

Blues singer John Hammond dead at 83

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John Paul Hammond died at 83 of a heart attack on February 28, ending a career of more than 60 years as a devotee and performer of blues music. He recorded more than 30 albums in his lifetime, yet always considered himself an itinerant blues singer. His performances paid tribute to the music originating from African Americans in the rural South, the pioneers of the blues. While widely known and respected among musicians, he purposefully avoided the trappings of celebrity bestowed upon “big name” artists.

Immensely talented yet humble, he loved the music he played and was grateful to be able to perform it. He described the blues as

probably the American folk music. It’s the music that seems to capture the American psyche somehow. It’s a music made up of many different cultures that are all somehow blended into America. Especially, it captures the depth of feeling of ... and passion of a person.

Hammond was unapologetic that he was white and played authentically the songs of his musical idols who were black.

Usually an audience isn’t so conscious of your color, as they are your feeling and playing, and how good you feel about playing. It’s only the critics, the interviewers, that seem to dwell upon the racial aspect of things.

I think the people want to hear that good feeling they want to hear, you know, share that experience, that feeling.

He was born in 1942 in New York City, the son of John Henry Hammond II, the renowned record producer/executive and scion of the Vanderbilt family. The elder Hammond was one of the most influential figures in 20th century music. Specifically, because of his left-wing views, his determined efforts to break down color barriers were responsible for bringing to the attention of the world music that had been previously been inaccessible to wide audiences due to official racism. Musicians such as Lionel Hampton, Charlie Christian, Count Basie, Billy Holiday ...

Hammond gave his son John the middle name Paul in honor of the boy’s godfather, Paul Robeson, the powerful bass-baritone singer and left-wing activist. The younger Hammond’s parents, John and Jemison, split when he was just five years old, and his mother was mostly responsible for his upbringing. He lived with her on MacDougal Street in the heart of Manhattan’s Greenwich Village.

John Junior came of age during one of the most painful times in American history. The postwar boom was accompanied by the anticommunist Red Scare. Witch hunting of artists suspected of being sympathetic to communism was aggressively pursued by the FBI and congressional committees. Writers, actors and musicians in the film industry and elsewhere were blacklisted or threatened with blacklisting if

they did not reach an understanding with the authorities. Well-known figures, such as Robeson, Pete Seeger and The Weavers, Leonard Bernstein, Aaron Copland, Lena Horne and Artie Shaw, were among those targeted.

There is no evidence that the US government ever had the elder Hammond in their crosshairs, although he was watched by the FBI. He may have been treated with kid gloves because of his immense standing and success in the music business, as well as his family background.

The American ruling class eventually censured and dispensed with the services of Senator Joseph McCarthy and the extreme “anti-red” hysteria diminished in the late 1950s, but anticommunism continued to exert enduring pressure on politics and the arts. Yet the reality of American life, including Jim Crow racism and poverty, as well as imperialist wars and interventions, inspired an anti-establishment radicalism among many young people.

One might think being the son of John Hammond would have *automatically* laid the basis for a musical career for the younger Hammond. It worked out somewhat differently. The doors the elder Hammond helped open on the world of African American music opened for *broad layers of young people*, and his son proved to be one of the beneficiaries.

Young John became enamored of blues at an early age. “I remember when I was 7 years old [1949] my father brought me to see Big Bill Broonzy.” His father brought him backstage to meet the legendary Broonzy. In other interviews, Hammond cites a concert by Jimmy Reed as an inspiration for devoting his life to performing the blues.

I went to the Apollo in New York and I saw Jimmy Reed play live. And he was fantastic. He played guitar and harmonica and sang and had a great band. And he had hit records that “crossed over” as they say. He was as popular with white audiences in the South as he was with anybody. He sold records ... everybody loved him, man. His style was so wonderful ... that country blues transitioning into electric guitar and bass and drums. His voice was just completely compelling.

Remarking on Reed’s harmonica accompaniment:

I had never seen anyone play guitar and harmonica at the same time, and it was, I was very impressed. And when I got a guitar in 1960, and I started playing professionally in 1962. And I incorporated the harmonica rack, and pretty much what I’m doing today.

Around 1958, he heard Robert Johnson on record. “I was a blues fan at that point, but I had never heard that the really early country blues.” Hammond added, “It really knocked me out.”

After graduating from high school, Hammond attended Antioch College in Ohio for a short time. “I was a painter, an art student.”

I had gone to art schools for a long time, so that was my comfort zone, and my first day in Art 101, I realized that this isn't what I really wanted to do.

In 1960, at 18, Hammond got a guitar and “drove his friends nuts” for the next year or so while he learned to play.

I don't know. I can't explain myself. I was just ready to play. I went to two prep schools and a progressive school in New York, the Little Red School House, and then I was just not a good student because I didn't live with my father. I stuttered so badly that every new exposure to new kids was always a really humiliating experience for me. I finally found something I really wanted to do, and I just went for it big time.

Once I felt like I could play a bunch of songs, I started playing parties at school sometimes, and people just say, “Oh, yeah, that sounds great.”

During his time at Antioch College, Hammond immersed himself in the Piedmont style of fingerpicking that fellow student Ian Buchanan learned from bluesman Reverend Gary Davis. One of Buchanan's students went by the name Jerry Kalkanin. He was actually Jorma Kaukonen, who a few years later became the lead guitarist for the Jefferson Airplane in San Francisco.

After dropping out of college, Hammond returned to Greenwich Village for a short time. He met fellow musicians, John Sebastian, Jose Feliciano and Richie Havens:

We used to go wandering around, playing little basket houses [clubs where musicians were paid in tips] in New York, and in the Village, and at the end of the evening, we'd take our change that we made, and go to the Kettle of Fish, a bar on MacDougal Street, and have beers, and talk music and stuff ...

Hammond then went to California to find regular paying gigs. His stint on the West Coast was short-lived as he returned to Greenwich Village to further his career. In 1963, while performing at Gerde's Folk City with folksinger Phil Ochs, he was signed by Vanguard Records to his first recording contract, along with Ochs.

As Hammond described it, “I got a guitar in 1960 and started playing professionally in 1962.” This length of time between beginning to learn an instrument and becoming a professional musician was, to say the least, extremely compressed. Obviously, Hammond was extremely talented and determined, but this was a period where interest in American roots music exploded, and he found himself amidst talents who were likewise seeking to master blues music.

Well, you know, there were artists that, you know, when I first began playing professionally I got to be on shows with a lot of the originators of blues—artists like Bukka White and Sun House, John Hurt, Fred McDowell, Furry Lewis and Sleepy John Estes—all these phenomenal originators—so I got to be on shows with a lot of

my idols, or those who I admire tremendously. The ones who had already passed on of course I was not able to see or hang out with, but ... I got to tour with Howling Wolf and Muddy Waters, Willie Dixon, a lot of the more modern blues artists. I've had a chance to record with artists who went on to become huge stars. I feel very fulfilled.

When he was just 21, Hammond played at the 1963 Newport Folk Festival. This interview gives a sense of his fearless approach to the music he loved.

He describes in another interview how he came to enhance his style of playing:

One of the really great things that my dad did for me was in 1963. He took me to a guitar store where he knew the owner ... Eddie Bell's guitar headquarters on 49th Street, New York. He had a 1930s steel-bodied guitar that was something special.

The guy said to my father that he had had it in the store for 30 years and couldn't sell it. Because the electric guitar wiped it out. Before the electric guitar, this was the loudest guitar that you could get. In orchestras, a guitar player might have a National guitar, because he could be heard, he could do a solo over the orchestra.

This is the same National steel-bodied guitar he used for the rest of his career.

Hammond described his relationship with up-and-coming artist Bob Dylan: “I knew Dylan really well when he first came to New York, and he went to my recording sessions, I went to his ...” Dylan was at a 1964 recording session for Hammond's third album, *So Many Roads*, where he met the future members of The Band, who backed up John on the album. The drummer, Levon Helm says of Hammond, “John, a scholar of the music we'd grown up on, realized the electric blues was the medium of the moment.”

Hammond recalls, “I introduced them to Bob... And the next thing I knew, they were his band.”

His many friends included Dwayne Allman, Tom Waits, John Lee Hooker. He describes bands that once opened for him reached a level of popularity where he would open for them, notably the Allman brothers.

In 1970 he was contacted by film producer Stuart Millar to play music for the film *Little Big Man* (Arthur Penn) starring Dustin Hoffman as the sole survivor of the Battle of Little Bighorn.

So I went up to a sound studio, where they showed me a five-hour film. This is before it was edited. It was just, you know, raw tape. And I said, well, the music I played didn't exist then.

He said, “It doesn't matter, it'll work.” And I met Arthur Penn, the director, who was responsible for doing *Bonnie and Clyde* with Flatt and Scruggs playing the background music and stuff. So it was really intense. They flew me out to Hollywood, and I recorded live to the film.

In the course of Hammond's long career, he acquired many friends and took on many different projects. He had a longtime friendship with singer-songwriter Tom Waits. In 2001, they collaborated on Hammond's 28th album, called *Wicked Grin*. Waits wrote most of the songs, Hammond sang. He said, “It stretched out my envelope. I did things I didn't know I could do... I'm a blues singer but I just felt really inspired by Tom.”

Hammond says of his performances:

There was a time when felt like I had to explain everything. Now it's like I am who I am and I've been doing it for so long that I don't feel like I have to explain myself anymore. You either like what I do or you don't. And I love what I do and I hope it shows. And I have an audience all over the world from coming and playing, and if they didn't like it, they wouldn't keep coming to hear me, you know?



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