Nothin’ but the Blues

A short History of the Icelandic Blues and
the Choice of Icelandic or English Lyrics

B.A. Essay

Matthías Ægisson

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Accompanying CD:
Interviews with Gunnar Þórðarson, Magnús Eiríksson and Jónatan Garðarsson.
Abstract

In an attempt to explore the short history of the Icelandic blues, with special emphasis on the early years, the main focus of this thesis consists of my interviews, originally taken in Icelandic and translated into English for this paper, with two blues pioneers and renowned Icelandic musicians and composers: Magnús Eiríksson (1945-), the founder of Blúskompaníð (The Blues Company) and Gunnar Þórðarson (1945-), a member of the band Hljómar (Tones) that enjoyed enormous popularity in 1964-1969. It also presents a translated interview with Jónatan Garðarsson (1955-), founder of Jassvakning (Jazz Revival) who knows the story of the Icelandic blues by heart.

What marks the beginning of the Icelandic blues history? What is the source of the Icelandic blues legends? Who were the first Icelandic blues heroes? These are a few of the questions that I aim to answer in my endeavour to encapsulate the short but exciting history of the Icelandic blues.

The second part of this thesis discusses whether blues lyrics have changed over the years, especially those of Magnús Eiríksson. What is their essence? How do Icelandic artists compare to the old masters? I also venture to explain why Icelandic songwriters and singers preferred to sing in English rather than their native language. Were they under pressure from their peers or did they simply want to follow in the footsteps of the old masters?

Finally, I summarise my main conclusions and envision the future: where is Icelandic popular music heading?
Where it all started

Son House was one of the legends of the Mississippi Delta Blues, which is the source of the American blues tradition. His honesty and sincerity when attempting to explain where the blues started is admirable:

People keep asking me where the blues started, and all I can say is that when I was a boy we always was singing in the fields. Not real singing, you know, just hollering but we made up our songs about things that was happening to us at that time, and I think that’s where the blues started. – Son House

Paul du Noyer underlines the seminal nature of the blues in modern culture:

Few would deny that the blues has played a more important role in the history of popular culture than any other musical genre. As well as being a complete art form in itself, it is a direct ancestor to the different types of current popular music we know and love today. Without the blues there would have been no Beatles or Jimy Hendrix, no Led Zeppelin or Nirvana, Louis Armstrong or Miles Davis, James Brown or Stevie Wonder, Pink Floyd or Frank Zappa, Oasis or Blur... the list is endless.

The blues has also played an important role in the history of the Icelandic popular culture. A proper question to ask would be: Where did it originate?

1 http://afgen.com/blusroot.html,[date missing]

Ironically, Þingvellir, Iceland’s national shrine, “sits on a huge geologic rift between the European and American tectonic plates.” One might wonder: “What’s the irony?” The answer is that the early Icelandic blues legends were, on the one hand, influenced by European bands such as the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, and on the other by American Blues artists Eric Clapton and Stevie Ray Vaughan, among others. Thus, one could say that this geologic rift represents the struggle between these two continents – in the geological as well as in the musical sense.

**The first Icelandic blues tones**

In the early ’40s, Icelandic jazzists such as Þórir Jónsson played some blues without being aware of it – they thought they were playing jazz. However, it would not be fair to argue that Þórir Jónsson and his band was Iceland’s first blues band since they mostly played jazz.

Alfreð Clausen (1918-1981) played an acoustic guitar and sang some blues, mostly popular songs from around 1946.

Haukur Mortens (1924-1992) sang some blues with several bands. The Rock & Roll songs of that time were often heavily influenced by the blues.

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4 Interview (M.Æ.) with Jónatan Garðarsson, May 2012, Track 3: 00:05:12-01:01:02.
The Icelandic Blues Company (Blúskomaníið) and solo blues artists

Magnús Eiríksson is undoubtedly Iceland’s first blues artist. When playing in the band Póník & Einar, he decided that he was a blues guitar player. He started playing long guitar solos that often characterized the early British blues, which resulted in his fellow band members’ kicking him out of the group. Magnus then decided to launch Blúskompaníið (The Icelandic Blues Company). Soon he and his band started playing the blues at weekly blues nights, mainly in the Glaumbær Club, as well as in the Klúbburinn and Silfurtunglið clubs, all in Reykjavík. They usually played when there were no other attractions on Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday nights.5

On April 10, 1969, Morgunblaðið, a national newspaper, advertised one of these blues nights. Five bands performed that night from 21:00 – 02:00: Magnús Eiríksson and the Blues Company, Björgvin Gíslason and his band, and Pétur Östlund and his band that usually played jazz. Ríkharður Pálsson performed with his band and that night a new blues band was introduced: Socrates. This compelling statement was made in the advertisement: “The Blues is the music of the year.”6

5 Interview (M.Æ.) with Jónatan Garðarsson, May 2012, Track 3: 01:01:03-01:02:00.

6 Morgunblaðið, April 10, 1969, p. 25.
Some of the early pioneers

Björgvin Gíslason (1951-) joined the band Pops in 1967 together with Pétur Kristjánsson, Birgir Hrafsson (1951-) and Ólafur Sigurðsson. In 1969 he joined Náttúra (Nature). Björgvin was selected the best guitar player in Iceland in 1976. In 1977 he released his first solo album, Öræfarokk (Desert rock) that contained a few blues songs, partly influenced by John Mayall (1933-). Finnur Jónsson played with Tónar (Tones) at this time and later Óðmenn (Men of Poetry), as did Jóhann G. Jóhannsson (1947-) who was a singer and a bass player in Óðmenn in his early years of the blues.

People who performed during these blues nights did not necessarily belong to any particular band, but played the blues with various groups. Karl Sighvatsson (1950-1991), a renowned Icelandic musician, started playing the blues on an organ, first the Vox and later the Hammond. In the late '70s and early '80s, it was Magnús Eiríksson and Blúskompaníð who were at the top of the blues scene in Iceland. The band changed rapidly as people joined and people left, but Magnús Eiríksson was always at the centre.

Björn Björnsson (1950-) beat the drums in the early days of the Blues Company. Then he quit and played with the band Lísa that later became Mannakorn. Baldur Már Arngrímsson (1943-) was also an early member of the Blues Company. Jón Kristinn Cortez (1947-) sometimes played the bass, and Halldór Pálsson occasionally played the flute and saxophone. Rúnar Georgsson occasionally played with the band, which was more influenced by the British rhythmic blues or beat blues than the American blues.  

7 Interview (M.Æ.) with Jónatan Garðarsson, May 2012, Track 3: 01:02:11-01:03:25.
**Hljómar, the first Icelandic Beatles & Gunnar Þórðarson**

The band Hljómar emerged around 1963 and became immensely popular. Gunnar Þórðarson, a songwriter and arranger who has composed over 600 songs, was its key member together with Rúnar Júlíusson, a singer and a bass player. While they played some blues music in the late ’70s and early ’80s, they mostly played pop music. Gunnar Þórðarson explains:

> When I started playing with Hljómar, there was no mention of blues, only jazz. We succeeded bands like Hljómsveit Andrésar Ingólfssonar, KK sextet and Lúdó sextet who played rock and pop music that was popular at that time... With the Beatles, and later the Rolling Stones, people started talking about the blues as a genre. It all started when people began to read about their way of thinking, in which blues plays a vital part.

Óðmenn played blues in the early Icelandic blues history, as did Eik who mostly played instrumental music. The band Dátar had a blues song called Kadilak. Hljómar played some blues songs because the blues was decent dance music. In the late ’60s young musicians who only knew 3 chords played and sang the blues, because, for them, it was a natural choice.

The bands that emerged in the late ’60s were influenced by British rock music. Around ’64-’65, there is a breach in communication with the United States. The American TV (Kaninn) becomes less compelling, because of all the exciting things that are taking place in the United Kingdom. Of course, the Rolling Stones were influenced by people like Muddy Waters, but Icelanders were primarily influenced by British rock music. We hardly ever heard American Blues – until the bands in the UK started playing it. 8

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8 Interview (MÆ) with Gunnar Þórðarson, April 2012, Track 1: 00:00:00-01:03:40.
The Icelandic Blues Boom had not started for real. Despite the weekly blues nights, the bands were mainly a mixture of various bands. Magnús Eiríksson was the glue that kept the blues in place.

**Bluesy driven jazz**

In 1975, Jónatan Garðarsson founded the Icelandic Jazzvakning (Jazz revival). He and his band and a few other bands started playing jazz on a weekly basis. “We played jazz,” Jonathan says, “but more or less it was blues, influenced by jazz or swing, and additionally by American jazz rock.” Magnús Eiríksson and Pálmi Gunnarsson sometimes performed during the jazz nights, as did Birgir Hrafnsson, Guðmundur Ingólfsson on electric piano, Guðmundur Steingrímsson on drums, and later Sigurður Karlsson who had played with the band Ævintýri (Adventure). Jónatan Garðarsson comments:

I remember that Þórður Árnason once came and jammed with the Icelandic Blues Company during one of these Jazz nights, but this was all rather vague. When the younger boys came, Stefán Stefánsson, Gunnar Hrafnsson and more, they are threading their way from pop to jazz music, but at the end of the day they were merely playing bluesy swing music. 9

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The breeze before the calm

From 1975-1980, there was no band dedicated solely to blues. Still, a lot of people were playing the blues. Kristján Kristjánsson (1956-), better known as KK, played the harmonica on some jazz and blues nights and his brother, Pétur Kristjánsson (1952-2004), played the guitar and sang.

In the Late 1970s, Bubbi Mortens appeared on the music scene and played the guitar and sang the blues. One might say the Bubbi is the first Icelandic troubadour, i.e. the first one to make it his livelihood. His music is primarily folk or blues songs. Jónatan Garðarsson again:

Bubbi sang a lot of Lead Belly songs (January 20, 1888 – December 6, 1949). He also played Leon Redbone (August 26, 1949). Bubbi composed a lot of blues songs and sometimes performed with Guðmundur Íngólfsson, Pálmí Gunnarsson and Guðmundur Steingrímsson. They played bluesy swing. Beside the Blues Company, this was the only fixed blues performance in the late 1970s. There might have been more people playing and singing the blues, but not to any extent.  

A decade of Stagnation

The 1980s has little to add to Icelandic Blues history. It was the decade of the sterile synthesizer. Everybody was playing cold, rock music, which was not a solid foundation for the blues. The music was mechanical, giving no room for feelings or emotions. People

10 Interview (M.Æ.) with Jónatan Garðarsson, May 2012, Track 3: 01:05:20-01:06:56.
played pop music with loops, drum machines and synthesizers. The only sign of the Icelandic blues could be found in Mannakorn, driven by Magnús Eiríksson who played and recorded blues music regularly under the name Blúskompanið. By publishing a few blues songs on each album, they kept the blues alive.\textsuperscript{11} Magnús Eiríksson says:

The disco era, starting around ’79-’80, was a knockout – not only for the blues, but also for live music in Iceland and all over the world. Saturday night Fever marked the climax of disco madness. One could say that Óðmenn and Blúskompanið were the only blues bands in Iceland from around 1970 until Vinir Dóra (friends of Dóri) emerged much later (Dori is Halldór Bragason’s nickname, the artistic director of the Reykjavík Blues Festival). And Magnús continues:

Three bands performed during typical blues nights at Reykjavík’s Klúbburinn Club: Blúskompanið, Björgvin Gíslason and his band, and usually a third band made up of a mixture of people who digged the blues. We gave up during disco but came back following its decline.\textsuperscript{12}

Beside The Icelandic Blues Company, Bubbi Mortens is the only blues artist that is visible during this dark decade in Icelandic blues history. Hornafjarðarblús (Blues from Hornafjörður) can be found on his album Í ljúfum leik (Gentle Play) that Mannakorn released in 1984. Bubbi Mortens published Blús fyrir Rikka (Blues for Rikki), which was a pure blues album.\textsuperscript{13} If it had not been for these two, Magnús Eiríksson and Bubbi Mortens, who were driven by the blues vision, the 80’s would have been a bluesy desert in the land of ice and fire.

\textsuperscript{11} Interview (M.Æ.) with Jónatan Gardarsson, May 2012, Track 3: 01:06:48-01:07:46.

\textsuperscript{12} Interview (M.Æ.) with Magnús Eiríksson, April 2012, Track 2: 00:00:00-02:23:20.

\textsuperscript{13} Interview (M.Æ.) with Jónatan Gardarsson, May 2012, Track 3: 01:07:47-01:08:15

Around 1987-88, the blues awakens in downtown Reykjavík when Vinir Dóra (Friends of Dóri) take their first bluesy steps. There was a lot of action there as renowned blues artists such as Joe Willie “Pinetop” Perkins (1913-2011) stepped on stage. Moreover, there was some minor blues action in the Tunglið Club.\(^{14}\)

In the mid 1990s, KK and Magnús Eiríksson released the album Ómissandi fólk (Indispensable people) that KK claims to be the first blues album recorded in Iceland.

Magnús Eiríksson:

Before releasing the album, KK and I met regularly at his place and wrote blues songs. He learned the blues in school in Sweden, but I don’t know if it did him any good. He is a natural blues artist and as talented as any other blues artist in the world.\(^ {15}\)

Blues Festivals

Brooks gives the essence of the festival scene in these words:

You know the formula: a little sunshine, a few choice beverages, big crowds of music lovers, and loads of bands on multiple stages. That’s the festival scene in a nutshell and every host city adds its own special ingredients to the formula. It’s each

\(^{14}\) Interview (MÆ.) with Magnús Eiríksson, April 2012 , Track 2: 02:23:20-03:31:21.

\(^{15}\) Ibid. Track 2: 16:25:16-17:40:15.
festival’s special personality that makes the festival circuit one of our favourite performing experiences.\textsuperscript{16}

Vinir Dóra began hosting annual blues festivals under the name Páskablús. Later, Reykjavik Blues Company was founded and Magnús Eiríksson was made honourable member number one.\textsuperscript{17}

In 2005, the first Blues Festival was held in Ólafsfjörður. KK and Magnús Eiríksson were among the first blues artists to participate. Magnús Eiríksson explains:

Blúskompaníð once performed on the Easter Blues Festival in Hótel Borg. We had a great band, but made the mistake of playing better than the other bands. Since then, Halldór Bragason has never asked us to play again. We overshadowed them. And the same thing happened in Ólafsfjörður where I performed with KK. Everybody was “masturbating on their guitars”, but we performed for one hour with two acoustic guitars. We overshadowed the other bands and were never invited again [laughs]. Dóri is a hard working blueser, but he resembles James Brown in that other band members must not exceed his talent.

Magnús continues:

Jimy Hendrix once performed with James Brown. The man was always nicely dressed wearing a red shirt – neat, like gay people. Then Hendrix said to the band members, ‘We can’t dress like jerks. Let’s get some Beatles shirts.’ They wore tassels, and had ruffled sleeve cuffs. They then all appeared in these nice blue Beatles shirts. James Brown went berserk. ‘Go and change! I’m the only one who can dress up like this.’ The moral of the story is that if you’re playing on a blues night you should avoid putting on a

\textsuperscript{16} Brooks, Lonnie, 1998, p. 263

\textsuperscript{17} Interview (MÆ) with Magnús Eiríksson, April 2012, Track 2: 03:32:07-03:55:11.
n...nicer shirt than Dóri. But Dóri is hard working and a great guy, and he has been very influential in keeping blues alive in Iceland. After all, he does make a living out of playing and singing the blues.

We have blues enthusiasts in every part of the country. Sölvi Ragnarsson in Hveragerði is one example. I played with him at Sölvahátíð Festival in December 2011... We have blues people in Hvolsvöllur, and in Höfn in Hornafjörður, which has always been open to blues and jazz people... We often performed in blues nights in Höfn in Hornafjörður long before the time of organized blues festivals. We simply went there and took along people like Guðmundur Ingólfsson. A lot of people attended and we had great fun. Local people also played with us. I have many pictures taken by Sæmundur Harðarson, a guitar player from Höfn í Hornafjörður. He moved to Reykjavík, as have many good men from the country. It’s strange that when people move to the city, they’re no longer kings. They’re kings in their own surroundings, know everyone and can do everything. But then they move to Reykjavík and they’re just one face in the crowd.18

Music with many facets

Pierre has this to say about the nature of the blues:

The Blues, like love, is a many-splendored thing. The classic 12-bar format, rather than being oppressively constrictive, allows for many variations on a theme. In addition to the various regional blues styles – usually shaped by the nature of the particular communities which gave them birth - there are wide divisions within the music.19


Magnús Eiríksson says the form is not an issue:

Bóluhjálmar was a sarcastic blues writer... I have been experimenting with writing blues lyrics to Icelandic quatrains, and with good results. There’s nothing to it. You simply repeat the first line, exactly as in the blues. The black American blues is very simple in its nature. But we fail to realize that it’s not completely boxed in. Sometimes the old masters play a rhythm, the key of A, for example and when we think they should change, for example to a key of D, according to a fixed formula, they can go on and on in the same key and then without a warning change to a key of D. This is especially evident if you listen to Howlin’ Wolf and many other solo artists. The form is not an issue. They’re never stuck in a particular formula.

Magnús continues:

Sometimes it’s difficult to know what is blues and what isn’t. Many of Elvis Presley’s songs were blues, for example One Night... He was a fine blues singer. Thus, in a witty and subtle way the blues tiptoes into what we call pop songs. And it’s always there.  

Guðmundur Ingólfsson said the blues was the mother potato. He meant the mother of jazz. You start by playing and singing the blues. From there people start to develop the blues, make it sophisticated and intellectual, add chords, change rhythms and then you have the jazz.  

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Choice of Icelandic or English lyrics

What about the lyrics? Were they written in Icelandic or English or a mixture of both languages? Magnús Eiríksson, honourable member number one of the Reykjavík Blues Festival, has this to say:

Blúskompaníð was the first blues band in Iceland that only wrote lyrics in English. In the early stages of the Icelandic Blues, it just wasn’t cool to sing in Icelandic. It didn’t even occur to us to localize the American and British blues songs that we played. This changed when Þorsteinn Eggertsson proved that it was possible to write simple Icelandic lyrics that suited every occasion. He paved the way and wrote Icelandic lyrics to popular blues songs or translated them into Icelandic. Harðsnúna Hanna is nothing but a fast blues song... This woke us up and we started writing Icelandic lyrics. I wrote Blús í G (Blues in G major) that was published on our Mannakorn record in 1975. I believe this marked the beginning of our Icelandic blues approach. I’m not saying that I was a pioneer, but this song was one of the first Icelandic blues songs written in Icelandic, apart from the lyrics that Þorsteinn Eggertsson had previously written.  

Having said that Magnús sings:

Þeir kalla mig kauða, þeir kalla mig skarf,  
Og nöfn þau til dauða ég bera víst þarf.  

(They call me fool, they call me rascal  
And I’ll have to carry these names until I die):

22 Interview (M.Æ.) with Magnús Eiríksson, April 2012 , Track 2: 07:50:00-09:35:16.
Oh, lonely, lonely blue boy.... Here, Þorsteinn Eggertsson uses a mixture of Icelandic and English.\textsuperscript{23}

Magnúss goes on:

Mugison’s latest record, \textit{Haglél (Hailstorm)}, contains at least two blues songs with Icelandic lyrics, \textit{Haglél} and \textit{Jarðskjalfti (Earthquake)}, if I remember correctly. This record was a huge success. Bubbi Morthens has written a lot of blues lyrics in Icelandic. \textit{Ísbjarnarblúz (Fish factory blues)} is one of his first blues songs, produced shortly after \textit{Blús í G}. Since then he has written a lot of blues lyrics in Icelandic.\textsuperscript{24}

Some of my lyrics have been translated into different languages. \textit{Gleðibankinn} was also written in English. And some lyrics were translated into English in Canada. I got a book from Canada with translations of two of my songs, \textit{Samferða} and \textit{Braggablúz}, if I remember correctly. I assume the producer contacted me for prior permission a long time ago; I really can’t recall. The book contains poems from various countries. It doesn’t contain pop music lyrics or blues lyrics. Simply put, there is only a vague difference between a poem and pop music lyrics.\textsuperscript{25}

Mannakorn’s latest CD, – \textit{Í blómabrekkunni (In the Flowery hill)}, which was released in June 2012, is evidence for the fact that that the old Icelandic blues masters are getting better and better and at the same time softer and softer. Magnúss has said that blues lyrics talk about women and wine and consequent regrets. In one of the songs, however, a

\textsuperscript{23} Interview (M.Æ.) with Magnús Eiríksson, April 2012 , Track 2: 09:36:00-09:58:12.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid. Track 2: 09:58:13-10:47:08.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid. Track 2: 37:53:24-39:01:03.
woman sings about her ideal man. Song number six is the only blues song on the CD that follows the “standard.”

Magnús Eiríksson told me when he was still working on the CD, that it would contain two blues songs. This may be true, but it can also be said that all of the lyrics on the CD are influenced by the blues.

In the first song, *Sumar hvern einasta dag*, *(Summer each day)* life is beautiful and the blues is fast asleep – but the blues tone is unmistakable.

... *Fjallkonan skelðunn – hún datt illa í það tvö þúsund og fokking sjó.*  
*The queen of the mountains got drunk Two thousand and fuckin’ seven.*

*Sól er í minni og sól er í sinni, blúsinn hann sefur í dag...*  
*The sun is in our memory and our minds The blues is fast asleep.*

In the second song, *Brim* *(Waves)*, Magnús writes about the economic crisis in Iceland. Here the spirit of the blues is unmistakable.

*Hvítfyssandi brim og hávaðarok,*  
*White roaring waves and staggering storm*  
*hvínandi útsynningur oní kok.*  
*Southwesterly winds that blow into your throat.*

*Þess bera menn sár um ókomin ár,*  
*You will carry the wound in the coming years*  
*að hafa hokað hér í gegnum trega og tár.*  
*for having stayed here through tears and sorrow.*

*Þetta er Ísland í dag, mér þykir það leitt.*  
*This is Iceland today, I’m sorry to say.*

*Það er ekki eins og maður sé að fara neitt.*  
*It’s not as if you’re going anywhere.*  
*Og lægð eftir lægð mun ríða yfir land,*  
*While storm after storm sweeps over the land*  
*refir læðast hægt um kalinn eyðisand*  
*Foxes creep over the frozen desert*  
*Þú ert ekki einn, stöndum saman hvert og eitt.*  
*You’re not alone, stand together you and I*  
*Það er ekki eins og maður sé að fara neitt...*  
*It’s not as if you’re going anywhere...*  

26 Mannakorn – Í Blómabrekkunni
The third song: Þú gerir allt svo vel (You do everything so well) talks about deceptions, delusions, disappointment and destiny:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Icelandic</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ég sem trúi á forlögin, mér bjargar ekki neit</td>
<td>I, who believe in destiny nothing can save me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>því ég trúi bara á tilviljanir, alveg út í eitt.</td>
<td>because I only believe in coincidences and always will.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veit þó best af öllum, ég er breysk og reikul sál.</td>
<td>Still I should know better than anyone that I’m a weak and wandering soul.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margt sem trúði ég hér áður reyndist blekking eða tál.</td>
<td>Many things that I believed in the past turned out to be deception or delusion.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In song number four: Ég vil bara eiga þennan (I just want this one), a woman sings to her man. In the early days of Icelandic blues, men mostly sang to their women:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Icelandic</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Óg vil aðeins eiga þennan</td>
<td>This one seems to be ok</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pó ýmsir aðrir bjóðist mér.</td>
<td>I do have many options though.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Af flestum öðrum ber, eða... það finnst mér, ég vil ekki hvern sem er.</td>
<td>He stands out in the crowd, or... at least I think so, I don’t want just anybody.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sumir eru bara heimskir, aðrir alltof gáfaðir. Einn er alltof stór, annar er of mjór, sumir eru geðveikir.</td>
<td>Some people are simply stupid, Others are far too bright, One is much too big, Another much too thin, Some are insane.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Þessi virðist vera í lagi, vissulega margt hann kann. Hann geti gagnast mér, að vissu marki hér. Óg ætla mér að ná í hann.</td>
<td>This one seems to be ok He’s certainly very talented, He could be of use, to a certain extent, I intend to make him my man.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is no mention of alcohol in this text. The only ambiguous reference is “He could be of use, to a certain extent.” This is typical blues innuendo.
Song number five: *Vals númer tvö* (*Waltz number two*) talks about a man who once had a crush on a girl, but only in his soul, or did he? He never had the guts to tell her until at a bar, where they probably were both pissed.

Ég var svo skotinn í þér einu sinni, I once had a crush on you,  
arkaði glaður um áskunnar mó. I walked the streets, full of happiness  
Allt gerðist þetta inni í sálunni minni, This all happened in my soul  
þar brann ástin heitast. Það held ég – og þó. That’s where love simmered, I think – or did it?  
Svo mæti ég enn gömlu ástinni minni Then I met my old love  
á blindfullum bar, hér á einhverjum stað. At a drunken bar, here somewhere  
Ég var svo skotinn í þér einu sinni, I once had such a crush on you,  
en þú hafðir alls enga hugmynd um það. but you had no idea.

Song number six: *Þegar blúsinn hellist yfir* (*When the blues washes over me*) is a typical blues song with typical blues lyrics.

Ég finn blúsinn hellast yfir, I feel how the blues washes over me,  
hjartadað sleppir slagi úr. my heart skips a beat.  
Víst er það að vonin lifir, Hope surely does live,  
þó við rekumst öll á múr. Though we all hit hard times.

Einn þú heldur götu hála, You walk alone on a slippery street,  
hart er að þér stundum sótt. Sometimes you’re under heavy attack.  
Hamingjan er hverfð gála Happiness is an ephemeral tart  
og hún hverfur stundum fljótt. (and sometimes quickly disappears).

Þegar blúsinn hellist yfir, When the blues washes over me,  
svartir hundar fara á kreik. Black dogs get moving.  
Vonin sem í hjarta lifir The hope that abides in my heart  
getur orðið ansi veik. can be fairly weak.
I have asked higher powers
to try and help me.
It’s sometimes ok
to ask for help.”

Song number seven, Einn á ferð (The lonely ranger) is about loneliness, full moon, cold winter night and the bittersweet and haunting blues.

When it’s cold outside and windy
The night silently sneaks in.
The full moon sheds its pale light
over the frozen ground on a cold winter night.
Travelling alone, on a slippery winter road,
Surely the blues, bittersweet, sometimes haunts me.
Before the break of day
I come home on a cold winter night...

Song number eight: Meðan sumar framhjá fer (While summer goes by) is about life and death. Life quickly passes by; nothing last forever.

The summer quickly passes by
Soon we’ll have chilly autumn
People come and people go,
Nothing lasts forever.
I’m hoping that straight paths
Will soon appear before me.
A true friend is the one
That pours you a cup of coffee.
Song number nine, Í blómabrekkunni, talks about the flowery hill or heaven. It’s a beautiful song with beautiful lyrics, showing Magnus Eriksson’s regret for his lost wife:

Ég var á ferð og flugi ástin mín, I was travelling day in and day out, my love
og alltof sjaldan fékk ég notið þín. And far too seldom I had the pleasure of your company
Vvíðlar tarnir enn ég ekki skil, I can’t understand how busy I was
því miklu minna hefði dugað til. A lot less would have been sufficient.
Og vorið leið og við tók sumarið, Spring passed us by and along came summer
við átum samleið, gengum hlið við hlið. Our paths crossed and we walked side by side
Lífðum marga gleði og gæfustund, We lived many happy days and hours
við örlöf grá við átum seinna fund. But later grey destiny was our portion.
Lífð er vatn sem vætlar undi r brú, Life is water that drips under a bridge
og enginn veit hvert liggur leiðin sú. An no one knows where it’s heading.
En þegar lýkur jarðlífs-göngunnin, But when our life on earthy is at an end
aftur hittumst við í blómabrekkunni. We meet again in the flowery hill.
Og þó nú skilji leiðir að um sinn, And even though we depart for a while
þér alltaf fylgir vinarhugur minn. I will never stop thinking about you.
Ég þakka fyrir hverja unáðsstund, I’m thankful for every hour of pleasure
við munum aftur eiga endurfund. And we will meet again.
Alltaf fjölgar himnakórnum í, The heavenly choir is getting bigger day by day
og vinir hverfa, koma mun að því. And surely friends will pass away.
En þegar lýkur jarðlífs-göngunnin, But when our walk on this earth is through
aftur hittumst við í blómabrekkunni. We’ll meet again in the flowery hill.

The last song, Í kirkjugárdi, (In the cemetery) contains lyrics from revered poet Steinn Steinarr. Magnús comments:

On Mannakorn’s latest CD I use a poem by Steinn Steinar. A poem is a more formal word for lyrics. And these American blues lyrics – they’re not particularly special. If it’s well written it comes straight from the heart. You
feel this way today and tomorrow is a different feeling altogether. Today it’s the bank blues. Tomorrow, shanty blues (braggablús27).

Death is omnipresent in this beautiful song. The last line in the text, and the last text on the album, wraps it all up, “Am I the one who lives or the one who died?”

27 Interview (MÆ) with Magnús Eiríksson, April 2012, Track 2: 39:01:09-39:35:06.
The Contemporary Blues Scene: How do Icelandic blues artists compare to other artists?

Born of the trials and tribulations, and the rare yet treasured good times, of a people transplanted from Africa to slavery in a strange new land, the blues has become true world music, reaching out and touching the emotions of us all. Its exponents now include not only white as well as black Americans, but Europeans and others too. And, thanks to this new dimension, a music which only a few years ago seemed destined to become a mere museum piece has been given a potent rebirth. 28

This quotation from Pierre sums up how this true world music can reach out and touch the emotions of the listeners. If you’re true, no one questions your credibility.

Magnús Eiríksson says:

Blues is a state of life and cannot be taught in schools. You need to learn it on the road. 29

Many of the young Icelandic blues artists that have appeared on the scene are good musicians and singers, but due to their age an inexperience they lack credibility.

Joe Louis Walker (1949-), an American musician, electric blues guitarist and singer, had the following to say about the social nature of the blues:

29 Interview (M.Æ.) with Magnús Eiríksson, April 2012, Track 2: 15:04:14-15:11:05.
I’ve found out that blues in particular, it doesn’t know a political party, it doesn’t know a race, it doesn’t know a gender. Now, what a person does when they learn these chords and when they learn these different songs is something different altogether. If it moves a lot of people, then I think that’s the criteria. I don’t think it has so much to do with what colour the person is.  

Magnús the following to say about the current status of the Icelandic blues:

To my opinion the Icelandic blues lacks organization, I’m sometimes asked by foreign blues aficionados if there are any blues or jazz clubs operating in Iceland. I really can’t answer this question because it’s so random. We need to have Blues on Thursdays, Jazz on Thursdays, at this place and this particular time. Tourists like to come and listen to blues or jazz.

KK and I play blues one Saturday a month at Café Rosenberg. We’ve done this for the last year and a half and the place is always packed. This isn’t a high profile gig and it’s only advertised on Facebook. It’s really a small blues club. But if people like it, they tell other people and the word gets around. Vinir Dóra also performs in Rosenberg and other places, but this is not regular enough anymore.

It would be nice to have weekly blues nights on Mondays as we used to... Two years ago we had a blues festival in Hvolsvollur. It was a fiasco. Too many bands were playing. They didn’t even pay us for the gas. Talk about idealistic work!

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31 Interview (MÆ) with Magnús Eiríksson, April 2012, Track 2: 03:58:00-05:33:18.
You hardly ever hear blues on the radio. I remember a radio show with Halldór Bragason a few years back. Apart from that, they hardly ever play the blues on the radio. You only hear kids – laughing at their own jokes and having fun. And then they play songs that their friends dig.\(^{32}\)

There are good blues bands in Ólafsfjörður and Akureyri and also on the east coast. The Blues is alive in many parts of Iceland. Pálmi and I play and sing the blues every now and then. I never gave up on the blues. You can always call some musicians and play it... We have blues bands like Blúsveit Þollýjar who seem to be determined to keep the flag flying.\(^{33}\)

Returning to his ‘guitar masturbation’ theme, Magnús continues:

What I don’t like is what I call a ‘guitar masturbation.’ Some Icelandic blues artists seem to think that playing the blues is to masturbate on the guitar for hours... I mean when two or three guitar players play solo for one or two hours – I can’t stand it anymore. I must admit that as a hippy in Tjarnarbúð I didn’t know better. Today this is driving me crazy. It might be ok to listen to it if you’re high, and only then.\(^{34}\)

Magnus is a mature musician. Today, he no longer needs to prove anything. He admits that he used to be young and foolish. Today he’s old and seasoned. Magnús goes on:

It might be a wise move for young artists to use old Icelandic blues lyrics. Kristján Jónsson, fjallaskáld (mountain poet), was one of our most profound blues poets. To me, Icelandic blues poets of old were just as important blues artists as the American black tradition that we’re continually worshipping.

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\(^{34}\) Ibid. Track 2: 05:33:06-06:20:02.
They wrote a lot of poems in the true blues spirit. Blues lyrics are all about drinking and screwing and consequent regret and in that respect our old poets did just as good a job as the past American masters. 35

Magnus is blunt when stating that Blues lyrics are all about “drinking and screwing and consequent regret.” Some certainly are, while others are more subtle, especially in recent years.

**Lifestyle of Icelandic bluesmen**

During my interview with Magnús Eiríksson two things particularly touched me and proved to me that Magnus knows what he’s singing about. My wife recently had a knee operation. Magnús had told me that there was an illness in his family. Since he limped I assumed it had something to do with his knee. During the interview he told me he needed a hip operation. He asked me how my wife was doing. I answered and asked him when his operation was due. “Hopefully I’ll pass away before having to have this surgery,” he replied. To Magnus death is more appealing than earthly pain.

The second thing that shows how Magnus and his friends are living the blues is something else he told me during the interview.

Last night I drank with a man who had been sober for sixteen years. I myself had been sober for three months but didn’t want to be sober any more, I had the blues. He performed with me in a small village in the country... He suffered from a sore throat like you and I and everybody else from time to

time. To treat it this time he bought a bottle of brandy in Borgarnes. [laughs]. Well, the cough vanished – and so did his sobriety. It’s sad when Magnus participates in putting an end to 16 years of sobriety. Blues and alcohol is a sad combination. It’s tragic. These men have got the blues.

Having heard this story I told Magnus that he had to compose a song about it. “I already have,” he said.

*Lævís mjög og lipur*  
Extremely cunning and agile  
laeðist syndið að,  
sin sneaks in,  
hún leitt hefur oft til freistingar.  
It has often led to temptation.

*Flughált var það svell*  
The icy surface was slippery  
Ég flatur stundum féll  
I sometimes fell flat  
En feginn skreið samt aftur lappir á.  
But gladly crawled to my feet again

The first four words, *Lævís mjög og lipur,* *(Extremely cunning and agile)* refer to Steinn Steinar’s poem about Jón Kristofer Kadett, and Jón Árnason’s book *Syndin er læví og lipur, Stríðsminningar Jóns Kristófers (Jón Kristofer’s war memories).*

Having quoted the poem Magnús added: “This is what matters. If you fall you simply stand up again.”

My interview with Magnús Eiríksson was taken while he drove the Golden Circle in South Iceland. We drove for about 2 hours. Before hitting the town we stopped at the Litla Kaffistofan Café. “As with the music, it’s all about timing,” says Magnús as we pull over

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36 Interview (M.Æ.) with Magnús Eiríksson, April 2012, Track 2: 21:49:00-23:02:04.

37 Jónas Árnason, 2012

38 Interview (M.Æ.) with Magnús Eiríksson, April 2012, Track 2: 23:03:00-23:47:09.
for coffee & soup. I asked him what he would like to drink. “Just soda.” I don’t think this was an honest answer.

In front of his house at the end of our interview Magnús says, “Have we stopped playing the blues,” meaning: “Is the interview over.” “Yes, we’re good,” I said.39

Magnús will never stop playing the blues. He lives it every day. And when he passes away he will keep riding on a blue note.

The blues has got more message than anything else. It’s more flashy now, but it’s the same thing as before. It’s come down low and come back up, but it’ll never die. Now the whole world digs it.40

39 Interview (MÆ.) with Magnús Eiríksson, April 2012, Track 2: 39:34:23-40:02:03.

Looking into the future: Where is Icelandic popular music heading?

The blues is the roots of all music. It’s in the air. You breath it, you live it. And when you embrace death, you have reached the ultimate blues destination.

The blues is the foundation of all music. It’s the roots. Every other song has got some blues in it, ’cause blues is the roots of everything. Blues has been here since the world was born. Once there were women and men loving each other and breaking up, that’s the blues. People’s heartaches, aches and pains, trouble and disappointment, money, no money, down-and-out, that causes the blues, and that affects everybody of every color, rich and poor.41

Icelandic musicians in general are or can be creative and original. This is why we have internationally successful performers such as Björk, Sigurrós, Mugison and Lay Low. However, too often they are following a trend, repeating or imitating what has been done. One reason why it’s more difficult for Icelandic blues artists to make it on the big scene is that blues thrives on repetitions. Originality is hardly an option. To make it you have to be an outstanding singer and musician. Nothing less will do. This is Magnús Eříksson’s vision:

I believe in the second coming of the blues. I think we can get the attention of the young people... I don’t think we can export Icelandic blues simply because everyone pretends to be able to play the blues. They play the blues in Greenland, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. There is a lot of blues activity in Norway, a lot of powerful blues bands, some of which have played here... The Danes are so sophisticated that you don’t think of them as good blues artists, yet they are. But blues as an export item from

Iceland? No, definitely not, although we can make the local activity more appealing and interesting. I think our young blues artists will manage to do so. We, the older generation, will continue to play and sing the blues until our dying day.\textsuperscript{42}

Commenting on the younger generation, Magnús says:

Guðmundur Pétursson is one of Iceland’s best guitar players in any genre... He entered the Hall of Fame in Iceland when he plays the guitar with his teeth on the local TV station. He was a child prodigy. He then learnt to play a classic guitar and later started playing the blues with Vinir Dóra. And his father, Pétur Tyrfringsson, played with them.

Sigurgeir Sigmundsson is also a great blues guitar player and Steini Eggerts. Sigurgeir played with the rock band Start, among others. He is a Gary Moore type of player – a player of that calibre, but not a pure blues guitar player. He simply plays all types of music as all good guitar players do.\textsuperscript{43}

Of Björgvin Gíslason, Magnús says:

Björgvin Gísla entered the scene with the first blues nights. Björgvin Gísla mostly played the guitar and also the piano. He’s a great talent. He didn’t start writing songs until the release of his first album. And it didn’t contain much blues. It was more of a pop music album... Björgvin is like me: he thought he would get away with just playing the guitar. Then you start experimenting with vocals. You can’t take for granted that a singer will be around when you play. When I’m performing with others I sing about 50%...

\textsuperscript{42} Interview (M.Æ.) with Magnús Eiríksson, April 2012, Track 2: 23:48:06-25:17:17.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid. Track 2: 27:41:05-29:50:18.
of the program. And I’ve never studied singing. I never meant to sing – just meant to play the guitar. I think Björgvin is a similar case. He’s always been surrounded by singers.\(^{44}\)

And, finally, on Halldór Bragason:

Halldór Bragason has been extremely efficient in straightening the path of the blues in Iceland. He appeared on the scene around 1980. If I remember correctly he’s been playing the blues for about 30 years, and more prominently for the last 20 years. He has been artistic advisor of Reykjavík Blues Festival, as well as the Blues Festival in Ólafsfjörður, which is older than the annual Easter Blues Festival.\(^{45}\)

Magnús continues:

Today, people like Mugison, Lay Low and Bubbi Morthens are playing commercial blues. Mannakorn plays blues occasionally. KK also plays the blues, as do Vinír Dóra, Andrea Gylfadóttir and Blúsmenn Andreu who are very active.\(^{46}\)

Nowadays, young Icelandic blues artists are mostly concerned about making it on the world stage, especially during this recession that everyone seems to be striving to forget exists. There is more reason now to sing and play the blues than ever before... Young Icelandic musicians are inspired by the success of Björk, Sigurrós and most recently Monsters of Men. Sigurrós is a wonderful group of musicians. They sang all their songs in Icelandic and got away with it.\(^{47}\)

\(^{44}\) Interview (M.Æ.) with Magnús Eiríksson, April 2012, Track 2: 35:47:10-37:14:23.

\(^{45}\) Ibid. Track 2: 30:05:10-31:37:08.

\(^{46}\) Ibid. Track 2: 06:20:05-06:56:16.

\(^{47}\) Ibid. Track 2: 11:06:00-12:09:12.
The final chapter

The Icelandic blues history is short but exciting. It started in the late ’50s with Icelandic jazzists who played some blues without being aware of it. The early Icelandic blues legends who appeared in the late ’60s were, on the one hand, influenced by European bands such as the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, and on the other hand by American Blues artists Eric Clapton and Stevie Ray Vaughan, among others.

These interviews with Magnús Eiríksson, Gunnar Þórðarson and Jónatan Garðarsson give strength to the conclusion that the best of the Icelandic blues heroes are fully competitive with the best of other countries. And also that the old Icelandic blues artists are getting better and better, since they sing what they’ve lived.

Blues lyrics have changed over the years. A comparison of lyrics from Mannakorns’ latest CD shows that they are more subtle than in the early days and death is more evident. Death is always nigh and not something that one should dread.

In the early days, Icelandic blues artists performed in English, since they were simply using lyrics from the old masters. Later, they started translating some of these lyrics to Icelandic or writing new ones. Today Icelandic musicians who want to make a world entrance write or perform in English. If they want to to make it locally, they perform in Icelandic. Icelandic popular music is heading in the right direction as long as musicians and singers are honest and original and sing about something that they have experienced. If they manage to do so, the future is bright.

The blues is the roots of all music. You breath it, you live it. And when you embrace death, you have reached the ultimate blues destination.
References


