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Now here was a triple bill: Ted Hawkins, Pops Staples and Michelle Shocked. At the ornate Orchestra Hall in Chicago. Tickets? \$15-\$30. A genuine voice from the street, Ted Hawkins is one of the prime exponents of the post-modern blues movement. He does not want to be called a bluesman, and his style is a honey-soaked pastiche of country, gospel and soul. Progressive music fans apply post-modern art applications to blues. They believe that for blues to evolve, it needs to embrace applications of Abstract Expressionism. A similar post-World War II movement broke up representational art. Po-mo (post-modern) blues is what the Orchestra Hall show is about. Hawkins is touring to support "The Next Hundred Years" (DGC; Geffen), his major-label debut and a magical roots record. Besides writing seven incisive originals, Hawkins applies his adventurous, 57-year-old timbre to country lend Webb Pierce's "There Stands the Glass" and adds an eerie feel to Jesse Winchester's "Biloxi." It's a long way from Hawkins' native Biloxi, Miss., to Inglewood, Calif., where he resides today. From 1974-90, Hawkins was a street musician playing a tattered Martin guitar among the roller-skating rastamen and other characters on Venice Beach. Before that, he hopped freight trains and hitchhiked across the Rust Belt. He was emptying his tip bucket after an afternoon's work on the beach in 1990 when he found a business card from a Geffen Records executive. At the same time, singer-songwriter Michael Penn was telling friends he "heard the greatest singer in the world, and he was right outside my window." Penn lives a few blocks from the beach. "Don't never hang up your guns," Hawkins said in a spiritual conversation from Los Angeles. "As long as life lasts and death passed, there's hope. Keep hope alive." Hawkins' trustful vocal twists make for a melodic conflict and shape the poignancy of his songbook. "The Next Hundred Years" is a moody recording, with Hawkins' swampy wisps accenting the feeling. In "The Good and the Bad," Hawkins sings, "Sugar is no good; Once it's cast among the white sand; What's the point; In pulling the gray hairs from among the black strands; When you're old; You shouldn't walk in the fast lane; Oh ain't it useless; To keep on trying to draw true love from that man." A good writer draws deep from early memories. Does Hawkins do that? "I remember the realization that I was on this earth," he answered. "I was about 2 years old. I had a bucket in my hand. I put the bucket down in a well to fetch some water and I was pulled in. I went down under and came up. Instead of panicking and drowning, I grabbed a root and pulled myself out. I walked all the way home crying. You know how babies want their mother to see them, to pick them up and hold them? When I got to my family's door, everybody was boogieing down and having a good old time. They didn't even know I was standing there crying. "I've been surviving ever since." Hawkins does not remember his father. His mother was an alcoholic and a prostitute. He was the victim of abuse by both men and women. "I can recall one or two sober moments my mother had," Hawkins said. "She took after her daddy. He was an alcoholic. His blood was running through her veins. She couldn't help it, so I forgive her." Hawkins taught himself to read and write, but by the time he was 12, repeated scrapes with the law landed him in the Oakley Training School, a reformatory about

25 miles outside of Jackson, Miss. Hawkins learned to play open-tuned guitar in school. When he was 12, Professor Longhair (Roy Byrd) traveled up from New Orleans to visit the training school. The stride pianist taught Hawkins "Somebody's Knockin' at My Door," and Hawkins sang it at a school recital. He had stage fright, and his teacher had to shove him on stage.

Although Hawkins just completed a tour of Australia and Ireland, he says he still is afraid to perform in front of large audiences.

"You must never lose your stage fright," he said sternly. "It keeps you on your toes."

Hawkins was less afraid of the road. He spent most of his 20s hitching rides on trains to Chicago and Philadelphia. For a while, Hawkins was married to a woman he met in a church in Buffalo, but he had the marriage annulled to follow a distant muse. What was he looking for?

"Anything," he answered. "Trying to find a life. I knew it wasn't in Biloxi. The main thing on my mind was food. I'd eat anything that would keep me going. My stomach was used to garbage can food since I was a child. I'd go into butcher shops and eat the ends you cut off of salami and bits and pieces of cheese that fell on the floor. Then I'd go into a bakery and catch the lady behind the counter. She would give me day-old doughnuts and sweet rolls. The man behind the counter usually yelled at me." In the spring of 1966, Hawkins married a second time to a woman he met in a church in Geneva, N.Y. Two months later she died of cancer. Using money obtained from her estate, Hawkins bought a one-way ticket on a Santa Fe Ry. train to Los Angeles. He was sick of cold weather. One of the first things on Hawkins' agenda was to find the manager of his hero, Sam Cooke. Hawkins didn't even know Cooke had been murdered in 1964.

"Sam Cooke is the greatest singer who ever lived," Hawkins said. "He made your skin crawl. When he sang 'Be With Me, Jesus,' you wanted to cry. The way that man (vocally) begged. He needed someone with him all the time. I've heard 'Nearer My God to Thee' many, many times, but never the way Sam Cooke did it." Cooke understood the importance of clear enunciation in vocal delivery, which also is one of Hawkins' assets. "Let people know what you're saying," he said. Hawkins applies a passionate diction to all forms of music, ranging from the traditional country of Webb Pierce to his searing cover of Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Long as I Can See the Light." "I like all kinds of songs," he said. "I'm a lover of music. Period. When you say you're a lover of music, you don't have time to say I like this and I don't like that. Before you know it, you won't like music." But Hawkins goes back to Cooke for inspiration on his desperately stunning "Green-Eyed Girl." He said, "I guess Sam Cooke sent it to me. Stuff comes to me when I'm riding my bicycle. My heart

is pumping, everything is moving, everything is working like it should. That's how I got the melody for that. I always have my little tape recorder within reach. And I wait for something else." Three months after this interview Ted Hawkins died at the Centinela Medical Center in Los Angeles of complications from a stroke.