

WFDD (/) / Arts (/arts) / Homelessness, Blues, And The Power Of Spoken Words

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Homelessness, Blues, And The Power Of Spoken Words

by David Ford

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Storyteller Don Miller in performance during the Healing Blues Spoken Words Concert, Oct. 30, 2016. (Credit: Ted Efremoff)

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A new album is giving voice to the homeless living in the Triad. ***The*** (<http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/healingblues>) (<https://www.facebook.com/healingblues/>) ***Healing*** (<http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/healingblues>) (<https://www.facebook.com/healingblues/>) ***Blues - Spoken Words*** (<http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/healingblues>) CD pairs dozens of local musicians with the narratives of fourteen homeless people. They're human stories—at times tragic and other times triumphant. The recording project benefits a local shelter, and empowers the people who rely on it the most.

Every night in Greensboro, nearly one-thousand people go to sleep homeless. Taken alone, it's a sobering statistic. But experiencing it is much more than that, says Don Miller.

"It happened, and I remember walking down the street," Miller says. "I was oblivious to anything else going on around me."



(/sites/default/files/Shannon%20Frazier%2C%C2%A0%C2%A0storyteller.png)

Healing Blues storyteller Shannon Stewart. (Credit: Ted Efremoff)

In 2011, Miller was laid off as a theatre arts educator. He says people stopped hiring in the midst of the recession. Money dried up. He became homeless, overcome with depression, and battling the stifling effects of medications meant to help him.

"They put me on some depression meds, and I had to stop taking them. I felt clogged up. It wouldn't let me emote, or even have a good cry even if I wanted to, so I stopped taking that medication and vowed to continue moving forward."

He says he knows how easy it can be to lose hope, but he was determined to pull himself out of his circumstances.

"I knew that I had to find a support system, one or two persons that I was willing to talk to and be honest with. I needed someone to encourage me, or push me, but most of all I had to do like David in the bible and encourage myself."

He found support through a non-profit group in Greensboro: the **Interactive Resource Center** (<http://gsodaycenter.org/>) (IRC). Miller was able to get off the street, into culinary school, and ultimately got a job as a chef. Now he's giving back to the organization that helped him.

Miller is one of several homeless or formerly homeless people on *The Healing Blues - Spoken Words* (<https://www.facebook.com/healingblues/>)CD. They share stories about their lives and the challenges they face, with more than 70 local musicians, singers, songwriters and storytellers.



(/sites/default/files/Recording%20session%20Roger%20Kohrs%20and%20Dave%20Fox.jpg)

Healing Blues Project recording session Dave Fox (R) and Roger Kohrs (L). (Credit: Ted Efremoff)

Executive producer and pianist Dave Fox says he used his background in jazz, blues and experimental music to guide the process.

"The idea for this album was to proceed artistically in a very improvisatory fashion. So we just made a list of all the things we would need and we started with the spoken word," Fox says. "I took a microphone and interviewed some homeless persons one-on-one and just asked them questions and they'd talk about their life."

Fox and his team looked for rhythmic words and phrases so profound they felt compelled to include them. It was a monumental project: ten different bands recorded grooves adding up to mountains of material. To Fox, it soon became a bit overwhelming.

"For about two months after that we were really at a creative standstill," he says. "What do we do next? And so finally we just said 'Well, we'll just do what an improviser does: we'll do something.'"

Ironically, the path forward began with looking back. Fox's team prompted all the storytellers to talk about when they were young. Recording engineer Benjy Johnson says the stories that emerged were pivotal.

"And we hear this guy say 'Those were simple times back then, with no ulterior motives,' and I said, 'That's almost like a chorus to a song.' ... So I said let's go back and pull out little pieces of some of the other people that you interviewed talking about their past," Johnson says.

What emerged from those conversations became the lead single, titled Simple Times. But the song isn't all whimsical reflection. Darker stories emerge: arrest, drug addiction, homelessness. Guitarist David Bolton says these are voices we shouldn't ignore. He's one of more than fifty local professional musicians who donated their performances to this project.



(/sites/default/files/Elsewhere%20Healing%20Blues%20Cafe%202.jpg)

Healing Blues musicians meet at Elsewhere in downtown Greensboro. (Credit: Julia Fergus)

"These are people who are really, you know, close to the bone. It's a hard life. And yet this part of our community is really left to the side," he says. "People in their busy day see somebody homeless and maybe they throw them a dollar or two."

Bolton wonders what impact a community-wide effort aimed at helping the homeless could have.

"These people have stories to tell us, the record shows. They have lives. They're real people," he adds. "And to bring that out and to help support those people getting back into the community and into their lives is such a noble and important thing for all of us to be part of."

For Don Miller, the song Simple Times reminds him of what was, and what may lie ahead.



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Storyteller Don Miller in performance during Healing Blues - Spoken Words concert, Oct. 30, 2016. (Credit: Ted Efremoff)

"This situation doesn't define me; it just was a part of me at that moment. But I will take the initiative. I had to get up, get going and make something out of this situation, and take something bad and turn it into something good."

More About The Healing Blues Project

- The Healing Blues Project was first conceived by Central Connecticut State University Professor of Art **Ted Efremoff** (<https://www.greensboro.edu/what-makes-us-unique.php>) in December of 2013.
- HBP is a collaborative effort to raise funds for Greensboro's **Interactive Resource Center** (<http://gsodaycenter.org/>), a tax-exempt, nonprofit day center for people experiencing homelessness.
- The first Healing Blues Project CD, *The Healing Blues* (<http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/thehealingblues>), was released in 2014 to critical acclaim, and has been played by DJ's around the world.



(/sites/default/files/Fred%20Wesley.png)

Healing Blues band member (and former James Brown band leader) Fred Wesley performs during Healing Blues - Spoken Words concert, Oct. 30, 2016. (Credit: Ted Efremoff)

- The second album, *Healing Blues – Spoken Words* (<http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/healingblues>), was released in October 2016.
- Both albums were recorded and produced at **Earthtones Recording Studio** (<http://www.earthtonesrecording.com/HOME.html>) in Greensboro.
- To date, the Healing Blues Project has raised more than \$15,000 for the Interactive Resource Center, with half of that total going directly to the storytellers of both albums.
- In April 2017, the Healing Blues Band will perform at the American Roots Festival, West Hartford, Connecticut.
- **The Healing Blues Video** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gEZ6db3keCY>)

...And The Interactive Resource Center

- The IRC is located in downtown Greensboro, one block from The Depot.
- The building is surrounded by organic, edible gardens that are free for the picking.
- **Important Facts About Homelessness In Greensboro** (<http://gsodaycenter.org/resources/statistics>)

The IRC provides the following resources for people experiencing homelessness:

- Personal Care (showers, hygiene products, haircuts and grooming services)
- Laundry (daily laundry services)