattle those gonads too hard! We want blues musicians to keep reproducing! Who were some of your personal mentors?

**Catfish Keith:** I heard blues, folk, and roots music at home when I was a child: Leadbelly, Odetta, Joni Mitchell, and Johnny Cash. I dabbled in mandolin, banjo, ukulele, and piano, but I fell in love with the sound of the acoustic guitar.

**BMM:** Who are your big influences in blues?

**Catfish Keith:** A lot of people that love blues say they first heard blues via rock bands, but not me. I came to it from the sort of nerdy, library-going, deep-

Publishing Company Method," giving me a new song every week. I was not really into "Home On The Range" or similar songs that he was giving me, nor the rather formal "Oahu" company teaching method at the time, so I soon quit. I just wanted to play!

In a year or two, I heard a friend at a party, she had a guitar, and she was just MAKING SONGS UP off of the top of her head! That was a revelation: you can just make songs up? It gave me a jump start. So, I dusted off the old Stella Harmony and started to teach myself songs from songbooks and just listening to records. The more I got into it, the more I realized that I loved fingerpicking acoustic guitar. Before I knew what fingerpicking was, I thought it was three or four guitar players playing at the same time. When I discovered it was just one person, I thought, "If I can just capture a little of that, wouldn't that be something?"

At first I was going wild about instrumental guitar players like Leo Kottke and John Fahey; then, singer-songwriters like early Bob Dylan, Paul Simon, and Joni Mitchell. I kept digging at the roots of it all; I always wanted to see, where did they get their music from, who were their influences? That led me back to the country blues. I then started to learn the repertoires of Mississippi John Hurt, Fred McDowell, Skip James, and Bukka White. Son House, I found him kind of disturbing, but I kept coming back to him, over and over. There was a riveting quality to it.

**BMM:** How did you become a singer as well as guitarist?

**Catfish Keith:** Before the guitar, I was always in choir in school, and enjoyed singing. So this really gave me a great foundation to learn how all of the parts of music go together, so when I finally came to guitar, I intuitively had knowledge of chords and theory and mostly, I could hear and sing harmony and counterpoint,

researching method. Really! Both of my folks were teachers, and I grew up sort of a satisfied loner, checking out LP records at the public library for fun: Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee, Lightnin' Hopkins, Blind Blake, Big Bill Broonzy, Memphis Minnie, Blind Boy Fuller, Furry Lewis, Charley Patton and others. They are still my big heroes.

**BMM:** What was it about guitar that grabbed you?

**Catfish Keith:** I had kind of a false start on the guitar, initially taking lessons when I was 12 years old in Davenport, Iowa. The teacher was a WWII vet that taught in his basement via the "Oahu

**Catfish Keith:** When I was coming of age in Davenport, Iowa, I got to see quite a few really great roots musicians: Mike Seeger, Elizabeth Cotten, Bill Monroe, it was magic meeting them. The music was so good! When I got out on my own, I got to know and play with Johnny Shines; to me he out sang and outplayed any other Delta blues artist. Every hair would stand up, listening to him. He was such a sweet and gentle person, very thoughtful. Honeyboy Edwards and I did loads of the same festivals in the 1990's, all over the world, and had some wonderful times together. He had the best, funniest stories, and knew most any blues musician that you asked him about.

Jessie Mae Hemphill, she was absolutely hypnotic. When we met down in Arkansas in the late 1980's, it was fantastic. She was all decked out in silver and gold sequins and played her beautiful, trance-inducing Mississippi Hill Country original songs. We had a ball together. I just loved her music.

It's been my pleasure to know Larry Johnson, John Jackson, John Cephas, Lonnie Pitchford, R.L. Burnside, Lonnie Brooks, Kansas City Red, Lefty Dizz, Koko Taylor, Pinetop Perkins, Maxwell Street Jimmy Davis, and Magic Slim. I've shared the stage with Ray Charles, John Lee Hooker, B.B. King, Little Richard, Queen Ida, Homesick James; I shook Muddy Waters' hand. Those were some of my "musical grandparents." My "musical uncles" are friends and mentors Roy Book Binder, John Hammond, the late Dave Van Ronk, Paul Geremia, Greg Brown, Robert "One Man" Johnson, and others.

**BMM:** Wow! What a list of legendary musicians! I'm glad that you mentioned Jessie Mae Hemphill. She is one of my all-time favorites; she is under-recognized historically, but her music was absolutely mesmerizing.

Do you do your own booking? Has it been a severe struggle surviving as a bluesman, or do you have a day job/career also?

**Catfish Keith:** Yes, I am agent-by-default, but I don't mind! I am very blessed to work with my wife, Penny Cahill. We have always remained independent, and made our full living just through the music. We have toured and worked together, as a team, for the last 30 years. She is my manager, sound engineer, and president of our record label, Fish Tail Records, which has put out 17 of my solo albums; there will be a new one in summer 2018. We've been to every state in the U.S., and have played in Canada and Mexico. We've done 46 overseas tours in many countries in

Europe and Asia. I would not call any of it easy, but we've managed to make a great life doing it.

I've been endorsed by National Reso-Phonic Guitars for 20 years, and they are coming out with a Catfish Keith Baritone Tricone Signature Model this year. I've also been working with Santa Cruz Guitars and this year they are coming out with the Catfish Special, a Signature 1929 O Style Acoustic Guitar. I'm excited! The liner notes of my albums list the many instruments that I play and love.

**BMM:** What is the songwriting process like for you?

**Catfish Keith:** When I get an idea for a song, it typically all comes out in about 20 or 30 minutes. There could be a snatch of some old song running through my head, I could be dreaming of it, wake up and write it down. Or sometimes I'll write a song while flying on a plane or taking a train. The songs arrive fully formed; it's very rare that I'll change anything. And usually, I write it without a guitar, I do it very quietly, all in my head. I may craft it later, when it's time to make an album.

**BMM:** It seems that guitar-driven, electric bands dominate the blues these days. What's the future of acoustic blues?

**Catfish Keith:** There is actually somewhat of a renaissance of acoustic blues these days among guitarists; I think that will keep it alive.

**BMM:** How do you assess the state of blues music these days, in the U.S. and internationally? How about in the Midwest specifically? Iowa isn't usually considered a stronghold of blues. Have you ever considered moving to a more commercial area?

**Catfish Keith:** We export ourselves. Our focus has always been on performing in concert halls, listening rooms, theaters, and festivals. My music fits into many different places where the usual electric blues bands might never go. We are fortunate to live not far from family, in a beautiful home that we can afford, usually far away from most catastrophes, and not far from an airport. We are connected through the telephone and Internet. That makes it as good as anywhere.

Eastern Iowa has quite a lot of great and important musicians that have made this a vibrant area to be from. If we moved anywhere it might be overseas. We are there a big chunk of the year, anyway. So far, so good! - BMM

