

## New Jersey Forum: The Blues Scene in the Delaware Valley A presentation by Gary Saretzky

### Abstract

I've been a blues fan since the 1960s in high school, when I listened mostly to jazz, blues, and classical music. My first blues records were acoustic sides by Josh White, Lightnin' Hopkins, and Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee. Then in about 1964, I saw Paul Butterfield on the game show, "To Tell the Truth." After the host said, "Will the real Paul Butterfield please stand up?," the curtain opened and Paul joined the band for "Born in Chicago." I've been a fan of electrified blues ever since. In 1991, I came across Jonny Meister's Blues Show on WXPN, the University of Pennsylvania radio station. Jonny announces local events and I started going to concerts hosted by the Philadelphia Blues Machine. At one of them, I met a member of the Bucks County Blues Society, which then sponsored blues events every Thursday night in Levittown, PA, and started going there regularly, as well as to other venues in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Gradually, I got to know and started photographing the musicians, mostly while they were playing.

In my blues musician photographs, I try to show how much emotional intensity these musicians bring to their work. As compared to musicians in most other genres, blues musicians are more likely to express their feelings in their facial expressions and body language. Along with the music, their emotionality helps create a psychic bond with the audience. This is one reason why there is such a significant difference between live performances of the blues and hearing it on recordings.

Unlike concerts in theaters, at blues clubs and festivals there are rarely any restrictions on photographing the musicians, but, especially when using flash, I try not to take so many that I distract either the audience or the performers. I make prints and give them to the musicians the next time I see them, or send them via E-mail. Some have used them on their own web sites, Facebook pages, and CD covers.

In 2004–2005, I began exhibiting this series in a group exhibition, "The Blues Show," held at Ellarslie, the City Museum of Trenton, and have had many exhibitions since. The intent of these gallery exhibits and digital exhibits on my web site Saretzky Online ([saretzky.com](http://saretzky.com)) is to help promote interest in the musicians, each of whom is an outstanding artist. Some of these musicians play only regionally; others tour internationally. Few make much money at their profession. I've been to see some of them who have international reputations when the audience totaled a couple of dozen or less, although about 75 people is more often the case, except at festivals which can attract more than a thousand. During breaks and after the show, most of them are glad to chat with audience members. This is a very different scene from the "arena rock" experience; it is much more personal.

In a slide show, I present a selection of my photographs of blues musicians taken in or near New Jersey and provide biographical information about them and the venues where they perform.

## Bio

A member of the Blues Hall of Fame, New Jersey Chapter, as a photographer, Gary Saretzky worked as an archivist for more than fifty years at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Educational Testing Service, and the Monmouth County Archives. Saretzky taught the history of photography at Mercer County Community College, 1977–2012, and served as coordinator of the Public History Internship Program for the Rutgers University History Department, 1994–2016. He has published more than 100 articles and reviews on the history of photography, photographic conservation, and other topics, and has self-published two books of his photographs of blues musicians. A large collection of his photographs of blues musicians is at the Blues Archives of the University of Mississippi and a substantial number are at the Trenton Free Public Library.