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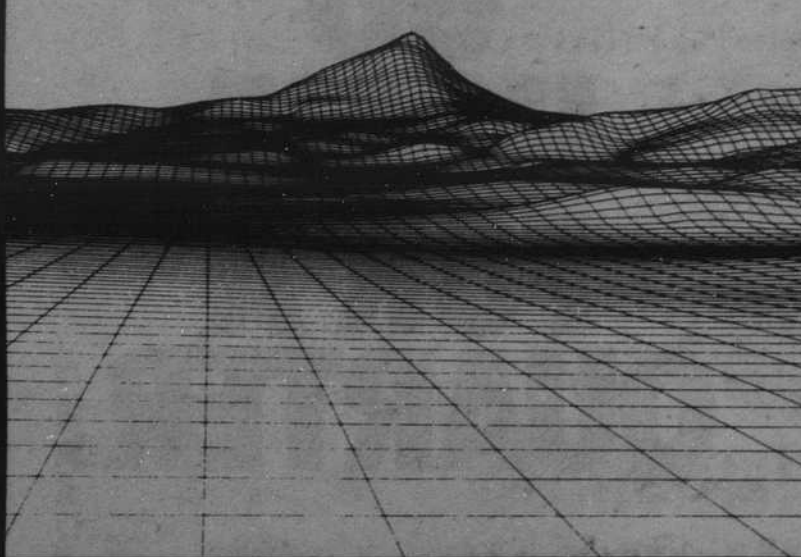
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Blues duo wows audience

Two top-flight bluesmen appeared at the west entrance to the EMU Breezeway Wednesday. Harpo Howard and David McKeand, who performs as Dave the Minstrel, have traveled the United States and Canada, becoming incredibly versatile musicians over the last 15 years.

The act is finely polished. No aspect of the performers' art is neglected, as the duo lays down some of the most supple, complex and yet soulful blues on the music scene today.

McKeand dances, jumps, spins, cavorts and comments on himself doing so, all the time establishing a rock-steady beat against which Howard's totally fluid harmonica stylings and McKeand's own hard-bitten but precisely pitched voice provide inspired accompaniment.

One of the most gratifying aspects of this duo's sound is that not a single note in two

hours of hard playing fails to meet pitch.

Dave the Minstrel's style and intonation resemble, at different times, Howlin' Wolf, Taj Mahal and Geoff Muldaur, but he is very much his own musical personality.

Howard, from Detroit, has totally assimilated all the major current harp styles, from Magic Dick to the great Charlie McCoy, and improved upon them. His work combines the inventiveness of Corky Siegel and Mike Turk with the sheer blues intensity of Junior Wells and the other Chicago blues masters.

On "Baby, Won't You Hold Me Tight," McKeand used his guitar and ringed hand as percussion to set off Howard's unusually rich, complex lines; Harpo wore boots with steel toe taps, which lent yet another percussive force to the driving music.

The two were equally suc-

cessful with satire. On a number entitled "Black Magic Marker," to the tune of the Santana hit, the Minstrel did a hilarious monologue in evocation of the reasons behind modern youth's disaffection and musical viciousness.

Political barbs followed, aimed at everyone and everything from Ronald Reagan to the herbicide and sugar industries. The sugar-crazed kid, a character portrayed by McKeand, was a crowd-pleaser, as was the duo's drug number, "Mushrooms," performed to the tune of "My Girl," by the Temptations.

Next, the couple dove back into the blues, Harpo again demonstrating his amazing musical versatility by playing in fifth position (key of G on a B-flat harp), a truly rare event in harp playing.

After they had finished their generous set, McKeand and Howard sat in Old Taylors' Tavern and discussed their musical lives. Among the musicians the two have played with are the late Muddy Waters' group, the Legendary Blues Band, Ramblin' Jack Elliot, bluesman Bobo Jenkins and local Eugene groups such as the Whiskey Blues Band and James Thornberry. They have played county fairs, blues festivals and vaudeville.

Harpo Howard, 28, typifies many younger bluesmen in his insistence upon an older way of thinking relinquished by most of his generation.

"I respect people a lot, especially other musicians. But when I meet some of these pseudo-intellectuals around here I sometimes tell them that I'm ignorant by choice, just to piss 'em off."

McKeand's musical career has been the more varied of the two; he said the most important thing in life for him is to play, no matter what the words say.

McKeand and Howard's music stands for itself. It is evidence of the vitality of the blues tradition in America today. They will be leaving for California today but will return to play at the Black Forest II on Oct. 25. Blues enthusiasts are in for a real treat for a couple of dollars with these two sterling practitioners of the blues art.

By Bill Homans



Photo by Michael Clapp

Harpo Howard, left, and Dave McKeand perform a finely polished act before passersby near the EMU Wednesday.

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