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# Bits

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## BLUES IN THE SOUTH

INTERVIEW WITH  
DONNA HERULA

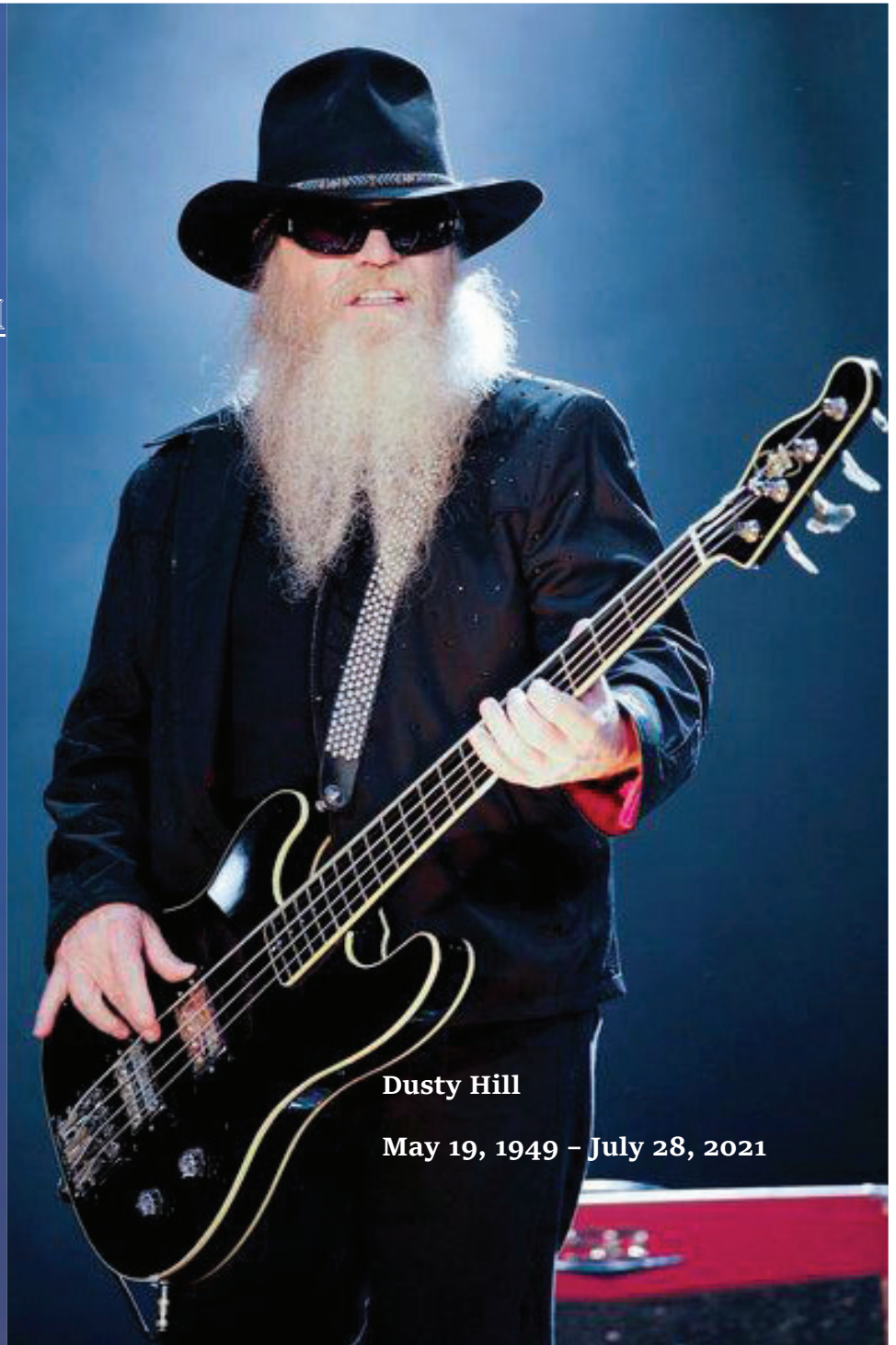
INTERVIEW WITH  
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Dusty Hill

May 19, 1949 – July 28, 2021

# BiTS INTERVIEW: Donna Herula

Donna was born and raised on the northwest side of Chicago, in the Portage Park neighbourhood. She began playing piano and writing songs at the age of 5 and guitar at the age of 10. In high school, she wrote an original song, "Mid-Term Blues," that she arranged for her high school jazz band and performed at her high school variety show.

Donna received a music scholarship from her high school and studied voice, jazz guitar and, later, classical guitar in college.



**BiTS:** Let's start at the beginning. Tell me Donna, how you found out about blues music in the first place. Was there music in your family when you were a kid?

**DH:** I live in Chicago, so there was a lot of music being played around. My older brother, who was eight and a half years older than me, played the saxophone and he loved music. My mom supported playing music. My parents didn't play, but my mum had me play piano when I really wanted to play the guitar, so when I was ten years old, I got a guitar, and that was it for me.

**BiTS:** You were listening to the blues from being a youngster, but surely at that time, most of the blues in Chicago would have been electric. Where did you get the acoustic stuff from?

**DH:** Yes, that's absolutely right. There were a couple of ways that I got into it. It's kind of surprising, but I'm a guitar fanatic. I loved guitars ever since I was a little kid, so I actually went to an Eric Sardinas concert. It was actually Steve Vai, and Eric Sardinas opened for him, and he was playing versions of Mississippi Fred McDowell and a lot of the old blues like Muddy Waters, and I was amazed by

how he played and then I looked on his website and there were all these different blues people I hadn't heard of because they were more acoustic and since I was from Chicago, they were very focused on electric blues.

I started going to the library and getting CDs and I was amazed when I heard Son House's 'Death Letter Blues', that was it for me. I couldn't believe that there was that kind of music out there. Good thing that I was in Chicago - they have the Old Town School of Folk Music and I really wanted to learn how to play slide guitar and so I went there, and I ended up finding a guy named Chris Walz who is a great teacher of slide guitar and old country blues in Piedmont style. I got into his level three class because, obviously, I'd played guitar for a long time. I took some classical in college. I took some jazz in high school, so I was a pretty accomplished guitar player, but I took his level three blues finger-style class and just learned about all these different people I'd never even heard about, so it really began my love for the acoustic blues being part of Old Town School of Folk Music as a student and the great thing about that - I took some classes from him. I took some lessons from Jon Spiegel as well over there and lo and behold, years later, Chris Walz recommended me to be a teacher at the Old Town School of Folk Music, so the last six years, I've been teaching some of the same classes that I was learning many years ago. It was just kind of amazing. I belong to a really wonderful community of acoustic blues people who really love the old blues and traditional blues.

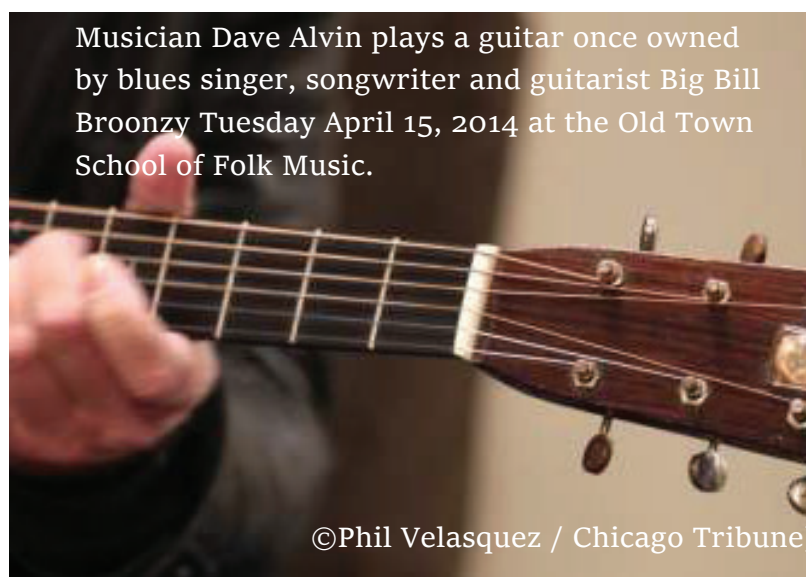
**BiTS:** Do you still do the teaching at the Old Town School of Folk Music?

**DH:** Yes, I do. I'm a current teacher there.

**BiTS:** I gather you've got another very taxing job. You're a counsellor of some kind.

**DH:** I am. I'm a marriage and family therapist. I'm very busy because I help individuals with stress and couples with relationship problems and then also on the weekends, I teach two or three classes. I teach an intro to slide guitar. I teach continuing slide in finger-style blues and then I also do a lecture slide class. I was doing a lot of individual private lessons but because of the album, what I had to do was, it was April and I ended up ending my individual lessons with people for the summer because the album came out and I had delayed my classes, so I didn't teach this summer because of all that's happening with the new album "Bang at the Door". I'm going to be going back to, at this point, teaching two classes in September because I'm also going to be doing a lot more gigs, I think, because of the album. I have to try to balance everything as well as being married.

**BiTS:** Do you do online teaching, Donna?



Musician Dave Alvin plays a guitar once owned by blues singer, songwriter and guitarist Big Bill Broonzy Tuesday April 15, 2014 at the Old Town School of Folk Music.

**DH:** Yes. What I've been doing all through COVID was online and many of my students are actually not from the Old Town School area. Due to the pandemic, what's been happening is I've had students from all over the US, like Texas and Minnesota and we've had some international people as well. That is really quite amazing. So my plan—because I have such specialised classes. It's not like guitar 101 or guitar 2 or guitar 3. They do have those classes at the Old Town School of Folk Music—is blues, it's slide guitar, and I'm planning to continue these online at this point.

**BiTS:** Am I right in thinking, Donna, that the place where you do teaching, or at least, the building where you do your teaching, is where Big Bill Broonzy's guitar is? Is that the place?

**DH:** Yes. I actually played Bill Broonzy's guitar. They allowed the teachers because they were fixing it in the music store and I go in the music store all the time and they called me and they said, hey, Bill Broonzy's guitar is in here. Do you want to play it? I'm like, absolutely. Actually, I love, love, love Big Bill Broonzy and, as you know, he was an early Chicago bluesman, and he was actually very instrumental in the beginning of the Old Town School of Folk Music. You can read the history of Old Town School of Folk Music, and he was the first performer on the first night, so we loved him, and I loved him and can't say enough. It was such an honour to play his guitar.

**BiTS:** It may help you to know that I run a website which is a kind of tribute to Big Bill, just simply called Broonzy.com.

**DH:** I saw that on your email address.

**BiTS:** That is my website.

**DH:** Yes. That's fantastic. I teach some of his tunes too, like 'Shuffle Rag'. I just absolutely love that tune.

**BiTS:** Mentioned in an article that I've read about you, you do a version of 'Hey Hey' as well.

**DH:** Yes, I do. I do. And I actually listened to your show yesterday, and there was a Big Bill Broonzy song that I've never heard ('I Get The Blues When It Rains' (Ed)), and I was so excited about that. The latest show, I think and then there was another tune. I was like wow! This is awesome. It's wonderful having an acoustic blues show that has all acoustic blues. It's just amazing, so I thank you.

**BiTS:** It's on a radio station which advertises themselves as being blues-rock (KCOR—[Kansas City Online Radio](#)), but I managed to persuade the station manager that they needed an acoustic show to balance it up and I've been doing it for a number of years now. And will continue [laughs].

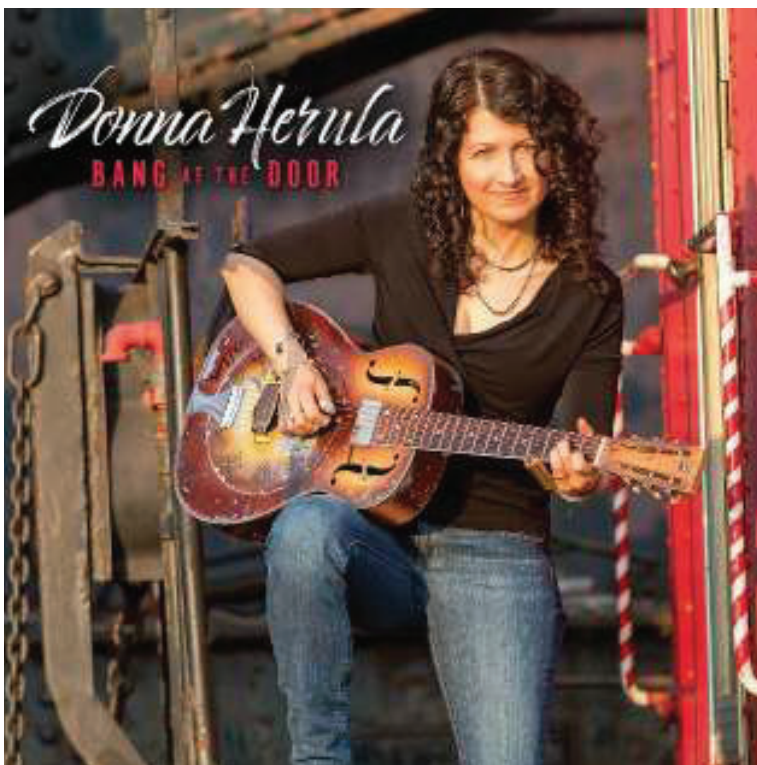
**DH:** That's fantastic. I'm so happy to find out about it.

**BiTS:** Donna, tell me something about the album that we're talking about here—"Bang At The Door". First of all, why the title? Why did you choose to call it what you did?

**DH:** Oh boy! I thought it was a good impassioned title, for one, and I think it's also me banging at the listener's door, hoping that they will open up for me and listen to me because it's been a while since I recorded my last CD. I just wanted people to hear, to take another listen to me and see if they like what they hear, so I just wanted to get some opportunities to play for people and travel and share the blues with people. So that's why it's "Bang at the Door" - it's - open up! [laughing].

**BiTS:** How did you go about getting the album together? There's a number of musicians that are on it with you. Was it all recorded in a studio? Was it done under lockdown conditions?

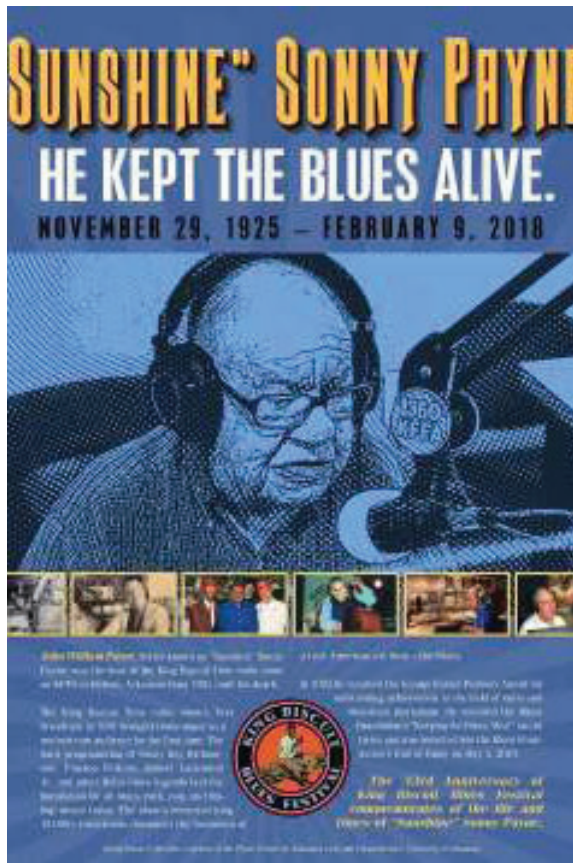
**DH:** Well, what happened is this album was recorded the last week of January of 2020. There were two times when we went out there and I didn't plan for it. My husband and I flew out there the last week of January and we recorded it, and this is something that Jon Shain and I had been preparing for, for about a year where we were on Zoom talking about the songs, instrumentation, keys. We put it into a spreadsheet. Just like planning which instruments we wanted on it and things like that. My first two CDs were recorded live together. I did a solo CD for my first CD, "Donna Herula" and then "Moon Is Rising: Songs of Robert Nighthawk" was me and a harmonica player and my husband. We were live in the studio. Jon had suggested that we do these multi-tracking and I would be doing it on my own with the quick track and so it was very different for me. What it allowed us to do was to really layer the musicians. The musicians came into the studio. The harmonica player came into the studio. He did his part. There was this layering. The only people where we actually had to send it out was Anne Harris because she's in Chicago with me, she did it at her own home studio and sent that into Jon and then what happened with the backup singers, for example, my cousin Tony Pons was the trumpet player, so he did his in a studio and sent it to Jon when I was there the second time so we could review it together and then I really wanted the backup singers to be Chicago and not North Carolina because obviously Jon's from North Carolina. He has a lot of contacts there, but I wanted it to be Katherine Davis, who is a blues singer here in Chicago and a friend of mine who's a



teacher at the Old Town School of Folk Music, which is Rebecca Toon, so we went into a Chicago studio after the song was done to add the background vocals and I was there with them in the studio. Everything else was done with Jon. Well, actually, again, we had a special guest Daryl Davis who did it at his own studio as well. I'm trying to think, there's Daryl Davis, Anne Harris, the backup singers, I had two of my friends, my niece do a little thing. A little background singing that they did on their phone and then we just added it to the mix because I wanted them on the album, but everything else like the drums were done in Jon's studio. Actually, FJ's studio - FJ Ventre.

**BiTS:** Do you have a favourite song on the album? Something that worked out maybe better than you thought it was going to.

**DH:** Well, I think 'Bang at the Door' worked out better than I thought it was going to, but I have a hard time having a favourite song on that album. It's very strange. I would think that I would have one favourite song or two. It's a struggle when people have asked me which song do I like the best? I like 'Bang at the Door'. Half the disc is about my friend and mentor, Sonny Payne. Especially when



I was first starting to listen to him, tears would come to my eyes because it's beautiful and exactly what I wanted. Then 'Can't Wait to See My Baby', I've been wanting to write a blues duet song and that was surprising because I was still trying to figure out which guitar I was going to play that one on when I was in the studio. It was a little crazy. Jon said, what are you going to do? I was like, I don't know, this and that. He's like okay. FJ and I are going to lunch. When I get back, decide what you're going to do [chuckles]. This is what ended up happening. We were there in January and then the COVID pandemic happened, so I'm sitting on the songs for months. FJ has other work to do besides my album. He can't gig, so he took some other work as a record designer, so he had to put my project on hold. I'm sitting there and then I started thinking about the whole album as a whole piece. It's a little dark, so I ended up writing three songs in the summer of last year. I ended up writing 'Can't Wait to See My Baby', 'Black Ice' and 'Who's Been Cookin' in My Kitchen' because I felt like as far as the mix, there was a missing piece. I wanted more of an acoustic Mississippi John Hurt style. I wanted a duet. I wanted an instrumental, so I added them and then I went back in there the last week

of August of last year, and I tweaked all these different things I was hearing. I want to add harmonies here. I want to add this here. The COVID time actually helped me take a break and to sit back and listen to the album as a whole and put in the pieces that I thought were missing as an album as a whole. I think it really really was beneficial to take that time out and not do anything because I couldn't. I had to wait and then Tony, my husband and I drove from Chicago to North Carolina a second time in August. I guess there's the bad and the good, but I think I really helped to improve the album and make it as good as it is at this point. I was really happy about that.

**BiTS:** That's absolutely magic. Tell me something about visiting West Helena and appearing on the radio show, the famous radio show.

**DH:** Wow! I was in the International Blues Challenge back in 2009, and it was my first time in Memphis. Never been part of that whole experience and when I played, there was a man by the name of Jack Myers and he was a person that worked at the Delta Cultural Center and after I came off the stage, he said would you like to visit us in Helena, Arkansas? I would say Flour Hour, but that's not what it is, but King Biscuit Time. He wanted to introduce me to Sonny Payne. He thinks Sonny would like me. Then they invited me, and I came down in June, that following June for the Mother's Best festival and so they told me I was going to play one song on his show and that was it. Then I took a tour of the wonderful Delta Cultural Center and Museum. They have all wonderful exhibits there. It



was amazing and Sonny had me play a song and then he apparently liked it because he said, why don't you play another one? I'm like, what? So I did and then I played another one, and then he said a third time, and everyone is looking around. That was apparently unusual that he asked for me to play three songs, but it was really the start of a great friendship. I ended up going down there for the King Biscuit Blues Festival a couple of times as a soloist and then in a duet with my husband and every time I would go to the Memphis IBCs - International Blues Challenge - I would visit him. It was probably seven or eight times and then the last time, I was touring in the area and I stopped by and I talked to Jess and Jess said that Sonny was not doing as well and he wanted me to come to his

house, so I ended up going to his house and he had to take some naps that day, but he ended up showing me and Tony all of his photograph books and his awards for being a great radio show host and in his field of the awards, celebrations that he went to. We were there for hours, and then he had to take a nap for a while and we kind of stayed there and waited until he woke up. It was just a really wonderful time and that was the last time I saw him. I just feel very lucky just to happen to be in this situation. I think many times it's like I love the blues and I play the blues and I do what I do and then you end up running into people that are just wonderful people. At the time you don't know how lucky you are. I really wanted to write a song about him because I really do feel like I have been fortunate with my friendships and people that I've met and played with being in the whole blues world.

**BiTS:** That, of course, Donna, that was a massive compliment that he paid you, but there's an even bigger compliment really and that is the success that you're having with this current record of yours.

**DH:** Yes, that was amazing to me. I had no idea. This album was released May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2021, and the international reception has been, I don't know what else to say, amazing. I was shocked that it was being played everywhere. It's like in Australia my record was number three. It's been on the acoustic blues chart for the Roots Music Report, with eight weeks at number one for acoustic blues and made it up to number one on the Blues Music Chart. And then people were just telling me how much they enjoyed it and that's really what is the most important thing to me is that as a songwriter, I'm like well, we'll see if people like it. I have some of these songs and I wrote some of these recently, but I just said to myself that I wanted to write songs, like I love Son House and it meant something to him,

so I wanted to write songs that personally meant something to me, and I wanted to share it with people. I didn't care. Well, if they don't like it, they don't like it. This is what I think the blues is all about. It's about emotion. It's about sharing your feelings, sharing your experiences, joy. All of the emotions and that was the thing that I wanted to share, and I didn't want to have songs where it's just like phoning it in - I guess that's a term where it's just trying to do what people like. Let's see what people like. I'm going to try to write songs that they're going to like. That is not what I wanted to do, and I just said, well, I'm just going to do what I like and if other people like it, great, but I really had no idea. The surprising thing is too, people really like the mix of the songs, which I was thinking that would be a detriment to the album because I know when there's awards or whatever, I thought in my head that people would say okay, well, this is country blues or this is Delta blues but mine was so different that it's hard to categorise, so I don't know if it's really going to fit in anywhere. Although I love the acoustic blues, that's what it really was - an acoustic blues album, but there's also some real influences from lots of different other styles of blues, though. But it ended being a really good thing that there were so many different styles, so I'm actually really happy with everything I did and all the decisions I made leading up to releasing the album.

**BiTS:** Well, needless to say. I think it works extremely well. I'm delighted to play it on air and will continue to do so for some time, of course. What are your immediate plans? Are you able to get gigs with COVID still being around, or what's happening?

**DH:** Yes, so one of the performances that I'm really excited about - there was not a Chicago Blues Festival this year, but they're having a three-day blues festival in Chicago. Well, actually, it's a suburb of Chicago called Berwyn at a place called FitzGerald's and I'm going to be the first band of the night that consists of me. This is September 24<sup>th</sup>. It's me then it's Lil' Ed & the Blues Imperials, then it's Toronzo Canon and then it's Shemekia Copeland. I am just thrilled about this show coming up in September and I have a trio and a band that I play with now as well, and so we're going to play with a man by the name of Marc Edelstein and Tony Wittrock on guitar and mandolin and then



the one and only Kenny Smith, who I love, is going to be our drummer. We've been playing together in gigs and I'm just really happy to be in Chicago where you can get these fantastic musicians. For example, you know about Kenny, of course, but Marc Edelstein was a founding member of his wonderful bluegrass group called The Special Consensus. He was an original member of that band and so there's all these wonderful, amazing players and I'm just happy that I am living where I'm at because I can just play with them.

**BiTS:** Okay. That's absolutely terrific. Like I say, I won't take any more of your time, but I just want to thank you for just speaking to me and doing a wonderful job on the current album, which is one of the most outstanding things I've heard in a long time. I have one other question - your last name, is that Spanish, Hispanic in some sort of way.

**DH:** No. It's interesting. My last name is, I think, Polish. My father died when I was ten years old, and I'm told he was Polish. He was an only child whose father died when he was young. His mother died when he was 19 and so there's not much family around, but it's very interesting because [chuckles] when I look it up in Wikipedia and stuff, my last name Herula, it looks like it's Norwegian. It looks like there's a Heruli tribe that invaded Poland, or something but I'm half Sicilian. My mother is Sicilian, so I'm half Sicilian and I'm half Polish and who knows, I might be part Scandinavian as well. That's what it said on 23andMe, that I had some Scandinavian blood in me. Italian and Mediterranean and Sicilian, but Eastern European as well and some Scandinavian, so I was wondering what happened there. Nobody has ever told me that. I'm hoping to come over to Europe and hopefully get some blues festivals next year if it opens up and it's allowed, so hopefully, that will happen and maybe I'll find out more.

**BiTS:** As soon as it opens up we'll have you here. Absolutely wonderful stuff. Yes, I'll look forward to that. Donna, thank you so much for speaking to me. I won't take any more of your time.

**DH:** I want to say one more thing. I want to thank you for doing what you do for acoustic blues because it's really amazing and thank you.

**BiTS:** Thank you for that. That's very much appreciated. Thank you. Have a wonderful day. Don't work too hard if you can avoid it.

**DH:** Wonderful. Thank you so much.

**BiTS:** Thank you. Bye.

**DH:** Okay. Bye.

