

# Braille Blues Daddy

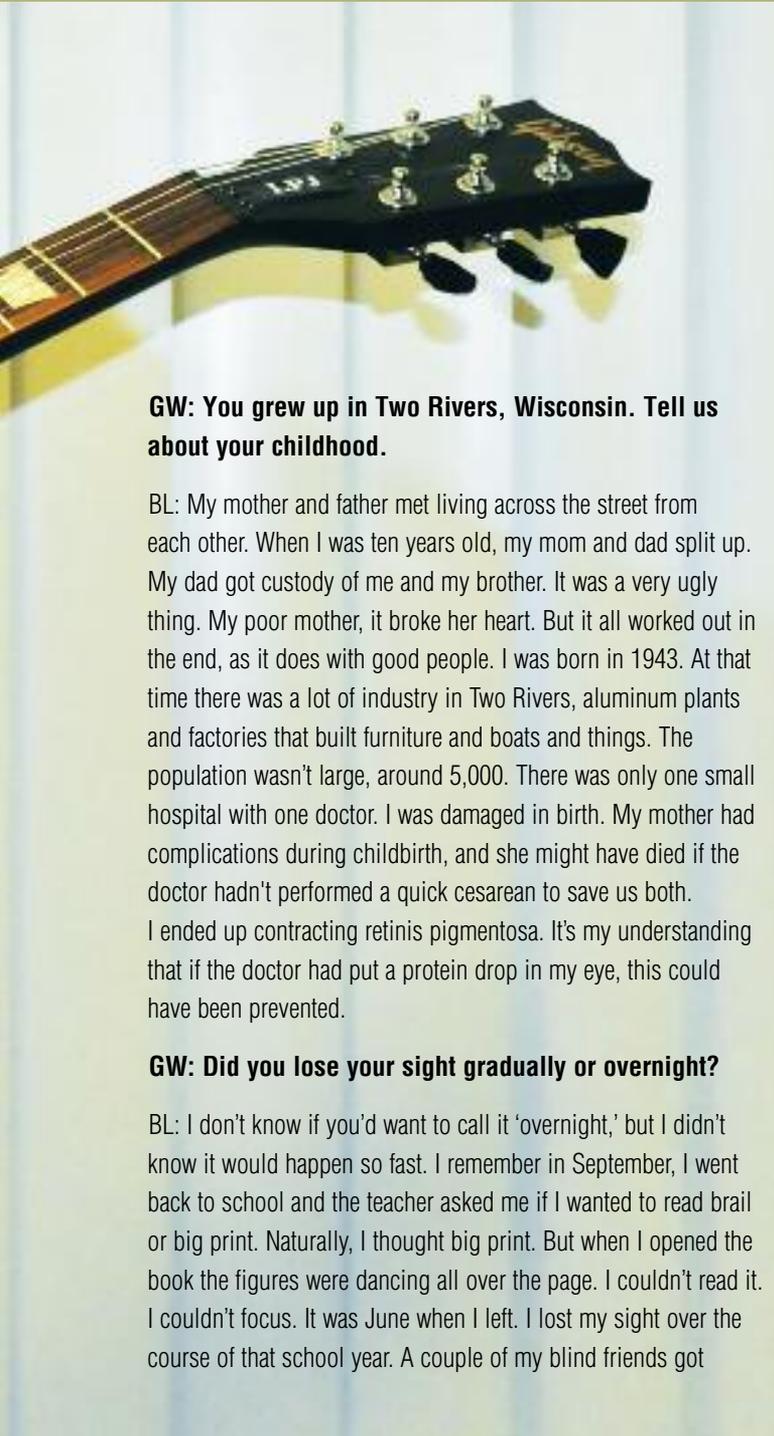
Destiny. Luck. Coincidence. Magic? You decide which noun best fits the story we are about to tell. It's the story of how a blind, New Orleans-based blues artist named Bryan Lee – affectionately known as the “Braille Blues Daddy” – delivered a message of hope to the members of Midtown Athletic Club. If you caught an earful of Lee's performance this winter, you received that message through his music.

But of all the blues artists out there today, why Bryan Lee? Where did this inter-state connection begin? The spark between the Club and Bryan Lee was first ignited by one of the blues guitarist and singer's biggest fans: Midtown general manager, Glenn Williams. When Glenn discovered that a trip to Chicago would coincide with a live show featuring one of his favorite musicians – a man who the great Muddy Waters once referred to as “a living legend” – he decided this was one opportunity he just couldn't pass up.

It only took one pre-concert conversation with Glenn to convince Bryan Lee to bring his musical gifts to the Midtown café and lounge. Having gained some insight into the personal history behind Lee's music, which includes 15 years as a fixture at the Old Absinthe House in New Orleans, Glenn wanted to give all Midtown members the chance to hear his remarkable story. As you might expect, the seventy-year-old blues man speaks about the same as he sings: with strength, wisdom, and always with his own distinct brand of soul.



## A Conversation with Bryan Lee



**GW: You grew up in Two Rivers, Wisconsin. Tell us about your childhood.**

BL: My mother and father met living across the street from each other. When I was ten years old, my mom and dad split up. My dad got custody of me and my brother. It was a very ugly thing. My poor mother, it broke her heart. But it all worked out in the end, as it does with good people. I was born in 1943. At that time there was a lot of industry in Two Rivers, aluminum plants and factories that built furniture and boats and things. The population wasn't large, around 5,000. There was only one small hospital with one doctor. I was damaged in birth. My mother had complications during childbirth, and she might have died if the doctor hadn't performed a quick cesarean to save us both. I ended up contracting retinis pigmentosa. It's my understanding that if the doctor had put a protein drop in my eye, this could have been prevented.

**GW: Did you lose your sight gradually or overnight?**

BL: I don't know if you'd want to call it 'overnight,' but I didn't know it would happen so fast. I remember in September, I went back to school and the teacher asked me if I wanted to read brail or big print. Naturally, I thought big print. But when I opened the book the figures were dancing all over the page. I couldn't read it. I couldn't focus. It was June when I left. I lost my sight over the course of that school year. A couple of my blind friends got

**“Muddy told me, stay with this, one day you will be a living legend...I went home and I cried.”**

together and gave me a crash course in brail arithmetic one weekend.

For a long time my eyes still looked like they worked. As a young performer, I started wearing sunglasses on stage to avoid eye contact. People thought I

was communicating something to them when I wasn't. Then they'd think I had an attitude because I was looking at them and then blowing them off. The guys thought it was funniest when women would flash me. The women would get so upset thinking, “How can this man not react when I'm so gorgeous?”

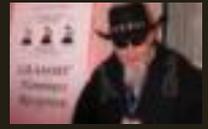
**GW: What sparked your interest in music?**

BL: I was drawn to the guitar because it was almost like my friend. Growing up, my grandmother lived downstairs. She played some piano and always wanted to play Hawaiian guitar. It was a labor of love; all these songs in her songbooks on how to play. Her guitar was tuned to a G open chord, so I could just strum and it sounded musical. I have a memory of being 4 years old, she and my uncle were babysitting me and I was strumming on the guitar while the three of us tried to sing. My mother was a very good singer. When she was 18, she had the chance to go sing with the Big Band. Back then you weren't an adult until you were 21 and my grandma said, “No way. Traveling on a bus with 15 men, gallivanting across the country? No way.”

By the time my mother was 21 she had me, so she never had the opportunity.

After hearing Chuck Berry do “Roll Over Beethoven” when I was 10 years old, I said, “*Yeah*. That's what I want.” Christmas was coming up and I went to my dad and told him which records I

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Left to right:

wanted. My dad was a factory worker. When he was 16 his dad died and he had to quit school to work to support his mother. He had a lot of anger in him. So when I told him I knew what I wanted to do with my life, and that was get an electric guitar and play like Chuck Berry, my dad started laughing. He told me to go talk to my mom about that, adding, "If you want to work at the aluminum company when you're 16, I'll take you to my boss to see what we can do."

So I went and talked to my mother and my grandmother and in 1954, for Christmas, I got an acoustic guitar. My grandmother knew someone who played and I learned a few chords from him and then I went off by myself. In 1955, I started hanging out with Fred Hawkins, another new kid at The Jones School. He was a very good guitar player. We started a band together with a neighbor friend of mine who played the drums. We called ourselves "The Glaciers" because they always said Two Rivers was the coldest spot in the summer time. When I was 12 I got an electric guitar and an amplifier for Christmas. I started playing on stage when I was 13 years old and I've never stopped since. I'll be 70 next month.

**GW: That's almost 60 years of performing. How much of it did you spend in Chicago, where we first met?**

BL: I played in some clubs in Chicago but I had some problems there because I was white. It was discouraging. People are beautiful no matter what color they are. If you go out and talk about all the flowers on your front porch, describing the different colors and how beautiful they all look, but then go downtown and curse someone out because of their skin color, you've just made a fool out of yourself. This is a blind man talking: it's all the same. If I do nothing else in my life this is the message I want to deliver through my music. Back in Chicago, people would tell me, "You're really good, but you're white." I'd say, "Look, I'm not trying to be black, I'm trying to be me. I have no visual prejudices here. I just love this art form."

**"I love the House of Guitars. It's my favorite place---ever. I'm going to send them up some crawfish."**

So, I went to Milwaukee and used that as my home base. I'd work around Chicago, playing in downstate Illinois and throughout the Midwest. That's how we grew, little by little. I would open in Madison or Milwaukee for some of my heroes like Muddy Waters or Albert King. One night after opening for Muddy, I found him sitting in his dressing room, drinking champagne with his young wife. He and I

got to talking about spiritual things. It went on forever and at one point I said, "Here you are, drinking champagne with your wife. I'm in the company of a living legend." He got up and said, "Bryan, my friend," and he gave me a big strong hug, "Stay with this, and one day you'll be a living legend. But don't try to become a legend in one day. It takes time." I went home and I cried.

**GW: What drew you to the blues?**

BL: Blues was born out of slavery and poverty. People learned to work in rhythm, creating music. There's a story about Muddy and a Baptist preacher. This preacher asked Muddy why he didn't consider being a preacher instead of doing all this blues, the "devil's music." Muddy told him if it were the devil's music it wouldn't be beautiful like it is. He asked if the preacher realized the misery and the pain that this music soothes. Muddy explained to the preacher, "You sing at church. You do your dance at church. The difference is more people like listening to me than they like listening to you. You're always telling them how bad they are."

Blues is life. Blues is Jesus. Blues is putting life into music. You've fallen down, you've made a terrible mistake, and you feel awful. Music in general is one of the greatest gifts that the good Lord ever gave us. The whole premise of life is there, and once you figure that out, it's so simple. God gave me a gift, and you know what? A gift is no good unless you share it.