Robert 'Fud' Shaw, the last survivor of the Southern Texas blues pianists, is an incredible talker, an interviewer's dream: one question is often enough to trigger off long detail-filled answers from the resources of his phenomenal memory. Needless to say, my interest never flagged while I taped his words. Additionally, Mr. Shaw, although he only plays occasionally in public, has kept his interest in the piano and music in general. He practises often and seriously, buys sheet-music and learns new pieces. To top it all off, Mr. and Mrs. Shaw form a happy couple, apparently devoid of financial worries. But that's thanks to Robert Shaw's grocery store... Whoever heard of a bluesman getting rich on his music?

Shaw: I was born in Stafford, Texas, about twelve miles from Houston, on August 9th 1908. My daddy owned a ranch in Fort Bend County and Stafford.

Springer: So where did you grow up? Partly on the ranch and partly in the city...

Shaw: That's how we grew up, from the city out to the ranch. You see, Ash County and Fort Bend County, they joins.

Springer: What started your interest in the piano?

Shaw: You see, that was in Prohibition time, when I was a little boy along at that time and, oh I liked to see the women dancin' and hug them fellers playin' the piano and have fun. And, you know how a boy is: he take a likin' to something he grow and, like, I was just a person liked to do something to make other people happy.

Springer: Did anybody play in the family?

Shaw: My mother did and I got another sister plays the piano and I got a baby sister plays and I had another brother played but he died. My mother could play guitar too. She could do most anything.

Springer: What sort of music was she playing?

Shaw: She play spiritual music. You know, that's a rare thing about music when you start to learnin' music if you go to learnin' it: you play a little spiritual, you play a little jazz, you play a little blues, you don't know where you gonna end up at! You realize yourself, you catch on to yourself somewhat along that line there and then you find out where you're goin'. You have a boat as easy... and you become acculturated to it and you just got your right feel and your right bounce! It's the same in playin' the piano. You'll find out what type of pianist...
Robert Springer: “Being Yourself Is More Than Tryin’ To Be Somebody Else”
Robert Springer: “Being Yourself Is More Than Tryin’ To Be Somebody Else”

Robert Shaw (Mack McCormick)

Robert Shaw, a musician from San Antone (now Austin), arrived in Corpus Christi from Kingsville in 1929. He played piano and other instruments, and he was known for his streetwise behavior. He used to have a store where he sold whiskey to people for fifty cents a half-pint. He would also play for tips in the streets.

Shaw: No, just a gambler.

Springer: Did you follow him around?

Shaw: I didn’t. But he wise me up. And I used to be in Houston on the streets and I’d be nice and clean and dressed up. Packs of cigarettes stickin’ up here in my pocket and I wasn’t makin’ a half a block, I wouldn’t have a cigarette. ‘Say buddy, say gimme a cigarette’. ‘No, I just did what my friends said. ’Cause you can’t keep yourself in cigarettes and you gotta do something. ‘I knowed another ole boy hangin’ around the streets all the time and he was a hustlin’ guy too. I see him one day, he got ready for a cigarette, run his hand in his side-pocket and pull his cigarettes out and put ‘em back in his side-pocket and he was standin’ there smokin’. A guy come up ‘Say, gimme a cigarette’. ‘No, I just put my hand in my pocket. I tell you, he’d just put them back in his pocket, he didn’t give him any. You don’t keep your cigarettes where people can see ‘em, always bumming a cigarette. You learn all that kinda stuff, I’m sorry, but if you just keep yourself a cigarette, you’ll be happy. ‘Cause you can’t keep yourself in cigarettes and other folks too.

Springer: So, the first place you played was where that woman had a daughter called Betty, but you weren’t making any money.

Shaw: No. And a dollar a night was about the best you could get.

Springer: How old were you then?

Shaw: Around seventeen, eighteen.

Springer: How long did you keep that up?

Shaw: Until... the saddest thing that ever happened, I was around the Gulf Coast down there: Corpus Christi, Kingsville and I come on up San Antone. I come out of Kingsville to San Antone here (Austin), in 1929. I had been to Kilgore and more people in that town then, the county couldn’t hold so many people there, there’s oil field, and I kinda noticed myself another ole boy outta Houston come up here: his name was Roadside. He’s a good player too, you know. Boy, he was salty! Oh, he was rough. And I stayed ‘round them good piano-players. I liked their timin’: it be so smooth and I tell you what... some pianists have trouble with their piano-playin’: they try to do everything with their right hand, but you run out of that last word in that verse and get to drop, you gonna have to step down for that chorus, you gotta do it with this hand (shows his left hand). Either shoot it up or down: that’s what makes the music sound good. But if you just stay in a natural best, it’s just like beatin’ on a box. That’s where the trick is in this music.

So, when I’m comin’ here, there’s an ole boy here by the name of Boot Walker, he played piano too. Well, I didn’t know him, so I rode hot-shot in here out of San Antone. I got off the train, come on downtown, down on 6th Street, an ole boy down there by the name of Coodle Goose.

Springer: What?

Shaw: Coodle Goose! (laughs). Too much name for me! So I asked him where the sporty class of people hang out. He said ‘Like who?’. I said ‘Piano-players and things’. He said ‘Ole boy live down here. Come on, I’ll go down there a way with you’. So it was round two o’clock, the sun was hot, was in March and we come down ‘bout twelve, fourteen-hundred block on East 6th and we went over one block on 5th and Walker and he live right back down there, ‘bout just time he was eatin’ and I ain’t never been here before, don’t know nobody. So I says ‘I’m a piano-player and I’m lookin’ for other piano-players to tell me where to stay. I just got in here’. So he said ‘Say, play a piece on that piano’. So I did and they commence lookin’ at each other, sayin’ ‘Say, he sure can play, can’t he!’. And they all wanted to know me then, all the ladies commenced comin’ in from outside. So I said ‘I’d appreciate if you could tell me somewhere to stay tonight’. They said ‘Oh, we’ll fix you somewhere to stay. You can stick around here’. So he say ‘All the street women be round here when you get off the street round twelve, one o’clock’. That’s where they’d come in and he’d sell ‘em whiskey, you know. Man, the women commence comin’ in around seven-thirty, twelve o’clock that night and I got to playin’ piano. They party round there until... Finally they all went home. The next mornin’ several ole guys come round there: the women had told ‘em ‘bout what a party he had in there that night. You know, he had money: twelve, fifteen dollars, that’s a whole lot of money in them days. And they went back to the kitchen and they commence shootin’ dice and I played the piano and there were four—five ole girls in there: Lilian, Little Mary, Little Sister, Big Sister; oh, that was them ace street-women and they was buyin’ that whiskey fifty cents a half-a-pint. Fifty cents was just what a dollar and six bits for half-a-pint would cost you now.

So I went back there in the kitchen and they was around there shootin’ dice, had their money all down there. I guess there was ‘bout eighteen, twenty dollars in the game. So I got over there behind this ole boy what I’d stayed with that night. His name was Boot. He done shot off all his cuts and they’d beat him out of all this money from this whiskey he’d sold that night: he had about eighty—ninety cents in his hand. When I come to get him, I was lookin’ for him there but fifteen minutes, wasn’t a soul in there that had a quarter: I done broke every one of ‘em, but you see, all this money was for him, ‘cause he was doin’ all the bettin’. I didn’t have nothin’. They looked at me, one of them ole guys, I think his name was Brock, I said ‘That goddamn raggidy son-of-a-bitch’ (laughs). He said ‘You always got some old raggedy guy round here that’s gonna buy this from us’. Ole Brock, he’s one ‘bout son-of-a-so-and-so, go and get some money and come back for some more gamble’. Now, he had got all the money then (laughs) and then he talked to them like they were long gone... I wasn’t in there ten minutes, broke every one of ‘em.

So, you know, the laws had a racket here right in those days. Everybody they saw on the streets, they’d arrest him, put ‘im in jail. He paid two dollars on his fine and one a half or two dollars a week and they let him out. But he better pay that dollar and a half or they’d go and shoot their him. And they had just about all the street people in town was on the books down there at the jail-house. So I think they had ole Boot ‘bout twenty times. Carnival would come in here and he’d be in the hustlin’ person, they’d arrest him, put ‘im in jail. He paid two dollars on his one fine and one a half or two dollars a week and they let him out. But he better pay that dollar and a half or they’d go and shoot their him. And they had just about all the street people in town was on the books down there at the jail-house. So I think they had ole Boot ‘bout twenty times. Carnival would come in here and he’d be in the hustlin’ person, they’d arrest him, put ‘im in jail. He paid two dollars on his fine and one a half or two dollars a week and they let him out. But he better pay that dollar and a half or they’d go and shoot their him. And they had just about all the street people in town was on the books down there at the jail-house. So I think they had ole Boot ‘bout twenty times. Carnival would come in here and he’d be in the hustlin’ person, they’d arrest him, put ‘im in jail. He paid two dollars on his fine and one a half or two dollars a week and they let him out. But he better pay that dollar and a half or they’d go and shoot their him. And they had just about all the street people in town was on the books down there at the jail-house. So I think they had ole Boot ‘bout twenty times. Carnival would come in here and he’d be in the hustlin’ person, they’d arrest him, put ‘im in jail. He paid two dollars on his fine and one a half or two dollars a week and they let him out. But he better pay that dollar and a half or they’d go and shoot their him. And they had just about all the street people in town was on the books down there at the jail-house. So I think they had ole Boot ‘bout twenty times. Carnival would come in here and he’d be in the hustlin’ person, they’d arrest him, put ‘im in jail. He paid two dollars on his fine and one a half or two dollars a week and they let him out. But he better pay that dollar and a half or they’d go and shoot their him. And they had just about all the street people in town was on the books down there at the jail-house. So I think they had ole Boot ‘bout twenty times. Carnival would come in here and he’d be in the hustlin’ person, they’d arrest him, put ‘im in jail. He paid two dollars on his fine and one a half or two dollars a week and they let him out. But he better pay that dollar and a half or they’d go and shoot their him. And they had just about all the street people in town was on the books down there at the jail-house. So I think they had ole Boot ‘bout twenty times. Carnival would come in here and he’d be in the hustlin’ person, they’d arrest him, put ‘im in jail. He paid two dollars on his fine and one a half or two dollars a week and they let him out. But he better pay that dollar and a half or they’d go and shoot their him. And they had just about all the street people in town was on the books down there at the jail-house. So I think they had ole Boot ‘bout twenty times. Carnival would come in here and he’d be in the hustlin’ person, they’d arrest him, put ‘im in jail. He paid two dollars on his fine and one a half or two dollars a week and they let him out. But he better pay that dollar and a half or they’d go and shoot their him. And they had just about all the street people in town was on the books down there at the jail-house. So I think they had ole Boot ‘bout twenty times. Carnival would come in here and he’d be in the hustlin’ person, they’d arrest him, put ‘im in jail. He paid two dollars on his fine and one a half or two dollars a week and they let him out. But he better pay that dollar and a half or they’d go and shoot their him. And they had just about all the street people in town was on the books down there at the jail-house. So I think they had ole Boot ‘bout twenty times.
goin'? `.Oh, we goin' to Oklahoma City'.'Hot stuff! You know I oughta go up there with y'all'. Said 'Why don't you come on and go?'. I said 'No'. Said 'Aw, man, come on'. He said 'What do you know?'. I said 'I'm a piano-player'. He said 'Man, they need you in Oklahoma City'. I said 'What?'. He said 'Yes, come on! We be leavin' in about twenty – thirty minutes. That freight oughta get in here about twenty – thirty minutes'. So I stood there and talked, stood there and talked and after while, that freight squall comin' up the track: whoaa! [imitates], comin' in town. Santa Fe she pull in there... and I caught it with 'em. Rode on up to a little place and stopped. You could buy a watermelon for a dime. We bought a watermelon and I had four – five dollars, but I had a little tobacco-sack and had it pinned over my underwear in here, you know, and if I ever got hungry, I'd get off to myself and get me fifteen cents and I could eat, you know.

So we went on through Somerville, Buckholts. We got into Temple 'bout four o'clock. We went over to Jay's mama's house and we laid down and went to sleep. So about eight or nine o'clock, we went over to one of those good timin' houses: they had 'em in Temple too. I went home with 'em and one set down on the small house over there and they got so high and we all got drunk and now you... Now, you've heard this about 'The Lord will take care of fools'... All right! I thought I had some sense, but I never had on that day. There's two girls come over from next door. They lived in a small house over there and they got so high they did hardly know their way home and they asked me to come and go home with them. So I went home with 'em and one set down on the front of the bed, the other set down on this part of the bed, I set down in the middle. And those girls were pretty high and I was too, 'cause we'd been drinkin' that stuff. Hot! And they laid back on the bed and I did too and all three of us went to sleep. Now, suppose some ole guy had come in there you couldn't talk to... Do you see what I'm talkin' about? All right, we slept there until about five-thirty, six o'clock. I woke up 'fore any of 'em. I jumped straight up. I said 'You oughta have more sense than this'. I said 'I never seen these people before and I'm sleepin' with two women I've never seen before'. Nice-looking girls, man, they were beauties. So I got ready to go, said 'No, we don't want you to go, we want to take you somewhere'. Hear what I'm fixin' to get into now!... They got in their bath, put on their little street dresses and here we go!

We got to a place where there was a lot: wasn't nothin' on this lot but this one big buildin', but that was the club-house. We walked up and there was trees all round out in there, but they wasn't stacked close to one another. Here one in a big field, here another... People played cards a lot in those days. So I looked and kinda wake myself. This is what I been lookin' for! So we went on in the house. First we went into the dance part. There was a baby grand settin' in the corner, spankin' brand new and everythin': oh man, just shining! I kind of wakened myself, said 'Man, I oughta get some hustlin' goin' on over here'. So I went over to that piano, never did set down, and I just hit it. Zoom! All the women straightened up just like that and they get to lookin' and I hit it again. Then we'd been drinkin' that stuff. Hot! And they laid back on the bed and I did too and all three of us went to sleep. Now, you've heard this about 'The Lord will take care of fools'... All right! I thought I had some sense, but I never had on that day. There's two girls come over from next door. They lived in a small house over there and they got so high they did hardly know their way home and they asked me to come and go home with them. So I went home with 'em and one set down on the front of the bed, the other set down on this
Robert Springer: "Being Yourself Is More Than Tryin' To Be Somebody Else"

Robert Shaw (Norbert Hess)

yonder with that blue shirt on? He sure can play that piano. And I hadn't even played nothing! So he called me. He said 'Hey, buddy, come here!'. I said 'I'll be down in a minute. This lady gonna change'. He said 'Come here! Right now!!'. I said 'I'll be down in a minute'. I kinda knew what he wanted. So she got her dress changed and we got back over there. He said 'Hey, my wife says you can play that piano. I like, I say, 'sure was no dream'. Said 'What you charge to play here tonight?'. I said 'How long you want me to play?'. 'Oh, from 'bout nine to one'. I said 'Dollar-a-half an hour. Ooh, man, I got into it then!! He said 'Where you own room?' (laughs). I say 'I come outa Texas. He says 'Well, you better go back to Texas. You must be son-of-a-so-and-so! . . . Hey, I didn't mean it'. So I didn't say no more, 'cause I didn't know nobody. I didn't even know nobody's name, didn't hardly know mine. So I went on down there among those gamblin' guys and set down and listen to them talkin'. They all knew I was a new guy around there. Wasn't too long, here's a piano-player feller and he went in there and he got to playin' and he played and he played. Man, you talk about people, just like the leaves on that tree. But they was all outside and he had a man at the door gettin' two bits apiece, you know, to come in. There wasn't nobody there but that piano-player and the man on the door. So about a hour, he come back out there and he says 'Where that ole Texas guy?'. Said 'Here he is'. Said 'Tell him I said come here!'. So he said 'It's 'bout ten o'clock; what do you charge to play from ten till one?'. I told him 'Two dollars an hour'. He said 'But you just told me 'a dollar-a-half?!'. I said 'Let me explain this to you if you will: the longer the time is, the less per hour and the shorter the time, the more per hour'. I said 'That's the way it works, 'cause you haven't dealt with many musicians then'. So he say 'You know what?'. I said 'No'. He said 'I'm gonna pay you dollars just to play one hour. That's what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna do that'. I said 'I'll play it for you'. I went on in there, sat down at the piano and I played one piece and when I got through, I think about six or eight couples was on the floor dancin'. So I stopped and chatted and told a little joke, thing like that and they gone to laugin'. While we was talkin' and goin' on some were still comin' in. When I got through with the second piece, I guess he had twenty couples in there. And then he said to me 'You see these forty-nine-cent glasses in' - you know, 'bout six-eight ounce glass - he said to order them half full of whiskey. I sat down and looked at him: 'He won't get all this stuff in me, for sure'. So, wasn't too long, here he come. It was gettin' on down in the night then. I didn't have but ten or fifteen more minutes to go, but, man, that floor was crowded! So I went over there to the door, you know. They was drinking and laughin' and havin' a good time. I said to the door-man 'Say, how much did you get off the door?'. I think he said about sixty-somethin'. Man, that was plenty money, for the times was hard. I didn't have but two dollars cornin' up. So I went up there and he got to playin' and he played and there's a piano-player feller and he went on in that same evenin'. I got twenty-five dollars a week for fifteen minutes, didn't play but two pieces! But the same evenin' I come off there, KFXX radio-station, a rich doctor called the disc-jockey and told him to send me out to his house that night.

Springer: Was that a black station?
Shaw: White. But this was a black fellow that I'd started off with, but I was gettin' over to the white side then. Well, then it was gettin' right into Xmas and I was playin' a big club downtown. So, this doctor had a big party goin' on in Tulsa and he hired Oxen [?] to play in my place and I went to Tulsa to play that Xmas dance.

Springer: How long did you stay in Oklahoma?
Shaw: About two years and I left and went to Kansas City. And I stayed there four or five months or more.

Springer: Why did you go?
Shaw: I just heard so much about Kansas City, I just wanted to go and see for myself.

Springer: What was it you heard about K.C.?
Shaw: Well, they had a blues they used to sing about 'I'm goin' to Kansas City, baby don't you wanna go'. But I run into a lot of static there! I got into K.C. one morning about four o'clock and I asked a guy was there a cabaret open all night, was a place that stay open all night . . . ? Say 'Yeah man, go right there at the corner, go right down the street about two blocks'. Just as I walked up there, man, cars full of laws come from everywhere! But I never did stop goin' to 'em. I just kept going to them and I looked down, big sack of flour layin' in the street: store had been broken into and they was all out and we never asked me a thing. So I stayed there a little while. So finally, I went on up the street where I was goin'. Walked in there. A guy looked at me, he said 'Where you come from? Didn't I see you in Houston about a month ago?'. I say 'I spect so!'. 'Did you play a party on Rooten [?] Street in the fifteen-hundred block?'. I say 'Yeah'. He say 'I was there. Don't you remember me?'. I said 'Not clearly, I don't. I done saw so many people since then'. He says 'I'll tell you what. Come on let's eat a chilli and drink a beer' - and you could get a stew-pot full
of beer for a dime — 'and I want you to play me a piece'. So I went on and I got to playin' and, man, you talkin' 'bout people! I didn't know they was upstairs. There was enough of 'em downstairs. Man, when I hit that piano, whoo ... they come from upstairs! And a guy come from there, bright guy, curley hair and he looked down on me and he said 'Don't you play another god-damn tune!'. I said to myself 'What have I got into now?!'. And he didn't say no more! Finally he wanted to telephone, call a taxi and two women say 'I'm goin' too'. And we goin' to this club down here, 18th and Fores [Forest?]. That club carried everybody. Carried bums on the first floor and carried those that was just above bums on the second floor and the next best on the third floor and the real poppers on the fourth floor. The Panama Cabaret.

So we went up on the third floor and they commence to buyin' that white whiskey and I start to playin' this piano and, man, them people raised the fog until daylight. We went to this house, wasn't but two blocks up the street. He lived on Tracy & Fores. Right back there was a big big flat and when he ring that door-bell a woman come to that door, and he'd just left two more women he'd been with all night. He's one of them really slickers: nice-looking fellers, 'bout thirty years old. And that woman, her hair was black and all her hands here was black, but man, that was the prettiest black woman I ever see in my life! And she had her teeth half-crowned 'long here. Just had chips of diamonds in 'em. When she laughed, you couldn't see nothin' but sparkles. Oh, she was beautiful! From her feet to the top of her head! So he said 'Go on and fix my friend a beer, we got to take me them books down there that evening and that man ... no, that was on a morning they hit that wheel and I take me them books at twelve o'clock and I stayed there until that night; the next day, the people got toollerin' 'bout they wanted their money. I couldn't pay 'em and I couldn't find the men. And so I just went on back and packed up my things and come here to Texas. They were slick guys!

Shaw: Why did you leave K.C.?
Shaw: Musicians get tired of looking at people ... I come back to Oklahoma City about four — five months.

Robert Springer: "Being Yourself Is More Than Tryin' To Be Somebody Else"
Shaw: You know what makes a person think when you’re fooling with music is the problem that you have and it rests on your mind, just like a piece of blues about ... just like old boy, he had lady trouble and he got to singing this song ‘bout (sings):

In the evening, in the evenin’, baby when the sun goes down
Ain’t it lonesome, ain’t it lonesome, babe, when the one you love is not around.
Last night I lay a-sleepin’, thinkin’ to myself
Last night I lay a-sleepin’, thinkin’ to myself

Worried, thinkin’ ‘bout the girl I love and she lovin’ someone else.’

I don’t know who put that out. I just heard it on a record. If a record hit the market and it’s anything that I like, well, I get it.

You know what I can do, I can go to a place and I can play one tune and I’ll watch the phrases and the bars that I set this tune upon and watch the people and I can tell whether I test ‘em or not. When I lead there with the next piece, I got ‘em! The words is accordin’ to what you want to sing about. You hear me singin’ ‘Piggly Wiggly’: ‘I got groceries on my shelf?’ You rhyme the words in with whatever category that that thinkin’ is on. Piggly Wiggly was a supermarket chain.

Now, people have had a pretty cultured type of life. He don’t have the idea, he don’t think about blues like a fellow that’s been compressed. Just like, say, if you had to go back to France and you had to walk back, didn’t know how you’s gonna get back, it would put something on your mind, you’d have some kind of song (laughs) fixed up, I tell you for sure! Well, that’s the way them songs come up.

Springer: Where do you get your songs from mostly? Others or yourself?

Shaw: Now, listen at this. I don’t know whether you’ve heard this number. I got it in there [inside the house], I’m gonna play it in there. Now, if we was on a party and there was three or four girls there. An old black girl there, man she was, you talk about a handsome baby, she was a baby! Feet, eyes, legs, nose, mouth, everything fit! Her and two more girls was there and they left and about thirty–forty minutes, two–three of us left and another ole boy named Joe Pullum and we went, the house that face the street just like this and we went this-a-way two blocks and turned right and went up the street south and when we got about half-a-block up the street, we met them three girls comin’ back. So Joe Pullum says to this girl what was with these other girls, this black girl, he said: ‘Say black girl!’ She didn’t say nothin’. Said ‘Black girl!’. She just kept on walkin’. He said: ‘What make your doggone head so hard?’

All right! Now, there was a boy down there named Purdue, and Shine and myself and Joe Pullum. Well, we went down to that party-house. Here Purdue come up playin’ the blues and this gal come in the door: the same black gal and Joe Pullum here he come (sings falsetto): ‘Black gal, black gal, woman, what make your nappy head so hard, I would come to see you, but your bad man has got me barred’. Joe Pullum brought that song up. Come right out of Fourth Ward, Houston, and he went on to say about (sings):

‘I’m going to the ‘sylum, I’m going to the ‘sylum to see if I had lose my mind.
I keep thinkin’ and worrying ‘bout that black gal all the time.’

I bet he sold a million records and that song come out of two men and half-a-pint of whiskey.

Springer: Purdue played the piano accompaniment for Joe Pullum ... ?

Shaw: Purdue played it for him, Joe. He was just singin’, he couldn’t play and Purdue was a boy out of Third Ward, I don’t know what his first name was. He left Houston and went to Chicago and hasn’t been back there since. That

Robert Springer: "Being Yourself Is More Than Tryin’ To Be Somebody Else"

was back in the twenties. That piece hit the market about ’24 or ’25. You oughta heard this Joe Pullum sing it. Man, he could bash your brains out! He had a very peculiar kind of voice and Purdue played it in B flat: (sings falsetto): ‘Black gal, woman what make you so hard,’ the man, he could blow it! Springer: He was singing about ‘your bad man’s got me barred’. Where did he get this idea from? Because he’d only seen that girl at the party and on the street...

Shaw: That’s all he saw! (laughs).

Springer: So why did he put that in?

Shaw: I don’t know. He made that up there some kind of way and then he said her head was just as hard as a two-by-four in some lumber-yard (laughs).

Springer: Just make it up...?

Shaw: Yeah. Just make it up and make it come out to a rhyme, that all.

Shaw: When you hear a piece you like, do you put the same words you heard when you play it later or some new ones?

Shaw: Sometimes the person that come up with the piece... You’ll put a little more thinkin’ in your idea. You gotta put some of you in there. If you learn to play a piece, you gotta play it your way, but after all, it’s his number. But if a person ask you can you play such and such a thing, you put the same words you heard when you put in on this drink, you wind up you ain’t got no more. You had a different style of music, had that jazz to... and tote you. Houston, Galveston, from Louisiana, say, yeah from Louisiana, I’ll put it that a-way: all round that Gulf Coast to San Antonio, did you know it afforded all the piano-players that they needed in London come in that country. They just couldn’t stay; them piano-players was too tough down there. Them piano-players was rough there in Houston. Oh man, them babies was salty! You’d hear them pianos whistlin’, just talkin’ like a man. And like I been all through the country, you didn’t hear no kind of piano-players. They felt their music just didn’t come up to them. But Houston had a different style of music, had that jazz to it and they could just bounce, you know, like that and tote you. Houston, Galveston, from Louisiana on down.

Springer: Did you meet people like Sykes, Little Brother in the early days?

Shaw: I met ’em in the later days. They didn’t get down that far. I don’t know why no piano-players didn’t come in that part of the country. But they had some salty dogs down there. You take this ole boy Willie Pickens and Shine, Jack Coleman, Rusty Johnson and Scanty Smith, Willie B. Smith, Peg Leg Will, Robert Shade, Dee and I ain’t called half of ’em. Man, them people was salty! And all those boys are dead.

They had a ole boy in Galveston, name was Andy Boy. I don’t know whether he’s dead or not. Man, he’s salty, whoo! He was rough! Springer: What sorts of places did you like to play best?

Shaw: I loved clubs and special engagements and things like that. Well, I tell you what turned me to jazz. I used to play popular music when I was tryin’ to learn to play the piano and this boy Roadside, he could play more popular music than you could name. Well, this boy Shine and Jack Coleman and all them other guys I was tellin’ you about were dressed up and nice and clean, shoes shined every day, but they was playin’ at these drinkin’ places. Now, at a popular place you play a piece and (claps slowly and coldly) that’s all they got for you... Now, you can play a piece in jazz at a club, roadhouse or dancing-hall or whatever you might call it... old gal walk up there and give me five dollars, say ‘Hey, play my piece’. And if I make like I’m ready to go, she like to give me twenty dollars: ‘Say, play my piece here’. That’s the way they do you ‘round them places. And if you were in the orchestra, you make fifteen dollars a night, with your board and your laundry, but you makin’ a flat fifteen dollar clear profit. All right! Now, if you get your drinks, you gonna have to put in on this drink, put in on this drink, you wind up you ain’t made but six dollars on that night! Now, I’m gonna be in this club, I’m gonna make fifty dollars, better nights make a hundred.

Springer: And you get your drinks free...?

Shaw: Pooh! What you talkin’ ‘bout, more drinks than I can drink! See.

Springer: Do you try to play every piano style?

Shaw: I’ve learnt that being yourself is more than tryin’ to be somebody else.

Springer: What about Alex Moore in Dallas? He also plays Texas style, don’t you think?

Shaw: I never have heard him!

Springer: Do you know other piano-players outside Houston that used to be?

Shaw: Now, Andy Boy was a top kicker there in Galveston. Now, he was good, he was sure good. Oh man, he could play some of the durn-

Robert Springer: "Being Yourself Is More Than Tryin' To Be Somebody Else"

Robert Shaw (Mike Rowe)

dest songs and the piano'd be talking just as smooth as he be talking. That's what you mean 'bout playing the piano, play it smooth! And it was a long time before I could really get that thing drilled out like it should be when I was learnin', but when I fooled around there one day and I got to handlin' them notes and them notes come out just as smooth and clear, I say: 'That's the way I want this thing to sound!'.

Springer: Did you teach yourself to read the notes?

Shaw: I had someone to teach me the notes. In the twenties.

Springer: Why did you think it was useful to know the notes?

Shaw: I wanted something to protect myself. Sometime it throws you a little late. Come on, let me show you something. [We go back inside for more piano.]

Springer: Did you ever meet Blind Lemon Jefferson?

Shaw: No. I heard lots of him, but I never did meet him! I wasn't much of a lad when he was runnin'. I wasn't allowed out the yard when he was cuttin' up.

Springer: Did you ever bump into people like Texas Alexander?

Shaw: No.

Springer: What about Mance Lipscomb?

Shaw: I met Mance Lipscomb in the sixties.

Springer: And Lightnin' Hopkins?

Shaw: I run into Hopkins in the sixties too.

Springer: So you were really not in contact with any guitar-players. Only pianists.

Shaw: Nothing but those guys in Houston clear up to Louisiana way, but I got acquainted with those after I left Houston. They just didn't never come round in the southern part. Now you take them boys, them good piano-players what's dead, they never got no further round that Gulf Coast. I'm the only one that ever left there.

Springer: Did you ever see any piano-players in those minstrel-shows and medicine-shows they used to have?

Shaw: Yeah, there was a bunch of'em, but I never did know any of'em because they all come from... they pick up them people out of Alabama, Mississippi and Georgia and all down in there. They pick up them musicians.

Springer: What sort of music would they play?

Shaw: They playin' 'Dinah', and 'Red Hot Mama', 'Sweet Georgia Brown'. They play some blues and such songs like 'How Come You Do Me Like You Do' and, oh man, they could whup that out, 'Baby Won't You Please Come Home', 'Baby Where You Stay Last Night' and all that kind of stuff.

Springer: What about the medicine shows?

Shaw: That's what they were playing. Minstrel-shows, medicine-shows. Same thing!

Springer: I always thought the medicine-shows were too small to have piano-players...

Shaw: No, no. Uh-uh. Oh man, that's what they sell that medicine on, with the minstrel shows! That music there they play, 'Sweet Georgia Brown', but you see, they chop it up so bad you wouldn't know what it was. Ta tatata ta ta ta tatata. That's ragtime style, that's what they played 'Georgia Brown' on. And then, when they quit dancin', the comedians go back in the tent, then the man he's ready to sell his medicine. And this was good for anything in the world. If you were blind, it make you see, if you had one leg, you'd have two next mornin' if you take it. This medicine was good for nothin', it wouldn't cure nothin'. That's the way they ought to had it! And them people, them poor ladies, run up with they aprons on you know, just got through: 'Er, gimme two bottles....' (laughs). Wasn't nothin' but coffee water, ah, ah. They'd have a piano and a trumpet and a drum and a trombone; a four-piece orchestra and a gal or two, and a feller or two and he would do that buck-dancin' and them ladies would jump and shake they hips and squat and do the Charleston and they be shakin' they hips: (sings):

'If I could shimmy like my sister Kate Jelly roll like the jelly rollin' in the plate Jelly roll, jelly roll sure is hard to find Ain't a baker shop in town can roll jelly like mine.'

Man, they'd cut up! And then here comes this man: (shouts) 'Doctor Vaughn's Medicine!'. Ha, ha. Them people buy a truck-load of that medicine in one night.

Springer: Did you ever work on those things?

Shaw: No, I never did work on those medicine-shows.

Springer: Did those medicine-shows come into town as well as in the country? Big cities like Houston?

Shaw: Yeah. Sure! They'd be standin' on the street, on the sidewalk until they run 'em off. They know that medicine wasn't nothing, they're robbin' the people, you know, with their junk and they parkin' in the cities there. You know, that was before the cities got popular enough to make 'em buy licenses, cut out certain things and let other things go. You know, cities ain't gonna stand and see somebody come here and rob the people just because they know how. And that's all that was: that medicine, oh man, it take corns off your feet, if your hair was short, it was good for that, oh man, it make somebody love you, who you wanted to, and you wanted them and they didn't want you! Oh man, it was good for everything!

Springer: I thought the medicine shows were never big enough to have a piano...

Shaw: Oh man, they did! In a panel truck, 'bout a ton-and-a-half truck, a ton truck, you know, something like that, ten-twelve foot long, that piano setting up there on it. Them medicine-shows'd stay in the town sometime a week!

Notes

1 Reported as 'Roadhouse' elsewhere.
2 Boot Walton — see Dr. Hep Cat article.
3 On record at least Pullum's accompanist was Rob Cooper or Andy Boy. 'Black Gal' was recorded in 1934.