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BLUES IN THE SOUTH

CATFISH KEITH

**In-depth
Interview
w/ Mr. Catfish
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Blues at Midnight

FULL ARTICLE with CATFISH KEITH Interviewed by LAWRENCE LEBO for BLUES IN THE SOUTH Magazine Published in Spring 2021.

Q: Tell us about growing up in Indiana and Iowa?

Hi Lawrence! Thanks, great to be here and talk to you today.

I was born on February 9th, 1962, in East Chicago, Indiana, also known as Indiana Harbor. It's an old steel mill town. I remember it as a place that had seen better days. It was home, though!

First memories are from my grandma's house. That is my father's mother. She was pure Polish, Grandpa was pure Slovak. East Chicago had lots of European immigrants of every persuasion, and African Americans, Latin Americans. Many people worked at Inland Steel. Grandpa was a railroad engineer, Uncle Harry worked in the open hearth at the steel-mill. Grandma was a telephone operator for Indiana Bell. We'd go to Grandma's every Christmas, Thanksgiving and Easter. She was a great person, I sure loved her. For 64 years she lived in that same house on Pulaski Street in East Chicago.

When I was about six years old, Mom, Dad, my little sister, our dog, and I moved to Davenport, Iowa. I was there through high school. Davenport is on the Mississippi River, part of the Quad Cities: Davenport and Bettendorf, Iowa, and Moline and Rock Island, Illinois.

Q: When did you first pick up guitar? Did you study or teach yourself?

I always loved music. I was in school choirs since I was little. Guitars were around, being played by friends. It seemed like a fun thing to do. Mom had some great records I remember hearing; Lead Belly. Odetta. Joni Mitchell. Johnny Cash. I would check out records at the library; one had Lightnin' Hopkins on one side, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee on the other.

I went to this YMCA summer camp, called Camp Abe Lincoln. A few of the camp counselors would play acoustic guitars and we'd all sing along, harmonizing on "Day is Done," "Barges," "Leaving on a Jet Plane," stuff like that. We went to St. Anthony's Catholic Church, and guitars were played in the "hippie mass," or "folk mass."

At age eleven or twelve when I first started playing guitar, and was signed up for weekly lessons from a WWII vet named Alvin Brown. He used the "Oahu Publishing Company" method. So I learned theory, how to read music, play chords, use of a plectrum, and was given a new song each week, including "Home on the Range," "Wreck of the Old 97," "Let Me Call you Sweetheart," "Your Cheatin' Heart," and "La Cucaracha," I built up a sizable songbook. It was a little dry, though. I didn't practice much, got bored with it and asked to quit after about a year.

Then a year or so later, I heard a friend at a party, who was just strumming away and making songs up off of the top of her head. That approach was exciting, and it inspired me to get my guitar out again. Then, I was teaching myself. I was strumming some, but discovered

fingerpicking. That blew my mind. One person playing bass, melody, harmony, counterpoint, the whole orchestra of sound, all from one person.

I was drawn to guitarists that did some fingerpicking: Paul Simon, Bob Dylan, then I discovered John Fahey, Leo Kottke, Peter Lang. I went crazy, especially, over Kottke, and had somehow taught myself a bunch of his instrumentals. I was curious about the roots of it all, and started to discover early blues. First the rediscovered artists: Son House was a disturbing revelation. Mississippi John Hurt I absolutely loved. Skip James was haunting. I was hooked!

Q: Would you like to tell us the story behind your stage name?

Sure. When I was nineteen or twenty years old, this would be 1981 or '82, I left Iowa, at the peak of a terrible winter when we had 3 or 4 feet of snow and got a one way ticket to the Virgin Islands. I had a friend, from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, who had a sailboat. He had mentioned I should come visit. I don't think he really meant it, but I did exactly that. His name was Curly. So I found him, and he graciously let me crew on his boat. It was the first time I had experienced the ocean. It was fantastic.

Anyhow, we would go fishing for tuna, dive for lobsters. There was guy from Tortolla that would go out with us sometimes. For some reason, he would say to me, "You ain't nothin' but a catfish swimmin' around!" Then, "Catfish steel guitar man!" All in his thick island accent.

I'm still not sure why he called me that; it could be he was making fun of me. But, fast forward just a couple of years later, I was living in the Santa Cruz, California area, and got a gig opening for Robert Cray. He was on the verge of big things...I got to open for him at OT Price's. I was using my given name, Keith Kozacik, and on the marquis, for that gig, it said, "special guest Keith Kozacyljyksi" or something equally wrong....I knew then my given name would just not work well as a stage name.

Also, at the time, I had an offer for my first record deal, with Kicking Mule Records. Another influence, was the song "Catfish Blues," by Robert Petway. He had recorded this in 1941 on a National, and it just got to me, the proto-funk beauty of this song, and the drive of his National guitar playing. I decided to go by Catfish Keith.

Q: Your guitar tone is unmistakably, originally yours. Can you please articulate how you achieve your guitar tone?

Thanks! I have some different ways that I approach the guitar. Probably the biggest part of my repertoire is played on six string, steel string, acoustic guitars. These guitars are both vintage, such as my first vintage guitar, a 1927 Gibson Nick Lucas Special, to modern, luthier built guitars, in a vintage style.

There are several builders that I have been proud to work with over the years including Dale Fairbanks, Todd Cambio of Fraulini Guitars, Tony Klassen of ARK New Era Guitars, David Flammang, Tony Revell & Pete Howlett, Ralph Bown, Collings, and most recently, Richard Hoover at the Santa Cruz Guitar Company. Santa Cruz makes my signature model, the **CATFISH SPECIAL**.

These are all smaller bodied guitars with a big sound. My technique on these is mostly bare fingered, with nails, and is a fingerstyle technique with a lot of deep string bends, percussive string snapping, thumping bass lines, and a range of harmonic techniques, including harp harmonics, palm sweep harmonics, harmony harmonics, and skank harmonics, all on lower tuned guitars.

I had heard these sounds in other styles of guitar playing, in Hawaiian and jazz and new age and tapping styles and rock and roll. It is not really featured in the long tradition of country blues guitar. I love how harmonics effectively double the range of the guitar sounds.

Also, slide guitar is a big part of what I do. This is usually played with fingerpicks, on a variety of Nationals, both vintage, and modern. My main tools for slide are **National Reso-Phonic Baritone Tricone** guitars, which are a more recent development in the guitar world. I played one of the very first ones of these that National made for me in 1999; I had always been attempting to get a lower tone on my Nationals, and the Baritone really answered that desire. These are tuned to open tunings, pitched usually at B-flat. So, what was Open D became Open Bb. What had been Open G became Open E-flat. A life changer!

Then, I also love and play the **Baritone 12-String** guitar. These are on vintage-inspired modern 12-Strings. I have one built by Ralph Bown, and one built by Todd Cambio of Fraulini. They are lower tuned, longer scale instruments, reproductions of old Stellas and Tonk Brothers guitars, similar to the ones played by Lead Belly and Blind Willie McTell and Barbecue Bob. These are also played in low tunings that start and end at B-flat or A instead of the usual standard tunings that go from E to E. Huge sound, and a wonderful and unique repertoire.

Q: You are extremely prolific both lyrically and musically, do you have any particular muses or sources of inspiration?

Thank you! I still love the old blues, and early jazz and roots music from the 1920s and '30s, and more modern music inspired by it. I will still listen for hours to The Carter Family, Lonnie Johnson, Blind Willie Johnson, Texas Alexander, Memphis Minnie, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Louis Armstrong, Bix Beiderbecke, Sol Hoopii, Tampa Red, Jimmie Rodgers, Little Hat Jones, Joseph Spence and many others.

Q: Please tell me about your latest album, BLUES AT MIDNIGHT. You wrote all of the 13 tracks over the course of your long career. Can you please tell us about your concept for this album?

Yes. **BLUES AT MIDNIGHT** is an album of original songs, which I had never done before on one record. I had never really considered myself a "singer-songwriter." To me, my originals, and the old songs I play, are the exact same thing. They come from the same place. They have the same timeless spirit, and could just as easily be a hundred years old.

My other records have had a few originals and, then, mostly, my versions of a variety of old time blues and roots pieces. When I put these songs all together on one record, I was surprised how well they fit together, even though they were written over a span of 35 years.

I had enough original songs for two or three albums, but the ones I chose seemed to flow well, and have a nice variety of voices and sounds. Turned out all of the songs were all on different guitars, too.

Q: Track 2, Pack My Little Suitcase reminds me of a time I was playing a little dive-club in Hawthorne, CA. A local homeless man was standing right in front of me while I was singing (no stage). He was holding a suitcase and swaying with the groove. All of a sudden his suitcase came open, and his underwear fell at my feet! What's the story behind this one?

That is funny!

PACK MY LITTLE SUITCASE was inspired by Cripple Clarence Lofton. He was a Tennessee born singer and boogie woogie and blues piano player in Chicago that recorded for Vocalion with Big Bill Broonzy in the mid 1930s. My song has a very similar melody, and my guitar playing mimics what Lofton plays on piano. I wrote my own lyrics, from my own experiences. Glad you liked it!

Q: Would you tell me about the other players on BLUES AT MIDNIGHT?

Yes. On “Move to Louisiana,” the fiddle is played by **Randy Sabien**. He is an amazing musician, and was a child prodigy. He is a violinist, composer, and music educator known for his live performances and numerous recordings, many of them on [Flying Fish Records](#) and [Red House Records](#). At the age of 21 he founded and chaired the Jazz Strings department at Boston's [Berklee College of Music](#) and since 2009 has been the chair of the Strings department of [McNally Smith College of Music](#). He lives in Hayward, Wisconsin.

On “Oh Mr. Catfish,” the harmonica is played by the wonderful **Peter Madcat Ruth**. Madcat was born in Chicago, and has been based most of his life in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He has played and toured with Dave Brubeck and his son Chris Brubeck, and a *Who's Who* of great musicians.

I was honored to play with both of these guys, it added a real nice flavor to the record.

Q: You've spent a good amount of time on the road and must have a zillion good stories to tell. Care to share a favorite?

Well, yes, we have toured for decades, all over North America, the UK, Ireland, Europe and Asia. The hurdles we would jump just to get to gigs amaze me now. We would drive for days, sometimes all night, white-knuckled, sometimes barely making it. On planes, trains, buses, and cars. I would accept insane challenges and we would really go through the ringer to make it. Early in our touring days in the UK and Europe, I remember having a gig in the North of England one night, in Worcester, then, even though there was a nice room booked for us, and we were exhausted, we popped in for quick showers and changes of clothes, that night, then driving all night at 100 miles an hour to make a ferry in Dover at dawn to get to France. After the gig in France drove through a thick fog during the wee hours, then we took the ferry back, barely making it on time, then had to drive across all of England to make a flight that day, from Blackpool to the Isle of Man, for a gig that night. Ridiculous routing, I was crazy enough to accept it. But, I never missed nor canceled any gigs, ever.

What I value the most through all of this, really, are all of the relationships we have had with fantastic and legendary musicians. I was just the right age to have known and played with Johnny Shines, Henry Townsend, Honeyboy Edwards, Jessie Mae Hemphill, John Jackson, John Cephas, Queen Ida, and so many other original first generation blues and roots artists. These I call my musical grandparents.

Then there are my musical parents, aunts & uncles. People I have known and worked with that were very inspiring, that were a generation older than me. That includes John Hammond, Dave Van Ronk, Rory Block, Roy Book Binder, Paul Geremia, Dave Ray, Spider John Koerner, Happy Traum, John Sebastian, Stefan Grossman, Woody Mann, Greg Brown, Dave Moore, and Jorma Kaukonen.

Q: What has 2020 been like for you?

Plans were going amazingly well, until March 2020 hit. Then, everything gradually crumbled to nothing. We had two tours booked, as special guest/opening act for **Robert Plant's Saving Grace**, both in the USA and the UK, for the summer of 2020, along with what would have been my best ever solo tour in the UK and Ireland for October and November, 2020. Then there were several upcoming USA festival bookings, which were subsequently scrapped. It would have been my 50th and 51st overseas tours. So, all of that was canceled. That was heartbreaking. But, we are all in the same boat, aren't we?

We've been home, still doing music projects. We decided to forge ahead and put out a new album anyway, which I am grateful to have been able to do. The reaction has been very good, **BLUES AT MIDNIGHT** has ranked on the worldwide **LIVING BLUES RADIO CHARTS** for November and December of 2020 and January of 2021.

Also, I just got some great news, I have been nominated for a **BLUES MUSIC AWARD** by the Blues Foundation in Memphis for **ACOUSTIC BLUES ARTIST** for 2021. So, we are tickled!

Q: Your touring schedule is already filling up post pandemic. What can we be looking forward to?

I want to keep making records, and would love to make a new one this Spring/Summer. I'd love to get back on the road. We have made plans to tour the UK and Ireland in Oct-Nov 2021, but hard to know if the world will truly be re-opened for gigs at that time. I hope so! I figure I have another 20 or 30 years and I'd love to keep it going, playing concerts and enjoying our life in music.

My wife, **Penny Cahill**, and I have been doing this together since we first got together around 1988. Penny is my manager, sound engineer, and President of Fish Tail Records. She loves travel and doing concerts as much, or maybe even more, than I do.

She quit a powerful career as a Psychiatric Social Worker for Dr. Nancy Andreasen's studies of Schizophrenia, and as an Adjunct Professor at the University of Iowa, to devote her life to my music. I am very grateful and so lucky that she did. It was her devotion and wisdom and spirit that made all of this possible. She made it possible to make this crazy dream come true. I love her so, and still can't believe she has done all of this to bring my music to the world. Thank you, Penny!

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