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

By Bill Nevins

Photo by David C Bach



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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 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.

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.

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JH: Definitely. As my wife likes to say, that song ought a be called "Bush Comes to Shove".

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

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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 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 . . .

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

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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?

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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?

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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 performers 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?

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

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