Putting the Blues in "The Blues Brothers"
A conversation with Dan Aykroyd

By Stacie Seifrit-Griffin

John Belushi with Dan Aykroyd on the set of "The Blues Brothers" (1980)

I grew up watching Saturday Night Live, "The Blues Brothers," and so many of your movies. I find you incredibly talented, funny and very smart. This is an intimidating interview for me.

Certainly, I have a physical intimidation *[laughs]* and I'm pretty bulky right now. But, as far as being smart, I was smart enough to engage and collaborate with people who were far smarter than me in whatever they were doing, and with their skills and expertise. I always deferred to the excellence of someone who had a learned background in whatever discipline we were working in.

I worked with the smartest people in set design, sound and cinematography, and writers, producers, and collaborators, you name it, in any field. I guess one of my gifts was being able to choose willing collaborators who are far smarter than I.

Tell me about "The Blues Brothers" and how you came to have John Belushi in your life. Actually, let's start at the beginning…

The beginning would be a parallel track of an Illinois alpha male—John—growing up in the suburbs near Chicago and an average Canadian boy, a young man growing up in the suburbs of Ottawa, Canada, with hardworking middle-class parents who, along with most of the constituency of our type at that time, were just suburban white kids who were turned on to blues and R&B through all of the British imports coming in: the Beatles, the Stones and giving props and credit to Chuck Berry and to all of the blues stars from Chess Records.

John and I were both fans, as were millions of people at the time, of the emergence of blues, R&B and soul music. Him on one track, me on another.

The Paul Butterfield record, “East-West,” opened up a lot of white suburban kids to the blues. Butterfield had Sam Lay as the drummer, Michael Bloomfield on guitar, and Butterfield on harp [harmonica]. And, that's a kind of a seminal blues record that opened up a world of knowledge about the originators to my generation.

John’s growing up in Wheaton, Illinois, doing stuff there, and I'm growing up as the son of government workers in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, right down the street from the Prime Minister's residence at 24 Sussex Drive.

Right down the street from where the Prime Minister lived, tucked behind the Parliament buildings, was a nightclub called Le Hibou. That means “owl” in French. There's a francophone constituency there in Ottawa Hall because of the government workers. It's also an academic town with great schools there. Along with the University of Ottawa, you also have Carleton University and the Algonquin College. Then, you have the CEGEP system in Quebec, and a multicultural froth of really intelligent people all working for the government, all writers, because you have to be a writer to work for the government, right? It was a very sophisticated academic community.

Le Hibou was run by a guy named Harvey Glatt, and he brought all of the touring soul, blues, and R&B artists through there. I saw live multiple times Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, Butterfield, Charlie Musselwhite, and Willie Dixon. I saw Howlin’ Wolf many, many times. I saw James Brown play at the Esquire Show Bar in Montreal.

That was a life-changing thing, but the Le Hibou had a whole roster of these great blues and R&B talents coming through in a very intimate nightclub. And, sometimes the guitar players would take their chords and go right out into the street on Sussex Drive. The harp players would, too.

I remember James Cotton going out in a snow blizzard and playing the harp out there with the mic so he could hear it through the amp.

Cafe Le Hibou located on Sussex Drive in Ottawa was the hub of the music scene of the 1960s and early 1970s. Photo from the Ottawa Art Gallery

Seeing James Brown at the Esquire Show Bar in Montreal, and going to Expo ‘67 and seeing Sam and Dave, that was a night I couldn't believe what I was hearing and seeing. Little did I know that later the guitar players from that very band, Steve Cropper and Duck Dunn, would be in "The Blues Brothers."

I grew up just listening to the radio stations in Detroit, Boston, and New York and just loving blues, R&B, and soul. There was a jukebox up in Kazabazua, Quebec, that had all the Stones and beautiful Stax Volt records on there. I used to hitchhike up the highway, up the river to this rural town on weekends, and sit there on the back step. I was too young to get in and I would listen to the R&B there. The Sam and Dave appearance at Expo ‘67 and then seeing James Brown, that was just all that I listened to, and wanted to be a part of it. I used to emulate Musselwhite with the slicked-back hair, the shades and the long raincoat, and I started to pick up the harmonica and play.

That's where, really, the interest in it all came about. And John on a parallel track, loving that and then migrating to loving heavy metal, which of course is all based on blues. Anyway, when we met, he was a heavy metal Grand Funk freak. I was into the blues.

How to you get to Second City and end up in Chicago?

You have to fuse my experience, John's experience, and my loving blues and R&B with me going to Chicago in 1974 with Second City.

We traded companies: Second City, the Toronto company, come down to Chicago, and the Chicago company went up to Toronto, and there I was right in the heart of where this revolution happened.

I went to the Checkerboard Lounge, the original one. Kingston Mines, I was there. This is before The Blues on Halsted opened. You walk in, it's two showrooms and a corridor, and a band is playing on one side. Everybody goes and sees that band, then another one starts up. A minute later, everybody crosses the room. It's a spectacular culture. I got to know some really good harp players. Little Joe Burson--God rest his soul--showed me a lot of basics that got me through the Blues Brothers recording and the movie because I was an actor playing the harp, not really a harp player. I had to learn it as an actor for the movie and for the records. So that summer of '74, the night Nixon resigned, we were doing those things at Second City.

Also that summer, there was a sort of a mini-scandal brewing that the county was going to tax some church properties, and "Oh my God! You can't tax the Catholic Church!" Somehow it all got suppressed, but that twigged me right there that summer of 74.

Then you met John and the ideas came together…

I had met him in '72 originally, and that's when our paths first crossed. John came up to Second City to recruit for National Lampoon, and we were in my club, The 505, which was an after-hours nightclub. Don Walsh of The Down Child Blues Band was what John and I were listening to when we met in 1972. The album "Straight Up" has a briefcase with a shot glass of whiskey on the cover. It was the blues record that we were listening to when we came up with the idea to someday do a record.

But the idea for the “The Blues Brothers” movie comes out of that summer of ‘74. I'm going to these clubs, and I'm seeing the newspaper reports about the politics in Chicago between the state and church. I am just steeped in the music and the culture and the accent and the whole feeling. I was a Catholic schoolboy, altar boy from age five, so there's also that culture that I thought I could somehow bring into a story.

That just percolated through my years at “Saturday Night Live.” I sort of put the idea away, but then began to write it in ’77.

How did you go from concept to a script and bring in John Landis?

There would be no Blues Brothers without two Steves; Steve Cropper and Steve Martin. When Universal saw the Blues Brothers open for Steve Martin at the Universal Amphitheatre and after the record came out, “Briefcase Full of Blues,” Universal Studios took an interest in the movie.

When we opened for Steve, all the executives at Universal came over and they loved the show. They loved the fun. They loved the idea of the story, which I pitched to Sean Daniel sort of in and around backstage. Then, when the record came out, they loved the fact that it sold 4.5 million copies.

From there, the movie sort of gelled. Judy [Belushi] and John infused their influence from Chicago, and I wrote two movies. I wrote the original and a sequel, “Return of the Blues Brothers,” and then handed it in as one sort of massive 300-page tome. It was a 300-page script.

At this point, everybody loved the Blues Brothers record, the “SNL” appearances, and they knew we had something there, but we're TV sketch players. We're only aspiring writers. We're not filmmakers. If you're going to make a movie, you've got to get with the best filmmakers, and this is where one of the smartest individuals in the business with reference intelligence, a huge brain, and a great heart, and a great friend of mine, John Landis, comes into the picture.

He was then a film aficionado, a cinephile with massive references, and the perfect collaborator to do this after he and John sort of fell in love, creatively, on “Animal House.” I had passed on “Animal House,” the role of D-Day, because

Lorne [Michaels] needed me to stay at “SNL.” But John went and did it and met Landis, and then, we got into that generation of filmmakers that was so vibrant at the time; George Lucas, Spielberg, and Coppola were all making their masterpieces, and John and I entered the business with “The Blues Brothers.” It was really a golden time in cinema for those artists and for that time.

Director and co-writer John Landis with Dan Aykroyd on-set of "The Blues Brothers" (1980).

How do you make a movie out of a 300-page script?

Landis comes into it and he takes that 300-pound tome and he made it into a really honest-to-goodness screenplay. We wrestled back and forth. In other words, he gave it to me, I gave it to him, and then we did a shooting script together. What you have is the collaboration of the two of us, there, on a very tight script.

Did you leave room for improv?

No, there was not much improv other than physically in the movie because we wanted to make it feel tight, and if you look at it, the movie's very buttoned up. It moves very well and it's tight, and that's really sort of *origins* there. It's basically parallel tracks: loving blues, R&B, and soul. Then making it a real shooting script and approaching the artists who all got what we were doing. They understood we're there out of cultural preservation, heritage preservation, love of their art, and their performances.

We really wanted to do a tribute to all of the great musical guests because of our love for these people.

There'd also be no Blues Brothers without the principal contribution of Tom Malone, Paul Shaffer, Steve Cropper, and Duck Dunn.

John and I went up to a club on Columbus and 124th and saw Matt Murphy play, and we fell in love there. Murphy had the big biceps and the t-shirt and the hat, and he was just the most gorgeous man and a wonderful player with a great sense of humor. He comes off in the movie as that beautiful appealing person that he was. So that was a seminal night as well.

We moved things along to get the record made with those three guitar players. Matt Murphy and Steve Cropper were both from Mississippi, and Duck from Memphis, and that first record got Universal interested in making the movie.

The back cover of "Briefcase Full of Blues" by The Blues Brothers. The album was recorded live on September 9, 1978, at the Universal Amphitheatre in Los Angeles, when the band opened for comedian Steve Martin.

We've got you and John Belushi established on “SNL” and the Blues Brothers band working with these stellar musicians. Then, you add Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, and James Brown, and yet, you seemed ahead of your time in terms of shooting the car crash scenes, the mall scene, the Pinto drop…

What we were doing was drawing from the great skills and abilities of masters like Hal Needham from those Burt Reynolds pictures. All of the guys on “The Blues Brothers” had “Smokey and the Bandit” on their resume, and other great car chase movies. We had drivers, mechanics and riggers punching out motors in these cars and building these different versions. A drag car for a quarter mile and for quick shots, a car to spin, to jump, and some cars just for shots and interiors. There were three, four, five iterations of the Blues Mobile built.

Pipe rail stunts were quite popular then, and you could take a car and just go up on a pipe rail and go on two wheels. It was from the old driving shows of the '40s and '50s. We were building on a tradition of all Americans. Anywhere you go, essentially, all Americans are motorheads. Even if somebody says, “I don't like cars,” you do love the car you drive. Our love for cars came from a fun background with guys who were into racing and street racing.

And don’t forget Evel Knievel!

Yeah, it was Evel Knievel. It was all those stunt drivers from those movies in the ‘70s. Hal Needham and his crew, Tommy Huff and Gary McLarty were veterans. We were really building on their knowledge. The movie “Sugarland Express” had a big police car chase in it and we thought, “We can do this.”

When it came time to write these scenes, we sat there and wrote, "Blues Mobile jumps swing bridge,” knowing that these guys could pull it off. That is a spectacular scene because we had divers below in case the car slipped through the slit in between the two bridge ramps. Tommy Huff and Gary McLarty did that stunt and, boy, they did it. They had oxygen in there in case the car went into the water, but there was no problem.

Some of the things the stuntmen did in the movie, like the stunt where Belushi falls down the stairs, that was Tommy Huff in the desk. That stunt there is one of the great stunts ever in movies. It was also a beautiful fun piece of writing, too.

But the car scenes were building on the reputation of Hal Needham, and the great pictures “Thunder Road” and “Bullitt.” Landis, me, and everybody loved those movies.

You used a lot of cars in that crash scene!

We found out that there was an auction of Chicago police cars, real wrecks. They were cars you couldn't drive because they were unsafe. They were trying to sell them for about $750 a piece, and we bought about 70 of them for that price. We made 70 cars look like much more. We would wreck and then rebuild, especially with the State Trooper cars. I picked the Dodge 440, the largest motor that Chrysler made at the time, for the Blues Mobile.

That's also from growing up in Ottawa, old police equipment was around all the time because of the many cops in that area that I had to avoid. *[laughs]* Military police, provincial police, Quebec provincial police, Ontario, Ottawa police, City Hall police. For years I rode, and still have, an old police [motor] cycle. The reason you buy these things, they have beefed up suspension and motors. The motorcycles, even though they're worn, there's a little extra care put into building them. I've always had old police equipment.

My husband has Mercury Grand Marquis, because he's from Chicago and he wanted a Chicago police car.

I had five. I have four now. I love that car. There's nothing like that V8. That thing will go 110 all day. I have two cars that were built by the State Department as diplomatic courier cars, and two Grand Marquis. I love them.

Man, isn't that funny? That's a good connection.

They stopped making them in 2011, and I bought two that were built by the State Department. I have the original and, in fact, if you look at my Seth Myers appearance--search “Aykroyd on Seth Meyers”--I had them take a close-up of the State Department ownership. If you keep the car lubricated, it'll just go, they're made to go a million miles. No doubt.

You had great musicians and a love for cars, so it seems like it was all coming together nicely.

We had the best musicians and we all loved cars, so we had to build all that into the Catholic Church story. Church and state, blues music, our love of R&B, our love of cars, and of Chicago. Chicago, as a city, is really a character in the movie.

And, you had a real filmmaker at work. To hand Landis that material, he made a great film, because he knew how to make a great movie. Together, we did.

John's performance is just meticulous. When he talks about writing a check for Bob's Country Bunker to pay for the beer, and he says, "I know what I usually do." I laugh today as I think of it. “I usually go to my brother's car and I sit down and I write a check. I will be right back.” The pacing is just so perfect.

The Elwood performance is buttoned up tight. There's not a glimpse of me coming through there. I was influenced by a friend of mine named John Hurtubise.

We would race cars together. We had fun, fixed up cars, rode bikes, and he was very taciturn and very slow in his kind of delivery. He was a big influence on the character. We called him “The Hawk” and everybody loved “The Hawk.” So, as an actor, I stole a lot from him.

He drove down to Chicago with me in a Mercedes. We did well over 130 on that trip and raced a big Volvo. That was fun. I wanted him to work on the movie with me because I liked having him around.

All the band members, they stepped up and came through. Aretha came through as an actress. So did Matt Murphy. It was a combination of everybody's multi-talents and the fun of making it.

Aretha Franklin was one of the many iconic artists to act and perform in "The Blues Brothers."

Is there a scene that you had originally written that you had wished was in the script, or feel like it's missing?

That anything was missing from what I had written in the big tome, I would say "no." What was in there had to be in there. We all agreed going forward that we were going to shoot what was written there. We cut stuff out for expenses, and it was very reasonable. It was $28 million [to make the movie] at the time, which was not bad when you consider what some people were spending just for talent. We got a lot of grief on the cost and going over, but in the economics of the time, you know, it wasn't too bad.

I often thought that the movie was a love letter to Chicago, and it's wonderful that you included so many people from Chicago.

Well, that's where "Shake a Tail Feather" happens. It was not one of Ray Charles' compositions, but it's just what we needed at the time. We needed a really almost obscure kind of dance number. That song was perfect and Ray just banged it, man. He just committed so beautifully on that song, even though it wasn't his material. He had fun with it, and it was the perfect dance number at the time, and the perfect time in the movie for that to occur, yeah.

Ray Charles performs "Shake a Tail Feather" during the famous dance number on the streets of Chicago.

I read that the Nazi Pinto drop was really hard to do. You had to bring in engineers to do that particular scene, is that right?

Well, Landis was working with the best stunt men and the best crew and we wanted to push the envelope and do something really outstanding and funny. The joke is the car goes off the ramp, the little Pinto with Henry Gibson. We shot that in Milwaukee at an unfinished freeway.

We were there for two weeks on that scene, because they were trying to rig the stunt. It goes off the ramp and then you see it fall, but it's falling from a height of about a thousand feet.

You're coupling the crane drop of maybe hundred feet or more, dropping the car with a shot basically from space, or an aerial shot of the city. A freeway ramp is not 3,000 feet high or a thousand feet up, but that's the joke there.

And then it falls and, of course, they live. That’s also Blues Brothers, you can get hurt and live. We're kind of like rubber dolls. Yeah, Landis wanted to do that. It was a combination of skills that brought that scene together.

Could we have lived without it and just had Henry Gibson end up in a pile of bricks at the end of the unfinished freeway? Sure, but that discussion will never happen.

Tell me about the Mall scene. A lot of stunts done in real time!

That was an abandoned mall in Harvey, Illinois. There was a change in the economic ownership of the neighborhood. A lot of the places were abandoned, and that mall was abandoned with weeds growing up in the parking lot. So, we basically dressed it like a real mall.

During that scene was the only injury we had in the movie. Mickey, somehow, didn't attach his seatbelt, and he hit a fruit stand or something we had set up. He cut his lip. That was really the only injury in the movie.

Impressive that no one got hurt with all those stunts!

We had master stuntmen. We were part of a beautiful community in Hollywood at that time. There were people on that crew that could relate to being Catholic. There were motorheads who could relate to the Blues Brothers. Everybody could relate to the music, everybody related to what we were doing, and had a positive attitude. They can say to their grandkids, “Hey, I shot that,” or “I was the grip on that movie,” or “I saw them do the church scene.” It's rare in a career that you can have something that impacts so many people so positively from the working experience.

Are there any other behind-the-scenes that fans should look for when they go back to rewatch the film?

John writing the check is funny, and John Candy's performance is wonderful.

And I love Carrie Fisher’s role!

Ahhh, Carrie Fisher. We fell in love. We almost got married. We had rings and blood tests and everything. And then she went back to Paul Simon, I think a better choice.

John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd with their friend Carrie Fisher.
John Belushi passed away in 1982 and Carrie Fisher in 2016.

Did you fall in love during the movie?

We fell in love during the movie and had a great time. She was a great friend of John's and they were buddies, and then we co-habitated for a while. When I moved to California, her mother Debbie, and her brother, they welcomed me like I was long-lost family. They were so warm to me. We remained great friends until the end of her life, both with Debbie and her. I worked with Debbie on the Liberace movie, the film that Steven Soderbergh made with Michael Douglas. So, yeah. Great friendships grew up.

You played Seymour Heller, Liberace's manager.

Yes, that's right. Please note that, if you see the performance, I actually dropped my knees to get to his height. I kind of bent my knees. And also, that's not a New York accent or a Boston, that's a Midwest Ohio sort of urban accent there. I wasn't doing New York. I think people, if they pick up on that, then I've done my job because I try to sound as much as I could like him in inflection.

One of my favorite scenes in "The Blues Brothers" is at Bob's Country Bar when the patrons are throwing beer bottles at you and where they play "country and western."

I'm going to credit Jim Downey, the co-writer of so much political stuff on "Saturday Night Live" for that. We wrote the Czech Brothers together, and so

many “SNL” pieces. That was a line heard from a woman in Indiana at a bar. He said, "What kind of music's on the jukebox?” And she said, “… we have both kinds, country and western.”

Something else of note in the movie is Steve Cropper's solo in “Jailhouse House Rock.” That clear precision solo at the end of the movie is Steve Cropper. He co-wrote some of the greatest hits ever, including “In the Midnight Hour” and “Sittin’ on the Dock of the Bay.”

Songwriter, guitarist, and Blues Brother Steve Cropper.

The Library of Congress has now deemed the “The Blues Brothers” film “culturally, historically, and aesthetically significant,” and added it to the National Film Registry with recommendation for preservation.

Perfect word: preservation. That these performances of these artists and the band are down and recorded now, and can be heard and accessed, and that researchers and historians can look at it and go, "Wow, here's James Brown dancing, singing and igniting one of the greatest gospel depictions of gospel music in a Sunday Baptist church.” I don't know that there's a comparable scene anywhere.

That alone, to preserve that and to preserve these performances, we're honored beyond belief. Wow! Thank you, thank you. Yeah. We're grateful, and we're humbled that these people came and agreed to work with us.

Now the joy of it is that their performances are preserved. That's what we were always about. Cultural preservation and recognition of the heritage of those who gave us so much pleasure as kids. Really, it comes down to that. These artists gave us so much pleasure. Their songs, they got us through school, heartbreaks, the deaths of friends, and through war in Vietnam. I wasn't there, but the Stax Volt movement in Vietnam was huge.

I recently talked to Al Bell of Stax Records, because "Wattstax" the documentary was also put into the National Film Registry. That film is another snapshot in time and showcases the significance of the sound.

But they paid the price. They paid the price for us to love that music. They paid the price in their tours, discrimination, and they paid the price in being right on the fronts of the Civil Rights movement.

As we were listening and enjoying that music, you had those artists being discriminated against and being exploited commercially by managers. Little did we know. I think "The Blues Brothers" makes up for that, I hope. John and I never took any publishing rights.

We never pursued publishing rights for any of the songs that are on any of our records. We could have, for instance, gotten "Shake a Tail Feather." We could have made an offer to the writers of those songs, "We'll give you $5,000 for the publishing rights, and then go record the song." We do collect mechanical royalties, because, as performers, we are entitled to mechanical royalties, but we didn't write the songs. We don't get publishers' royalties because we never made deals with any of the songwriters to buy them. Every songwriter, who has good management, collects those royalties to this day.

And, opening the House of Blues and presenting the Sunday gospel brunch is a tribute to all the folks who otherwise may not have had the spotlight.

Right! Well, House of Blues really is a house of all music. That was the inspiration of Isaac Tigrett, who started Hard Rock Cafe.

And, in fact, the weekend that I buried John in Martha's Vineyard, I took a Concord flight to New York and the Concord makes a sharp right turn, right over the island. I looked out my porthole looking down on Martha's Vineyard, and you could see the whole island, the Cape, everything. And there on that ground was my friend.

The Concord then flew me east to London, where Isaac Tigrett picked me, and we went out to Dr. Bach's Flower Shop, and started a friendship that brought Hard Rock to America and, eventually, House of Blues. He helped revive the whole Blues Brothers brand long after John was gone. We are licensee sources to Live Nation with that property. And, of course, we are able to benefit all kinds of causes through the House of Blues Foundation.

The second movie came out of starting House of Blues. Everybody saw how popular House of Blues was and we convinced Universal to write a check for us to go and make the "Blues Brothers 2000" movie.

It's also through our audience that we are now a part of film history and a part of the Library of Congress. We're all really happy about it. I'm going to call Landis next and tell him that he needs to talk to you.

I recently talked to Tim Matheson about "Animal House." He said almost all of the same things that you did about the masterful work of John Landis. I'd love to talk to him for the Library of Congress.

No, no…that's not the reason though. It's because your husband drives a Grand Marquis. *[laughs]*

My husband's 2007 Mercury Grand Marquis

This interview with Dan Aykroyd was conducted in April 2021 by Stacie Seifrit-Griffin for the Library of Congress. "The Blues Brothers" (1980) was added to the National Film Registry in 2020. To learn more about the National Film Registry, visit www.loc.gov/film.

The views expressed in this interview do not necessarily reflect those of the Library of Congress.