

Theresa Needham Interview.

At Theresa's Tavern, 4801 S Indiana, Chicago.

September 20, 1982. 6pm.

When did you open?

December third 1949.

Has it been in the same place all the time?

Mm. December the third of next year will be thirty-three years.

That's the oldest blues bar anywhere, I think.

Oldest in Chicago, I know that. That's what the licence people say.

Who was playing for you in those days?

Back in those days I didn't have a band. Band started in 1954. Ike Perkins and his band started, and from then on, I don't know - Rufus Foreman, Buddy Guy, Junior Wells, I can't remember all of them. But from '54 up until '64 or '65, all the musicians at one time or another except old man Muddy and BB King, worked out of here. Sunnyland Slim, Memphis Slim, Earl Hooker, Myers brothers, - what's the other boy that's sick now, I can't think of his name - oh, there's so many of them I can't call them all. They did a filming of old man Muddy down here when he was in an automobile accident - that's the only time that he has ever been here and worked out of here. BB King came here when Buddy Guy first came here from Louisiana. This the first place Buddy Guy worked when he came here. Came in here one Monday - at that time we used to have blue Monday parties - and when Buddy came down off the bandstand, he told him that if he didn't change his style of music, as long as he didn't, he'd never get anywhere.

Did he take that advice?

No. Him and Buddy went up on the bandstand together, you didn't know one from the other one, unless you knew 'em apart. Buddy Guy'd never made it till Junior Wells came down in '61 or '62. Philip Guy started out of here, Fred Robertson. At that time, you see, to my knowledge, there was only about four taverns that had live entertainment: this one, Club de Lisa, and the guy used to be on 43rd - Peppers, and there was one over on the West Side - yes, Sylvio's. Those were the only ones. All the schoolkids from over on Hyde Park, Oak Park, everywhere, used to come in here.

What made you start having music, if you were just a bar for some years?

Well, I had record spinning in the beginning, and some fellow came in here and spoke to me about he had a three-piece band, and let him play, and see how it would work out. It worked out OK. So we started from there. From then, I think, Rufus Foreman came in, and then Sunnyland Slim, Detroit Junior, Willie Williams that made Winehead Woman, he worked here; Bill Warren, oh, I don't know.

Was there any one time when business was really good?

Back in the fifties, all during the fifties. I'd say business was good all up until about two or three years ago. Used to couldn't get in, they'd be standing all out in front and everywhere, waiting for someone to leave, so they could come in. It just got bad here, I'd say, in the last six, seven months or a year ago.

Well, I'll tell you. I had a band. And they'd be going off on the road with Junior, some of them would be going off with Koko Taylor; you know, when you try to piece up a band and keep the band together, it doesn't work out too good.

You try to do that?

Mm. I tried to. John Primer, Sammy Longhorns - you know Sammy used to play with old man Muddy - and Sammy learned John how to play back there, he'd been running and running and running, now I just tried to fire the band. Smitty Smith and the Night Riders, they been working down here for the last past month, and they just picked up some; Louis Myers was down here on Wednesday night - the other Wednesday - but when you're trying to keep a band together, it's a hard job, 'cos see I don't have seating capacity, and I can't afford to pay them no forty or fifty dollars a man. They go away and look for more money. And when I first started, I started with three pieces: now, they got to have four and five. I can't afford that, not now.

Is that your policy, to pay each member of the band? You don't just pay the leader?

Smitty and them, I pay the leader, but all the rest of them... John was the leader of the band, but he wanted me to pay each one. We usually make it on the door there, specially on Fridays and Saturdays. Sometimes, when they play Mondays, they have to wait till the following week to get paid.

Is John playing tonight?

I don't know, I heard John left. But the rest of the band will be here. He might be back, I don't know.

Most of these guys play up on the North side now, where they can get fifty dollars a night.

Mm. They pay them on North Broadway, B.L.U.E.S, there's another one over there - Kingston Mines - and there's another one, I can't think of it, 'cos I've been to that one with Cotton, James Cotton worked out of there. No, it wasn't Wise Fools. I went over there to see Sammy working with him. You know Sammy had a tendency to get high and go to sleep on the bandstand, and I went over there to see if Sammy was going to stay sober.

When he's sober, he really plays well.

There's not another man can beat Sammy playing guitar. Not another one in the world. Sammy would quit drinking, you couldn't touch him. He loves that alcohol.

Up on the North Side now, the audiences are mainly white. When did white people start coming in here to listen?

It was in about fifty-seven or fifty-eight, kids started coming from Hyde Park over here. That's what brought them. Junior had quit working at Peppers, and was working here, and I started the blue Monday parties. I used to cook a two-course dinner on Mondays, and bring it down about 11 o'clock. The band would start, they'd play all the way through.

This was 11 o'clock in the morning?

Mm. Yeah, those were some good old days. I don't think they'll ever come back. Have you been down to the Checkerboard? Buddy Guy hadn't started back then, but I didn't tell him he got it on nothing in Jewtown. He worked here at the time I only had bands

on Fridays and Saturdays, and they used to have a nightclub, the 708 Club, and he used to go in there and work on Wednesday, and they stole his guitar from him from down there. I had to buy him a new guitar.

Was he very popular when he first came here?

No, when he first came here, I wouldn't let him work. I had just fired Rufus Foreman and his band, and Rufus brought him here, and I sent him back, and he came back, I don't know, about two or three weeks later, he went over to Sylvio's, and he came back one Friday night - I was standing right there - and he walked up to me and asked me, he said, "You look just like my mother to me." He said, "Don't put me out." I said, "What am I going to put you out for?" He said, "Well, last time I was down here you put me out." And he went on to explain, and I laughed, so he said, "Let me play a number, and if the people don't like it, I'll walk out." I said, "Oh, go ahead." And at that time there wasn't no youngsters coming here, it was all settled people. Buddy went back there and got over to the boy's guitar, and I never seen so many old people start to jumping up and dancing! So everybody liked him from the beginning.

So is business not so good now?

No. Just on the weekend. Tonight, maybe. Some Monday nights are good. The band starts tonight, eight o'clock.

I like this bar. It's very famous. Everybody in Europe has heard of it.

Yeah. A lady came here from overseas, and I was talking about doing it over and making it remodernised; she told me not to. She said this place is more like an established tradition. So I had to leave it. She told me to keep it clean! I try to do that.

Have you been up to B.L.U.E.S?

Have I ever been to B.L.U.E.S? I don't drink. When I feel like a place to go and drink, it don't have nobody to talk about!

That's a nice place.

I heard it was.

Wouldn't you want to go up just to hear the music?

I hear enough.

I suppose so, in the last thirty years.

Yeah, I fell out back then. I can't stand too much violent noise, those instruments; I get out of here after they start to work.

Have you noticed any changes in the music in the last thirty years?

Mm. They don't play like they used to years ago. I don't know, they just don't seem to have... when you do something, you have it in your soul and body, like music. I know when I was a kid, I had to take music. These fellows, they don't seem to care, all they want to do is work, long as they get paid, these young ones coming on now. I wish they'd cut it out.

When did you first hear the blues then?

I was trying to think. I think it was in '57 or '58. Before then they were playing

jazz.

In here?

Mm. Yep. First started out with jazz.

Where are you from?

Mississippi. (?) Mississippi. Came to Chicago in 1933.

Do you remember hearing any blues when you were a child in Mississippi?

I wasn't allowed to go in those places. Hm-mm. I was raised in the Catholic school, Catholic church. I wanted to be a nun. My grandmother wouldn't let me.

So you ended up owning a blues bar.

Mm. I didn't have no intention of doing this.

How did you get into this business?

Helping a friend out. Caught myself doing somebody a favour and got stuck.

You must like it really.

Well, when I first come in, no I did not, hm-mm. I had a son in High School, I worked a jog, and come down here and worked at night. And then after I brought him out of high school and two years of college, I came on down here and started to working regular.

What brought about the change from jazz to blues in this place?

You really want me to tell it to you? I really forgotten! I don't know.

Was blues getting more popular than jazz?

I tell you the truth, I really forgotten, I haven't given it too much thought. I couldn't even tell you no more than round '57 or '58 that they brought the blues down here. But I'm trying to think who was it. I don't know whether it was Sunnyland Slim, or Memphis Slim or Detroit Junior, they all were piano players, we got a piano put back there. And it was somewhere between those. And then when Junior came here from down the Peppers, he brought the blues with him. I don't know who started it.

It wasn't you, deciding to book Junior?

No, when Junior came here, Junior was working for Pepper, and Christmas fell in the middle of the week, and they wanted to play, and Pepper wouldn't let 'em, got another band. So when Junior came down here, that week, before Christmas, he asked me about working for Christmas Eve, Christmas, New Year's Eve and New Year. And I told him, I have a band, and he said, "I don't want to bring the band in here." Junior had a band of his own. He said, "I just want to come here and work myself." And then he explained to me, so I told him, "OK, come on." He came down Christmas Eve, and worked Christmas night; he left, came back New Year's Eve, and New Year's night.

Did the people like him?

Oh, they went crazy over him. He brought all 43rd Street down here. Then when he got through he asked me if I would ever give him a job if he needed one, so I said, what do you mean? He said I might be back after a job, I said well, any time you feel like it, I said, come on. I don't know how long it was Junior was gone; he came back one Friday night. He always called me Old Lady. "Old Lady, I'm ready for that job, now." So he came in, moved around, worked his band in. Dick Waterman came in here and heard Junior, and he was the first white to book Junior. Junior signed

his first contract with Dick Waterman back then. He told Dick, he said, "This old lady been good to me," he said. "I'm not going to leave her." So Dick called me back there, I said, "Go ahead on boy, and make that money. But just let this be your home base whenever you're in the city."

It still is.

I don't see him too much, because I don't be here at night.

There's only you and the Checkerboard left on the South Side.

When did the decline start?

I don't know. That's what the licence man asked me, last time I went to get my licence. Was talking about the different places that used to have live entertainment. Say, I don't know what went with the ones that was before you, nor the ones that opened up after you, he say. But you are a legend in Chicago, because you have the oldest blues bar in Chicago. I couldn't tell you. Because I'm not a person, I don't like to make a big show, nor a big front. I always like to stay in the background. How long have you been here? ...

June the first, I got here. I'm leaving this week. My money's run out.

Have you been down here before? How did you enjoy it?

Very much. I like the Christmas decorations.

They've been there, this is the first year I didn't take 'em down and put up fresh ones for Christmas. I take 'em down every Christmas. That's to keep the pipes from showing! You see the bare pipes, I don't know, they look kind of funny, even though I decorated the pipes. So after I first put it up there, it was later in the year, and I was getting ready to cut it down, said leave the wrapping on the pipes, it looks pretty! That's been about twenty years ago. Mm, I change it every year.

How often does Junior play down here?

Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. He come in sometimes on Mondays.

Do you tell him when to play, or does he play when he wants to?

He play when he want to. I never be here when he come.

Do you pay him for turning up?

Mm.

I've never seen him play down here. And Buddy, it always says in the ad for the Checkerboard, 'Buddy Guy,' and he never plays.

Yeah, I had another fellow tell me, came from New York, a news reporter, and they were down there filming Buddy's place, and he came down here - I was quite busy that day - he walked up here, sit down, asked me could he talk to me? I said talk to me. He said, "Do you know Buddy Guy?" I say "I should know him, he started out down here." So he showed me his card and things, and told me who he was, and asked me about Buddy. I say "Ain't but one thing I'll tell you about Buddy, I'll tell you now: He's not the person that he used to be. Very much different." He said I see. I said if there's anything else you want to know, you can go back down there and ask him! So he did, he went back down, and he came back down here I think two or three days later, the following Monday, came down here and made a filming, and Junior worked. And he told me that Monday he was down, he said Buddy wouldn't even get up on the

bandstand and play.

People here are used to that, but people from out of town think Buddy plays there and Junior plays here every night.

Hmm. It used to, before he started travelling so much. He was here Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday, five nights a week. You could always find him here. But after he and Buddy teamed up together, he's between here and there. I don't know whether he sings down there or no.

I've seen him there once in the last three months. A hard man to pin down.

Have you been able to talk to him?

No, he wants me to pay him. He thinks I'm going to make money out of this book. He won't believe that I'm not.

That's Junior.

I don't mind. I like him.

Mm, a very nice young man. When you finish your book, send me a copy.

Sure. I find it amusing that you go home when the music starts. See now, if you ever had to listen to it for twenty - let me see, I fell out back in '70, and I have a nose condition, a ringing in my head, and the doctor said it comes from that band, so I have to get out, because when they play, if I'm here, it gets loud loud loud. But if you ever get in one of these of your own, and have a band, and listen to it seven nights a week for - let me see, '54 to '70 is how long? Sixteen years, you'd have one too! I mean, I was here, I used to be so tired I'd get up and fall over in a booth, I wouldn't even go home to go to sleep. Next morning open up! Man, you'd leave it alone.

Is that an old picture of Lefty Dizz?

Mm. He started out down here. Played right back there. He played here before Buddy. There's old man Muddy over there. He sent me that picture. After he came out the accident, the doctor say he's never walk again. Somewhere back in the sixties, he had an automobile accident travelling. And he broke his leg, and the doctor told him he never would walk again without a crutch.

Are you ever going to retire?

Mm. Trying to do it now. Trying to draw my social security. That's when I'm going to quit work.

You've made your mark.

I don't know, it's just like going to a job every day. I had a fellow call up here the other day, he wanted to speak to the owner. I told him the owner wasn't here! He asked me when would she be in? I said, I don't know mister, I just work here!

Who was he?

I don't know. - didn't ask no questions! I thought maybe he might catch my voice.

I'm glad you didn't do that to me.

Well, he talked to you first. That's Herman. Been here with me about eighteen years.

Does it feel strange to be a kind of legend, with people like me coming from London wanting to talk to you?

It does. But I had James Cotton, he told me a long time ago, he said you know you

are known all over the world. He said, I don't know how it happen, he said, but everywhere I go I run into your name. And he said, but you don't go nowhere but here and back home. I said, well, somebody thinks something of me. I know a fellow wrote me from - what's that gambling place over there? Las Vegas - and told me if I'd come over, they'd pay my way, give me a trip over there. I said aaah, I'm not going. Do you drink? Do you want a drink?

I'll get one later. If I drink too early, I fall asleep. I was at Florence's yesterday, drinking in the afternoon. Have you been down there? That's another place a little like this.

Famous, old. The Checkerboard isn't old, is it?

Let me see, when was it? I was working here, and Buddy went down there and told me he was going to open up a tavern; I told him, I said, man, you're crazy. I said you're out on the road all the time, you don't have nobody to run it, 'cos I think they had two or three kids. I said you ought to wait till you come off the road. Then Buddy had rented the place, and couldn't get no licence. Went down there two or three times, City Hall, trying to get a licence, couldn't get it, so he came down here to me, and asked me if I could get some licence for him. I said what's wrong with you? He said, I don't know T, they won't give me no licence. So I got on the telephone, called up Dan Gaines, the jukebox man, and I told him, I said + have a friend that's trying to open up a tavern, can't get no licence. I said, do you think you can get him some licence? He said you sure he's a friend of yours? I said yeah, he used to work with me. He said well, licence four sixty-five - they have this four sixty-five, an application down there - and I'll have him so he can open up about twelve o'clock. Sho'nuff, he did. And now Buddy don't speak to me! I don't know why.

This isn't like the old blue Mondays, is it?

No, it's quiet.

Did people really come in at 11 in the morning?

Mm. They don't have the money.

But in the old days...

They did then. Used to couldn't get in here at 11 o'clock. At that time you wasn't charged anything to come in. Just walk in. But I don't know, back in the sixties the (?) started hanging around, coming in and hitting on the customers, so I just put the chain up and started charging a dollar. I first started, fifty cents.

Do you own this place, or rent it?

Rent it. I hope that I won't have to live with nobody but myself. This is enough hassle!

One day it should be a museum for the blues.

A fellow did come down here and ask me one time. The old gentleman that owned it, he was owing back tax and things, and myself and the tenants chipped in and pulled it out the hole. There was a fellow that wanted to come and take the first floor and make a museum out of it, you know, if it fell to us, we could make a cooperation out of it. I told him, I said no. You might^{know} him, Metcalfe Junior?

why didn't you like the idea?

I don't like no publicity. And they were going to build it around me, I told him no. If you do it on your own, but leave me out.

What will you do with the place when you retire?

If I sell it, they'll close it up. And the buildinginspector toldme, when your name come off the wall, that's it. So I'll probably wind up keeping it. Though I won't work at it.

Will you visit?

Have to, to see they pay the bills! I have a son. But he has a job, he been on his job for thirty-two years. Works at running a plant. He might take it, I don't know. He loves the job.

I'm going to turn this off.

OK.