The Blues Aesthetic

PART I

by BILL FERRIS

During my field research in the Mississippi Delta I have tried to relate blues to the singers of the region. Rather than impose personal ideas and concepts on Delta blues, I sought those of the singers themselves. One way of determining the bluesman's musical "aesthetic" was to play selections of other unknown musicians and solicit comments and criticisms of their work.

It was with this purpose in mind that I taped the following interview with Arthur Lee Williams, an outstanding blues harmonica player who lives on a dirt road three miles northeast of Lula, Mississippi. Williams knew Robert Nighthawk and played with him numerous times. He farms during the week and at the weekends plays with Frank Frost, a blues guitarist from Lula. He sometimes plays with the weekends with Frank Frost, a blues guitarist from Lula, Mississippi, and now and then with John Lee Hooker.

A number of the selections by Lee Kizart and Lovey Williams can be heard on The Blues Are Alive and Well (XTRA 1109). Blues World readers will probably be interested in comparing their own reactions to the music with those of Williams, whose perspective is that of a Delta bluesman. This interview was recorded in the home of Arthur Lee Williams on August 8, 1968. Selections played during the interview are indicated by capital letters.

LOVEY WILLIAMS:

BOOGIE CHILLUN (XTRA 1109)

That's pretty nice. He got nice balance for a one-man outfit. The timing is good. Like when you dance, you got to have time to make your movements in the dancing. If you don't have time to make your movements in the dancing, they'll catch you in the wrong position. I think that's pretty good.

LOVEY WILLIAMS:

CRAWLING KINGSNAKE

He bases his music on somebody. He gets his inspiration from somebody else. Just like me, for instance, I like Little Walter's style. I kicked off with Little Walter and then I ended up with a mixture of Little Walter and Sonny Boy Williams (Rice Miller), too. He (Lovey Williams) can impersonate John Lee Hooker to a tee. He (Hooker) tried to get me to cut some with him, but I couldn't stay in time with him. We tried to work together, but we never could get together cause he just couldn't play the right time.

(Ferris) You can't play certain people's "times"?

Music is based on a time altogether. You got four-four counts. You got eight counts. You got twelve phrases, that's long stuff like B.B. King and Bobby Bland. That's mostly twelve-bar phrases. You know how they hold their lyrics.

Four count is with four beats. If you got your music based on a certain count, you got to keep to that. If you start out on a four-count, you can stretch it from a four count to a eight, far as that concerned. But you got to keep it balance - you can't go back and forth like that. If you do, you'll mess your dancers up. Take me, for instance. If a guy plays in four or eight or twelve, if he keeps it right, I can play with any band that's playing.

(Ferris) You couldn't stay with John Lee Hooker cause he wasn't keeping right time?

That's right. I couldn't stay with him. But when he got the other part of his band, they don't pay his guitar any attention and they balance it. You know everybody got their style. If his style wasn't in there it probably wouldn't sound like him at all. You could hear his voice, but you'd say "That's John Lee Hooker singing with somebody else."

WASH HERRON:

LOOKA THERE and LEMON SQUEEZER.

(The above selection is a blues harmonica player in the style of Rice Miller.) He making his changes pretty good there. He plays all right. He don't have very much harmonica in his playing. He sing and he spots it. He got a spotting type of harmonica in there to kind of balance his music. I sure believe I know the guy.

Fred McDowell - photo by John Earl,

FRED MCDOWELL

HIGHWAY 61.

(The above selection was recorded by the author in Como in 1968) He's pretty good. I like that.

(Ferris) Why?

He got nice wording. He got manner to it. "Some people think they're wisest, bound buses don't run." Then he got the rhyming in it too. Like the people make up words that don't ever have a rhyming to it. Like you way well he may say nonsense or anything.

I like the rhyme to it. I knew a fellow that played in that style once. He was a fine fellow. He had a regular kitchen knife and two sticks in his fingers: one of rock and roll and he was bad with a guitar. That called him Cut. And he had some songs that was on sight. He was an old fellow. I imagine when he died, he was about seventy. He was a tough old man, but he taught them whiskey and them late hours and drugs heavily. He was a good guitar player in his style. At that time we had stepped on that bracket.

Course we already were out of that bracket, him being as old as he was. That made us a little different in style, you know. We would cut a loose and do him play what he wanted to play. He played all the real old stuff.

(Ferris) Where do you reckon the blues comes from originally?

Well, blues actually is around you ever day. That's just a feeling from what a person you know. You have a hard time and things happen. Look like every time you get free, something else happen. Hardship between you and your girl, or maybe you and your girlfriend, or something like that. Downheartedness, that's all it is. Hardship. You express it through your song, I guess.

(Ferris) Where do you reckon the songs come from, the style of playing we all that?

I don't know. Sometime that's a feeling within you. If you figure out some song. you automatically gonna figure out a matching background (musical) to it. If you don't know how to write music, you may sit down and just hum something to yourself. You try that to see if that don't work, you hum you or something else. You may pick out something from some other song and switch it around a little bit.

LEE KIZART:

I GOT THE WORLD IN A JUG, BABY, AND THE STOPPER IN MY HAND

(XTRA 1109)

He used to play church music. I can tell from his piano playing. (Interestedly, Kizart is concerned with the division between blues and religious music and discusses his feelings in the interview published in Blues Unlimited: "Lee Kizart Tells The Delta Blues" vol. 72, May 1970, pp. 9-10.)

(Ferris) Is there a special style for church music?

There is. You can tell in Ray Charles's singing. He used to sing with a blind spiritual quartet. Did you know that? He did and you still can hear it in his voice. He (Kizart) pulls away from it at times, but now when he comes to the church, he watch him. See that downbeat. That's
heads is set in a groove and they can't get out there. I notice that about a lot of guys. They have a certain style and even if they play another number, you can still hear that old style in there.

I'd git some of them same old guys that you got recorded there, and try to git to them to do some of the new stuff. If they can do it, I bet you can still hear some of that old stuff that they put on first. It's in there and they can't git outta. That's the problem there. What you call it.

At one time I got in a position like that. I noticed all my solos was getting like that. I had concentrated on solo stuff and I really like it. It's all in practicing. But it is now, if you don't practice you stay in the same old category and don't git any new stuff. A lot of the stuff that come out, you never can git it just like the record, but you can git close to it. When you start to playing, you can put it over to the people and they know what you doing. But they done got away from rehearsals, but you can play without that.

Lee Rizart - photo by Bill Ferris

These old guys, they just didn't never play with anybody. They played by themselves all the time, or either just a two-piece. Just like you had a harmonica and a guitar, that's all he'd hear. At that time there really wasn't any bands, and these guys would just git together where they had good cold beer and a little whiskey and they'd just set there and enjoy themselves.

But if you put these guys with a five or six-piece band, they wouldn't know what to do or where to start at. Your Pine Top, (see Blues From the Delta pp. 62-86) we had him down on the organ and he was gone, man. He didn't leave any space in there for the others to play. He was playing all the parts. He didn't give the harmonica a chance to play and he'd cut us off during the solos, if you did sneak one in. That's no practice. That's all I can say. I used to do it before I started practicing. I had some good sounds but I didn't have the time. I know I had a tough sound, but I learned how to follow the time. It took me about two years to straighten that out.

To be continued.

NOTE: This research was done with support from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research.
The Blues Aesthetic
PART TWO

by BILL FERRIS

This is the second interview (Part One in BW 42) with Delta blues singers which sought to get criticism of different blues styles from the singers themselves. Though not as long as the earlier discussion with Arthur Lee Williams, this conversation with James Thomas is particularly revealing in the comments on Fred McDowell's Highway Sixty-One. As mentioned in the earlier article, some of the selections can be heard on The Blues Are Alive and Well (Transatlantic XTRA 1105) and have been marked accordingly. This interview was recorded in Leland, Mississippi, in the home of James Thomas in July, 1968.

LOVEY WILLIAMS
BOOGIE CHILLUN (XTRA 1105)

That one is all right, only just he left out a few chords on it. He's playing one beat all the way through it, and it (the original recording) got some lead music to it. The singing is perfect, but he ain't got the verses the way they go. Now he could make another record of it, singing it different.

(Ferris) Where would he get the music to go to it?

All he got to do is change the tune he had there.

LOVEY WILLIAMS
CRAWLING KINGSNAKE

Now that's more perfect. He's playing the lead like John Lee Hooker.

WASH HERRON
LOOKA THERE

That's one you got me on there. I ain't never heard that one. That's played real good.

FRED MCDOWELL
HIGHWAY SIXTY-ONE

Now that's played good, but when we played the Sixty-One Highway we played it different. When he says "Sixty-one highway is the longest highway he know, Runs from New York to the Gulf of Mexico," well we said "Runs from Chicago down to the Gulf of Mexico" and he says it runs from New York to the Gulf of Mexico. So that's the only mistake I see about it. Quite naturally I hadn't heard the record of that but I've heard men play it.

(Ferris) If you were learning a song and you heard it from a man one way and a record the other way, which way would you sing it?

Quite naturally whatever verse you like in the other, that's what you'll put it in. Just like if you hear me sing a record about "Sixty-one highway is the longest road I know, Runs from New York to the Gulf of Mexico," well that's way off the line. It would sound better to run from Chicago down to the Gulf of Mexico.

(Ferris) Why is New York off the line?

Well, sixty-one highway don't go through New York. New York City is on the Atlantic Ocean.

(Ferris) When you say "record" do you mean, a song somebody sings or something that's on a record?

Well these old songs, mighty near all of them that was made and ain't been on a record is hard to find. The fellows what used to play them songs, they sing them same verses and they ain't gonna play a bit longer than the record is supposed to go.

Well nowadays you git to playing and as long as the people is enjoying the record and dancing, they plays on it. You just keep a playing.

(Ferris) Where do you get your verses from?

Well you have to get verses out of records. You can get a verse out of each record and make you a recording of your own.

(Ferris) But if you playing for a group of people and they keep on dancing and you don't know but three verses, where do you get your other verses?

That's something else I can do. If I'm playing and don't know the song, I can add verses as I play. It comes to me, the right verses, as what to say and everything. I can make them match with the music, bring it in time. Just like if you were gonna make up a song about Vicksburg. Now you heard about the song they made up a long time ago about "Vicksburg on the high hill and Jackson just below." Well now that fellow, he was making that by head, you see. He skipped way over from Jackson to Vicksburg.

Most records is made up about women. That's what most records is made about.

(Ferris) Around here are most of the blues singers men or women?

We have lots of quartet women that sing in church, but we don't have too many blues-singing women here.

(Ferris) Why is that?

Well it's some used to sing, but they quit. I don't know why they quit. Now you take in Chicago, they comes down from Chicago with them big groups and sing. When my brother was playing guitar in Chicago, he brought Lilian Hopkins down here. Now its women here (in Leland) can sing like her, but you can't hardly find them.

LEE KIZART
I GOT THE WORLD IN A JUG, BABY, AND THE STOPPER IN MY HAND (XTRA 1105)

Now that sounds real good. I believe he's trying to imitate Walter Davis. I play trying to imitate Walter Davis. I play chords kind of like Walter Davis.

(Ferris) If you had to pick between all the one, which one would you think is best?

That one on the piano.

(Ferris) Why do you think that?

It just sounds better to me.

(Ferris) Which one has the best voice?

The first one you played (Lovey Williams). He playing just about how he got a good voice. He playing just like John Lee Hooker. But I just like

LOVEY WILLIAMS
LIGHTNING LEE

piano music. I used to play a lot of records of Piano music.

(Ferris) Whereabouts have you played?

Clarksdale is as far north as I've played, Lexington, Mississippi, that's as far east as I've been. I hadn't did no playing over in Greenville to amount to nothing. I went over there a time or two. The furthest south I've played is Jacksonville. I went there and recorded a record on Farish Street a few years ago. But the amplifier I had had a lot of static in it. That was the cause that my record didn't pass.

(Ferris) How far west did you go?

No further than Greenville.

(Ferris) Do you know most of the musicians around this area?

I know practically all of them. It's the same type of music, but everybody don't play the same. You take if you playing a lead guitar and you ain't used to playing in a group, it's kind of rough when you first go to playing with somebody. When I first come up here, I couldn't hardly play with none of the fellows round here because I always played by myself. I always played my lead and bass together for myself. After I got here and played with the boys, that caused me to play nothing but lead or bass. That makes it easier on you and you can play a lot of records they making today, you can't play lead and bass by yourself because your lead is way down on the guitar and your bass is way up in A flat somewhere.

The Carl Jones Story
by Cary S. Baker

Carl Jones' association with the blues goes back to his first music lesson. Having studied in Waxahachie, Texas, under Mr. R.B. Robinson, Carl learned trombone and several other instruments. Later, he became a singer and musician in Robinson's band and appeared on several local broadcasts.

Job opportunities took Carl to Chicago. There he joined many bands, including the Carolina Cotton Pickers, and recorded, semi-successfully, for Mercury and for Maro Williams. His vocals were in the Jimmy Witherspoon vein. Carl was also associated with Willie Dixon and, without credit, co-wrote many of Dixon's famous tunes. Dixon was a great influence on Jones' writing and vice-versa.

Failure to receive airplay on Chicago radio prompted Carl to start his own small label to promote talent he developed himself. Thus the C. J. label began, followed by a sister label, Firma, and another label, Colt, which was associated with Chicago D.J. Big Bill Hill. Three 78s' were produced (100, 101, 600), and the rest 45's.

Carl Jones' R & B men for C.J. were At Perkins' little brother, Ike, and Freddie Hall, his accompanist. The two appear on many of the C.J.'s sides. Carl Jones' discovery, Phillips Smiley, recorded a number for C.J. and soon signed as a blues singer for the Duke Ellington orchestra. Issues by Ike Perkins ('Ike's Boogie') and Freddie Hall ('Little Baby's Rock') appeared and had regional success. Further issues in the post-war
Chicago blues vein were produced. Sides appeared by the likes of Hound Dog Taylor, Little Mack, Earl Hooker, Lee Jackson, Bobby Davis and Slim Wilkins. Big Bill Hill's recordings of Eddie Shaw behind Magic Sam and Honeydick James were issued on Cobra. Other issues were timely r&b vocal groups of the 50s, schlock singers, and fine religious groups.

Carl is indeed a busy man. He holds several jobs. By day he works for Gold Label whiskey manufacturers; Sundays he works as a bartender at Theresa's lounge, a blues club, and of course he produces and sells C.J. records. He lives not far from Theresa's and is enjoying the moderate international interest in his recordings. This is the only thing that keeps C.J. Records going.

Patterson: My guitar playing is worse than ever for the company, but oddly his newly released Gloria Fowler record is No. 3 on a Louisiana station. The reassure LP on my Blue Flame label has renewed interest in his vintage recordings.

Jones is at present in the process of locating unreleased tapes and identifying them and will soon issue several additional LPs on C.J. He also intends to re-record Lee Jackson and Bobby Davis. Carl Jones can be contacted at 6827 South Prairie Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60621, U.S.A.

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**DELTA REMINISCENCES**

Floyd Patterson interviewed by David Evans (Crystal Springs, Mississippi) August 31 and September 2, 1970.

One of the Crystal Springs musicians interviewed by David Evans when he was doing field research for his Studio Vista book on Tommy Johnson was guitarist Floyd Patterson, whose brother T.J. had learnt guitar from Johnson. Patterson, although not especially interested in blues himself, has met and played with many blues musicians and his reminiscences provide some fascinating sidelights on pre-war Delta bluesmen and Patterson's World War II musical activities.

Also included in this edited transcript are comments from Mott Willis, a prominent Crystal Springs bluesman now in his seventies.

Evans: You've got a brother?

Patterson: Yeah, T.J. Patterson.

Evans: He plays guitar too?

Patterson: That's right. My brother John, he plays too.

Evans: Which one is the oldest?

Patterson: John. I'm next, T.J. is the next. I'm the youngest.

Evans: How old are you?

Patterson: I'm sixty. Born 1910. Learned to play in 1927. This here's my 43rd year.

Evans: What's your birthday?

Patterson: March 8, 1910. I learned in 1927.

Evans: Who did you learn from?

Patterson: I played with myself. From my brother. He learned when he lived in the Delta in 1925.

Evans: Where did he live?

Patterson: He lived in Rolling Fork. He came back here. He came back home and stayed. He had a guitar, and he's play. He told me I was dumb. My head was too thick, and I would never learn. But I wasn't interested in it. All of 1926 he tried to teach me, but I wouldn't take no interest. In '27 I went and bought me a Stella guitar. That was the best guitar and couldn't tune it up. And so we was living out here in the country, back on the east side. I heard him playing the guitar. And I heard him play me. Well, I heard him play the guitar. I noticed him. He came out there. He asked my mother whose guitar was that. She told him. He'd say, 'What are you going on buying a new guitar, and he can't even tune it up?' Well, she told him, 'That's his money. And so, I knew the way he played in C. And when he put the guitar down, I put my fingers like he had his and hold it up to my ear where he couldn't hear me. And I walked two miles with my fingers in a cramp like that. Walked from the road where I showed you. It was the Great Northern Railroad. It was about 12 o'clock. The fourth Sunday in August, 1927. I never will forget it. I came out the next morning about three o'clock, and I could play just as good as I can play now. So I knew he was coming here the next Saturday. And I was watching for him. And I see him coming around that curve. I took that guitar and went to playing it. And I just knocked him off his feet. He asked me, 'Who's playing the guitar?' She said, 'Floyd.' 'He can't play no guitar,' she said. 'He's been playing ever since last Sunday night.' And that's the way I learned. And I met Houston Stackhouse. He was blowing a French horn. And I kept on at him to put that French horn down. And he got a guitar and followed me everywhere I went. I eventually got him started to playing. -<-

Evans: That was here in Crystal Springs?

Patterson: He played Crystal Springs.

Evans: Jack Smith, too. I live right up here, and he live on this side of my house. I get off work at five o'clock. Every night until Jack learned, he stayed at my house from five o'clock up until two, every morning until he learned. They was the cause of me getting this outfit for Christmas. After they came back here, they wanted me to play some. And so, here I am.

Evans: Do you play anything else besides the guitar?

Patterson: Well, I've played a mandolin. That's what I love is a mandolin. Nobody got a mandolin around here.

Evans: Now after you got going, you went up in the Delta, and you said you got with Robert Johnson?

Patterson: Yeah, Robert Johnson, Tom Johnson, Tom Johnson and Mager down here is brothers. They had another brother that played. His name was Clarence. He's dead. Tommy's dead. Well, I met all them fellows. And Sonny Boy Williamson (Rice Miller) - I played with him. I met B.B. King in Isola in 1941. Well, he wasn't the B.B. that he is now. Mostly all guitar players at the time when we was coming on, I was rated as one of the best. All the old real guitar players is dead and gone. You can find some (i.e., only a few) now.

Evans: Where did you run across Robert Johnson?

Patterson: I believe I ran across Drew. That was when I first learned to play. It was around '28. I don't know. I was just from place to place at that time. Back in that time anybody just have a guitar alone. He could go up in the Delta, and he could make ... I had a guitar just like them you got. Stella guitar. I'd put all my greenback in it. To hold it, you see. And I wouldn't take