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Bluesist Henry Vestine: The Sunflower shows no sign of folding

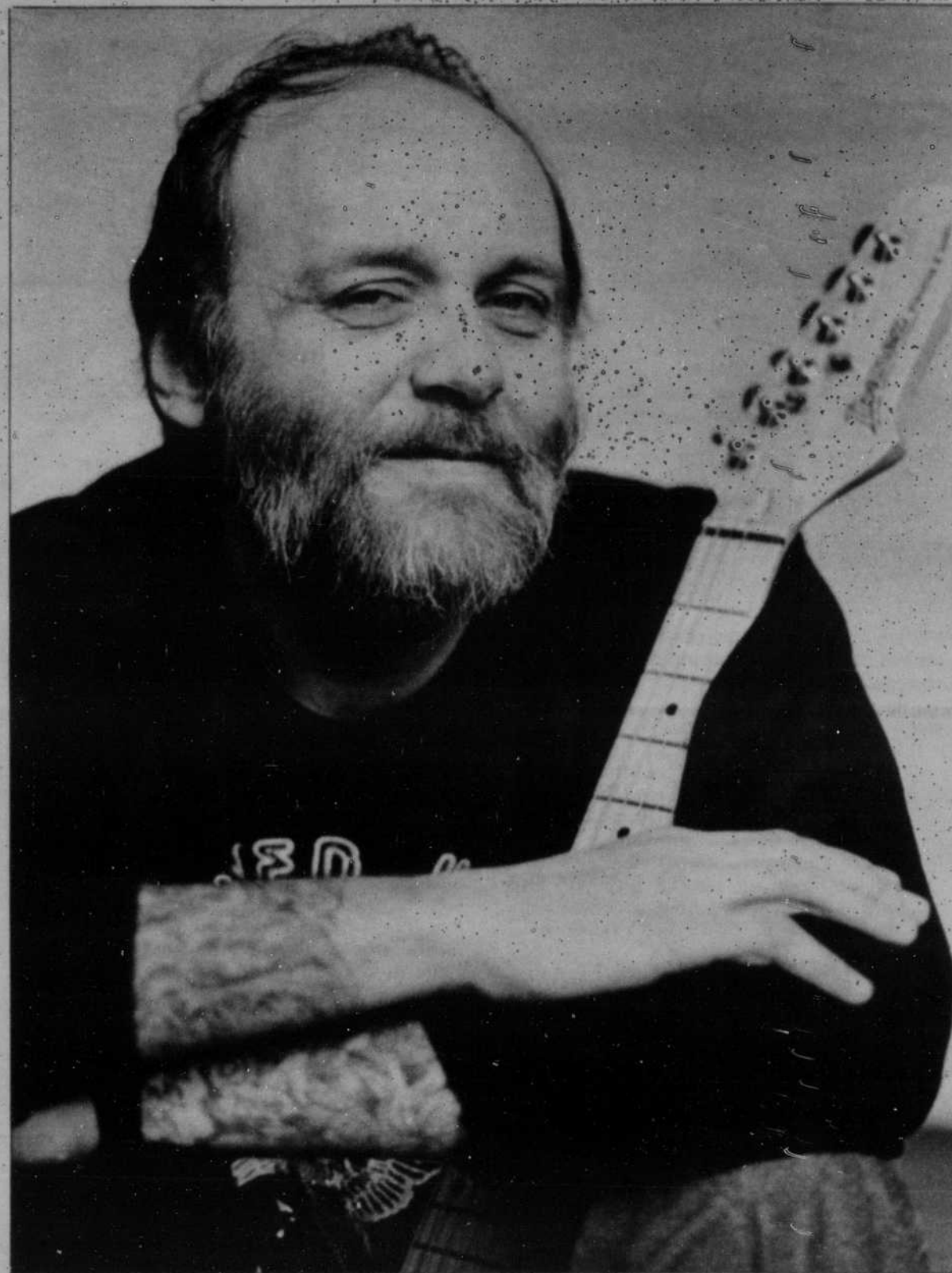


Photo by Karen Stallwood
Henry "The Sunflower" Vestine's 30-year career includes a stint as lead guitarist for Canned Heat. He has also played with Frank Zappa and John Lee Hooker, and regularly plays with James T and The Tough and jams with other local blues artists when he's in Eugene.

My personal acquaintance with Henry "The Sunflower" Vestine is not of long standing, but it is very deep. Both Henry and I are buried in the blues for life. That means we each have a lifelong commitment to the music, but it also means many other things.

The blues touches many bases, such as disappointment, hard times beyond one's control, anger and fear of the unknown. Each blues musician plays or sings from these bases, though time may have burned out the anger, or personal self-acceptance may have eroded the fear.

Henry is one of those in whom the anger, if it ever existed, is burned out, and a personal dedication to his music has brought him a high level of self-acceptance. At age 42, his face is deeply etched and his beard is graying in places. His eyes glitter fiercely, with a hint of scorn for extraneities. To one who doesn't know him, Henry would appear formidable. To one who does, he appears triumphant.

His 30-year career has brought him international acclaim as one of the best blues and rock guitarists around. Henry gained fame in the 1960s playing lead guitar as "The Sunflower" with Canned Heat (one of the hottest boogie-blues bands to come out of L.A.) He has also played with blues greats such as John Lee Hooker and Albert Collins and rock stars such as Frank Zappa, who led the Mothers of Invention and Mick Taylor, who played with British musician John Mayall's Blues Breakers Crusade.

Between touring with the newly reformed Canned Heat, Henry now calls Eugene his home base. When in town, he gigs with local rhythm 'n' blues band James T and The Tough and jams regularly with fellow blues artists in the area, particularly at the Blues Jam at Taylor's Tavern on Monday nights.

Henry and I sat down for some refreshments, as we often do, at the historic Whale House on Patterson Street, where he talked about his life with the blues.

Homans: Tell us about your musical life before Canned Heat.
Vestine: I grew up in Los Angeles, and played parties on weekends as I went through high school. We made a couple of records, even.

Homans: In high school?
Vestine: Injunion high school. Then I went to college a little bit. I was playing six nights a week, and I had a seven o' clock philosophy class. I just couldn't handle it, so I quit, and decided, "I'm gonna play the guitar."

Homans: How long after you left college did Canned Heat come together?
Vestine: About three years. I was working with the Mothers, with Frank Zappa, and I quit them. Also, Bob Hite (known as "The Bear," vocalist with Canned Heat) and I used to trade records, so I knew him, and he called me up to come hear this band playing at the Ash Grove in Los Angeles. So I came down and heard them, and one night I called him up and asked him, "can I play in your band?" He said, yes. Alan (Wilson, known as "Blind Owl," guitar and harmonica player with Canned Heat) was with the band then.

Homans: And that was about 1965?
Vestine: Yes. Larry (Taylor, known as "The Mole," bassist with Canned Heat) wasn't there yet, but he came soon thereafter. The original Canned Heat was Bob, Alan, me, Stuart Brotman on bass; they had Kenny Edwards, who later worked with Linda Ronstadt, on guitar, and the drummer was another record collector named Pete Sawyer. That was it.

Homans: When did the group which recorded the first Canned Heat album — the orange cover — come together?
Vestine: Pretty quick. A couple of months after we started. We had one other bass player, Mark Andes, who later worked with Spirit, and the drummer on that album, Frank Cook.

Homans: So when that first album was a hit, in 1966, you were a big time, commercially successful group, right?
Vestine: Pretty much so, yes. I'd been working steadily for several years though.

Homans: What did hitting the big time, being invited to Monterey and whatnot, do to you?
Vestine: (smiling) Well, it made me think I'm gonna make some money. (Vestine picks up a midnight blue Ibanez electric guitar and dreamily picks a few chords as we talk.)

Vestine: And our manager, this was his first problem. This was when the Beatles were hot, and they were out of the William Morris agency, and they took acid and decided they wanted to be a rock 'n' roll band. He told 'em he would have them headlining in London in a year, and he kept his promise. I wanted to get there too.

Homans: You went through several years of high-profile national success. "Boogie With Canned Heat," and "Refrid Hockey Boogie," (two of Canned Heat's many albums) you went to Woodstock...
Vestine: I didn't go to Woodstock. I had quit the week before, and came back nine months later. People are always coming up to me in nightclubs and saying, "Hey, I saw you in Woodstock," and I'll tell 'em, "No, you didn't." All the others got two gold records, and I didn't get any.

Homans: Tell us about Topanga Canyon (outside LA) and what about John Mayall's connection with the band.
Vestine: Well now, he wasn't part of the band, of course. We did Walking by Myself, and he plays the bass, on one of the albums. Bob used to have a house up in Laurel Canyon, not far away from Topanga, and Mayall used to hang out there. I guess he lived there for a while.

This was after we left Topanga Canyon.

Homans: So why was Topanga Canyon significant?
Vestine: Well, there was this kind of a little artistic, post-beatnik, early hippie kind of community up in the woods. Now it's a big Yuppie area, costs a lot of money to live there, but it didn't use to. And there was this great club there called the Topanga Corral, which was the only place around to get a drink of liquor besides the VFW. It was a real good, loose place to play, so we played there a lot. It was like our home base club.

Homans: Did you notice a tail-off in the popularity of the blues after the 1960s?
Vestine: We were a progressive blues band, and so I never noticed any tailoff. We were getting gigs with people like B. B. King and Otis Rush, and they were playing places they had never played before. B. B. plays Las Vegas now, even. But there's been an upswing since the '70s.

Homans: What does Canned Heat mean today? Has playing with them changed?
Vestine: Okay, now when we went to Australia (with James Thornbury of James T. and the Tough) on our recent tour, of the five original recording members, there are three still alive (Henry, Larry Taylor, and drummer Adolfo "Fito" de la Parra) and we all went on the tour, so it's as much of the original as you're gonna get.

Homans: So Canned Heat is still Canned Heat?
Vestine: Well, Larry doesn't always go with us, so then it's just Fito and myself, just two-fifths.

Homans: Yes, I'm sure you all could account for at least two fifths. (laughter) What real unusual things have happened to you as you have lived the blues?
Vestine: That's a strange question. You should ask it again after we drink some more beer, then I can tell some weird stories. I've lived a very unusual life; I don't think there's anyone who's lived quite like I have. I'd rather not go into specifics. Here's one, though. When I met (local drummer) Mac Singleton, we were at Moro Bay, California, fishing for tuna on a commercial boat for three months at a time. Mac decided to become a drummer while we were out at sea. This was 1963.

Homans: What goes around, comes around.
Vestine: Yeah, he'd be beating on the deck there; I vaguely remembered him, but I was on LSD the whole time I was on the fishing boat.

Homans: You're kidding.
Vestine: Look at these eyes — would I lie? Let's go to another subject...
Homans: Let's stop at Laurel Canyon a minute. Did the band ever live all together at Laurel Canyon, and was that where Alan died?
Vestine: The Owl went down at Topanga Canyon. I never lived in Laurel Canyon. One time, Bob Hite had this great house in Hollywood Hills, with our manager and several others. Elvis Presley stayed there some, when he was in Hollywood. I think Mayall may have lived there. He may live there now. His house burned down, and he lost his gigantic porn collection...
Homans: Tell us about your times with John Lee Hooker.
Vestine: No, I won't tell you.
Homans: I'll pour beer on you.
Vestine: Okay, I met John Lee Hooker as a kid, when I was in L.A. I went to a concert at UCLA, brought a record, and he signed it. Anyway, later we did the Hooker and Heat album, probably the best blues I ever worked on, and then we did a tour, played Carnegie Hall and whatnot, and a bunch of other gigs. Recently I saw him in Corvallis, after I hadn't seen him for a good while. He's tremendous! He was out in his three-

Continued on Page 8B

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