

# That's Why They Call it the Blues

By LAURINDA KEYS LONG

His black hair in braids, his big glasses slipping down to the tip of his nose, Arthur Flowers steps up on the stage and finishes dressing. He straps a string of bells to his blue-jeaned leg, another to his ankle. He wraps a bracelet or two on his wrists, and drapes necklaces of beads, shells and a talisman pouch over his black suit jacket and black shirt. He lays out gourds, a conch shell, a bag of beads and shells on a table, tests a snatch of a tune on his harmonica, taps the microphone in front of his laptop.

Now, this English professor and novelist is ready to lecture.

"I am going to speak on blues this evening," intones Flowers, a native of Memphis, Tennessee who says he grew into adulthood without knowing anything about the African-influenced American music genre for which his hometown is famous. Flowers discovered his musical and cultural roots, African and American, in New York. He was performing a poem on stage and someone later referred to him as a Memphis bluesman, so he researched his heritage and began incorporating music into his story-telling and literary lectures. He has been a professor of English at New York State University and now teaches literature and writing at Syracuse University in New York. His novels—*Another Good Loving Blues*, *De Mojo Blues*—resonate with his musical roots, whether he is telling a love story or recounting the reintegration into American society of Vietnam War veterans like himself.

The cadences of the blues—with their echoes of Africans singing around a campfire, of slaves calling to each other in the fields of the American South, of singing hymns of hope around plantation huts in the evening—suffuse Flowers' speaking style

and his literature. His tales of ordinary folk, often poor and rural, are permeated with hints of mystery, magic and ancient stories passed down orally.

"The reason the oral tradition became so powerful in African American culture is because when Africans were brought to the United States they were systematically stripped of their cul-



Above: Arthur Flowers (left) converses with sculptor Andrew Logan and Rajeev Sethi, chairman of the Asian Heritage Foundation, at a post-festival literary reception at the New Delhi residence of U.S. Deputy Chief of Mission Steven J. White. Right: Flowers tells stories at the Jaipur Literature Festival in January.

ture to make them better slaves," Flowers told an audience at the American Center in New Delhi, after the Jaipur Literature Festival. All the slaves had "was what they were able to carry in the oral tradition. It was literally against the law for black folks to read and write" in some southern states. "The oral tradition was used to keep the culture alive and thriving under supremely hostile conditions."

It was later, "at the time of the great migration, at the turn of the 20th century, when black folk moved out of the farms and into the cities of the South, and moved from being a rural people to an urban people that the oral traditions became the art forms," Flowers explains. "Their folk tales became literature and their blues music became jazz."

He clicks the play button on his laptop and the haunting, not-quite-wail of a fellow soul from long ago, calling to his co-laborers across a southern field, takes our breath away with its beauty and pathos. Then, Jimi Hendrix! Is that sliding wail on the guitar from the same place, culturally and spiritually, as that antique field-holler? Here comes a southern Gospel song, from an African American church choir. Then, the rhythm of the words tumbling forth from a Black, southern Gospel preacher,

"Into each life must come some trouble, must come some rain  
Only through adversity will you ever know your true strength  
When hard times come we fight the battles we find no one else could win  
Remember what the old blues doctor said,  
Trouble don't last always."

—Arthur Flowers, New Delhi, January 2009



Martin Luther King, Jr. Now it's hip-hop from Louisiana bluesman Chris Thomas King. It's the same ancient beat and heart-tugging undertone, surviving across cultures, years, lands and experiences.

That, says Flowers, is the blues.

The field hollers were used by slaves to communicate to each other, without words, how they were feeling, says Flowers. Each had a unique call and the musicality was innate. A friend from across the field would respond with his own holler. This call and response style is part of African music; it's also a basis of southern Gospel and rock 'n' roll.

The wailing sound, and the sadness it expressed, developed into the earliest blues music. Many people, when they hear the word "blues" think of sad, woe-is-me music. "But blues is about getting through life's trials and tribulations," says Flowers. "...The way it works is that you might be feeling bad, because you do feel bad sometimes in life, so you're talking about it—*trouble in my mind, I am blue, but I won't be blue always, sun, you gotta shine, in my backdoor some day, I may be blue but I won't be blue always*—the next thing you know you're not feeling bad at all."

Then he played some Dinah Washington, one of America's greatest blues singers, performing the classic *Birth of the Blues/I Don't Hurt Anymore*. The transition, the turn of the music, in her voice, in the lyrics, the arrangement and tempo, from the field-holler cry to the "things are gonna be okay" hopefulness can plainly be heard.

"The blues are more than the art form, more than the music," says Flowers. "They are cultural instruments intimately tied to the African American culture of trial and tribulations.... When the culture was dismissed as unworthy the blues carried us through."

Flowers is a founder of the New Renaissance Writers Guild, an offshoot of the half-century-old Harlem Writers Guild, which supports African Americans telling their own experience through writing. "There are those of us who feel we are heirs to two literary traditions, the Western written tradition and the oral African tradition, and we are hoping through the fusion to contribute to the evolution of both," says Flowers.

These writers, he says, "are consciously attempting to forward a uniquely African American literary language based on the oral tradition—and its musical notes."

## For more information:

- Flowers' blog  
<http://rootsblog.typepad.com/rootsblog/>
- Audio interview, with music  
<http://wiredforbooks.org/arthurflowers/index.htm>
- Dinah Washington  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FsqEG\\_3p5g](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FsqEG_3p5g)
- Blues  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blues>
- Chris Thomas King  
<http://www.christhomasking.com/>