

Sherman Ewing's Online Interview with Tipitinas' John D'Aquila

The idea was to get Sherman Ewing online with MSN Instant Messenger so we could conduct Tipitina's first online question and answer session. Normally we do it the old fashioned way—face-to-face. But Sherman lives in New York City and I in New Orleans.

"Why don't you just do it over the phone?" someone asks, incredulously.

"Because this is 2001, babe, and it is more websitney (I invented a word!) to do it online," was my reply.

So, here we were, on the phone, trying to get Sherman set up in MSN IM. So much for us being "websitney." Sherman is a singer/songwriter scheduled to perform at Tipitina's Uptown on Oct. 26. He has quite a cadre of musicians playing behind him: JoJo Hermann, Anthony Krizan, Harold Brown, and Jimbo Walsh, who plays locally with a host of bands, including Michael Ray and Cosmic Krewe and is the conductor of the Naked Orchestra. The other guys either play with famous bands or have played with famous bands in the past, but I am not allowed to mention any of them. Let's just say they rhyme with Bridespread Kanic and Din Spoctors, and one of them is "raW" spelled backwards.

It is 8:30 p.m. CST and Sherman keeps repeating: "I told you I am a moron when it comes to computers," as he works the mouse on his ancient Mac. I pour a glass of wine and am ready to go. I tell him he is such "a major computer geek."

Sherman has a dial-up modem and his old Mac is slower than a Julio Iglesias ballad. So, while he is downloading the MSN IM software, I run to the grocery, come home, cook a five-course meal, eat, and settle in with another glass of wine. (Not really, I already had the groceries!)

Two hours later we are no closer to beginning the interview than when we started, but we are having a blast chitchatting on the phone. I am now halfway into that bottle of Pinot Noir and I don't care if the interview goes off or not. We are becoming fast friends, even though I am doing all the drinking at this party. I mention this to Sherm and he says I am "a major wino." I am not sure this is a compliment, so I hiccup and pour another glass of wine.

Finally, through a wine-induced fog, I see a ray of light and ask a question I should have asked a couple of hours ago: "Sherm, do you have AOL Instant Messenger?" "Why sure," he says. "Hells bells!" I reply (actually the language was a tad stronger) "So do I. Let's go!"

Thus the interview began.

Sherman covered a host of topics: His days at an all boys (religious) boarding school near London (Surrey), his days at Columbia University, where he met the members of his current band, a job he once had letting attack dogs attack him (no kidding!), his music, and his current day job -- he owns a dog walking service in New York with a couple of very famous clients (Uh uh, I ain't tellin'. You are going to have to read further to find out!).

Have I mentioned yet that my New Orleans Saints beat Sherm's Minnesota Vikings last weekend? (I think I will go with a six-pack of Corona -- with lime! Sherm.)

Tip's—Hi

Sherm—Be back in 5-10, gotta take the dog out and feed the cat!

Tip's—Rock and roll!!!

Sherm—I'm back—cat fed, dog relieved—very relieved!

Tip's—Fresh glass of wine here!

Sherm—Bonus

Tip's—Okay.... you ready to go?

Tip's—First question....

Sherm—There is a first for everything.

Tip's—Are you ever mistaken for Bobby Sherman? (This is what is called a warm-up question—do you feel warm yet?)

Sherm—No, not as of yet.

Tip's—Okay...for real.

Sherm—That wasn't for real?

Tip's—I understand you grew up on a tree farm in Minnesota. What kind of trees and what was that experience like?

Sherm—Actually, my tree farm experience was in the town of Hopewell, NJ -- Minnesota was on a lake—Lake Minnetonka. I lived in Jersey until I was 11—though Minnesota has remained somewhat of a home for me—family hails from there, etc.

Tip's—When did you pick up your first guitar?

Sherm—First guitar was shortly after leaving Minnesota—I went off to an English boarding school—started piano and first started strumming.

Tip's—Where in England and for how long?

Sherm—The school was just outside London -- in Surrey -- for three years—actually closer to four. The school, was called Fan Court, a religious institution—sounds fun, eh?

Tip's—Loads of fun, dude. Better you than me!

Sherm—Well, it was a very interesting time —one of the weekly "can't miss" shows on TV was a show Top Of The POPS. It, I believe, had to be the inspiration for MTV. Anyway, my classmates and I were way into anything that came on there—Bohemian Rhapsody was the all-time longstanding # 1 - (it was a weekly countdown).

Tip's—A great one! Queen!

Sherm—Yeah—we were into that—and at the same time it was the early years of Punk. We used sneak out of school and head into London and check out the punks—they were totally radical. Everybody was obsessed with the Sex Pistols.

Tip's—Ever venture into a mosh pit?

Sherm—Stayed away from the pits—we were too young to get in.

Sherm—I also got introduced to Bob Dylan at that time—big influence—started me getting into the guitar. I was into a lot of singer-songwriters—Neil Young, Jim Croce, James Taylor.

Tip's—Harry Chapin?

Sherm—Yes, Harry Chapin. When Bruce (Springsteen) first came around I was way into his stuff.

Tip's—I actually met The Boss once, but that is a long story. I will save it for another time.

Sherm—Tell me now!

Tip's—Long story, but I worked for Pace Concerts. Springsteen did a show here in New Orleans. There was a party for the band afterward at a little place called Acey's Pool Hall. A local act played for the party (the late Ernie K-Doe). The boss came, hung out, ate, had a couple beers. Clarence Clemons (the sax player) and Stevie Van Zandt (the guitarist) got up and jammed with the band. Clemons was wearing a black suit with a huge black cape. He was the shit! Anyway, it was a fun night and Clemons and Van Zandt really jammed.

Sherm—My drummer in NYC played with Clarence Clemons after Bruce's Glory Years. One night Bruce showed up at the place they were playing and the doorman charged him not knowing who he was.

Tip's—Too funny.

Tip's—What kind of bands did you play in growing up?

Sherm—First, I was always in the school singing groups. I also seemed to hang with the kids who were playing guitar—obsessed really. It kind of followed when they were looking for a singer that I was the guy. The current thing (the Sherman project) is really the first time I've ever played guitar live, but it has always been a writing vehicle. Anyway, when I was in England punk was the thing so that's what we did. My first band was called The Pushers -- you can imagine the teachers of this strict boarding school were thrilled about that!

Tip's—Yeah, they had to love you guys.

Sherm—Yeah—we were always in a heap of trouble.

Tip's—Any funny stories to tell regarding that?

Sherm—Well, the dorms consisted of seven boys to a room. In my last year, we were the school seniors and with that came certain privileges—one of which was having a turntable to play records.

Tip's—Oh oh.... I smell trouble.

Sherm—We used to open the window and crank up all kinds of crazy shit.

Tip's—Naturally it was stuff the schoolmaster approved of, right?

Sherm—I think they must have confiscated God Save the Queen three or four times. When we got to Donna Summers "Love to Love You Baby"—lots of grunting and moaning—that's when they took the turntable away.

Tip's—I am rolling on the floor, dude!

Tip's—Okay...moving right along.

Tip's—So how did you end up at Columbia U.?

Sherm—Well, I went to Princeton Day School for two years and then went on to another boarding school and then went off the big city. I actually was pretty involved with Theater Arts while in high school and figured NYC was the place to come for acting. I was surprised to find when I got to Columbia that there was no theater major. But I met up with a very good bunch of guys and really got involved in my first "serious" music thing.

Tip's—Tell us how those musical connections developed.

Sherm—It's pretty confusing how it all got started, but it's something like this: I met my friend Bill Zuckerman on my first night in NYC. He and I hit it off. He played guitar, and lived one floor below JoJo Hermann. JoJo played Keyboards for this ska band that played in a lot of the clubs downtown. I think they were called The Cost of Living, or the Terrorists. Anyway, we used to hang out and one day I walked into a very smokey room and Bill told me that they were starting a band. He was gonna play guitar, JoJo drums, and I was going to be the singer.

Tip's—So became Sherman and the Bureaucrats?

Sherm—Yeah, I think that was JoJo's call. So, Bill and JoJo had a music theory teacher—Jimbo Walsh—they said he was gonna play bass and banjo. Well, after the JoJo moved to Mississippi, the Bureaucrats kept going for a while, but it really was never the same—we were really tight. In retrospect, it just wasn't the same.

Tip's—Any interesting stories emerge from this band?

Sherm—At this time there was a bar in the Columbia vicinity—The Blue Rose—that was owned by an old gypsy woman named Electa. Her very old—very, very old—mother would sit at the door didn't say anything—really, she was very close to dead. Anyway, Electa would say: "You can play, but I no can afford to pay you." So we'd play and the place would fill up with a pretty rowdy group who would sneak in their booze. Electa charged something like \$6 for a warm bottle of Bud. Anyway, we would blast our amps—blow the doors down. Several times she pulled the plug on the band, called the cops and the thing would break up. But we always packed the place, so she would inevitably invite us back to repeat the whole shebang all over again. Our highlight came when legendary MC5 guitarist Wayne Kramer produced our first single—a cover of their tune "Shakin' Street."

Tip's—Great story, Sherm.

Tip's—So once The Bureaucrats dissolved, where did you go from there?

Sherm—I started playing with some other bands and then was sort of on the side asked to audition for the play "Rent," which was sort of the hot musical on Broadway at the time. I went into a cold call - cattle call. I hadn't acted for a long time. It was really a rock musical—long story short I ended up getting called back something like eight times. The second to last time the casting director was at the audition and asked me my name and said he would call me in a few weeks to meet the directors—art, musical, stage—and have one last audition.

Tip's—Oh oh....I think I know what is coming.

Sherm—So, that night I was so excited I went out, stayed out all night, smoked like 1000 cigarettes only to wake up to a call the next morning at like 9 o'clock saying to get in by 10:30 a.m. or so for the final audition.

Tip's—Something tells me this is not a happy ending....

Sherm—I got there and basically fell over my water bottle, started crying, asked for another try—they got the hook out and that was that. But it got me back into theater.

Tip's—To bad, bud.

Tip's—As the story goes, the Sherman Project emerged from a screenplay you decided to write. Where is that screenplay now and do you have any plans for it?

Sherm—I really got into studying theater—all aspects of it. That's where the screenplay part came in. I really put that in the "I'll get back to that someday file." No time. For the past three years I've really been focused on writing and playing out with my band.

Tip's—But didn't the Sherman thing indirectly come out of the screenplay?

Sherm—Yeah—well, part of the plan was to write a soundtrack for the screenplay—and when I realized that I would most likely die by the time I finished both, I started sending around some of my songs hoping to find someone who I clicked with to produce me.

Tip's—And then you found Godfrey Diamond.

Sherm—Yeah. I had put together some pretty mellow acoustic tunes that I liked and so I decided to send them off hoping to hook with someone to produce some of these recordings. One of the people I sent these recordings to was Godfrey Diamond—a New York Producer who had done some 160 records (godprod.com). Jimbo, who had moved down to New Orleans and been playing with Michael Ray, just happened to be coming up to New York for the whole summer, and when I told him my plan to do a record, he signed on.

As we moved towards pre-production rehearsals, I had really not found a drummer or a guitar player that really suited the project. Godfrey ended up calling upon an old friend and amazing drummer, George Roselli. George had just finished rehearsing with Keith Richards. When I heard this my eyes practically popped out of my head. George had been doing a lot of work with a guitarist named Anthony Krizan, who had been in the Spin Doctors. So the lineup for my recordings was complete -- and certainly far more impressive than I had ever imagined possible.

Right as we were about to cut the tracks, JoJo happened to be in town for a few shows at the Beacon Theater, which is about 3 blocks from my house. He came by a rehearsal and did the piano part on the song "Okindalai." He also mumbled something about someday down the road sitting in with me for a gig. Anyway, the recordings went so much better than I ever expected -- working with such amazing musicians was like my wildest dreams coming true. After finishing the first set of recordings, Godfrey and I decided to go to work on writing some new material before finishing the CD.

Tip's—Tell me a little about the songs themselves, the type of music and where the lyrics came from (you obviously wrote them).

Sherm—Well, its all pretty personal. I'm not sure I can talk about it.

Sherm—Only kidding.

Tip's—Tongue sticking out....

Sherm—The songs are really all written on the acoustic guitar. And they pretty much draw from all of my biggest influences. I've always been writing poetry and lyrics. I think that all started when I got into Dylan.

Tip's—How does the creative process happen in your case?

Sherm—Well, usually I'm doodling on the guitar and kind of walk into an idea. Maybe a guitar rhythm, maybe a melody, some lyrical thing...it varies. Sometimes it's quick, usually I have to get into a certain headspace. So when I'm on an idea, I really have to ride it out, cause I may not be able to get back to that space. I once read an interview with Neil Young. It was actually from a book called Songwriters on Songwriting. He said he had one rule when it came to songwriting is, when you get an idea, you stop everything and follow it, right there. I like that idea. If it's good enough for him, it's certainly good enough for me.

Tip's—You obviously have been playing the songs at gigs. How have they been received?

Sherm—Really well. I think that my songs are pretty personal, but they seem to convey feelings that people can kind of relate to ... at least I hope so. It really helps having incredibly talented people playing with me. Anthony Krizan is amazing. Sometimes we will be playing and he'll be ripping away, and I find myself barely aware of what I'm doing, because he just kills me. It really a privilege having him play on my stuff. It would not be the same without him. But that goes for everybody that's been a part of this project.

Sherm—How am I doing—first interview and all?

Tip's—Going great, dude, really it is!

Tip's—What's the music scene in New York like?

Sherm—It's really a very weird town musically. And its been going through a weird time. Guliani isn't a very live-music friendly kind of guy. Actually, I don't think he's a very friendly guy period, though he is doing an amazing job right now. I won't go there! Anyway, there is so much to do in New York. I think the live music scene has certainly seen better days. I've been told by several successful friends that if you want to make a living playing music you have to leave New York.

Tip's—Interesting ... it use to be the place to go!

Sherm—That's not to say that I don't love playing in New York. I have a pretty loyal group of people who come to my shows. But the city has changed in an incredible way over the past 10 years. I guess nothing is more indicative of this than the closing of the Wetlands Preserve at the beginning of September. One of the great New York institutions. It got so many bands started -- Phish, Blues Traveler, Spin Doctors, Joan Osborn, the list goes on forever. Anyway, their building was bought by a developer who wanted to cut the building up and turn it into condos. And that marked the end of Wetlands.

Tip's—That's a shame.

Sherm—But there are still some very good clubs: CBGB, the Knitting Factory, Brownies, Arlene Grocery. They are cool to play.

Sherm—I'm trying not to diss my hometown!

Tip's—Nice job!

Tip's—What were the events of Sept. 11 like for New Yorkers like yourself? Where were you when it happened and have you been to "Ground Zero?"

Sherm—You know, I guess the first thing I'll say is that the whole thing, the whole scene, the day of, the days that followed, its all so big. Everybody has a different experience of it, but I just can't seem to get a grasp on it.

Tip's—Where were you when it happened?

Sherm—I was getting ready to leave my apartment when I got a call from someone who asked me if I thought they should take their dog to work. I kind of said...whatever man ... do whatever you gotta do, thinking it was a rather strange question to ask. He then said "you clearly haven't turned on you TV. A plane just went into the world trade center." I was like: "WHAT!?" So I turned on the TV and sat on the phone with this guy and was just saying, "Holy Shit" ... and then bang!!! a big fireball came out of the second tower and we both were just screaming "Oh my God!!!" It was so unreal ... so unbelievable.

Tip's—Whoa!

Sherm—The strangest thing is that every time I see it shown again on TV, it hits me harder...deeper. It's like I could see it a thousand times and every time it's more horrible because it's so much to take in that you can't. And then there's the whole thing of that this is our city, our home. It's surreal to think of how the first days you were calling your loved ones, your friends just looking to see if they were alive, and you couldn't get a phone line—cell phones were out.

Tip's - Wow!

Sherm—Out of so much violence and destruction there came so much love and caring.

Tip's: It is really amazing ... it has calvanized this country, particularly, that town.

Sherm—There were vigils on almost every corner, churches open around the clock. It really is incredible. I could go on forever. I guess you can see that....

Tip's—Thanks for sharing, dude.

Sherm—Hey man, thanks for listening.

Tip's—I am sure some of your friends down here have been talking to you about the New Orleans music scene. So, with that in mind, what are your expectations?

Sherm—My expectations are ... I guess I should note that a huge grin just came over my face.

Tip's—The Cheshire Cat variety?

Sherm—Well, I'm just thinking it's gonna be one hell of a good time.

Tip's—I guarantee!

Sherm—For me, it's like living out my fantasy. It really is beyond my wildest dreams to get up and play with such great musicians at Tip's in New Orleans. Someone once told me that community is what music is all about. The thought of doing this with JoJo, and Jimbo is ... its just really a dream come true. Both as friends, but also because they (and of course Michael Ray, and Harold Brown -- both of whom I have never played with before) are so damn goooood!!!

Tip's—Great!

Sherm—They are my friends ... my family.

Tip's—What have you heard about Tipitina's? (You know, Tip's was rated by Travelocity Magazine as the third best live music venue in the country). I ask this same question to everyone I interview.

Sherm—I haven't heard anything other than this ... New Orleans is the town to play music ... Tip's is the place to play it!

Tip's—Okay...well said!

Sherm - Why, thank you.

Tip's—I understand you walk a few famous dogs ... er ... dogs belonging to famous people, that is.

Sherm—Hell yeah. Mathew Broderick and Sarah Jessica Parker ... Tatum O'Neil.

Tip'sv—Any ambition to move up to walking like Lassie or Rin Tin?

Sherm—I was going to make a brave effort at saying something clever -- always a bad idea!

Tip's—Okay, enough jokes. Do you want to talk about rassling attack dogs with a padded arm?

Sherm—Sure!

Sherm—20 bucks a day ... scooping shit and getting attacked by vicious dogs ... tough way to make a living!

Tip's—You had to be a starving musician when you did that!

Sherm—I was!

Tip's—That's a wrap Sherm. Thanks for being a good sport and see you at Tip's!!!

Sherm—You got a glimpse of my computer skills!!!

Tip'svYou are a total geek, dude!

Sherm—Some day, I will aspire to your levels.

Tip's—Oh yes ... then you can bang on printers when they don't work!

Sherm—I'm well on my way!

Tip's—Computers will mess with your head, man.

Sherm—I've looked towards my window on more than a few occasions.

Tip's—Yeah ... but you would be just losing an old Mac ...Macs suck, dude.

Sherm—PC here I come!

Tip's—You know you owe me a six-pack from the Saints-Vikings game....

Sherm—If only Cris Carter had held on to the ball!!!

Tip's—He has caught his share against us... 'bout time dat sucka dropped one!

Sherm—True!!!

Sherm—Well, I should tend to my four legged friend—the Vikes will rise again!

Tip's—Okay...gotta hit the sack myself ... goodnight Sherm!

Sherm—Goodnight bro ... and thanks again!

Tip's—You got it.

Sherm—Peace.