Lafayette Colorado - November 21, 2026

Interview with Harmonica Player, Vocalist, and Indigenous Flutist Mad Dog Friedman of Mad Dog Blues – *Hot Harmonica Hokum*

1. Tell us about your music. When did you start performing?

I started playing harmonica and making up songs on harmonica in 1968 when I was teenager. I did not realize at the time there was a tradition of unaccompanied harmonica and voice music. My first four years of playing harmonica were just me doing my thing in that style. In 1972, I started playing blues harp with guitar players and performing around the St. Louis, Missouri area where I lived at the time. After moving to Colorado in 1974, I played full time in a harmonica/guitar duo called King Comfort, playing acoustic blues exclusively. The summer of 1979 found me living out of my truck and busking solo harmonica blues daily on the Pearl Street Mall in Boulder, Colorado. This is when I worked out most of my solo songs. Throughout my 52 year career in Colorado, I have played in numerous bands and duos experimenting with many genres of music but only doing my solo harmonica blues when one of my bandmates broke a string. Over the last two years, I have rediscovered my longtime love for unaccompanied harmonica and voice music, taken a deep dive into its roots, and dedicated myself to helping keep this almost forgotten musical tradition alive.



2. What do you consider to be your hometown and how does that affect your music?

I was born and raised in Alton, Illinois, a sleepy little river town on the Mississippi River just north of St. Louis. Alton sits along the "Blues Highway" connecting St. Louis, Memphis, and New Orleans. Once you have Mississippi River mud running in your veins, it never leaves you.

3. What performers have been your inspiration?

I began playing harmonica after hearing Jack Bruce (from Cream) perform his long harmonica feature, "Train Time." My path then took me to John Mayall, Sonny Boy Williamson (Rice Miller), Sonny Terry, James Cotton, and Paul Butterfield. Taj Mahal has been my mainstay inspiration since the early 1970s, and I am drawn now to the work of Peg Leg Sam.

4. What do you find most challenging about being an independent artist in today's music industry?

It has been difficult to stay creative when bandleading, booking, and promotional obligations take up so much of my time. Since the pandemic, with the increased expenses of performing and my own decreased endurance with aging, I have shifted my focus to composing, songwriting, and recording. This works well for me—I have produced several award-winning blues albums. My indigenous flute improvisations under the artist name Mad Dog Friedman have over two million streams on Spotify.



5. *What do you base your success on?*

I feel successful in that I am doing what I love and am able to reach a diverse global audience with my music. The support of my loving wife is as responsible for my success as anything I have done. My career reached a new level after the International Blues Challenge (IBC) in Memphis, Tennessee in January 2026. Playing my unaccompanied harmonica and voice music on Beale Street in Memphis, where much of this tradition started, cemented my resolve to help bring back this entertaining yet under-recorded form of the blues.

6. *Can you talk about your experiences collaborating with other artists or musicians? How does it influence your creative process?*

Friends and longtime musical collaborators, like Jenn Cleary and my bandmates, have often pulled me through times of lost focus. I often rely on collaborators to help me compose or arrange my more complex songs, and to introduce me to new ideas, especially outside of the blues. I see musical performance as a conversation, so if I am not collaborating with someone on stage, I am collaborating with the audience.

7. *What is your next musical release?*

My next musical release is “We All Belong,” scheduled for release on November 25, 2026, under the artist name Mad Dog Blues. This acoustic single, created in collaboration with Jenn Cleary, carries a message of unity and gratitude at a time when so much feels divided.



8. *Could you share the story behind your latest CD, Mad Dog Blues – Hot Harmonica Hokum, and what inspired its creation?*

After competing solo in the International Blues Challenge in January 2026, I was inspired to start performing full solo shows of my unaccompanied harmonica and voice music. While re-learning the many songs I had written over the years, I noticed the songs were mostly hokum-style blues, and the image design for the album cover came to me, along with the album title, *Hot Harmonica Hokum*. Many of my projects start with a visual concept, and this album cover had a strong effect on me, launching a two-day marathon recording session that resulted in sixteen tracks of original music stretching—yet faithful to—the historical stylings of early twentieth-century hokum songsters like Peg Leg Sam Jackson.



9. *How does your last album fit into your creative path? Is this a goal you wanted to achieve?*

Competing at the Colorado Blues Challenge with nothing but my harmonica and voice was scary to me. I had competed for many years in the local challenge —sometimes with a full band, often as a harmonica and guitar duo or just a harmonica and a washboard player, once with just a stand-up bass, and even once with a tap dancer—largely to avoid my intense fright around solo performance. Winning the Colorado Blues Challenge in the fall of 2025 with just my harmonica and voice showed me what can happen when we push

through fear. After performing on Beale Street in Memphis at the 2026 IBC, I dedicated myself to keeping a nearly forgotten form of solo harmonica blues going—a century-old style of music I have been playing my whole life, whose historical weight I am only now fully appreciating.

10. How do you approach the process of songwriting?

Early country blues performers often made up their own songs out of a body of blues lines, phrases, and imagery, borrowing generously from each other while making it their own. That is how I started songwriting, and even now it finds its way into my more singer-songwriter style songs.

11. As an indie musician, how do you navigate the balance between creative freedom and commercial appeal?

Not well. I only play from my heart—that's who I am.

12. What role does technology and social media play in promoting your music and connecting with your audience?

I use Facebook *(@ColoradoCountryBlues)* as my primary free promotional tool and often use AI to help with creating promo copy and some graphic editing. Mad Dog Blues' music is a human-made, organic, eclectic, roots-inspired, improvisational conversation filled with passion, humor, and honesty. That is what connects with audiences.

13. Could you describe a memorable live performance experience or tour that has had a lasting impact on you and your music?

When the Muddy Waters Band played on their last tour at the legendary Ebbets Field in Denver, I attended two of the shows on February 11 and 12, 1977. Luther "Guitar Jr." Johnson, Carey Bell, Pinetop Perkins, Calvin Jones, and Willie "Big Eyes" Smith were backing Muddy. Luther Guitar Jr. spent Friday night with us at our mountain cabin southwest of Denver, and we jammed a little on Saturday afternoon before the show. Afterwards, I had an opportunity to hang out with the band. Muddy and everyone in his band were kind, friendly, and generous with their time. I remember Carey Bell showing me

how he set up his harp amp, advice I still use today when I want that fat Chicago-style harp tone.

14. ***In an era of streaming platforms, how do you feel about the changing landscape of music consumption and its impact on independent musicians?***

It has certainly made things more complicated for songwriters and composers. My royalties are spread over several sources and take real time to track and maximize. The drop in physical media sales has cut into an important income stream for independent musicians, and streaming payouts do not fairly compensate artists. At the same time, there are fewer obstacles for global distribution and discovery, which I have taken advantage of with more than sixty self-produced albums on my Bandcamp page at ***maddogfriedman.bandcamp.com***.

15. ***Musicians often have a close relationship with their fanbase. How do you engage with your fans and build a dedicated community around your music?***

When I perform live, I like to go out into the crowd with my harmonica on a wireless mic and dance with people—especially two- and three-year-olds, and the elders who dance like no one is watching. My favorite way to build community is to organize events and write songs centered on connection, kindness, and compassion.

16. ***How can fans find you?*** ***ColoradoCountryBlues.com/mdb_solo.htm*** is a web page "where the century-old tradition of unaccompanied harmonica and voice blues still lives." It features audio and video recordings of my solo harmonica performances, along with a long list of links to historical and current examples of solo harmonica and unaccompanied harmonica and voice music.

17. What are some final words for your fans?

My final words are the chorus of an original song I plan to record in December of 2026called “Follow the Fear”:

When we follow our fear to where we belong,
Full circle to where we came from,
Deep within a magic star
Flows through who we are.



Mad Dog Friedman's HEART TO HARP CD Wins the 2026 Mile High Blues Society's Self-Produced CD Contest