

# Events

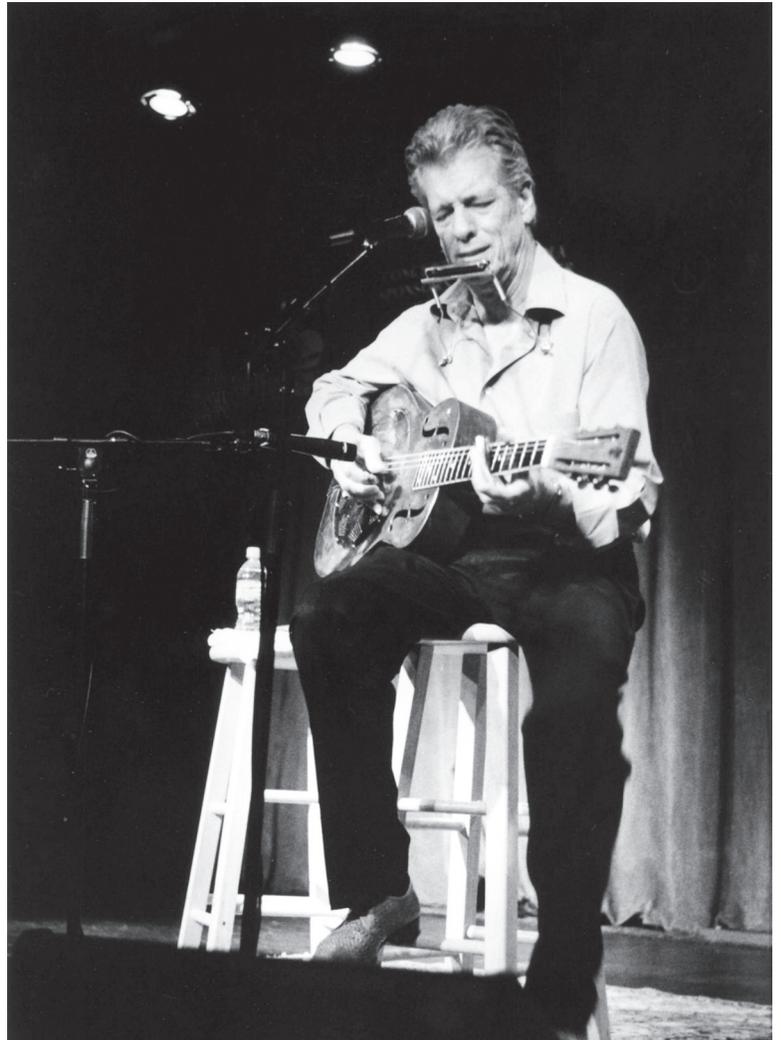
## John Hammond Graces the Low Spirits Stage-- Albuquerque's New Home of Blues and Roots

By Bill Nevins

John P. Hammond's long career—at least thirty-four albums, a Grammy, seven WC Handy Awards and countless hundreds of performances—ranges from the coffeehouses of the 1960s to grand concert halls to the joyful “endless tour” which is his life today. Whether playing blazing electric guitar with his full band, or stunning acoustic solo gigs, Hammond sings in a barrelhouse style which demonstrates what longtime musical collaborator Tom Waits meant when he said of him, “John’s particular dialect in music is that of Charley Patton’s shoe size and Skip James’ s watch chain. He has a blacksmith’s rhythm and the kind of soul and precision it takes to cut diamonds or to handle snakes.”

Son of legendary jazz writer and record producer John Hammond, Jr., John Paul Hammond has long established his own right to sing and play the blues with authenticity and true fire. He is the living touchstone for this vital American music, and one of the world’s acknowledged authorities on its history.

I’ve collected his albums since high school, and attended John Hammond shows from his 1967 NY City anti-war march performance on a flat bed truck through his Philadelphia Blues Festival starring gigs and his many sold out El Rey and Outpost shows in Albuquerque. I remember the unrestrained joy of fans when Hammond stepped down from a Philly stage after his gig to chat and proudly show us one of his cherished National Steel guitars. He’s



[www.lowspiritslive.com](http://www.lowspiritslive.com)

that kind of guy—down to earth and happy to share his love of music. The man is a bridge among generations—he jammed with Muddy Waters and Eric Clapton and introduced Bob Dylan to the ace musicians who became The Band. One of Hammond’s major fans is youthful hip hop soul-man G. Love, who produced and appeared on Hammond’s album Push Comes to Shove. Despite all this, John Hammond always displays a gentle grace and a charming, humor-laced modesty.

**Low Spirits Bar & Stage**  
2823 2nd Street NW  
Albuquerque (505) 344-9555

I interviewed John Hammond late in 2007 in New Mexico during his tour in support of his album, Push Comes to Shove, and we caught up by phone again recently to talk about Hammond's greatly anticipated Low Spirits show with Albuquerque blues icon Stan Hirsch.

(That concert is sure to sell out. Get your tickets NOW!)

Low Spirits is the newly opened blues-and-roots friendly music room in Albuquerque's North Valley neighborhood. Opened by music lover Joe Anderson in December 2009, Low Spirits has already established its reputation for a comfortable relaxed atmosphere, cheerful welcomes and the finest touring and locally-based truly soulful musicians around. Mississippi Hill Country blues masters Cedric Burnside and Lightnin' Malcolm will perform there on January 20, songwriter Cole Mitchell on January 23, and future gigs include The Albuquerque Blues Connection, Ryan McGarvey, Exene Cervenka and many surprises to be announced.

John Hammond's latest 2009 CD, Rough and Tough, like its predecessor Push Comes to Shove, is distinguished by inclusion of several original Hammond-penned songs alongside the older Delta Blues of which Hammond has become a most venerated and admired interpreter. (Hammond's album of classic Robert Johnson songs, At the Cross Roads, was recently released by Vanguard Records and his album of Tom Waits compositions, Wicked Grin, is itself now a treasured classic of Americana music. For a complete discography, visit [www.johnhammond.com](http://www.johnhammond.com)).

Following are some notes from my conversations with John Hammond. While our situation politically has changed

with the election of Barack Obama, still Hammond's comments on the George Bush era give insight into his sharp eye and ear for social reality as well as for the hard truths of the blues.

BN: I've followed your shows over the years, but the first time I recall seeing you in person was in 1967 at an anti-Vietnam War protest parade in New York City. You were on a flat bed truck, playing that Arthur Crudup song, "Give me a 32-20, man, they need me in the war".

JH: That's right! I picked that song, "I Got My Questionary". The irony of it all, I suppose. (Sings) "You can cry hero on my grave . . ." It's a song about a man who was drafted to fight.

BN: How are you feeling about this present (2007) war situation?

JH: Oh, please, it's so surrealistic. That a man that stupid, who has done so many things that he ought to be put away for anyway, should be leading the pack! And the mainstream press just get in line and they've consistently overlooked his whole past! It's scary. My wife and I thought of leaving the US, but I was damned if I was going to be chased out of my own country by an idiot like this!

BN: Yes, I have friends leaving for other countries, or planning to.

JH: It's just awful. What's happened in the Bush years with domestic surveillance and Gonzales and all this stuff—I've got outrage overload!

BN: You've got a line on your album, Push Comes to Shove: "Life's no secret, man, if you live the blues." Seems like that might describe these times we're in?

JH: Definitely. As my wife likes to say,

that song oughta be called "Bush Comes to Shove".

BN: It's been only in recent years that you have started recording your own songs, after decades performing blues and songs by other writers.

JH: Having worked with Tom Waits on our Wicked Grin project opened up some possibilities for me. I've known Tom for a long time, but still I've long been intimidated by such great songwriters. Tom is one of the greatest performers I've ever seen. I've worked gigs with him for about 30 years. You know, I played with Phil Ochs at Gerde's Folk City in 1962. We were both signed by Vanguard as a result of that show. Phil was so passionate and prolific and he was really great! And I knew Dylan in the early days and John Sebastian and Tim Hardin and all those incredible songwriters. It just flowed out of them, you know?

And yet, I knew so many great songs just from being a blues freak since I was really young! I knew four hundred songs in those days! Seemed like I really didn't need to write any new ones myself!

BN: Yet, lately you've begun writing your own songs. You haven't worked your way through the blues, have you?

JH: (Laughs) Oh, no, blues is a continuum. You think of the sky being blue. There are so many artists back in the Twenties and the Thirties that I haven't gotten to record yet.

I found my home really early on. I found my position, my place at an early age. I feel so fortunate. I've grown into it, never out of it.

BN: Between songs you told that story of your playing at age 18 with Mike Bloomfield, who was 17 then.

JH: I loved that guy. I think about him

## Hammond Interview Continued...

almost every day. He was such a great player. He did a little thing called "Me and Big Joe" where he went on a trip with Big Joe Williams and he wrote this narrative book of all the crazy people ,the drunken maniac scenes out there! And Charlie Musselwhite was there, too. Michael introduced me to Musselwhite.

BN: Michael was in the Butterfield Blues Band when they backed Bob Dylan at Newport. That was before Dylan hooked up with The Band.

JH: I introduced Bob to the The Band, who were called Levon and the Hawks back then. They played on my early album, I Can Tell. In fact, I just saw Levon Helm about two weeks ago. He does his "Midnight Rambles" concerts right out of his home in Woodstock, NY. He's great.

BN: You give an incredible lecture on the blues between songs at your performances, telling stories and sharing bits of information, like how Lightning Hopkins got his name . . .

JH: Yeah, he was in "Thunder and Lightnin'" with Wilson "Thunder" Smith, a great Texas piano player.

BN: Right! You know so much! Have you thought of writing a book?

JH: My wife and I have talked about that, of just sitting down with a tape recorder and just plumbing the well. I've been doing this for 45 years now, and I've met

some outrageous characters. I suppose I should do that, but I have all this energy to go out on the road and play. We work twelve months a year. I don't make big bucks but at the end we have enough to pay the bills. I'll be 65 in November.

BN: You're not planning to retire, are you?

JH: Oh no, not yet. My dad [John Hammond, the famed music producer who discovered Billy Holiday and Bob Dylan, among many others], wrote an autobiography, but I found it really boring. He was very political but he wrote about his family and irrelevant stuff, not all that exciting engaged business he was involved in. So, I don't know about a book.

BN: Some veteran artists like Bob Dylan seem to be reaching their maturity by mining the blues tradition, but you've always been there.

JH: Well, Bob was a blues fanatic way back when. I met him when he first came to New York in '61. He was just wide open, in your face, fearless—I'll always remember those days.

BN: When did you start writing songs?

JH: In 2003, with "Slick Crown Vic". I played that one last night. That's the first song I wrote that I liked. And now it's been eight new songs in the last five years. I tend to do things when the deadline approaches. I've got one I haven't

recorded yet, and about five in my head.

BN: You narrated the documentary film, Searching for Robert Johnson a few years ago.

JH: Yes, it was a film crew from England and they really did their homework. There was wonderful stuff that didn't even make it into the finished film. Robert Johnson spent time in Chicago and he did gigs in New York! Victoria Spivey told me that she saw him play in Brooklyn! People just don't know that about him.

BN: Your album, Push Comes to Shove, was produced by G. Love and he performs on one song with you. What other young players do you admire?

JH: Alvin Youngblood Hart—go see him! He's great. It takes time to see who's going to stay with the blues. G. Love could become a blues man. He's a sweetheart—he's got all that charm and poise—he's not fooling around.

BN: Can the blues change the world?

JH: It's like the backbone of American music. It has to do with seeing things for what they are. Like this stupid war. Like so many other things that just need to be addressed.

I spoke with John Hammond again by phone on January 13, 2010 two weeks before his Low Spirits concert. John told me of the glad recent news that his latest album Rough and Tough has been nominated for a Grammy.

JH: I'm surprised and delighted by this Grammy nomination. The album is a solo performance, and it includes two of the songs I wrote while working with G. Love on the Push Comes to Shove album, so that feels especially good.

BN: Does the changed social climate—the election of Barack Obama, the many economic and international developments of the past year—impact your performances or how your music is received?

JH: Well, that's a tough question. Certainly events influence everybody's feelings. But really, I don't think politics has that much to do with this music I play. Blues is its own entity, a traditional art form that outlasts political changes. Blues is a uniquely American folk art that's spread all over the world. Blues is not for everyone, for those of us who connect with it, it has become much of what we are about and it is forever fascinating. At least that's how it's been for me. This music sort of captures the human condition, in almost every aspect of that varied experience. It's a very passionate thing. You're either very much into it, or you're not.

BN: Your audiences are always intently focused on your performances, and you seem to guide them along, sometimes giving explanations of the history of the songs or getting a laugh with a story about your meetings with blues perform-

ers over the years. It really feels like a community come together at your shows, a very comfortable feeling.

JH: Thanks, that is the way we like it to be. The blues is a shared time together, and a good one, we hope.

BN: On the last page of his book Escaping the Delta, author Elijah Wald discusses your meetings with a number of elder blues musicians, documented in the film Searching for Robert Johnson. The context is the old story that Johnson met the devil, and the larger concept of blues as directly related to hoo doo and dark magic in some way. Wald thinks some fans and writers may have put too much emphasis on this debatable aspect of the blues. What's your opinion?

JH: At some point in an artist's life there may come a time when they can do what they want to do. It's just a process that happens when you discover what your niche is and you find that you can work in that art deeply. It is not a bad thing at all. Now, some people might find a need to express that feeling in a mystical or spiritual context. The rural South, especially back in the early 20th century, was very religious. If you played music and you did not play church music, then it was said that you were playing the devil's music—so the blues was called devil's music. Certainly rock n roll was called that, sometimes still is! That didn't mean it actually was music from the devil! But, you know, as I said, the blues is not for everybody.

BN: You draw on a repertoire of hundreds of blues songs, and you continue to write your own new songs in recent years. Do you have

a set list, and can you tell us what you plan to play at your Albuquerque Low Spirits show later this month?

JH (laughing): I have no idea! Whatever comes forward at the time. I never have a set list. I just play what seems to be for me at the time. I discover that when I am on stage, and it always seems to happen.

BN: Thanks, John. We're looking forward to your visit to Albuquerque.

JH: My pleasure—I am, too..

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