

April 6, 2013

Terry Stewart
President Emeritus
Rock & Roll Hall of Fame & Museum
Cleveland and the World

Dear Terry,

I've been asked to write a personal letter for inclusion in a collection of them being given to you on the night the Rock Hall pays tribute to your astonishing fifteen years as the heart and soul of, if not rock & roll itself, then at least the shrine that you and others have built to it. I could, of course, write about the relatively rudderless first four years of the Hall when five or six well-intentioned Executive Directors tried to get the place fully afloat, and how it took your arrival in early 1999 to make the vessel truly seaworthy. But I'll leave that to others, I think, since I would far prefer to recount the adventures we two have shared during those fifteen years that you've presided over this mighty "Ship of Shake," if you will.

As you'll remember, you arrived in Cleveland as I was midway through post-production on my first collaboration with the Rock Hall, and my last with the overreaching and somewhat duplicitous WinStar Productions: a feature-length documentary titled **HELLHOUNDS ON MY TRAIL: The Afterlife of Robert Johnson**. In fact, you arrived just in time to help calm the animosity among production partners, and our first actual adventure together was premiering the film as part of the 1999 SXSW film festival. Happily, the film also had a well-publicized New York City opening and a good life on DVD, even if it's now in limbo because of ongoing WinStar rights issues.

Later that same year, we worked together again when the Rock Hall's musical tour of Louisiana joined forces with my own efforts to create another feature-length music

doc, this one titled **RHYTHM 'N' BAYOUS: A Road Map to Louisiana Music**. I have many great memories of my crew and your tour group enjoying the likes of Kermit Ruffins, Rosie Ledet, Nathan Williams, Hackberry Ramblers, Warren Storm, Rod Bernard, Lil' Alfred, Dale & Grace, and Jambalaya Cajun Band. But even better than memories is my footage of you introducing our film audience to Kermit Ruffins at Vaughan's Lounge in New Orleans, and interviewing Floyd Soileau at his influential Floyd's Record Shop and Flat Town Music Company in Ville Platte.

In 2000, we premiered that film at the Rock Hall and at an arthouse in New York City before it, too, went back on the shelf because of a lack of money to pay off music rights. Then, in 2001, your collector buddy David Hughes invited you, me, actor-musician Chris Thomas King, and film critic Michael Wilmington to appear at Jackson, Mississippi's Crossroads Film Festival which he was helping to program that year. The festival appearances were fun enough, but what I'll never forget was when David took us to the legendary, late-night, urban juke known as the Subway Lounge. As you know, that experience led directly to my production in 2002 of the Starz-funded feature **LAST OF THE MISSISSIPPI JUKES**. But no subsequent night I spent at the Subway was as magical as that first one, which I described in this way on my Mug-Shot Productions website:

Although it's difficult to put our feelings that night into words, I believe it's safe to say that Terry, Michael and I were simply transported by the rough ambience of the dank, smoky, poorly lit basement room in which we found ourselves, by the harmonious interplay of black and white Mississippians in a black-owned venue on the black side of town, and especially by the extraordinary caliber of local musicians who sang and played their hearts out from midnight until shortly before dawn. As for myself, I decided right then and there that any film I made about Mississippi jukes would have to include Jimmy and Helen King's Subway Lounge because, for reasons I could not fully comprehend, I truly felt that I was home. It was as if all of the music I had listened to since my mid-teens, and all of the issues I had cared about for just as long, were suddenly present in their purest forms. And yes, there was something in that welcoming smile of Helen by the front door, and of Jimmy behind the bar, that said to me, "Your musical family has been waiting here to receive you. You need never more feel 'like a motherless child.'"

Now, I don't know if you romanticized that particular night as much as I did, but I do know that your own life and career has been centered around your overwhelm-

ing love of rock & roll, rhythm 'n' blues, rockabilly, and all of the other classic genres of popular music and related cultural artifacts that you grew up hearing in Mobile, Alabama and that you've been collecting and supporting ever since. For this reason, it's been an honor and a joy to share this handful of amazing experiences with a guy who has done as much with, and as much for, American music as you have throughout your days on the planet.

At any rate, this brings us to our last musical adventure together, which was when you generously invited me to come film my friend Ted Drozdowski and his band Scissormen with you at the Rock Hall for our feature-length music doc titled **BIG SHOES: Walking and Talking the Blues**. Your implicit endorsement of Ted, of his band, and of his style of playing offered an important climax for the film, as did you and Ted trading colorful tales about Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, Jessie Mae Hemphill, and more. It's this sort of dedication - not only to the music in some abstract or historical sense, but to both music and music makers as living and breathing embodiments of who we are as a people and as a nation at this particular time in our history - that sets you apart both as a person and as an administrator.

A great deal of the music you champion was born around the same time that we were and has developed over the same years that we have. And certainly, from the very beginnings of rock & roll, its creators have declared that it would live forever, whether it was Johnny O'keefe insisting that, "It's swept this whole wide land...Rock 'n' roll will stand"; or Danny and the Juniors singing, "I don't care what people say... Rock and roll is here to stay"; or even Neil Young proclaiming, "My my, hey hey... Rock and roll is here to stay" and "Hey hey, my my...Rock and roll can never die." Yes, it was musicians who wrote, and performed, and recorded those words, but it's been you, your Rock Hall colleagues, your fellow collectors, journalists, archivists, and many millions of fans who are seeing to it that those words continue to ring true. For that, I thank you greatly, and I express my own admiration along with that of everyone else who is paying tribute to you on this special day.

Certainly, as you retire from your all-important role with the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame & Museum, I don't have to admonish you to "keep on rockin'," because just as Elvis never *truly* "left the building," neither will you. No, your vision and your spirit will be on permanent display as long as there *is* a Rock Hall. And I, myself, look forward to still more musical adventures with you, even if we have to carry them out from all-too-literal rocking chairs.

Warmest regards and congratulations from Diana and me!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bob". The signature is written in black ink and has a horizontal line extending to the right from the end of the word.

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