

Meanwhile, Belushi was complaining about his bee costume. Belushi hated putting on the bee costume. It weighed a ton and made him sweat like a hornet in heat.

“I hate these bee sketches,” said Belushi.

“Lorne loves them,” said Aykroyd.

“Fuck Lorne,” John exclaimed. “This is my last one.”

“Wait a minute,” Danny interjected. “I’ve got an idea. What if we get the band to put on bee costumes, and we all play Slim Harpo’s ‘I’m a King Bee.’ I’ll play harp and you’ll sing the shit out of it.”

“How’s it go?” asked John.

Danny started singing the lyrics.

“Let’s do it,” said John.

Next thing I know I’m running around the *SNL* set in a bee costume. I understand why Belushi rails against this thing. It stings. It disorients me to the point that during rehearsal I wander into a Gilda/Garrett Morris sketch in my bee getup.

“What are you doing here?” asks Gilda.

“I don’t know,” I say.

When we do “I’m a King Bee” on the air, everyone loves it.

Belushi is sensational as a buzzed-up blues singer. In the middle of the song, he does a full flip and lands flat on his back. The audience licks it up like honey.

Now Danny and John are warming up the *SNL* audience as two blues singers, not bees but two guys dressed in dark hats, dark ties, dark suits, and dark glasses.

“Why the dark suits and dark glasses?” I ask.

“I was hipped to the look by Fred Kaz,” says John, “the beatnik musical director at Second City in Chicago. He’s the cat who told me that junkies always wore straight-looking outfits so they could pass. Check out William Burroughs.”

Shortly thereafter, Lorne is featuring the singing duo, not as a warmup act, but as on-air performers. Not only that, I get to introduce them on camera in the guise of Don Kirshner. I give it the slowed-down, frozen-stiff, tanned, gold-chained, full-nasal Brooklyn brogue treatment of my show-biz friend and say . . .

“Today, thanks to the brilliant management of Myron S. Katz and the Katz Talent Agency, these two talented performers are no longer just a legitimate blues act. But with careful shaping and the fabulous production of Lee Solomon, who’s a gentleman, and his wonderful organization, they have managed to become a viable commercial product. So now, let’s hear it for these two brothers from Joliet, Illinois. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you . . .”



The Blues Brothers!

The thing caught on.

Belushi and Aykroyd started showing up at local clubs to try out their act. They were a hit everywhere they appeared, especially at the Lone Star Café, where blues stars like Dr. John and Charles Brown often played. Before I knew it, they had a record deal. I figured they'd use a group like Roomful of Blues or Duke Robillard to back them.

"We want you," Belushi said to me one day at *SNL* rehearsals.

"To play piano on the record?" I asked.

"No, to be our band's musical director."

I was stunned. I was delighted. There was only one problem: we didn't have a band.

"We'll put one together," said John. "You and me."

A word on the great Belushi: I loved him. We called him "Bear Man" because he was big, hairy, and cuddly. John had a heart of gold. He grew up in Wheaton, Illinois, just outside Chicago, and had played drums in a rock band. His first love

was rock. One of his favorite songs was “Kind of a Drag” by the Buckingham.

Of course he could do Cocker, and his version of Ray Charles, channeled through Ludwig von Beethoven, wearing dark glasses and sniffing snuff, ranks with the greatest skits of Jackie Gleason and Sid Caesar. But John wasn’t yet a blues fan. Danny was the blues maven and had a tremendous influence on John in that regard. He played records for Belushi and schooled him on the greats like Sonny Boy Williamson, Muddy Waters, and Howlin’ Wolf.

When John went off to do *Animal House* in Eugene, Oregon, he met Curtis Salgado, a great harmonica player and blues singer who was the vocalist for Robert Cray’s brilliant band. Curtis befriended John and became his next major blues mentor. They spent weeks together digging deep into the treasure chest of twelve-bar beauties.

Back in New York, John and I began discussing the personnel of the band. Steve Jordan, the *SNL* drummer, was an easy choice. Belushi and I both loved him. The big decision was the lead guitarist. If John was to be Mick, he needed a Keith. Belushi needed a killer guitarist to punctuate his vocals. Through John’s rock-and-roll connections he learned about Mike Landau, a brilliant young musician. When we jammed with him, I was impressed but felt we needed someone absolutely drenched in the blues.

“Oh man,” said John, “let’s hire him. We need someone now.”

“I’m hip, John,” I said. “Mike’s great, but I just don’t think we can compromise when it comes to an authentic balls-out blues guitarist.”

John thought long and hard. “Okay,” he said, “we gotta go see Doc.”

Doc was Doc Pomus, the ultimate blues guru. Once a blues singer himself, Doc was one of the great writers of blues and rhythm-and-blues and the reigning authority on all things blue. We caught up with Doc at Kenny's Castaways, a downtown club where the blues cats crawled. When we explained the situation, Doc had two words for us: "Matt Murphy."

I didn't know Murphy, but when the pope gives his blessing, you gotta eat the cracker.

"So Doc," I asked, "he's the real deal?"

"Real as rain."

We hired him on the spot. And Doc was right. Matt wailed.

"Now we need another guitarist," I told John. "A rhythm guitarist."

That's when Tom Malone, who had come aboard as trombonist/baritone saxist, mentioned that Steve Cropper, the fabulous guitarist of Stax fame—the guy who had backed Otis Redding and cowritten "Midnight Hour"—was available. What's more, Duck Dunn was part of the package. Duck was the bassist from that same Stax era and, along with Cropper, a member of Booker T. and the MG's. With Steve on guitar and Duck on bass, I knew we'd be grooving like mothers.

"We gotta get these guys," I told Belushi.

Belushi hadn't heard of them. I quickly filled him in on their pedigrees. Danny, who was a Stax fan, backed me up.

"This is a big break for us," he told John.

John concurred, and once we rounded out the horns with Lou Marini and Tom Scott on saxes and Alan Rubin on trumpet, we were set.

Atlantic Records had offered us the deal. The first record was to be culled from a nine-night stand we were set to play,

opening for Steve Martin, then at the top of his stand-up game, at the Universal Amphitheater in L.A.

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The next step was picking tunes: Danny, John, and I spent a week at John's house on Morton Street in the Village. Our goal was to listen to blues records and find songs that would work for us. But that didn't quite happen. *Animal House* had just opened, and John was getting calls and kudos from everywhere. This was, in fact, the week that John became a superstar. He couldn't be contained.

"We gotta stay here and listen to music," said Danny, doing his best to keep his pal focused.

"The Allman Brothers are playing Central Park," said John. "Let's go."

And with that, he was gone. Ultimately, though, we got Belushi's attention long enough for all of us to select killer material like "Hey, Bartender," "Shotgun Blues," and "Flip, Flop and Fly."

Then it was rehearsal time.

From the first second we hit the first groove, we felt the power. The combination of these musicians from disparate backgrounds worked in a way none of us had anticipated. We were stoked.

"The songs are good," said Steve Cropper, perhaps the greatest rhythm guitar in the history of rhythm, "but shouldn't we do more than old blues?"

"Yeah," said Duck Dunn. "Don't we want some hits?"

"What would you suggest?" I asked.

"Some straight-up soul," said Cropper.

“ ‘Soul Man’ would work great,” they both chimed.

“Soul Man” was the hit song that Isaac Hayes and David Porter had written for Sam and Dave. I agreed that it would be a perfect cover for the Blues Brothers. Steve and Duck, who had played on the original, taught Belushi how to sing it.

Next thing we knew we were winging our way to L.A. for the live recording gig. After our dress rehearsal, John’s manager, the venerable Bernie Brillstein, approached me.

“Look, Paul,” he said, “I hate to tell a client what to do with his act and I’d be the last one to say anything to John, but that intro number is all wrong.”

The opening number was a blues shuffle.

“What do you suggest?” I asked, somewhat defensively.

“Something that won’t put the audience to sleep.”

As a result of the intervention of Bernie, a non-musician if there ever was one, we came up with a killer opening number: a heart-stopping lightning-fast “Can’t Turn You Loose” while, in the wings, Danny made his dramatic announcement:

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen and welcome to the Universal Amphitheater. Well, here it is the late 1970s going on 1985. You know, so much of the music we hear today is preprogrammed electronic disco. We never get a chance to hear master bluesmen practicing their craft anymore. By the year 2006 the music known as the blues will exist only in the classical records department of your local public library. So tonight, ladies and gentlemen, while we still can, let us welcome from Rock Island, Illinois, the blues band of Joliet Jake and Elwood Blues—the Blues Brothers!”

Then here come Danny and John. John does a couple of cartwheels before taking a key out of his pocket and unlocking the handcuffs linking Danny’s wrist to a briefcase. Inside are

Danny's harmonicas. And from there, we're off and running. The crowd goes crazy. As Steve Martin's opening act, we almost outdo Steve. We're a bona fide sensation. Even the sainted Cathy Vasapoli, who has come to L.A. to hear us, is impressed.

"I love Linda Ronstadt and country music best," she says, "but you might really have something here, Paul."

The week is a blur of press conferences and interviews. Because of the heat from *Animal House*, Belushi has rocketed to outer space. His movie is a smash; his band is a smash. Danny is thrilled for his best friend. I'm thrilled. Brillstein is talking about a Blues Brothers movie deal. The Blues Brothers' album comes out. It's called *Briefcase Full of Blues* because Belushi, hearing my Elton John impression on the National Lampoon *Goodbye Pop* album, thinks I was singing "You got an English tailored suit and a briefcase full of blues" when, in fact, I was singing "briefcase full of loot." No matter, on the strength of the hit single "Soul Man"—thank you, Steve Cropper; thank you, Duck Dunn—the album goes multi-platinum and starts making lots of loot. Any way you look at it, what once began as a comedy routine in bee costumes has turned into a show-biz phenomenon.

Before I continue the Blues Brothers saga, a quick word about the ethnomusicology of the matter. Blues purists started complaining we weren't playing pure blues. Cultural critics started carping on us as white boys ripping off black sounds. Some said Aykroyd and Belushi were inauthentic in their roles as bluesmen. Well, here was my attitude:

We were a tribute band. We played the music with unrestrained joy and sincerity. We loved the music. John wasn't a great singer—and he knew it. John was a good singer. Danny was a good harp player. They revered blues and R&B and, most

importantly, through their comic genius, helped keep this stuff alive. The fact that, among others, Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, and James Brown were only too happy to appear in the Blues Brothers movie testifies to the musical value of the project. Referring to Danny and John, Ray himself told me, “Those are some funny motherfuckers, and they’re helping cats like me get work. God bless ’em.”

Amen, Brother Ray.

Between my work on *SNL* and as musical director of the Blues Brothers, I was flying high—only to be shot down in a way that gave me, usually the happiest of piano players, a bad case of the blues.