Buddy Moss talks to
Valerie Wilmer

"BUDDY MOSS? Oh he's really a mean guy—you ought to stay clear of him!" That was one of several warnings I received on making it known that I intended to visit the Atlanta bluesman who had shared one of Josh White's first record dates.

I'd been told Moss was moody and mean and knew he'd served a jail term stiff enough to put paid to his successful recording career back in the mid-thirties, so naturally I approached his house with some trepidation.

Moss had rather barked down the telephone when I'd mumbled something about an interview and the man who thrust his head round the door looked like the voice sounded.

Sturdy and well-muscled for a man of 58, his broad shoulders and close-cropped, pugnacious head represented much more than the arrogance that stems from insecurity.

Moss is tough because he's had a lot to contend with in his life; he's also a man of great personal charm—something I not only experienced myself but observed from the warmth with which he was greeted later that afternoon.

They'd also told me Buddy Moss was "difficult." What people who'd tried to exploit his talent did not—or did—realise is that Buddy Moss is not about to get talked over by anyone.

"People been coming round here asking me to record things," said the guitarist. "Well, you have to give something every once in a while—but to a worthy cause. There's no sense in making one person richer when you are getting poorer."

Flattery carries very little weight with Moss who was shrewd enough thirty years ago to guide his old friend Brownie McGhee, to royalties that were due to him.

"Lots of the rock bands, they're trying to go over to the blues—or at least to do their things in a bluesy way," said Moss.

"This English guy called me—he does lots of stuff that B. B. King does. He talked to me once, said he wanted me to do just a session, but you know most of those guys, when they want you to do 'just a session,' then there's something in there that they want. They'll do it and then they say to themselves 'Yeah, man, we really did this thing right!'

"Next time, next thing you hear is what you did with them and you hear it some other place! You get Paid for the session but they collect the royalties. In fact, every song that I write I copyright it. Then, if things do change, I'm the owner."

Between January 1933 and August 1935, Moss recorded 59 titles under his own name. He also backed Blind Willie McTell and played harmonica behind his old running partner, Curley Weaver, on sessions from the same period.
His best songs financially he recalls, were "When I'm Dead and Gone" and "V-8 Ford," but his period of incarceration put an end to his recording career until 1965 when he played the Atlanta Blues Festival and cut a date for Columbia. The session has never been released, and Moss is understandably bitter.

"They'll leave it on the shelf for 4 or 5 years and tie you up so you can't record for no-one else, then release it and it's a hit. They'll push something else as long as they can, and then when it starts going down, they'll reach for you or anyone else they can." But yet and still blues always had a little spot here with me" — Moss touched his heart — "And it doesn't make no difference if there's no words to the music, as long as it's a blues, I just love it." Moss came originally from "a little old country town," Jewell, Georgia, and moved through Augusta to the state's capital as a child. He started playing the harmonica at the age of 12 or 13 but did not pick up the guitar till around 1931.

He taught himself to play by listening to records by Blind Blake and Blind Lemon Jefferson, and through personal contact with Barbecue Bob. He met Josh White, who came from Greenville, South Carolina, on his second record date.

"We never worked together as a team," he said. "Sometimes, if I was going to record, he would be there also, so we'd get together and maybe do a few things together. He'd think of this thing, and maybe I'd think of that thing, and finally we'd do something.

"We spent a lot of time together, and I also worked with Barbecue Bob and Curley Weaver, but practically all the old guys are dead. I was more or less a loner after they died, in fact I've been a loner for practically all my life."

Moss has done very little playing since he appeared at the Newport Festival a couple of years ago, because his wife became ill and he decided to take a day job for security reasons.

"Some places in Atlanta there's interest in blues, but some like sentimental, some like Country and Western. I'm going to stick with blues—I can do other things, but I just don't like anything except blues.

"See, I've lived the blues and I love the blues. You take a little of what we call heritage—some people say you forget it, but you never do forget that. It doesn't make any difference—unless you're very young, you understand—that's something you can't forget,"

There is a possibility that Buddy Moss may be headed for Europe some time this year. Should the tour materialise, there's no doubt that he still can play judging from the little I heard of his gentle guitar and wistful way of singing which is so dramatically opposed to the hard headed, tough-guy image he projects for self-preservation.

"No" he smiled, "I don't think it's strange that people in Europe should be interested In the blues—Europe or anywhere else—because you can take the blues and do anything you want with it.

You can't take a sentimental song or jazz—and I'd say jazz was originated from blues, anyway—and make a blues out of it. Maybe some people could, but it'd be very hard to do because if you never had the blues, you don't know 'em.

"You don't have to have lived a hard life yourself, you have to see the other people lead a hard life and
know blues. I'd say that round in the 'thirties it was grand for me but it was tough on other peoples—you see my point?

"You know I couldn't say that because I see you live a hard life and I don't, that I have to do it in order to sing the blues, but I've seen so much of how people did live though it was grand for me; Musicians, in a way—they had a good time. The only thing is, sometimes a guy trusts people too much, which I had the misfortune of doing with two or three bad business ventures.

"If you can't trust a human, you're in bad condition, but now it's getting to be dog-eat-dog, you know."

Moss shook his head sadly. Wisely, he changed the subject

"Would you like to hear an old country blues?" he asked, reaching for his venerable dark brown Gibson.

"I don't like it, but you might." I certainly did.