



# BLUE MUSE

WRITING FROM THE CENTER OF CONNECTICUT

Ericka Bryant / May 10, 2016 / [On Process](#)

## The Healing Blues | Ericka Bryant



The blues. A man dejected, depressed, down on his luck, down in the dumps, stuck under his own personal rain cloud. The blues. Musicians standing on the stage crowing lyrics, plucking chords, and tapping rhythms that pour out every ounce of pain into bone-deep melodies. The blues are meant to heal the blues. That was the idea Central Connecticut State University assistant art professor Theodore Efremoff and Greensboro College music professor David Fox came up with for the 2014 *The Healing Blues* album that paired blues musicians with homeless people in Greensboro, North Carolina to write and record songs together. The songs were based off of the stories and experiences of the homeless, while musicians created the beat. The album helped raise over \$10,000 for the Interactive Resource Center (IRC),

a nonprofit homeless center in downtown Greensboro, has won fans overseas in Great Britain and Australia, and a documentary has just finished filming about the making of the first album. Now Efremoff and Fox team up again to release a second Healing Blues album in the summer of 2016.

Think of creating a record like an artist would paint a picture. Before they can paint anything—a portrait, a landscape, a still life—they need certain supplies first: brushes, different colored paint, and a canvas. Before recording, first you need to gather all the elements of a song. Beats and grooves are brushes. Melodies are blues, choruses are reds, solos are greens, lyrics are yellows, and spoken word is purples. Fox's starting point, his canvas if you will, is his storytellers.

Fox interviewed fourteen homeless people for the second album. Every interview started with them stating their full name and telling him about their earliest memories: selling watermelon, falling three stories off a banister, getting attacked by a dog for a piece of bread, etc. Their stories will be heard on the recording. "I'm not sure why, but incorporating the voices and words of homeless people struck me as the correct thing to do to give the music something that sets it apart."

Then began the long process of editing those interviews. They lasted up to an hour, and had to be condensed into one-four usable phrases from each storyteller. The transcripts from the interviews are the basis for the songs being written for the album. "I have handed a transcription to a songwriter and said, 'See what this inspires in you,'" Fox explained. Fox sifts through the highlighted transcripts Efremoff supplies, always keeping an eye out for anything that "pops out of the page" at him, like one storyteller's musings about how "you can change places, but you always take yourself with you." Another storyteller's comment on perception—"they have already perceived a notion of who you are"—will also be heard on the album.

From here, choruses, solos, horn sections, and spoken word artists will be added to create a fresh, unified sound. Creating that sound starts with grooves. Fox has produced four grooves, and over the last two months has held several recording sessions with local blues and jazz bands. "The bands played the exact same groove, same tempo, and same feel. This is the beauty of artistic dynamics. Even though they had the same drumbeat described to them and the same tempos, I knew each of them would be different. I gave them freedom to do whatever they wanted to do, just use my beat as a starting point." Most of the bands consisted of bass, drums, and guitar. However, some were unique, featuring instruments like the fiddle, saxophone, and upright bass. "This allows us to aurally paint a diverse, yet unified, scene," said Fox.

Artistic influences from Fox and Efremoff's past play an important role in the development of their music. Efremoff's desire to incorporate spoken word stems from his love of hip-hop. "I was a sixteen-year-old kid from Russia who moved to West Philly in the 1980s. Hip-hop was beginning to be the dominant sound and I got really into groups like Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. They had two songs, "The Message" and "The Message II (Survival)", about the difficulties of the urban poor and it really touched me. I wanted to represent the voices of the dispossessed in our society."

"Artistically," Fox said, "I have always been fascinated by improvisation as an outlet for creating." Fox is inspired by artists like Miles Davis, who would just have musicians play in the studio and figure out how to use it later for his 1980s electronic rock albums. "My work with artists Eugene Chadbourne and Frank Gratkowski, improvisers from the US and Germany respectively, left the lasting impression on me that valuable creativity comes from being in the moment and going with the flow." The improvisational, going with the flow mind-set means that the process is always unfolding, one completed part revealing the next.

Living in the Greensboro music community for over forty years meant that Fox had a large pool of bands and musicians to pull from. "I tried to use all the groups from the first album, and then expand from there. In this way, we include many of Greensboro's finest musicians on one album to draw attention to the homeless and to foster communal creativity." Just like an artist would swap out their flat paintbrush for a detail brush, Fox is able to slide any band's sound he needs into the right place of a song in order to create one complete sound.

Fox, the album producer, describes the recording process for the second album as "intelligently flying by the seat of your pants." He's dubbed the technique "Structurally Improvised Recording Process", or "SIRP". "The structure is the different elements, the improvisation comes from the fact that we do not know what comes next until we finish certain parts first. After Ted told me he wanted to utilize spoken word, it took me about a week to frame the idea." The first album helped create strong community ties between the blues enthusiasts and homeless population, allowing Fox to stay on top of things from a production standpoint and include more members.

Though Fox's depiction of his "Structurally Improvised Recording Process" is lighthearted, he and everyone involved in the album is taking its creation very seriously. Their main goal for the album has always been to keep the plight of the homeless in the minds of the Greensboro community. Hopefully, the second album

and the stories of the homeless will continue to bring awareness to a community of people who live their daily life not knowing how they're going to eat, or if they'll be able to work, or where they're going to sleep; they only know that today is another day that has to be lived. And while this album gives them an outlet to make their lives, struggles, and voices known, they continue to "live by the seat of their pants." But this, Fox said, "is the way many homeless live. Making it up as they go along. In fact, that is the way a lot of us live."

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**Ted Efremoff** on May 10, 2016 at 11:00 am [Reply](#) [★ Like](#)

Thanks for the thoughtful article Ericka. Stay tuned for The Healing Blues in Connecticut. The photo credit goes to Julia Fergus.

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