

BOB DORR

For more than four decades, this award-winning radio producer and musician has been “driving the blues bus down Blue Avenue” for Iowa listeners. Here’s the man behind the music.

by AVERY GREGURICH | photography by KATHRYN GAMBLE



Bob Dorr in his garage studio, surrounded by the combination of vintage and state-of-the-art gear he uses to produce his three radio shows *Backtracks*, *Beatles Medley*, and *Blue Avenue*.



Dorr is blues historian as well as a musician and producer. He's studied — and in many cases interviewed — scores of musical legends. When he talks about the blues, people listen.

It's well past midnight in Cedar Falls. The streets are finally quiet: Neither traffic nor lawn mower spoils the stillness. At a desk in his garage, Bob Dorr sits surrounded by a maze of recording equipment. Stacks of music publications rest in clusters on what little space is left. Floor-to-ceiling shelves of LPs, cassettes, and CDs line the walls — enough to fuel a lifetime of listening.

Tonight, as for the last 25 years, he works compiling and recording material for one of three radio programs that air on Iowa Public Radio's (IPR) weekend lineup: *Backtracks*, *Blue Avenue*, and *Beatles Medley*. He will work nearly to dawn.

It's not just the quiet that has him working so late.

"I have a biorhythm of late night," Dorr says, his voice smooth, rich, and deep, with a slight growl.

His life and career have fueled this biorhythm, or perhaps it's the other way around.

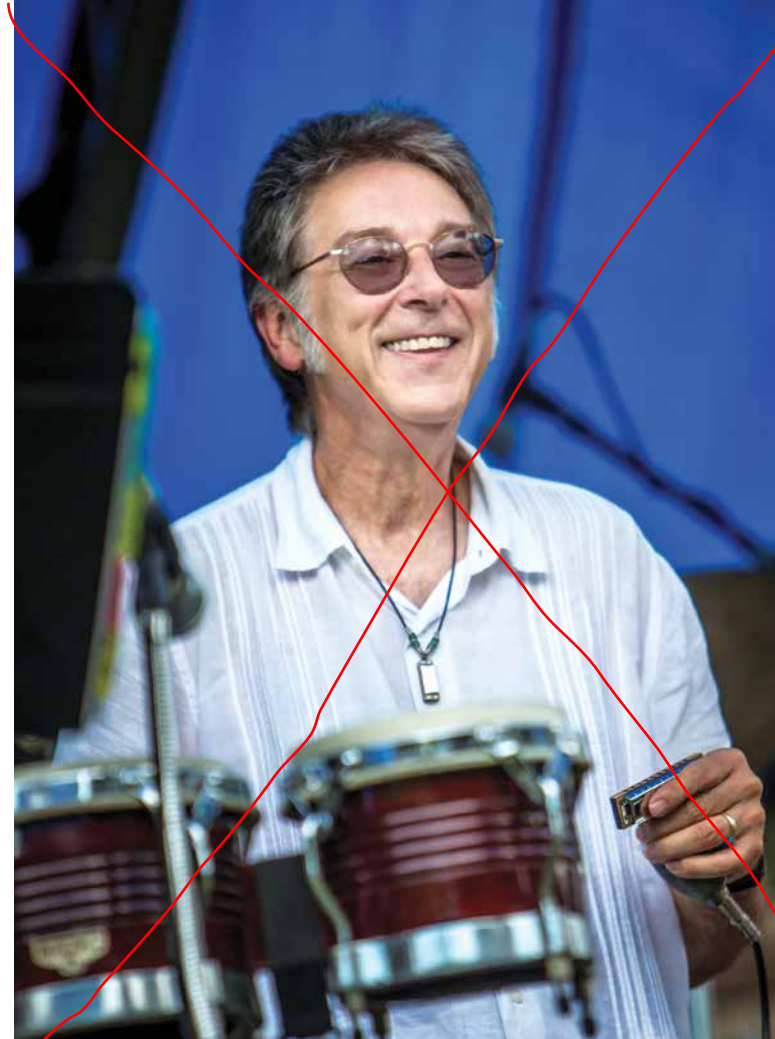
PROGRESSION

Dorr, 63, has been a critically acclaimed radio and television host and producer for more than 40 years. He has produced programs syndicated nationally through National Public

Radio (NPR). He has interviewed the likes of Muddy Waters, Willie Dixon, Ry Cooder, Luther Allison, and Tom Waits. A celebrated musician in his own right, he's led Bob Dorr & The Blue Band for more than 30 years. He was inducted into the Iowa Blues Hall of Fame and the Iowa Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame (twice). Dorr was even a part of the birth of public radio station KUNI (now part of Iowa Public Radio (IPR).

That station's first broadcast was October 2, 1972. That night Dorr, then a junior at the University of Northern Iowa, hosted the first FM rock and roll program broadcast on a public radio station in Iowa. The program was called *Progression*, and Dorr's music director asked him to play something a little different.

"I was encouraged to be as weird as I could be," Dorr says. "It was classic '70s underground: I played everything from Shel Silverstein to Gregorian chants." *Progression* grew mainly by word of mouth. Dorr's material for the show came from several sources — two in particular: "*Rolling Stone* was my bible and Cloudburst (a record store in Cedar Falls where he became "wallpaper") was my source," he says.



His evident joy in the music, vocal talent, and professionalism on stage have won Dorr and The Blue Band generations of fans.

His passion for radio and music — especially American music — began much earlier. As a kid Dorr was immersed in the sounds of the British Invasion sweeping AM radio stations. "I grew up in Chicago in the '60s with really great radio — WLS and WCFL," he says. "A good deal of the songs I loved from the invasion bands were actually their covers of classic American rock and roll and blues songs."

At the ripe age of 22, he experienced a life change when he had a chance to talk with the man behind much of the music from which British Invasion bands were borrowing heavily: blues legend Muddy Waters.

Waters was playing a show at Luther College in Decorah, and Dorr came upon a scrap of information he hoped would gain him access to the father of modern Chicago blues.

"I had found out a few weeks before that Muddy was into champagne," Dorr says, laughing.

Dorr found a \$10 bottle of champagne and told Waters' manager he would share it with the musician in exchange for an interview. "There is always some key to open the door, but I never thought that \$10 champagne would open that one," Dorr says. "But it did."

EVERYBODY NEEDS THE BLUES

Dorr is a blues historian and practitioner who prefers "traditional '50s and '60s Chicago-style blues." As a member of a listening project put together by the Blues Foundation (blues.org), a Memphis nonprofit that calls itself "the international home of blues music," Dorr has been "inundated with blues releases." Here are four Iowa blues artists that Dorr says you should be listening to right now.

JOE AND VICKI PRICE

joepriceblue.com

To Dorr, Joe and Vicki Price epitomize "the real deal." "Joe Price has been a hero of mine since the mid-'70s, when he was part of the Mother Blues Band in Iowa City," he says. The husband and wife duo have been playing and touring together since 1982 and have shared the stage with the likes of Willie Dixon, John Lee Hooker, and fellow Iowan Greg Brown. Their album *Rain or Shine* won the Independent Music Award for Best Blues CD of 2010. They call Decorah home but are rarely there long. They tour nationally and perform often at Buddy Guy's Legends in Chicago. "They continue to inspire my own perseverance," Dorr says.

THE MERCURY BROTHERS BAND

Made up of a host of Quad Cities blues veterans, the Mercury Brothers Band (you can find them on Facebook) is one of Iowa's premier bands. The band represented Iowa at the International Blues Challenge in Memphis for the second time earlier this year. Lead singer and harp player Ric Burriss has a voice that glides and sails smoothly over a sound best described as Chicago-via-Texas.

BOB PACE & THE DANGEROUS BAND

bobpaceband.com

"Bob Pace has been a Des Moines music icon for decades," Dorr says. "There seems to be no instrument he can't play." Pace has opened shows for Jimmy Vaughan, the late Johnny Winter, and John Mayall in his 40-plus-year career. Like Dorr, he is a member of both the Iowa Blues Hall of Fame and the Iowa Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame. He and The Dangerous Band play two weekly gigs in Des Moines: at Zimm's Food and Spirits on Wednesday and The Gas Lamp on Friday.

KEVIN BURT

Dorr calls Kevin Burt "probably the most musically gifted bluesman in Iowa." On any number of tracks, you will hear Kevin, or BF (for Big Feller), singing, playing guitar, and blowing the harp. His voice is reminiscent of Bill Withers and has been heard in bars and clubs across the nation over the course of two decades. (He can also be found on Facebook.)

PHOTO BY JIM DOROTHY



Iowa-based The Blue Band has been performing blues, soul, rockabilly, and rhythm and blues since 1981 and has a national following. *Left to right:* Nolan Schroeder from Marion and Eddie McKinley from Iowa City on sax, Steve Hays from Iowa City on drums, Dorr, Doug Norton from Marshalltown on bass, and Jeff Petersen from Waterloo on guitar.

Dorr interviewed Waters in the women’s locker room at Luther College, the two of them sipping champagne from Styrofoam cups. “He was fantastic, the classic blues gentleman,” Dorr says. The day that Muddy Waters died — April 30, 1983 — it was Dorr’s interview that played on NPR’s *All Things Considered*.

THE BLUE BAND

Around the same time, Dorr’s other long-standing musical vehicle, Bob Dorr & The Blue Band, began.

He formed it after his earlier The Little Red Rooster Band had broken up amid management issues. It still had three gigs scheduled, so Dorr placed an ad on a bulletin board at Stebs Bar in Cedar Falls. He found some musicians, rehearsed some songs. The new band played the dates with wild success.

Thirty-three years later, The Blue Band still plays more than 70 shows a year, including an annual stint at the Iowa State Fair. At its peak popularity, it played more than 200 shows a year nationwide — including annual stops in Sun Valley, Idaho, and at B.B. King’s nightclub in Memphis. All the while, Dorr kept producing three programs each week for IPR in his garage, dropping them off at the station before heading out on the road again.

For his work with The Blue Band and his dedication to the preservation of blues music, Dorr was inducted to the Iowa Blues Hall of Fame in 2005, an honor he cherishes.

“It’s fantastic to be recognized by people that do the same thing that you do,” Dorr says. To persevere through all the BS to where people recognize and honor your perseverance — that was really, really special.”

“I can pretty much turn a stack of records into a radio show any time.” —Bob Dorr

Since 1981 Jeff Petersen has been The Blue Band’s guitarist (Dorr is the lead singer and harmonica player). Peterson first knew Dorr as “that mysterious voice coming through the radio.” Since then he has come to know Dorr as a complex personality, a fair businessman, and a loyal friend. Petersen says Dorr’s relationship with music is a sacred union.

“Anything to keep the blues alive, he’d be up for it,” Petersen says. “He loves music. It’s the paramount thing in his life.”



Dorr amiably goofing around in his studio surrounded by thousands of records, cassettes, CDs — even 8-track tapes. They’re all raw material for his Iowa Public Radio programs.

This enduring partnership with music, both on stage and behind a soundboard, has led Dorr to plenty of the same tribulations found in his favorite blues songs.

“I used to be the life of the party when I was swimming in a bourbon bottle. And I could be a pretty dark, black, sarcastic, biting ass after I’d had 15 shots. I did that five to seven days a week for years,” Dorr says. “I’m not proud of the way I conducted my life in the ’70s and ’80s as far as whatever substance came by, but that was the thing to do at the time.”

Things have quieted down since. He hasn’t had a drink since getting “s---faced drunk on Y2K, 1999.” He got married for the first time five years ago.

“Carolyn and I had a thing for 22 years,” Dorr says. “I would run after her and she would run away and vice versa. We finally decided to get married. Had I known it would be this good, I would have gotten married way sooner, but I was a blues man on the road. I had to come around to that on my own.”

THE REAL DEAL

Now, 40 weeks each year you can find Dorr in his garage recording material for his three programs on IPR’s weekend slate: *Backtracks*, a three-hour journey through obscure rock and roll music that is at least 25 years old, *Beatles Medley*, a half

hour of nonstop music from the Fab Four and their various side and solo projects, and *Blue Avenue*, a celebration of the blues in all its many forms.

After 42 years, “I can pretty much turn a stack of records into a radio show any time,” he says. But it still takes time. For a three-hour show like *Backtracks*, Dorr will spend eight to nine hours selecting music and recording the program. It takes longer than it used to. These days, says Dorr, “Anyone can make a record with Pro Tools and GarageBand [software]. The problem is wading through the BS to get to the real deal.”

That never-ending search for the “real deal,” however, doesn’t show any signs of slowing soon. As the night grows old, think of a home on a quiet street in Cedar Falls. There, sitting in his garage surrounded by walls of vinyl, cassettes, and CDs with the rest of the world asleep, music playing, and microphone held close, Bob Dorr finds his authentic self.

“It’s become a part of my self-worth,” he says. “I can’t quit because then I would no longer have that self-portrait of what I am.”

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WHERE TO HEAR HIM

RADIO SHOWS:

iowapublicradio.org
Click on *Backtracks*, *Blue Avenue*, or *Beatles Medley* for show times and information.

THE BLUE BAND:

theblueband.com/cal.htm
The band will play more than a dozen dates in July and August alone.

RADIO INTERVIEWS:

theblueband.com/bobdorr.html