

Blues in Iceland (Blúshátíð)

Going There

I returned to the Holiday Inn in Marietta, Ohio, to headquarter for two weeks (March 13 to 25, 2006) to conduct a Blues in the Schools artist residency program at Marietta Middle School. When I received an email requesting my availability to perform at the Reykjavik Blues Festival in Reykjavik, Iceland. "Iceland"? Talk about traveling off the beaten path. There was not much time to prepare for the trip to Iceland. I was excited about performing in Iceland, departing on April 10, 2006, due to an artist cancellation. I was replacing the headliner on an acoustic night.

I had known Deitra Farr for many years in Chicago. I considered her an underappreciated powerhouse talent on the world scene that, at some point, would draw her just due from Blues and Jazz fans worldwide. Like most blues artists, the sky would be the limit if she could get consistent airplay on the radio. Although "diva" is used loosely today, it is a fair term when describing Deitra Farr, who proudly writes her material which I consider some of the finest songwriters on the music scene today. Deitra Farr is gifted with a tonal quality in her unique vocals, unlike any other singer I have heard on the stage.

Deitra Farr and I had interviewed together for the Chicago Sun-Times newspaper about five or more years ago, along with Shirley Dixon (Blues legend Willie Dixon's daughter) and Wayne Baker Brooks (the son of Lonnie Brooks, of Alligator Records), regarding the *State of the Blues* in Chicago. Deitra Farr was candid when she bravely took the local Chicago blues club establishment to task for encouraging blues artists to perform standard-fare cover songs such as *Sweet Home Chicago*, *Mustang Sally*, *Hey Bartender*, etc. while discouraging original material. These frustrations may have led her to move to Europe to promote her career. Fast forward to March 2005.

Last year in March, our paths crossed at the 2005 River City Blues Festival sponsored by the Blues, Folk, and Jazz Blues Music Society of Marietta, Ohio, where I received her current CD, "Let it Go" (JSP 5105). I have become addicted to and inspired by her songwriting.



Deitra Farr referred me to the festival organizers in Reykjavik, Iceland. I accepted their offer and would leave home for the land of "Fire and Ice" in less than three weeks. The Iceland festival organization was professional and expeditious.

Getting There

I had a *ticket to ride* in about a week, United Airlines to Boston, flight 530, then Iceland Air to Reykjavik, flight 630 (a six-hour flight). Iceland is an island nation 6 hours ahead of Chicago and is about the size of the State of Ohio. Iceland is Forty thousand square miles. It is a micro-population of about 300,000 people, with eighty percent living within and around the nation's capital, Reykjavik. Iceland is located in the North Atlantic Sea just south of the Arctic Circle and is considered a part of Europe. Ten percent of the island is glaciated. Iceland is geologically active with volcanoes, geysers, and geo-thermo power.



According to Icelandic history, the island nation was settled by immigrants from Scandinavia, Ireland, and Scotland during the 9th and 10th centuries. *Erik the Red* (950-1003), a Norwegian explorer credited for founding Greenland and establishing its first colony, lived in Iceland. Like his father, Erik the Red's son Leif "the Lucky," Erikson would be a key player in the Norse expansion and exploration of the Americas. His son, Leif Erikson would become the first European (Viking) explorer to reach the Americas. Erik the Red succumbed to disease during an epidemic in 1003. Some scholars say Leif was blown off course. However, the region he discovered would become known as Newfoundland and, by later extension, Canada.

In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared October 9 "Leif Erikson Day" in the United States.



My view from the airplane was limited at night. Everything seemed to be blue-black with a cloud cover that ran for hundreds of flight miles until I could glimpse the waters of the North Atlantic Sea. With the help of a waxing moon, I viewed large *house-sized* chunks of ice. I thought of how cold it must be to be immersed in the deep dark water below. I envisioned scenes from the movie *Titanic*.



Terra Firma

Deitra Farr was the only veteran artist on this tour. My other traveling companions included Delmark recording artist Zora Young and vocalist Grana Louise Smith. Billed as the *Three Divas from Chicago*, it would later become evident to me how accurate their billing was and how I became impacted by their spirits, collective musical insight, and blues aesthetics. I learned that certain aesthetics when vocalizing could not be taught. It must be absorbed; the raw honesty of an individual's life experience combined with musical ability and how it is transmitted emotionally equals the power of the spoken word. The Divas exemplified this in their performances.

We were collected at the airport by festival volunteers who drove Range Rovers and other capable vehicles befitting the weather and the season. I remember being introduced to "Siggi" on more than one occasion. The drive to the hotel seemed long, even for an airport, but we arrived at the Hotel Nordica. It would be the same hotel where we would be performing. It was Tuesday, April 11, 2006, around 7:30 a.m., as we checked into this five-star hotel before departing to our respective rooms. The four of us would have to be in the lobby *standing pat* at 2:30 p.m. to be driven to the local television station to videotape a trailer for the festival.



My room had a dormitory feel, with a flat-screen television—three cheers for CNN and Dr. Phil. I slept hard and deep because, to me, flying is a stressful means to an end. I could finally let go and give the *sandman* his just due... *Zzzzzzzzzz*.

Getting Ready

I love foreign languages. I found the Old Nordic Icelandic language very challenging. It seemed as if there were 26 letters in every word with two dots over the vowels. I found very few similarities to English. I remember the street name Suðurlandsbraut (Southland Way). The word "breakfast" is *morgunmatur*, and the term "tourist information" is *upplýsingar fyrir ferðamenn*.

I was fortunate to meet and play with some of the finest musicians in Iceland. Dori Braga, who led the *Blue Ice Band*, is a musician first and a promoter second. Dori's bond with his instrument was instinctive. I quickly learned several licks from him while we played together. The blues community and the fans in Iceland are lucky to have such a down-to-earth, decent human being promoting the blues in Iceland. Some people have a knack for getting things done, and Dori Braga is one of them.



Like the *in-your-face* Stratocaster bands at home, the blues guitarists in Iceland play just as loud, and the drummer plays at a faster tempo by the end of the song. I felt right at home.

However, I have a slight bias against my electric blues brethren worldwide. I guess you can not do all of your shopping at one store. However, the electric format is exciting to watch and listen to. Including facial contortions, triple pull-offs, and what I call

three-frets-and-a-cloud-of-dust playing, I never get a sense of healing from the music as I do in the acoustic format unless a band is playing a slow burner minor key blues song.

I quickly assimilated with the local acoustic players. We broke bread musically, showing mutual respect for the classic traditional rhythms of the masters and then other contemporary acoustic styles. All the musicians working on the show took notes and seemed to believe in the purpose of rehearsal and creating a good listening sound for the audience.

On Wednesday night, I performed a couple of songs for the media to promote my upcoming concert performance in this huge hotel ballroom where the venue was held. I was introduced to some of the local acts whose performances covered every style of Blues, Jazz and traditional Icelandic music. All touring artists met with the press and did videotaped interviews regarding the blues.

Blues in Iceland

My first clue that the blues had established a beachhead in Iceland was in 1993 when a magazine publisher and musician named *Chicago Bo* appeared on the Front Porch Stage at the Chicago Blues Festival with musicians from Iceland who *set the stage on fire*. The Chicago audience was awe-struck by their musicianship and the reaffirmation of John Lee Hooker's statement that the blues were "*all over the world*." One of the musicians on the stage was Dori Braga, now the point man in Iceland, and is responsible, along with his team, for promoting and producing the Reykjavik Blues Festival. Dori told me he gravitated strongly toward the blues in the late eighties. He said that his first blues venue drew about eighteen people. Since those early days, Dori has invited many blues artists to Iceland to reinforce the establishment of blues in Iceland. Such artists as "Pinetop" Perkins, Jimmy Dawkins, Deitra Farr, Chicago Bo, Shirley King, Billy Boy Arnold, Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown, and others have visited Iceland. The Reykjavik Blues Festival began on April 11, 2006. There was an awards segment (Blues Artist of the Year Award), a jam session, and a performance by the leading Icelandic vocalist, Andr ea Gylfad ttir. We were all taken out to dinner at a restaurant called "Siggihall" on Wednesday before my evening performance by a gentleman named Eggert J hannsson and his one-person crew,



Jean-Paul, who was the most gracious hosts. Jean-Paul is a fantastic jazz musician in the mold of Joe Pass, and Eggert is a furrier who gifted me with a handmade Big Apple-style hat made of seal fur, silk lining, and a lambskin bib.

"Siggihall" was a tablecloth restaurant with more than one fork in a place setting. Not the kind of place you would order a hot dog. The seafood was to die for. Unless you are a *real* coffee drinker, be careful of these tiny cups of coffee (espresso) that look like they came from a doll set collection; they will keep you up all night.

I read about Icelandic meals called *Porrmat* from earlier times with traditional dishes such as sour ram's testicles, rotten shark, burned sheep heads, sheep's head jam, blood pudding, dried fish with butter, and many other courses that are considered delicious among some Icelanders. We did not see any of those dishes. Oh well, maybe next time.



I performed at a standing-room-only sold-out venue on Wednesday, April 12, 2006. Local acoustic performers later joined me on stage to complete my concert. This concert segment was Front Porch with the Legends of Iceland with Dori Braga, Bjöggi Gísla Gummi P., and Siggí Sig. We were applauded back to the stage for an encore. An encore should be different from anything played during your regular performance. I chose an original calypso song entitled *Mango Bango*.

The *Blues Divas from Chicago* took the stage on Thursday, April 13, 2006, bringing the house down. They have backed up Dori and the Blue Ice Band of Iceland. Large round tables with tablecloths sat eight to ten people who filled the large banquet hall. The general crowd chatter morphed into rousing applause when the musicians took to the stage. The stage management and sound were solid as a rock. Enter stage right, Grana Louise Smith.

Her bio bills her as "Sass with class!" Grana Louise is a singer/songwriter who spent time in Minnesota and Ohio before making Chicago her home. She has played at the famous Apollo Theater in New York and toured Europe and parts of South America. Grana has produced three CDs to her credit. The current one is entitled "Generations" on the independent label Crystal Blue Records and has appeared on several Delmark Records compilations. Her repertoire includes Blues, Jazz, "Old School" Rhythm and Blues/Soul, and "Old School" Gospel Classics. www.granalouise.com

Grana took the stage as a well-seasoned performer. Her operatic training was most apparent when she ended a song. I thought I loved her Jazz singing the best. However, little did I know I would be in for a complete surprise by the next day. Grana laughed and danced on stage and was most generous and appreciative to



her audience. Her voice shook the rafters. She transmitted deep emotion and fun to the audience as she took us on a musical journey. I congratulated her backstage as a real fan. By this time, I was bought and paid for.



Next was the powerhouse diva, with many fans already sitting in the audience. Deitra Farr was a veteran performer in Iceland. She is a fun-loving person, but when it comes to business, she is a straight shooter and as candid as possible—showing respect for the blues and its *pecking order*. She put together this triumvirate of performers I would later call the *wrecking crew*. Deitra Farr was the first female vocalist I met who wrote original songs. Her songwriting skills inspire me.

I remember one occasion when Deitra performed with a group called *Mississippi Heat* in the mid-nineties at a concert held at the University of Illinois (circle campus). Willie Kent and the Gents featuring harpist Billy Branch, was scheduled to perform before Mississippi Heat. A mild controversy regarding what band should close the show. The line-up went as expected. Willie Kent and the Gents performed like the masters they were, and when the crowd settled down and the smoke cleared, there on the stage was Mississippi Heat with Deitra Farr on vocals who saved the day, along with blues legend Bob Stroger on bass and James Wheeler on guitar. Her song selection was relentless, from covers to originals. She capped off her performance with a slowed-down version of Little Walter's "Mean O'l World." She waded through the crowd without the microphone testifying to her unmet needs. Deitra's raw passion and reinterpretation of this song nearly finished me off. Unintimidated by Willie Kent and his fan base, she collected many new fans that night, including me.

Deitra's career goes back to 1975 when she performed with Rand B/soul bands. The blues came later in the 1980s. According to her biography:

"Deitra Farr is considered one of Chicago's top vocalists, according to Living Blues Magazine (May 1997). Fiery, energetic, and soul-stirring describes this woman, who has been nominated for Traditional Female Blues artist of the year by the W.C. Handy Awards, Female Blues Artist of the year by the Living Blues Critics Awards, and the British Blues Connection Awards".

After recording on many compilations with others, she recorded her first solo CD, "The Search is Over," for the London-based JSP records. In 2005, Deitra released her second JSP CD, "Let it Go!" Deitra is a graduate of Columbia College with a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism and writes a column in Living Blues Magazine, "Artist to Artist"

<http://www.deitrafarr.com/>

Deitra's performance was stellar. This well-traveled artist received a standing ovation from the audience. Many of her fans sang along with her clinging to her every word. No one sounds like Deitra Farr. She would later, on the following day, breathe life into some traditional gospel songs I had not heard in years.

Zora Young is a powerful well-seasoned performer who would complete this group of female blues ambassadors from the windy city. It was the first time I heard hints of blues legend Junior Wells conjured up in someone else's vocal phrasing.



I later discovered that Zora has been performing for some 30-plus years and has graced the stage with Junior Wells, Jimmy Dawkins, Bobby Rush, Buddy Guy, Professor Eddie Lusk, Albert King, and B.B. King. Zora's bio indicates her collaborations with Willie Dixon, Sunnyland Slim, Mississippi Heat, Paul deLay, and Maurice John Vaughn. Her recordings as a solo artist include releases from the labels Deluge, Black Lightning, and Delmark. Zora has more than 30 European tours under her belt, including Italy, Germany, Belgium, Sweden, France, Switzerland, Greece, Austria, Tai Pei, and Turkey. All of these places are a long way from West Point, Mississippi. www.zorayoung.com.

They say you do not vintage in the blues until you pass the age of fifty and that your apprenticeship ends while your journeymanhood begins. When you have paid enough dues you are free to go. Zora Young, wittingly or otherwise, did just that. All of the blues divas returned to the stage for a final rendition of Queen Bee, leaving the audience in a frenzy and wanting more. The loud applause was an affirmation of the spirit of the Blues in Iceland.



Hanging Out in Iceland

One of Deitra's friends from previous visits is Kristen Mary Swenson, a U.S. transplant who teaches in Iceland. There are some charming people in the world, and she is one of them. She gave us a bar of chocolate-covered Easter eggs chock-filled with candies. She drove us around to shop for souvenirs and see some sites. There was not enough time to do a lot of sightseeing. I wanted to stick my big toe in the Blue Lagoon but maybe next time.



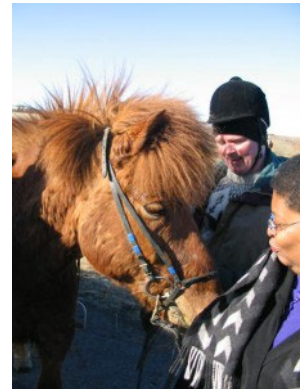


Many Icelanders have a fondness for horses. Horseback riding is very common. There is a breed of horses that dates back to the Vikings that are ridden exclusively by the Icelanders. The *Icelandic horse* is known for its strength, sure-footedness, and mild disposition. No other breed of horse can be introduced in the country by law. They remind me of the Shetland pony but are full-sized. You can see many groups of about twenty-five riders

riding down the countryside. It was a fantastic sight. I found these horses to be very calming and friendly.

It dawned on me that I had not seen any dogs. There were some, mostly on sheep farms, and it was in the late 1980s that ownership of dogs became legal in the urban centers. They believed up until recently that dogs should live out in the open rural areas where they can roam.

I was in a drugstore and saw a reusable condom. Say what? I guess you could save a few bucks. I could not see through the packaging, so I felt the packaging. It was thick. You might as well wear a sock. 'nuff said.



Going to Church



Deitra mentioned something about singing gospel at a church before leaving for the Iceland tour. She indicated that she had previously sung with a full choir on a previous visit. She did not consider herself a gospel singer but indicated the experience was rewarding. The four of us showed up at the *Frikirkjan I Reykjavik* Free Lutheran Church on Friday, April 14, 2006, for a rehearsal before the evening performance. The church is 125 years old, with a pipe organ built within its architecture with balcony seating. This beautiful edifice reflected off a large pond or a small lake. There is no separation between church and state

in Iceland. Lutheranism is the state religion. <http://www.frikirkjan.is/>

Before the establishment of Christianity around the 10th century, *Paganism* ruled the land. I grew up reading Marvel comic books and was familiar with Odin (Óðinn), Loki, and Freyja. The only known statue of Thor (Þórr), the God of Thunder, was found in Iceland. I purchased as a souvenir a miniature replica of Thor.



The Performance

The Legends of Iceland Band were already in place when we arrived for rehearsal. I wish to this day that I had written down their names. There was a grand piano, drummer, guitarist, and upright bass player among some of the finest musicians I have ever worked with. These educated musicians could play American gospel as quickly as they could play blues or Jazz. Plus, they understood the gospel aesthetic and how to feature a vocalist in their musicianship.

There were no recording devices allowed or merchandising for this unique program. The program was divided into four songs apiece. I would perform solo with my guitar first, and then Grana, Deitra, and Zora would rotate among themselves. It was emotionally challenging to complete the rehearsal because the songs evoked remembrances of our parents and ancestors. The Chicago Divas did not sing the songs they inhabited them. Their tears flowed like drops of rain.

Even though I had brought my heaviest parka with accessories and dreamed of blowing snow and the Iditarod, The weather had been pleasant during our visit. I was able to wear a leather jacket in the 45-degree weather. It was clear skies. There was a full moon on this day, and it began to snow softly in large chunks. The musicians remarked about it being the first snow. I was shocked. We all felt that it was an omen.

We returned to the Lord's house that evening to a standing-room-only crowd. The balcony was filled. I opened the program with *Since I Laid My Burden Down*, followed by *Old Time Religion* and ended with a Tim Williams arrangement of Blind Willie Mctell's *When the Pearly Gates Unfold* in open D slide. For the first time in hundreds of performances, I was nervous. I thought of my grandmother, Anna Pearl Bradley, and Sister Rosetta Thorpe.

I finished my set a bit relieved and waited as the Chicago Divas made their way down the long aisle to the front of the church, where there were seated and subsequently introduced. The musicians took up their positions. This time the divas came prepared. They brought their box of Kleenex.

Grana Louise rose, took center stage, and began singing, *Sometimes I Feel like a Motherless Child*. Her performance brought out tears from the audience. She worked her diaphragm like a mechanic, with unpredictable notes soaring and dropping at her command. She touched the hearts of the believers. Her song list included *Joshua Fit, the Battle of Jericho*, and *the His Eyes on the Sparrow*.

Except for my grandmother, I had never experienced a singer so emotionally overwhelmed by the songs they sang. My grandmother is one of the founders of New Jericho Missionary Baptist Church in Doddsville, Mississippi. Her name and my grandfather's, Willie Bradley, are carved into the church's cornerstone.

Deitra chose *Jesus won't You Come to Hear* as her first selection. I can still hear it in my head, not since Mississippi Fred McDowell as I listened to the song performed live. Deitra says it was one of her father's favorites. Deitra sang with authority, grace, and sublime simplicity. She completed a version of *Kum By Yah (my Lord)*, drawing the audience to sing along. Until that moment, I never realized the universal appeal of that song. Everyone seemed to know the words. She also sang *Go Down Moses, and Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen*.

I like traditional gospel music that hits you where you live. I do not currently attend church services regularly. However, when I have been present contemporary gospel seems to reign supreme in the song selections.

Zora Young began her singing career in the church. She was at home in the Lord's house from West Point, Mississippi, to Reykjavik, Iceland. Her uplifting, gospel-rooted songs would *feed the hungry* in some faraway places. The tonal texture of Zora Young's voice is apparent when she speaks and is the closest I have ever heard to the greatest gospel singer in the world, Mahaila Jackson.

Her slurs and inflections were awe-inspiring. There was a whole lifetime of the gospel coming through her voice. The most unforgettable song was *Just a Closer Walk with Thee*, which caused me to raise my right hand. At that moment, I was "*ret to go*," I thought, "Take me now, Lord, take me now. Then Zora chanced the song *Please Send Me Someone to Love* and sold it like a Sunday dinner. She sang *When the Saints Go Marching In* and *Whole World in his Hands*. I felt blessed to be in the company of women with such rare, outstanding talent.

The applause was thunderous as the three Divas took to the center of the floor and closed, with *This Little Light of Mine* beckoning the audience to join in. Deitra signaled me to join them on the floor, and we gave them all we had. After the program, we shook hands and took pictures. I swapped CDs and email addresses with the other musicians. We then headed to Enrico's, a downtown restaurant, for dinner. That night I slept like Rip Van Winkle.

Going Home

We met in the hotel's restaurant around noon to say our goodbyes and have lunch for the last time. Unlike here at home, Iceland does not have a fat population. Even their seniors have pep in their step. They seem to get going where ever they are headed and do not mosey. Iceland's literacy rate is among the highest in the world, and a love of literature, art, chess, and other intellectual pursuits is widespread. Their command of the English language was excellent and made it easy for us to communicate. The U.S. dollar was a mere 0.72 against the Krona. I smiled after exchanging my Krona for U.S. dollars. from CD sales.

We took a cab to the airport, and after 7 1/2 hours of flying, we landed in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and then on to Chicago. Only my luggage arrived promptly, and the Chicago Divas had to fill out lost luggage forms. I sighed. Welcome home.



Blúshátíð í Reykjavík

11. - 14. apríl 2006

11. apríl þriðjudagur Næðica Hotel kl. 21:00

Andrea Gylfadóttir, Páll Rósinkranz, Skaf

Björgvin Gíslason, Sigrúnur Sigrúnarsen, Einar Lárusson, Björg Baldvinsdóttir, Elvar Ríkisásson og George Bjarnason

The Bumeats

Tómas, Pétur, Steinn, Helgi og Berhar

Blússveit Pollýar

Boðbjörg Magnúsdóttir, Magnús Axel Hansen, Björgvin Ólafsson, Lovísa Sigrúnardóttir og Bergvínur Ingi Þórhannsson

12. apríl miðvikudagur Næðica Hotel kl. 21:00 Ókeypis leyfingakerfi

Fruteland Jackson frá Mississippí á verðindinni

Háldur Þrágason, Björgvin Gíslason, Guðmundur Pétursson og Sigrúnur Sigrúnarsen

Krummarnir

Haraldur, Steinn, Magnús, Helgi og Kristján

Blússljóð eftir Kristján Gallaskáld Jónsson

Háldur, Tómas og Pétur Ólafsson leyfingakerfi

13. apríl fimmtudagur Næðica Hotel kl. 21:00

Þrjár divar frá Chicago

Deitra Farr, Zora Young & Grana Louise

Vinir Dóra

14. apríl föstudagur Þróttasævi kl. 20:00

Gospel og sálmátónleikar, þrjár divar frá Chicago

Zora Young, Deitra Farr, Grana Louise & Fruteland Jackson

Einar Lárusson, Ása Ríkisásson, Anger Ólafsson o.fl.



www.blues.is

Reykjavík Blues Festival