

# Blues on the route



Philip  
Dine

**S**ome folks write a book after researching a topic they knew little about but are intrigued by. Others write about something they've done at some point. Some, meanwhile, write about topics they've *lived*.

Retired letter carrier Pat O'Connor's book on the legacy of blues music in Wichita fits squarely in the latter category.

No surprise, then, that *Wichita Blues: Music in the African American Community*, released in September, is, in a word, riveting. In another, heartfelt.

Because, as has been noted in this space, journalists tend to think in terms of threes, let's add a third word: authoritative. That reflects the firm foundation on which the book rests—

Pat's longtime immersion in the quintessentially American form of music known as the blues, and in his native Wichita's history and culture.

The 50-year Branch 201 member knows Wichita, largest city in Kansas, as only a letter carrier can, having carried mail there for 28 years, starting in 1973. His fascination with the blues predated—but was rekindled by—his postal job, as we'll discuss shortly.

Taking after his father, Pat was drawn to folk music in the late 1950s. Soon, as a teenager in the mid-1960s, "rebellion kicked in, and blues is the best music for that," he says—largely because of its depiction of life under tough circumstances in places like the Mississippi Delta, plus the authentic—and spare—way it tells those stories. And, importantly, "the resolve" of those who sang the blues to persevere and overcome, and to "just cut loose with some pretty good music, innovative music."

"It's the bare bones of rock 'n' roll; rebellion and the telling simplicity of it," Pat says. "They get a lot said in a few words with the blues. It's good poetry, really."

**Just days ago as I write this, Pat was featured at a local museum** where more than half the crowd bought copies to be autographed, on the heels of discussing the blues' "hidden history" at the Kansas Book Festival in the state capital of Topeka—reflecting the considerable early attention to the book.

Beyond the captivating interviews of 19 local blues musicians, some of whom Pat performed with, the book (fittingly published by University Press of Mississippi) is an impressive volume, from the cover photo of the Blues Corner Bar and Grill to the inside photos, from the research-oriented footnotes to the bibliography.

Indeed, *Wichita Blues* is both scholarly and entertaining,

two traits that don't necessarily go together. In this case, they reflect Pat's journey, from college dropout to college instructor and author of numerous academic articles, plus his own colorful musical adventures, here and abroad.

Early on, legendary blues musician Lead Belly captured Pat's imagination; in high school he'd listen to Son House; and at Wichita State University he discovered Robert Johnson's records, "and that was it for me. Robert Johnson was the ultimate—he had a modern approach to an old music."

But college wasn't really Pat's thing, so he brought his guitar to California during San Francisco's 1967 Summer of Love, where "I saw a hippie delivering mail. I thought this was a job I could appreciate." He took the test, but then went to England during the British rock 'n' roll invasion, accompanied by his 1936 National steel guitar (a la Son House) and soon by some demo tapes Pink Floyd's original agent made in London, and playing folk clubs and street venues.

**Later, back in Wichita, he retook the postal test and was hired**, which he calls "a terrific break for me" on several levels. His route, which abutted Wichita State and was heavily minority, "got me more into Black culture, not artificially taking it in through records." One day in the mid-'70s, P.J.—his station moniker to distinguish him from the three other "Pats"—heard a resident playing "some real hardcore blues," perhaps B.B. King or Little Walter, on an 8-track in his pickup truck.

"That really surprised me," Pat recalls. "I thought nobody listened to blues anymore." That got him back into the blues, and particularly "got me interested in the history of blues in Wichita."

In the '90s, he found himself teaching a university course on the blues and doing a research project "which years later turned into this book."

Disclosure: Decades ago I grew enamored with the blues and attended concerts by the likes of Muddy Waters, Son House, B.B. King, and John Mayall and the Bluesbreakers—making me intrigued to learn of Pat, yet less prone to be overly impressed. But, after numerous conversations and examining his body of work, I can report that Pat O'Connor—and his book—are, by every measure, the real deal.

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