

Bluesman's last stop was Grafton

**Music great Townsend died Sunday after being inducted into
Walk of Fame**



ALONZO TOWNSEND held a plaque he accepted on behalf of his father, legendary bluesman Henry Townsend, during an induction program at the Paramount Plaza Walk of Fame in Grafton on Sunday. Shown with the younger Townsend are (from left) Grafton Blues Association members Peter Raymond, Kris Marshall and Ellen Zacharias, author Alex van der Tuuk and Village President Jim Brunnquell. Henry Townsend, who was unable to attend due to illness, died later Sunday. Photo by Sam Arendt

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America lost one of its great bluesmen last weekend, and Grafton lost its last living link to a storied past.

Henry Townsend, a 96-year-old musician known as the Patriarch of St. Louis Blues, died of a pulmonary embolism Sunday at Columbia St. Mary's Ozaukee Hospital in Mequon.

Townsend, who was the last living blues artist to record at the former Paramount studio in Grafton, had returned to the village earlier in the week to perform at the inaugural Paramount Blues Festival on Saturday and be honored the next day as the first inductee in a newly created Walk of Fame.

However, Townsend was unable to attend either event after he became ill Friday and had to be hospitalized.

"It's a great loss. He was a real patriarch of music who had an incredibly long career," said Michael "Hawkeye" Herman, a musician who knew Townsend and performed at Saturday's festival.

"His death is tragic, but it's also bittersweet. Henry lived a long, full life and carried on the blues tradition.

"He was influenced by others, and he influenced others for years to come. What more could a musician ask for?"

Townsend was booked by the Grafton Blues Association as one of the festival's featured acoustic performers. He traveled to the village from St. Louis with his band, which includes his son Alonzo.

On Thursday, Townsend and the band went out for dinner with association members and Herman and was in good spirits, said Kris Marshall, association president.

"He was talkative and excited about being in Grafton and looked forward to the weekend activities," Marshall

said. "We all listened to his stories."

After being hospitalized, Townsend wanted to perform Saturday and attend Sunday's induction ceremony, but doctors refused to allow him to leave because his condition did not improve, Marshall said.

"He was extremely disappointed," she said.

Alonzo Townsend appeared at the festival and apologized to the crowd on behalf of his father. He also accepted a plaque for his father during Sunday's program outside the site of the downtown Paramount Plaza being constructed near the intersection of Wisconsin and 12th avenues and Bridge Street.

"I wish my dad could be here. We've gotten so much love and support from the people here," Alonzo Townsend told the crowd.

Marshall said that when Alonzo took the plaque to the hospital Sunday afternoon, his father "was so pleased with the honor."

"Henry was still cheerful and talkative," she said. "He said it was one of the nicest honors he had ever received."

Townsend, who was born in Shelby, Miss., in 1909, was one of the few musicians who recorded in every decade for the past 80 years. After making his first recordings for Columbia in 1929, he came to Grafton in September 1930.

At the Wisconsin Chair Co.'s factory studio, he recorded two titles that were released in May 1931. Townsend's visit to Grafton last weekend was believed to have been his first trip back in more than 75 years.

During his career, Townsend performed as a guitarist, pianist and vocalist with scores of blues legends, including Robert Johnson, Roosevelt Sykes, Walter Davis, Sonny Boy Williamson and Robert Nighthawk.

Townsend wrote and published hundreds of songs. In 1995, he was inducted into the St. Louis Walk of Fame.

During Sunday's induction program, which was attended by about 100 people, Townsend was praised as a seminal artist whose Grafton connection helped fuel a renewed interest in the community's musical heritage.

Alex van der Tuuk, author of the book "Paramount's Rise and Fall," described Townsend as a key figure who embraced his role as the last remaining descendent of early blues.

"He was a musical genius," van der Tuuk said, noting that Townsend was the recipient of the Heritage Fellowship Award presented by the National Endowment for the Arts. The award is the highest honor given to traditional American artists.

Village President Jim Brunnquell said Townsend will be remembered as a musician whose work transcends generations.

"What we're trying to do in the village is connect our past to our present and our future," Brunnquell said. "Mr. Townsend represents all that."

During the induction program, a granite stone engraved with Townsend's name was unveiled. It was the first of 44 stones, each 2 feet wide by 7 feet long, that will be placed in a keyboard-style pattern forming the Walk of Fame in the plaza.

Once the plaza is completed, five other Paramount artists will join Townsend as first-year inductees. They are Charley Patton, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Ma Rainey, Skip James and Thomas Dorsey.

The inductees were chosen by a committee formed by Paramount Grooves in Grafton, a group created last fall to promote awareness and preservation of music recorded and pressed in the village.



Henry Townsend

Memorial fund set up to help artist's family

A fund has been established to help the family of musician Henry Townsend.

Contributions are being accepted for the Henry Townsend Memorial Fund, which will defray the cost of returning the artist's body to St. Louis and medical and funeral expenses, said Kris Marshall, Grafton Blues Association president.

After the family's financial needs have been met, plans call for additional money received to be used for a scholarship fund in Townsend's name, Marshall said.

Donations can be dropped off at local Grafton State Bank offices or mailed to: Henry Townsend Memorial Fund, Grafton State Bank, 101 Falls Rd., Grafton 53024. For more information, call 377-5511.

The association is also accepting cards and letters of condolences, which will be forwarded to the Townsend family. They can be mailed to: Grafton Blues Association, P.O. Box 566, Grafton 53024.

Townsend's funeral will be Monday in St. Louis.