

Chicago blues great David "Honeyboy" Edwards dies.

Written by Pat Graham

Tuesday, 30 August 2011 03:23 - Last Updated Wednesday, 27 March 2013 01:38

Chicago Sun-Times: The aura of a shaman surrounded any given appearance by blues legend David "Honeyboy" Edwards.

He often favored creased, pinstriped suits because he fit so well into dignity. He had soft and easy cheekbones that were curtains to an enduring soul.

Mr. Edwards died of congestive heart failure early Monday morning in his South Shore apartment. He was 96 years old.

He was the last of the Delta bluesmen.

Mr. Edwards was in the house when the iconic Robert Johnson took his last drink of poisoned whiskey. He witnessed the Mississippi River flood of 1927. In 1953, he moved to Chicago after recording "Drop Down Mama" for Chess Records. He won Grammys and had a cameo in the 2007 spoof movie "Walk Hard."

But few events may have stirred Mr. Edwards' soul as much as his January 2009 appearance at the Hideout-sponsored party on the eve of President Barack Obama's inauguration at the Black Cat Nightclub in Washington. "Playing the D.C. show was a very special thing for him," said Michael Frank, Mr. Edwards' longtime manager and harmonica player.

Mr. Edwards was the crowd-pleaser among heavies including Andrew Bird, the experimental band Tortoise and members of the Mekons. A sold-out audience of more than 800 people saw Mr. Edwards deliver a haunting version of "Sweet Home Chicago" and Robert Lockwood's "Little Boy Blue."

Mr. Edwards piercing eyes were as wide as the Potomac River.

"I never thought I'd live to see the day a black man get elected president," Mr. Edwards said after his set as fans lined up for his autograph and Icy Demons played a mix of Brian Eno-influenced pop and hip-hop. Mr. Edwards traveled the world. He could adapt to every setting.

The Rolling Stones' Keith Richards was a fan. In May 2004 he dropped in unannounced at the now-defunct Boxcar blues club near his home in Southport, Conn., to sit in with Mr. Edwards.

To have watched Mr. Edwards play was to have participated in history.

Mr. Edwards was born in Shaw, Miss. His father, a guitarist and violinist in country jukes throughout Mississippi, bought Mr. Edwards a Sears guitar for \$4 from a plantation worker. At the age of 14 Mr. Edwards left home to hobo with bluesman Big Joe Williams. Mr. Edwards' distinctive style of uneven phrasing and skewed timing was a response to woodshedding with Williams' clanky nine-string guitar.

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"When I started playing with Big Joe, he had bad timing," Mr. Edwards told me in a 1988 interview at Wise Fools Pub. "He played a lot of chords, but there was so much break time in the middle of them since he played by himself so much."

After roaming the mid-South with Williams, Mr. Edwards debuted in 1935 on the legendary Beale Street in Memphis. He became homesick and returned to Greenwood, Miss., where he began playing with harmonica player Big Walter Horton.

This was the template that Frank used in 1972 when he met the guitarist, who was sharing a bill with Jim Brewer at Bidly Mulligan's in Rogers Park.

"Blues musicians from his generation were in one sense revolutionaries," said Frank, who also managed Brewer before his death in 1989. "Honeyboy was very much underrecognized as a guitar player. He was deliberate in some performance techniques because he knew they engaged the audience. He enjoyed playing so much that when he did tricks, he did them for himself as well as the other musicians on stage. He loved to screw around with the very last notes of a song. He'd hold these chords and notes, look at the other guys on stage and laugh, almost to say, 'You can't do this, watch me.' He never doubted himself. He liked to hear a good player but he didn't have heroes as musicians."

Mr. Edwards cultivated a new audience around 1997, when he began woodshedding with blues band Devil and the Woodpile at the Hidedout music club, a non-blues room. Club owners Tim and Katie Tuten were fans, and a photo of Mr. Edwards and Devil and the Woodpile hangs in the front of the bar.

"People sat on the floor around the bar," recalled former Woodpile frontman Rick Sherry. "[Blues harmonica great] Sugar Blue showed up the first night and sat in with us. Honeyboy was particular about playing in the city because he didn't get enough money. He loved the fact the young crowd appreciated him."

Sherry's current band, the Sanctified Grumblers, was to play with Mr. Edwards at this year's Chicago Blues Festival, but Mr. Edwards cancelled because of illness.

"When you played with Honeyboy you were in the millisecond of the moment," said Sherry, who plays harmonica, washboard, clarinets and sings. "You never knew where he went. Every song was 12 bars. It was never 12 bars. He'd hold that note, look in the audience and kick his leg. Playing with him was this amazing Zen thing I'm going to miss."

"You were living right there, and that's where the energy built." Over the years there has been a mythical debate as to who wrote "Sweet Home Chicago," Robert Johnson or Mr. Edwards. (But the wordplay and rhythm is derivative of Scrapper Blackwell's "Kokomo Blues," which preceded even Mr. Edwards and Johnson).

Mr. Edwards' life was well documented. In 1997 he penned his autobiography, *The World Don't Owe Me Nothing: The Life and Times of Delta Bluesman Honeyboy Edwards* (Chicago Review Press), and in 2002 he was subject of the Scott Taradash documentary "Honeyboy." Mr.

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Edwards also was featured in Martin Scorsese's PBS series "The Blues."

Mr. Edwards won a 2008 Grammy for best traditional blues album for "Last of the Great Mississippi Bluesmen: Live in Dallas" and last year was honored with a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award.

On the day of his death, Mr. Edwards was slated to perform at the noontime concert series at Millennium Park. He last performed April 17 at the Juke Joint Festival in Clarksdale, Miss.

"He'd always put on a great show, even though sometimes at the beginning of the night he said he didn't feel like it," Frank said. "But the music came to him.

"And then he got inspired by that commitment he made."

Visitation will be from 2 to 7 p.m. Thursday at the McCullough Funeral Home, 851 E. 75th St. There will be an open mike between 7 and 9 p.m. for remembrances from friends and fans. A friends-and-fans gathering will begin at 8 p.m. at Lee's Unleaded Blues, 7401 S. Chicago Ave.

Services will be private on Friday. In lieu of flowers, it is requested that donations be made to the National Blues Museum.