

Billy Branch Interview

At Biddy Mulligan's, 7644 N. Sheridan, Chicago.

September 1, 1982.

Carey Bell said that you and Lurrie teach the blues in schools.

Can you tell me about that?

[Well, we've been doing it together for about three years, and what we do, we go as just a duo, harmonica and guitar, and we deal a little bit with the history of the blues, and incorporate it into a performance. So we start like from the roots, take it back to slavery, and try to work it up to date, even work up a little scene, like take the kids into a fake-believe slave scene, and say, 'What would it be like if you was a slave? You know, if you wanted your freedom.']

What ages of kids are you talking to?

[We've had 'em as young as three and four years old, all the way up to high school. And we try to let the kids get involved, we let them make up their own blues song in the context of the programme, they come off sometimes, and just try to get them to relate.] You know, sometimes we ask them, 'Well, what gives you the blues?' Nine times out of ten they say teachers, or homework, or money, or my little brother, or my little sister, and we try to get them to make up a song about that, and let them sing it, so then they can really relate to it.

How did you get into this?

Well, I think it was the time I was at another school programme, where I'd be at one school. Me and Lurrie, we travel all over...

Chicago?

Well, the suburbs too. White suburban schools, black ghetto schools, Mexican schools, all over. But I was at another programme where I would just be at one school, Newberry, and me and another partner, first time I worked with a piano player, Shelley Fisher, and next time I worked with a guitar player, Mart Dumas. We'd do a more of an intensive thing where we actually taught the kids how to play the instruments, make up their own songs. We'd bring in blues artists, like Willie Dixon and Big Walter, and the kids would put on their own blues show.

How did originally get involved?

Well, I just heard about it, and I submitted an application to the Illinois Arts Council. You know, had an interview, audition and an interview, and just got selected to do the blues residency. They only had one a year, and the first guy that did it I think was Jimmy Tillman had the first one, and then me and Shelley Fisher had the next two, and then I did one with Martin Dumas - I think all in all I did about four of them. I did one at Molesey, the bad boys school, it's like a reform school almost, we did one there, which was something.

How did that go down?

It went good, it went good. You know, we would never run into too much of a problem. These kids were the kids that got kicked out of every other school. Most of the kids, they come from broken or fucked-up homes. You know, sister or big brother's on done, and he's taking care of them, or the parents are never at home, or the parents

are alcoholics, or some kind of thing. But it went down good - we had a lot of success with it.

This thing you're now doing with Lurrie- is that still Illinois Arts Council?

[That's under Urban Gateways. That's like a private donor, and a state-funded agency. It hires artists, all kinds of artists, magicians, dancers, singers, you know]

I'm really pleased to hear that such a programme exists.

[Yeah, it's real good. See, a lot of times the kids, they don't know anything about the blues, and a lot of times they turn off to it, from what they think they know. But after it's brought to them in such a way that they find out that everything is the blues, because you got happy and sad blues. You know, you can be happy, and they've got the blues too, because they've got problems - and it's one of the few times a child would actually, in a group, air his problem. Because we make a song about, 'I didn't do my homework today, and I can't go out and play, I feel so bad, just like a ball game on a rainy day.' And there's like five or six hundred kids singing this all together - well, they feel good. 'Hey man, I got the chance to say my piece.' You know. I mean, who listens to kids? You know. 'You're just a little kid, you don't know what the hell you're talking about.'

More of this would be pretty good, because it seems that young blacks don't really know the blues exists.

[Well, yeah, in terms of music, a lot of them don't. But in terms of life, most of them live the blues, most young blacks live the blues. Especially now, because they're alienated, the only thing they got to identify with is the radio and the television. A lot of them, you know, it's a one-parent family, and they just don't have any direction. So they follow the things they're exposed to the most, which is namely the radio and the television. Which is sex and violence. So it's good we come from a cultural basis, and let them realise that the blues is the foundation of every American music - came out of the blues in one form or another. And we tell them, 'This is your music. Black people created this music, and it's something to be proud of.')

It's the only living folk music left.

[Yeah, the blues, it'll never die. You know, some folks predicted that it would die, but it will never die. It can't die. It is impossible to kill the blues! As long as people are around they're going to have the blues.]

Everybody says that. I've got cassettes full of people saying, 'The blues'll never die.' It's good to hear.

[It's eternal.] There's more young people playing the blues than people realise. Like Carey Bell's kids, yeah. And they're professional, aged what? Nine through thirteen. Lot of other cats, they have little sons and grandsons, and daughters and grand-daughters, they pick it up. They can't help but pick it up. And it's somewhat coming back now.

I read somewhere that you're a political animal. You did a degree in it.

Yeah, well, I'm a political animal to a degree. I am.

I've been wondering if the reason that young blacks, or black people generally, aren't listening to the blues is that it's no longer an adequate expression of what they're thinking - 60s urban discontent being more a 'soul' thing than a blues thing.

Well, not really. [Everybody got their own theory. My theory is that after the 60s, after demands were made, and riots, we did receive some compensation. We got civil rights programmes, you know, a lot of us went to college under the scholarships, and different special programmes under Kennedy and Johnson. So there was a feeling of content. Maybe a feeling like, 'We don't have the blues any more.' So the blues kind of disappeared from the air waves.] You know, with the advent of rock, and rhythm and blues, and then finally funk, it disappeared so bad that right now the main reason they don't identify with it is that they don't hear it. They refuse to play it. They claim they refuse to play it because nobody wants to hear it. I'm talking about the media people in control of the radio stations. But actually it's a Catch 22, because the reason it's not in demand is because they don't play it. If they don't hear it, how can they buy it?

Was there really a feeling of content?

To a certain degree, because hey, you got all the way into the fifties - and this is only thirty years later - you know, blacks couldn't even sit at the front of the bus. Almost up to the sixties you still had signs, 'White only,' and 'Colored.'

Even up here?

Even in the United States, not just South Africa. See, you're only talking about a little bit over 20 years. And even still, you know, you don't have the signs, but there's plenty of places black folks can't go, right here in Illinois, right here in the city of Chicago. Like Cicero, like Mayor Daley's neighbourhood, Bridgeport. I wouldn't walk out there after dark.

Still, there's places I wouldn't walk after dark.

Yeah. Contrary to popular belief, it's a lot safer for a black person than it is for a white person, because black people aren't naturally inborn violent against white people. See what I'm saying? They're not, because how could they be when... don't start me to talking, I start talking... we live in Mayor Byrne's city, and that's Mayor Byrne's city from the North Side to downtown to the South Side, to the West Side. These are the politicians that run the city, and the gotta get their money, so they have to come in there. And we have to get favours in order to eat. So, you know, you don't bite the hand that feeds you. So that's the way it is, times are hard. In terms of the racial situation - it's cool, black folks are cool, black folks are very friendly, downhome, down to earth kind of people. Unless they're crazy, you know a crazy person, it doesn't matter about colour, ain't nobody going to mess with him.

I was reading Mike Royko's book, 'Boss.' A lot of the time it seems to have been the black vote that got Daley in. I don't know if that was before black people were really politically aware, or what.

Yeah, well that politically aware thing. But it was like, Daley, or who else? So it was one or the other, and at least Daley would send some turkeys around, Thanksgiving time, maybe a few hams around Christmas. At least you might make five or ten dollars if you pulled the right lever in the voting machine. You know, what other candidate was going to do that? Something beats nothing, you know.