



Pinetop Perkins lives for his music: the blues piano player turns 97 this month



Pinetop Perkins, blues legend



Als Kind wurde er mit Schlägen überhäuft, als Erwachsener mit Preisen. 2005 bekam der Musiker einen Grammy für sein Lebenswerk. Seither steht er wieder auf der Bühne. In diesem Monat feiert er seinen 97. Geburtstag. Von **POLLY HUGHES**

It's Monday evening, and Pinetop Perkins, the blues pianist Americans call "a national treasure," is waiting by the front door of his home in Austin, Texas. Wearing a tweed fedora and socks with a piano-keys print, he's ready for another night on the town. As he approaches his 97th birthday on July 7, Perkins is a rarity — one of the last of the legendary Mississippi bluesmen still to be performing.

On the way to a performance in Austin, which calls itself "the live music capital of the world," Perkins asks if he can roll down the window and smoke. He no longer indulges in hard drinking and fast ladies, but says he has a deep affection for his one remaining vice, cigarettes.

"I love these little fellas," he says, blowing smoke into the cool night air.

At a bar called Sam's Town Point, a waitress brings Perkins a clean ashtray and a special order of gourmet coffee and two bananas. The band soon calls him to the stage with the familiar sounds of "Chicken Shack." With the help of a cane, Perkins navigates his way to his place behind the keyboard and starts to play, singing:

"Hey, Jack, / I just got back. / Still looking for the place / They call the Chicken Shack..."

The crowd cheers as Perkins's keyboard catches fire with "Got My Mojo Working," "Big Fat Mama," "Grinding Man," and "Down in Mississippi."

Perkins's frequent live performances delight blues fans, who are impressed by his talent, longevity, and energy. That he gives these small, impromptu performances is astonishing, considering his fame. He received the Lifetime Achievement Grammy in 2005, and the Grammy for Best Traditional Blues Album in 2007 for his work on *Last of the Great Mississippi Delta Bluesmen: Live in Dallas*.

"People like the way I play. I love that," Perkins tells *Spotlight*. "The piano's playing me, because I don't know how to read or nothing. All I do, I do by ear. I hear changes before they come to me."

Perkins, in a music career of more than eight decades, has shared the stage with such famous players as Earl Hooker, Sonny Boy Williamson, Ike Turner, B. B. King, and, especially, Muddy Waters. Like other prominent black blues musicians of his day, he migrated from the cotton fields of the Deep South to the industrialized North and helped to bring in the electrified Chicago Blues sound, laying the foundations for rock 'n' roll.

"He really was a part of the history of the entire style of music called 'the blues.' We are very fortunate to have a direct link to him, because we are running out of those guys," says Texas musician Marcia Ball, winner of the Blues



Blues friendship: Muddy Waters (left) and Perkins played together for years before Perkins made his own records

Music Award for piano players named in Perkins's honor. Ball plays an unforgettable duet with Perkins called "Pinetop's New Boogie-Woogie" on his album *Ladies' Man*.

"The very music he played is the music that The Rolling Stones heard and that they re-recorded and handed back to us in the '60s," Ball says. "That made young American musicians take a second look at what we had on our own doorstep. All the British Invasion — that was American blues. The Beatles used American blues."

Barry Nowlin, who cares for Perkins full-time and manages his U.S. and European shows, thinks the piano player's creative explosion so late in life is sensational. He says Perkins has played on 14 albums since age 85, and has another ready for release this summer. Called *Joined at the Hip*, it features Perkins with Willie "Big Eyes" Smith, who also played with Muddy Waters.

ashtray ['æʃtreɪ]	Aschenbecher
cane [keɪn]	Gehstock
doorstep ['dɔːrstɛp]	Schwelle; hier: Haustür
electrified [i'lektɹɪfaɪd]	verstärkt
fedora [fɪ'dɔːrə]	eine Hutform
fella (= fellow) ['felə] <i>US ifml.</i>	Kerl
impromptu [ɪm'prɔːmptuː]	spontan
indulge in [ɪn'dʌldʒ ɪn]	sich gönnen (→ p. 57)
key [kiː]	Taste
longevity [lɔːn'dʒevəti]	Langlebigkeit; hier: hohes Alter
run out of [ˌrʌn 'aʊt əv]	fast nicht mehr haben
the very [ðə 'veri]	genau die
treasure ['treʒər]	(Kultur)Schatz
vice [vaɪs]	Laster