

Blue Cliff

By Alan Gullette

1. Branning Boulevard

The soulful sound of the tenor sax filled the small alley and spilled out on the street, flowing up and down Branning Boulevard. Autumn was quickly turning into winter and the pace of the pedestrians kept time with the season – and the briskly blowing wind. Still, a few of the passersby tarried near the entrance to the dead-end alley in midtown Kalamazoo, drawn by the music of the young man and his saxophone.

Before the busking musician sat his open instrument case, a black-velvet-lined affair littered with silver coins. For listeners who wanted to do more than toss spare change into the case, there was a slotted jar for bills. Its tall glass sides insulated the bills against the gusting wind, whose action was evidenced by the testimony of dancing maple leaves.

The musician's skillful fingers defied the chilly air, executing deft maneuvers as they depressed the keys in rapid succession, sending out long, sinuous lines of notes that could cut through any weather.

As sunlight dimmed, the shops began closing and it was time to quit; but one listener lingered on faithfully till the end of the tune, which somehow managed to be both festive and mournful.

"Hey, that was great, man!" the last listener said, genuinely beaming, once the player had stopped.

"Well, thank you very much."

"It was almost as good as Blue Cliff!"

The name was like a shibboleth whose very mention opened doors.

"Oh, you know Blue Cliff's music? Gee, that's very kind of you to say!"

"What's your name?" the listener asked, offering his hand.

"Porter," the musician answered, taking and shaking.

"I'm James. Yeah, I've been a big fan of Blue Cliff for many years."

"You don't find that too often," said Porter.

"I know, it's like a secret cult!"

Porter put away his horn after gathering the coins and adding them to the jar.

"Not bad for an afternoon... Hey, let's get a drink," he suggested.

"Sure! There's a bar just around the corner... Say, how long have you been in town?" James asked.

“I just got here from Waynesville – I know... I’m staying at the Motor Inn.”

“You drove?”

“No, I came in by bus, but it’s the cheapest place that’s still pretty decent!”

“I hear ya!”

“Anyway, I’ve got every one of Blue Cliff’s records and I wanted to come to the place he lives, plays and records.”

“Yeah, well, Kalamazoo is the place. He never plays anywhere else.”

“I’m going to ask him to teach me,” Porter announced confidently.

“Woah, that’s excellent! Well, good luck with that! I’ve never heard of him taking on students, though. But you never know – you’ve got some good chops, and a sweet sound.”

“Thanks! Anything I’ve got, I got from Blue Cliff.”

“Heard that! Well, cheers!”

And they drank.

“Nice bar,” Porter said, looking around.

“Not a bad place. I come here pretty regularly. Hey, are you playing anywhere in town?”

“Just that alley over there!”

“You might try Trixie’s Place on Clement Street. They usually have full bands, but that’s where Blue Cliff plays – that is, when he *does* play, which ain’t very often.”

“That’s something that puzzles me. Why did he come to Kalamazoo in the first place?”

“Oh, don’t you know the story? Blue Cliff was in Kyle Tapper’s band, you know, and they came to town to play a gig. Thing is, Blue Cliff took a walk that afternoon, though no one knows where he went or what he did. When he showed up for the gig he was like a different person. When it was his turn to solo, he just went off – off to Never-Never Land! There was no reference to rhythm or scale – at least not any the band could follow. He just suddenly started playing something new—not jazz, not blues, not even soul – something with the same spirit but with something extra, between the notes or beyond the notes.

“After the gig, Kyle fired him, so he didn’t go on to Chicago with the rest of the band. That’s when D. Z. Williams got his spot.”

“Oh, so *that* explains it. I never knew what happened with Tapper.”

“Of course you know it was Kyle that gave Blue Cliff his nickname?” James asked.

“Yes, I *do* know that one!” Porter said. “There was already a Cliff in the band, Clifford T. Elmo, and when Clifford Hayes showed up, he was...”

“Wearing a blue shirt!” they said in unison.

“That was, what, twenty years ago,” James resumed. “So Blue Cliff just stayed here in Kalamazoo. He couldn’t find musicians to work with, who could catch the same vibe, so he began soloing and never stopped. Some people came from Chicago and formed the record label around him. They’re down on Second Street, you know. And the rest, like they say, is music history!”

After a couple rounds, talking solely about Blue Cliff and his music, they parted ways.

2. Second Street

The next morning Porter took a bus downtown and walked the six blocks along Second Street. It was like a pilgrimage to a holy site, and the magic of his destination transformed the rows of run-down houses into authentic homes full of urban charm. Driven on the breeze, the fallen leaves of sugar maples skittered and scratched their way along the sidewalk.

Blue Cliff Records was there on the corner, unmarked by any awning, but it was closed. Porter checked the time – maybe he was early. No, it was nearly 10 AM and the sign said 9... But there was a second sign, hand-written, taped to the other door: “Closed due to a death in the family.”

“Could it be?” Porter asked himself, but answered: “No! If it were Blue Cliff, surely they’d say so...”

He stood there in a daze, looking through the window. It was more like a record store than a record label. Here and there posters were taped to the inside of the glass, all advertising the Blue Cliff singles that Porter knew so well, like “There’s No Mystery (Is Just Is),” “(You’re) Just a Flower” and “Don’t Sit Under the Bodhi Tree (With Anyone Else But Me)” – the last a jazzy rendition of the popular tune from the 1940s. There was a rare, half-torn poster for “Bubbles Like Us” and another for “Ask the Fence Post” – the A and B sides of Blue Cliff’s first single. Peering through the window at the back wall, Porter could read the title of one of his favorite tunes, “You’ve Got That Buddha Nature.” The Buddhist influence was obvious and its importance to Blue Cliff was clear.

Now seen under the glare of Blue Cliff’s possible death, the songs took on a new meaning and special poignance. They kept playing through Porter’s mind as he took the bus back to midtown. Strong as the creations were, they seemed to wobble without their maker.

“A body of work... a body of work...” he repeated to himself.

That night he thought about going back to the bar where he drank with James, but he couldn’t imagine receiving the bad news if Blue Cliff were really gone. Trixie’s Place would be worse... No, Porter wasn’t ready to let go of his idol just yet, nor face the world without him.

On the following day, Porter had a more positive feeling. And though he was still apprehensive, he retraced his path to Second Street and Blue Cliff Records – after having called ahead to see if they were open. As he was going in, he glimpsed someone getting into a car, but he couldn’t tell who it was.

Two or three workers looked up when he came in.

“Good morning—is there any chance Blue Cliff is here?” he asked rather sheepishly of no one in particular.

“You just missed him,” a woman said.

Porter dashed back out, but the car had driven away.

He realized that he had been rude, so he went back in to apologize.

“That’s alright,” the woman said. “You might try Trixie’s on Clement. Cliff said he was going there later on.” And she winked.

No doubt they got avid fans from time to time, mostly stragglers from Chicago.

3. Clement Street

James was at the bar when Porter got there.

“Guess who’s rumored to be playing tonight?”

“No way!”

“Way! Blue Cliff himself!”

“What luck!”

There was a buzz in the room when the lights dimmed. Blue Cliff came out to a warm welcoming applause, but the audience quickly fell into respectful silence while the maestro prepared to play. He drew out a vintage, raw bronze sax that looked amazing in the blue stage lights.

The music was no less than transcendent... Coming from another place, it took you there, too. The low bass notes rocked the root of things, while high-flying melodies coursed and sang in new tongues. The rhythms were now savage enough to make you want to move, now soothing enough to release all anxious need to act...

He blew like a Sirocco coming off the endless Sahara: sharp, serene, searching. He captured the spirit of the wind!

Though he was alone onstage he didn’t seem lonely, and his music provided as much variety and roundness as a full band. The absence of other players, instead of thinning the sound, allowed Blue Cliff complete freedom to forge and follow his own chains of changing patterns. He could forget all the usual road marks and signposts, and not be forced to follow some rigid train track through known territory. He could wander freely in a terrain of his own imagining.

It was a short set but time seemed to cease, and in the interval a curtain was drawn back to allow a glimpse into Eternity. Afterward, Porter slipped down from his barstool and was about to go up to talk to the legendary performer. But other fans had the same plan and they crowded the stage (in civilized fashion), all wanting to talk to Blue Cliff or get his autograph.

Porter felt embarrassed to see that he was just another fanatic. Turning to James, he excused himself and went to the men’s room. When he returned, Blue Cliff had gone.

“He’s like that,” James said with a smile. “He just comes and goes like that – shows up with little warning, then disappears before you know it!”

4. Lessons

The lessons with Blue Cliff were not at all what Porter had expected. Previously, his teachers had provided exercises to develop his dexterity, stretch his fingers, and challenge his ability to reach any of the keypads at any time. There were breathing exercises and blowing exercises. Naturally, the teachers also provided guidance to Porter’s understanding of harmony, melody and rhythm – the fundamentals of traditional music. He had excelled in these studies due to his hard work between lessons and his constant emulation of Blue Cliff, whose chops and licks he knew so well.

With Blue Cliff lessons were entirely different. It was as if he taught from the inside rather than from the outside. All of the foregoing was assumed to be over and done with. It all dealt with music as a physical event involving muscles and nerves and air. It was bound by the acoustical rules

of nature tempered by somewhat arbitrary conventions.

“All that is the *outside*,” Blue Cliff said, “but music comes from *inside*.”

After a week of daily lessons, Porter wanted to know how he was doing as a student.

Blue Cliff was busy painting the fence.

Porter asked him, “So, how has my progress been so far?” There was a certain smugness in his smile, though he tried to hide it.

But Blue Cliff responded almost angrily: “We’re not making progress here. You’re not learning anything!”

Porter was caught off guard by the reply and tried to argue his own defense.

“But... I think I’ve learned a lot – in ways, more than I’ve learned from all my previous teachers!”

But Blue Cliff cut him off and continued with the cold treatment.

“I want you to go see Mud Flats Willie in Kansas City,” he said.

“But... Mud Flats plays slide guitar,” Porter objected, more puzzled than ever.

“Tell him I sent you,” he said with a little smile, and returned to painting.

Porter just stood there, frozen like a pizza.

Blue Cliff turned and barked at him: “I said, ‘Go!’”

So Porter left, creeping away like a dog with his tail between his legs, trying not to whimper. But his faith in Blue Cliff was absolute, and rather than doubt himself for any failure of his own (for he knew he had not failed), he accepted it as part of his teacher’s wise instruction. If Blue Cliff thought he had something important to learn from Mud Flats Willie, then by golly, he was going to Kansas City!

5. Kansas City

Mud Flats Willie was sitting outside his trailer, just like the man at the country store said he would be. Sitting in a lawn chair, smoking a cigar. A walking cane leaned on the aluminum arm of the chair.

Porter’s only image of him came from album covers, all dressed in suit and tie, and of course younger. It was strange to see him old and alone, living in a trailer on a strip of land outside the very city where he rose to fame as a pioneer blues guitarist.

Porter parked his rental car and approached the trailer meekly, calling out, “Hello there, uh... Mud Flats!” He halted, then took a few more cautious steps forward. “Blue Cliff sent me. He asked me to give you his regards.”

Mud Flats looked Porter up and down. “So, you’ve been studying with Blue Cliff?” he asked with a raspy voice.

“Yes, I have,” Porter said rather proudly.

Then Mud Flats asked, “Tell me, young man, how is Blue Cliff like that tank of propane?”

He picked up his cane and pointed it at a big, white-washed tank at the end of the trailer, half-buried in a pile of yellow leaves.

Porter looked at the tank but didn’t see the connection. Blue Cliff was not large and round, nor white, nor half-buried in yellow leaves. Surely he wasn’t full of gas – maybe full of energy?

“I don’t get what you mean,” he admitted.

“Maybe you should go ask him,” Mud Flats said, and he was serious.

“Go now!” And he raised the cane again, as if threatening to strike!

So Porter left! He drove the ten hours back to Kalamazoo. His old room at the motel was gone, so he took the next one over.

The next day, he told Blue Cliff of his brief encounter with Mud Flats, repeating the question of how Blue Cliff was like the propane tank.

Blue Cliff didn’t bat an eye, didn’t crack a smile, didn’t pause to think, but only asked, “Did you notice how large the tank was?”

Porter: “It was huge!” Then he added, thinking he should use a superlative, “It was the biggest propane tank I have ever seen.” He felt confident in the answer.

Blue Cliff: “Then you must be very strong!”

Porter: “Strong? What do you mean?” He was completely confused.

Blue Cliff: “You carried that huge tank all the way from Kansas City!”

6. Questions

Porter had innumerable questions for his teacher.

“Why does it take so long to learn to play with nuance, with expressive phrasing?”

“It takes some a long time and others only a short time,” was the answer. “Over time, it’s natural to get better and better: more nuanced, more subtle. But it doesn’t take time to let go of the old restraints and play freely. That can happen immediately, in no time at all.”

And Blue Cliff looked at Porter intently, as if prompting him to do something then and there.

Another time, Porter asked, “Don’t you have to challenge yourself?”

“There is no one to challenge,” came the cryptic reply.

Still another time: “How do you think up what you are going to play for the up-coming solo while you’re still playing the current verse?”

“The pattern does not exist in time; the mind glances ahead at the space and perceives its shape, then returns. What happens next, happens next. Pattern only happens on the surface.”

7. Studio Time

The time came when Porter thought he was ready to go into the studio. He begged Blue Cliff to let him try.

“I think I’ve got it! I know what to do...”

Jasper the engineer was there, and Sarah – the woman from Porter’s first visit – and two or three others.

Later on, Sarah would tell what happened.

“There was real excitement in the studio. We were all anxious to hear the new guy play. I mean, if Blue Cliff liked him – was even teaching him lessons and letting him record in his own studio – then he must be good!

“The tapes rolled. But Porter was stage-struck, couldn’t play a note! Awkwardly, gradually, he started to play, but he made odd note choices that had no meaningful connection...

“Then he tried too hard; he made a mistake and tried to cover it up by working with the bad note – which only made things worse.”

Jasper was more direct: “It was a catastrophe, a calamity, a major embarrassment! I really felt sorry for the kid.”

After the session, Blue Cliff took Porter aside. Oddly, Blue Cliff was smiling, as if he was happy how things turned out.

“You still think it’s about *you*,” he explained. “But it’s not about you at all! it’s about the music. You’re just trying to become another Blue Cliff.”

He let that sink in, then added, “*I* can’t help you – no one can. It’s like finding your sense of balance, of which way is up. No one can describe that to someone else.

“Just find the music within you and let it out, like a bluebird sings in the morning, or a nightingale at night. *You* don’t do it.”

And he repeated one of his favorite koans or mantra: “In music there is no musician.”

If Porter wished to be taught, he had to accept the lesson that was given; but it was a painful lesson to learn.

8. Notes

And so Porter’s learning and unlearning proceeded in many ways, and he came to appreciate that Blue Cliff’s wisdom far transcended “merely” playing the saxophone.

“You breathe out, and the fingers decide what notes will happen, what pitch the breath will have. Remember, the song is your breath going out,” Blue Cliff would say.

“Don’t play the notes. Release them,” he said often.

“Music is not the notes in time. You have to leave the notes behind.”

Porter asked what he meant by that: “Do you mean like leaving the room, or leaving a note for someone?”

“No, no. Leave notes behind in the sense ‘forget about them.’ Stop worrying about producing a sequence of notes, each perfect, each... manipulated. Just like you forget about the letter when you form a word. Instead, you reach for the meaning --- and the words come to you.. Reach for the music and the notes will come.”

Besides the notes, Blue Cliff emphasized the importance of silence.

“Silence is not just between the notes, it surrounds them all the time.”

9. Non-dwelling

One of the most abstract notions was what Blue Cliff called *non-dwelling*.

“Notes do not last. They come and go like bubbles.”

“Bubbles like us?” Porter quoted the song title.

“Yes, bubbles like us!” Blue Cliff confirmed and they both laughed.

“Duration is just a measurement from beginning point to end point in time, but what’s in-between doesn’t happen in time.”

One day they were in the kitchen having a beer.

There was a pause in the conversation and the only sound was the refrigerator. The compressor was making a loud, rhythmic, grinding sound. It was almost humorous, but when Porter looked at Blue Cliff, he saw that his teacher was watching him intently.

The refrigerator noise stopped with a suddenly pop, leaving a stunning silence.

After a minute Blue Cliff said, “The engine is silent. When the machine stops, you can see there is no dwelling because there is no one to dwell.”

10. Dust

One night Porter was lying awake in his motel bed, looking up at the dusty cobwebs that dangled from the ceiling, swaying slightly to and fro on a current of air. All the silver strands connected together to form a single web, like the warp and weft of spacetime; and the specks of dust were like individual things that exist – because of the web, and part of the web.

Abruptly and without cause, Porter grasped the unity of things... He was like the dust on the web, and the dust was like the notes of music, and music was really just life...

He suddenly understood many of the puzzling things Blue Cliff had said; and more, he experienced an ever-widening circle of realization. He saw the inner connections of everything. It was like flipping over the tapestry and seeing all the connecting threads on the back to make the picture happen.

One lesson remained, but Porter had to learn it on his own: “Music isn’t necessary!” Music isn’t necessary because it’s everywhere, always; it’s the basic harmony of things, whatever it is that keeps all those moving parts in order. Music merely makes it audible, so folks will know it’s there...

11. Waynesville

Porter went back to the alley to play – not the one in Kalamazoo, but the place he used to play in Waynesville. It didn’t seem right that there would be two sax wizards in Kalamazoo... The only difference was, this time it wasn’t Blue Cliff’s music, it was Porter’s.

But Blue Cliff remained with him, and his wise words often sounded in his mind, even as he played his sax, filling the air with soulful sounds.

“The source is not in the past, it is still here. It is here now, pouring forth the moment.”

From *The Elephant in the Room and Others* (translucent books, 2020).

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