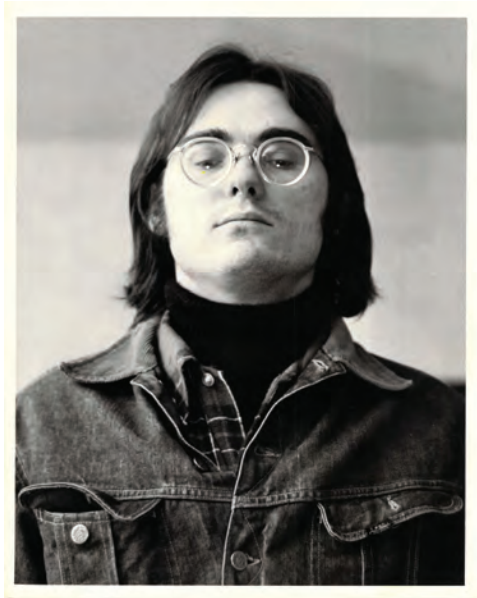


DELTA DOWNLOAD INTERVIEW

“I saw Son House live in 1967”

A promotional poster of an old Delta bluesman with a National steel guitar in his lap grabbed his attention.

Seeing Son House live on campus at Penn State in 1967 changed his life.



Delta blues zealot Bud Pazur was one of the fortunate ones who got to see Son House live in the late 1960s. Bud was an undergrad student at Penn State when manager and promoter Dick Waterman brought Son House to campus as part of a university-sponsored cultural events series. Here Bud reminisces about the man and the music he first heard in 1967 in an experience that changed his life.

the poster grabbed his attention

The flyer pictured an old Delta bluesman with his National steel guitar who was set to appear on campus in a couple of days. Bud Pazur never heard of the musician.

It was a tumultuous time at Penn State and other college campuses in the late 1960s. Bud was an undergraduate physics major in his third year, and was into the rock 'n' roll thing—Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Cream, Jefferson Airplane—music you could readily hear on the radio in 1967. **Bud would hang around local record stores back then, where he could feed his head on record albums, psychedelic posters, tee shirts and sundry paraphernalia.**

"I was entranced," Bud says of the poster promoting Eddie "Son" House's upcoming gig. He expected the old black bluesman from the Mississippi Delta to play in the finger-picking style of someone like John Hurt. **Bud was wrong. Son House served up a whopping dose of white lightning in a riveting performance that left Bud stunned and speechless.**

"It was a totally different sound than I ever heard, his voice was very forceful, like a primal force of nature," he recalls, still absorbed in Son's performance all these years later. "I was totally moved by the power emanating from the guy and his guitar."

It was a small audience, only about 25 people, and Bud was embarrassed in a way that so few people had shown up to

see Son House. **He recalls a white guy standing off to side behind Son. It was Dick Waterman,** who "rediscovered" Son with two of his friends in 1964. Son had left his music behind for decades, and was living in Rochester, New York with his wife Evie.

Dick went on to guide Son's "second career" as his agent, manager, producer and promoter until 1974 when Son officially retired from music. In that role, Dick took Son to perform at festivals in Newport and Philadelphia, and in cafés and college campuses across the country.

But Bud didn't know any of this. **He didn't know that the great Son House had recorded his raw, slashing style of Delta blues in 1930 for Paramount Records in Grafton, Wisconsin.**

Or that Alan Lomax had recorded Son House in 1941 and 1942 when the musician went back to farming in Mississippi.

Or that Robert Johnson was inspired by Son House after watching him perform in Mississippi juke joints in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Bud didn't know that because of all this and more, some people called Son House **"King of the Delta Blues."** **He didn't know he was seeing a legend and witnessing true history.**



early influencers

Bud refers to himself as someone who gravitates toward "minimal instrumentation and a lot of aural head room for the rhythmic components, where you can hear every instrument clearly in headphones," as he describes it. "Like Hendrix only had three guys in his band. Spare and rhythmic, where the beat is the most important thing...like the opening riff to Hendrix's Purple Haze." In other words, no Phil Spector "Wall of Sound."

"I was totally out of the Delta blues scene, even the blues scene back then," admits Bud, adding that he knew Cream and the Stones were covering old Delta blues, but that was about it.

Back in the 1950s and during high school in the early 60s, Bud got a hefty dose of race music and black rock 'n' roll from Pittsburgh's popular radio DJ George "Porky" Chedwick, known to listeners as the "Daddio of the Raddio." By the early 1950s, black music record labels were hearing about the noise Chedwick was making in Pittsburgh with old R&B stock, so they inundated him with new material which he introduced to his "movers and groovers" while never accepting payola, which was standard practice at the time. Bud listened to Porky in the 1950s on a primitive crystal radio that he built himself.

"Tremendous primitive race music and black R&R, and extremely rhythmic" is how Bud describes the music he heard Chedwick play back then. In undergraduate school (1965-1969), Bud transferred his primitive music bent into white rock of the late 1960s.

Then Son House came literally out of nowhere to nail the style and authenticity Bud was driven toward.



Son comes out

Son House's 1967 performance at Penn State was one in a series of a university-sponsored cultural series, free to students and faculty. Bud remembers Ravi Shankar's performance as standing room only, but in stark contrast, **Son House only drew a couple dozen people.**

"It just didn't matter to him," Dick Waterman told me about the small audience size at that college gig. "Son was going to do his performance. He internalized it. He closed his eyes and did his show. His voice is as significant in a small or large venue, whether he's playing to 15 or 15,000."

Dick goes on to describe each song Son performed as **"cathartic in that it took everything out of him. He'd slump back, reach in his back pocket for his handkerchief, mop his brow. Then he'd become a quiet docile man. He'd talk to the audience about the next song, in a voice so soft you sometimes had to strain to hear him."**

Then he'd sit forward in the chair, take a slide out of his pocket, and do it again. That's how he got through it (each performance over a decade-long second career). He'd been playing this way for a really long time."

Dick continues: "He was never a performer 'putting on a show.' It came from inside him. Son was a quiet, unassuming person with just raw emotion. It's kind of like opera singers who seem like normal people, and then they turn on this great persona, this voice."

Bud remembers it like this: "Son House was not an audience-friendly performer. He kept to himself, looked at the floor and didn't smile or anything. When he performed, it's like he transferred himself to another universe."

"I was thinking gentle (like Mississippi John Hurt), and he came out with such superhuman intense power from an old man. He was sweating. He had on his bowtie. He had this strange guitar. He had a maniacal intensity that emanated from him."

"It's like Dick Waterman says, when Son started playing, he went into a trance. It invoked some primal energy in him, and he transmitted it through his voice and body language. It was like watching a rock concert with the Stones and being in the front seat. **I was in the front row watching Son House that night, and it was like a high-power concert—he played like a whole band, he filled the whole room."**

"It was the most transformative experience of my life up to then."



PHOTOS OF SON HOUSE ON STAGE
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after effects

When Son finished his last number, Bud remembers Dick Waterman shut things down right away, stepping to the mic and telling the audience, "Okay, that's all, folks." No questions. No dialogue. No nothing. It was just...over.

The sparse audience drifted out the door in silence. Bud got into his faded blue 1960 Rambler and drove back to the rundown house he was renting off campus with three grad students and a "bunch of cockroaches."

So, did Bud tell his roommates or friends about the Son House show? "I kept Son House to myself."

But he began seeking out blues music wherever he could find it. Especially after Bud graduated and went on to earn a master's at the Mellon Institute (Carnegie Mellon). As an undergrad, Bud didn't have a lot of money to buy records. But in grad school, he had money from working full-time and teaching classes.

Bud would hang out around Shadyside, a neighborhood near Carnegie Mellon known as Pittsburgh's Greenwich Village. He frequented small clubs on Walnut Street including the Fox Cafe, where Janis Joplin appeared in 1968. The local blues-playing Pinto Beans were Fox regulars that reviewers said on a good night, "were equal that of any of the better British blues bands."

"They played really chunky stuff like Taj's *She Caught the Katy (and Left Me a Mule to Ride)*," Bud recalls of the Beans repertoire that included great covers of Albert King and other black electric blues musicians.

Bud began looking for more blues wherever he could find it. He even hopped a ride to Philadelphia with some other grad student friends and saw Paul Butterfield perform with Butterfield's mentor Muddy Waters.



glad to be different

Seeing Son House in person was transformative for Bud.

"Son House was like a secret of my mind to help determine my destiny, determine the direction of my later life. To seek out music that had the same emotional gut response that Son House gave me."

"He validated what I'd been feeling from race music and the raw heavy rhythmic beat rock I liked—it just solidified my tastes over the course of my life. I became addicted to music that generated a visceral gut response. I needed it. It was like dope to me."

Bud regrets "not having the balls" to go up to Son House and Dick Waterman after the 1967 show was over. "Maybe I was stunned. It was totally strange for people, for me. This old black guy but extremely powerful. It wasn't frightening, but I didn't feel comfortable going up to him. He was too intimidating and Waterman didn't seem to encourage it."

So what would Bud say to Dick Waterman today? "I'd thank him for bringing Son House around."

But Bud says it's really Son House he has to thank.

"I feel I owe Son House a debt of gratitude. Seeing him made me more counter-culture. It solidified the feeling that I didn't have much in common with people who just listened to white rock 'n' roll, Top 40 hits. I was different before that, I didn't listen to that stuff."

"Seeing Son House made me realize I was different. I felt glad to be different. I still feel that way today."







DELTA DOWNLOAD

A dose of the Mississippi Delta

Stories exploring the allure of Delta blues and its roots

Bud Pazar was interviewed by phone on August 10, 2020, and Dick Waterman was interviewed on August 9, 2020 for this feature story.