

The blues is synonymous with the passion of its performers, and in the often harsh economic landscape of the north east of England, Paul Lamb discovered that passion. Inspired by Sonny Terry and Little Walter, and yet frustrated at being on the outside looking in at these warriors of the blues. Then came the harmonica; that melodious harp that takes many a song for a rollercoaster ride, giving it a unique voice along the way. Paul played the way his heroes played, and he fought the way his heroes fought. His journey strayed from the Mississippi Delta blues of Doctor Ross, and settled instead for the east coast style of Sonny Terry. He sought the keys to the citadel, to the cathedrals of the blues, bidding farewell to family and friends as he swept aside the doubts that have crushed so many others before him, and he emerged victorious, with emperors from all corners of the blues kingdom hailing him as one of their own.

Paul Lamb was born into a traditional hard working Geordie family in Blyth, just north of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne. The harsh world of the recession was yet to come, and throughout his early years there was more than enough employment in this male dominated era. The shipping industry was strong around the port of Blyth, though his grandfather, father and several uncles found work in the coal mines. The work was not particularly well paid, and there was never a lot of money around, but it was a happy time in a very close knit community. Pocket money did not really exist, so he brought in some income with a paper round, and by helping the old folks to bring in their coal. It was a world of trade unions and working men's clubs, a world where the men came home from work, ate their dinner, and then disappeared for a few hours relaxation, drinking and playing darts. One of his earliest fond memories is of his grandfather who was a merchant seaman. He used to come home and play sea shanties on what he called his *gob-iron*, the first encounter that Paul had with the instrument that he would become famous for.

Whilst most of the work was in the shipping and mining industries, Paul took an apprenticeship as a painter and decorator with the co-op. Musically, he listened to a John Mayall track *Have you heard*, and he wanted more. As so many before, he was emotionally attached to the blues, but without an instrument he did not have the vehicle to express his feelings through the music in the same way that Mayall did. He tried to play the guitar but could not really get into it. He then had piano lessons, but his frustration grew as he wanted to go straight from Doh-Ray-Me to the Chicago blues of Otis Spann. He then returned to John Mayall and picked up the distinctive sound of the harmonica. The memories of his grandfather stirred, and at 14 years of age he decided that this would be his instrument of choice.

He was browsing through records in a junk shop and stumbled across the names Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee. It proved to be a seminal moment in his young life, and he spent the next 12 years trying to perfect the Sonny Terry sound. As Paul explained, "You've got to listen to someone to get your influence, and mine was Sonny."

At the age of 17 he got his first big break in the music industry. He was at a folk club held at the Blyth labour club, and the organisers asked him to play three numbers. He was thrilled. "I went down a storm, and my performance even made the local newspaper." He became a regular on the folk club circuit, and he also visited the Lampglass Cellar Club in Ashington

where Long John Baldry heard him play. The English Blues singer was so impressed that he asked Paul to join him on stage, and many years later it was fondly remembered when they met at a club in Germany. However, it was not all big names and star billings. There were many occasions when he had to sleep in his van, with meals sometimes consisting of crisps and a beer.

In 1975 Paul saw an advertisement in the music press. It asked for harmonica players to apply for the World Harmonica Championships in Germany. Paul sent off a tape, and he was invited down to London to audition. He got through to the final and finished second as a soloist. The poor boy from Blyth had made his mark on the world, and this was recognised back home with flags and a street party in his honour. Ultimately it led to him holding a place on the advisory panel for the National Harmonica League, as well as running harmonica workshops and endorsing the Hohner brand.

Eventually the folk club scene and other live bookings meant that the painting and decorating had to be dropped. Sadly, it also had an adverse effect on his family life, and he split from his wife.

He put together a band that took blues standards and gave them a unique touch. This went down well with the crowds in the north east, but Paul's ambition took him to London. He was hoping for wider exposure and bigger audiences, and the record label Red Lightnin' set up a show at Dingwalls. He shared a bill with Junior Wells and Buddy Guy, and at one point actor Jimmy Nail, a friend of Paul's, tried to join them on stage. Unfortunately he was not up to the task, and Paul had to persuade him to get back down again. Eventually, life in the capital proved to be too much for his band, and they decided that their future lay back in Newcastle and Blyth. For Paul, London was where it was all happening; he was steadily climbing the ladder to success, one rung at a time.

Steve Rye worked with Hohner and was on the panel for the World Harmonica Championships. Over the years Paul had become good friends with Steve, and this friendship led to a memorable first meeting. It was part of Steve's job to take Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee around on tour. One day, at Steve's house in Streatham, Paul finally got to meet his greatest blues hero. It was an inauspicious meeting, as Sonny was walking down the street carrying a box of Kentucky Fried Chicken and beans, and the beans had spilled down his shirt as he tried to eat them with his fingers. Paul joined Sonny and Brownie on tour, and when Sonny fell ill Brownie asked Paul to join him on stage. It was a great honour, and another step in the right direction.

Paul was picking up plenty of work, playing sessions and meeting many of the great American bluesmen who came across to the UK in the 80s. He also got to play with Mark Knopfler, who grew up in Blyth, as part of the Notting Hillbillies, a country rock band formed by Steve Phillips and Brendan Croker, that featured Knopfler on guitar when he was not performing with Dire Straits.

Paul has put together several more bands, including the Blues Burglars who released their first album, *Breakin In* on the Red Lightnin' record label. The Blues Burglars included

Johnny Whitehill on guitar, and their name came from their tendency to steal songs from the early blues greats and give them their own signature. Paul Lamb's Blues Band was the next incarnation, again featuring Johnny Whitehill. They had a residency at the Station Tavern in London on Tuesday nights, and the crowds were queuing along the street to see them. They often drew bigger audiences than the better known bands at the weekends, and this led to shows further afield around London and beyond into Europe. It was time for another name change, and so they became Paul Lamb and the King Snakes. This time Paul had nothing to do with the name; the band members wanted their own identity, and so they came up with The King Snakes after John Lee Hooker's *Crawlin' King Snake*.

In the early nineties producer Paul Riordan had the idea for *Harmonica Man*, and he wanted a Sonny Terry kind of sound. Apart from Sonny himself, there was only one man that could produce this; Paul Lamb. It was released under the name Bravado, though the feel and tone of the harmonica playing is unmistakably Paul's, set within a new genre. Paul would have been happy to take his session fee for the recording, but Riordan persuaded him to forego that and take a 50-50 split on royalties instead. Paul's girlfriend then heard it playing at a dance club and it appeared on pop radio station Kiss FM. Record producer Pete Waterman was interested in it, and they recorded a video for MTV. Paul got to meet Kylie Minogue and a host of other stars, as *Harmonica Man* reached number 24 in the charts. He was putting in appearances at dance clubs, and being chauffeured around in a limousine. An appearance on Top Of The Pops was scheduled, but quite suddenly Waterman decided to shelve the project. At the time *Cotton Eye Joe* was storming up the charts, which was the same idea as *Harmonica Man*, but using a banjo rather than the harmonica. Paul believes that this song was the reason that *Harmonica Man* was shelved and can only assume that *Cotton Eye Joe* benefitted from better management and promotion. However, it was an exciting time while it lasted, and it certainly got the attention of Paul's ex-wife who started calling and asking for a share of the royalties!

There was a deal with ACE records, though this was just for covers and so there were no royalties. They moved over to Indigo Records, and had a long term relationship until Indigo sold out to Sanctuary Records. The founders of Indigo then formed Secret Records, and they were happy to take on Paul who felt like part of the family again. For Paul, record sales are not just measured in chart success, as he explained, "Record sales are not the big thing that they used to be, but if you sell while you are on tour it helps to support the band and create a fanbase."

Paul has lived through many ups and downs of the fickle world of the music industry, but his artistry and showmanship survives because he has a talent that transcends the moment, the year, or even the decade. He has won many awards, included being inducted into the British Blues Awards Hall Of Fame, and he looks back on them fondly. "Normally there is a voting process and then the trophies and plaques are sent to me. There are no real ceremonies. I love them all, and I see it as a good thing that people have taken the time and the effort to vote. My mother was extremely proud, and she used to complain that there was no room for any more on the mantelpiece! God bless her!"

Despite many successful years playing the blues, Paul believes that there is still more that could be done to promote his music. “Blues, for me, gets a bad press. Especially when they put out the line *Black Americans are the Real Deal* which is not always the case. White guys can play the Blues. It is also billed as sad, troubled music, but it can also be uplifting and happy.”

One aspect that he does welcome is the opportunity to play at festivals, to an audience that would not normally listen to Paul Lamb And The King Snakes. “I have done many festivals that are pop, hard rock or mainstream, and they are all alike to me. My type of music crosses over really well. Its good to have variety in any event. I have played with Meatloaf and Mark Knopfler, then last year I played on Danish metal band Volbeat’s latest album. This started off as one track, but when we went into the studio, they loved my style of playing so much that it became three tracks.” He cherishes these friendships, and was delighted to be flown over to Boston by Jerry Portnoy for the American blues harmonica maestro’s 60th birthday. It was a star studded affair where he met the Fabulous Thunderbirds and the J Geils Band.

However, he knows that he cannot afford to be complacent. “The audience appear to be growing old with me! I would love to see more young kids at the blues festivals and folk clubs. The Blues scene is not the same as it was. The record industry was good in the 80s and 90s, but the style has now changed to a heavy rock blues. Players like Otis Grand and Mike Sanchez are still trying to stick to roots and blues, and we are all staying away from rock to create our own style. That’s what I did. Once you mastered one of those greats you can play them all. It’s the same instrument, just a different style. I listened to east coast guitar players like Reverend Gary Davis and Blind Boy Fuller, and that’s what I played on the harmonica. It wasn’t based on the harmonica playing, it was more a mountain hillbilly sound rather than the Delta blues.”

Paul has taken his playing further afield, including Hong Kong and Indonesia where he loved the food and the people, but he still retains a strong affinity with his heritage, So much so that if he ever wrote a book it would probably be called *Seabirds Of The North East*; he is a keen twitcher!

He recently suffered a health scare that knocked his confidence, but he is now back on the road again, and surrounded by friends and family. His son Ryan plays guitar with him, and he often departs from the full King Snakes lineup to perform as a duo with their guitarist and old friend Chad Strentz. This makes it more affordable for venues to book the man Paul Lamb. Behind the scenes he still does a lot of self promotion as that is how he originally built up his reputation. He realises the need to keep up with technology, and he has enrolled a couple of people to maintain his website. Paul Riordan, his friend from the days of *Harmonica Man*, has now been transformed into Paula, and she also helps out with the website as well as producing his music. After all this time he has no regrets, believing that “life is too short to have them”, and considers himself an entertainer rather than just a musician. “Well Brucie said that the name of the game is entertainment, and I believe that communicating with the audience is what makes a great show.” Paul Lamb has built a great legacy, originally based on the influence of Sonny Terry, and it is a quote from Sonny that he holds dear to his heart. “Son, play what you feel, and feel what you play, and that’s it.”