

Lee, "Shot" Williams and Ruth Young Interview.

At the Town and Country Restaurant, Interstate 94 and North Avenue, Chicago.
September 1, 1982, c. 6pm.

Ruth: This man that owns the station lives in Miami, Florida, and he owns about twelve or fifteen stations around the country, and he has no money, you know. Right, exactly. So if it's going to cost something (putting blues on radio), you know how it goes, if it's going to cost something, they always shy away. But I did present that idea to him. (Live blues on radio) But the blues show that I did, I don't know if you could really call it a blues show, but compared to what I'd been doing, it was a blues show, was suggested by one of my co-workers. The station manager came and asked me what I was doing, and I told him, and he said, 'Nobody tells me anything.' He didn't know I had done it, but I kind of go through nut city on him every once in a while, and say, 'Oh, I didn't know I was supposed to do that.' But that's what I did with that. The only person that may be able to get something done in that range is the Blues Man, they call him here. You know, Purvis Spann.

I've never yet been able to find him on the dial, but I will.

Lee: 1450 AM, come on at twelve, then he on WXFM, 106½, from ten until two.

I also want to hear Big Bill Hill's show, but for that you have to drive out to the western suburbs and listen in the car.

Yeah, exactly, because he's out in Le Grange now. It's probably a lot like WOPA, after ten o'clock at night they cut down, what is it, the wattage, or whatever the engineers do up there. They cut it down so it doesn't go as far as it does during the daylight hours.

He gave me a leaflet with a diagram which shows it beaming out to the northern suburbs from La Grange. It doesn't seem to hit Chicago.

They do that. Mine does that too. Mine says all the way to Waukegan. That's not true, you know. These sheets, or maps they give you, it has the western suburbs on it, way to Waukegan, and what is the nearest southern little town, south of here? Wherever it is, it's too far. Nobody ever gets it. Out past 149th street.

Lee: That don't be true?

R: No. It doesn't go out there. Unless you got one of those whadyacallit, great fantastic wave sets, or something. I have some friends that live on 119th that gets my show sometimes, but they have one of these radios. You're right, you'd have to drive out to maybe Maywood to get him. I live at Austin & Mason, and I can get his show, I have gotten it, from La Grange. That's closer, that's 6000 west, so that's closer.

He just plays gospel stuff now does he?

R: Right, he just went into gospel.

He told me that he used to rent time, and then get his own sponsors, which I found pretty interesting.

Yeah, I told you, he was instrumental in getting me on the air. Well, that's a long

story, but I can give you a little bit of it. I gave a talk, I called myself the big mouth of the Austin community, I was very active in civic and political organisations. So I was giving a speech to a group of kids. 600, maybe a thousand, at Malcolm X college, and Big Bill Hill was there and heard me talk, and he came up to me after I gave the talk, and said, 'You've got such great ideas, why don't you do a piece on my show?' Oh, God, no. At that time radio was the farthest thing out of my mind, I was never thinking of doing that. So I said OK. He said it's no big thing, but you would have to get sponsors, you know, I pay for this time. I said no, I'm not interested in gettingsponsors. But he talked me into it, and finally I decided to do that, and that's how I got into it. But he did, he bought time on the air. But most of them, I won't say most, but a lot of the people do that, the religious programmes, Macio Woods that comes on WNRB, he pays for that time. So that's what they do, I think most of the religious programmes. But see, my programme is public service, so I don't have to sell advertising for it, I'm hired by the station. So that's nice. But it would be nice if they, I mean the programme directors, would do something for the public, well, they do do something, they do the minimum amount, what the FCC call for, that's natural. FCC says, and I'm there for that reason, FCC says you have to have so many of this and so many of that, and so many of that on the station. I've been there for eight years now, and you know how transient radio is, that's history as far as radio is concerned, but I was the only black at WOPA for about five of those eight years.

After Big Bill left?

Yeah. And now we have the head of the engineering department is black, which is interesting for me, you know, and then he has a helper, and me, and everybody else is not. But it's an ethnic station, that's what's nice about it too, you know, they play all kinds of ethnic music, ethnic programmes, educational and musical. Lithuanian, Hispanic, you name it. I'm doing all the talking, I want you to talk to Lee Shot.

L: That sounded great.

I've been looking you up in the books. You've been in the blues a long time.

L: Twenty years.

I'm white, and when I go to the Kingston Mines I see a lot of other white faces, and a couple of black ones up on stage playing the blues. Why? Why don't I see more black people my age who are interested?

L: We haven't been able to figure it out. We've been trying to - like I said on her interview -

R: I asked him the same question.

L: - I believe, like you said, the blacks my age and your age just don't think the blues are hip. It's a downer, and they don't want to be associated with it. If you mention pop or jazz, yeah, but blues or rhythm and blues, it scares them. So that's what's happening there. That's my belief. And then it's not - I just believe it's not getting enough exposure on the radio.

Anything played often enough on the radio, people will like, and that doesn't necessarily mean it's good, so there's got to be another reason for it being on the air - somebody getting paid, or something.

L: I don't think it's a pay thing. I don't think. The payola supposedly have stopped. But there is something going on, I don't know what it is. Now I can't get no airplay. I get airplay on WXOL, Purvis Spann, WXPB, Purvis Spann, and WNRB, Mr A. They play local artists, it's nice. They are giving local talent a shot, you know, a run for their money.

But they're all on pretty late, which isn't what's needed.

L: Need daytime.

R: And, what is it, the blues show that comes on WIND. I never say that station right, is that right? What time they come on, at two? They're always so late at night.

L: But with my new record I got coming out soon, I'm hoping to elevate to daytime stations.

I sometimes wonder if the record companies and the radio stations are a bit frightened of the blues, because old stuff of 30 years ago still sounds just as good now. If all pop music was like that, you'd never sell any records. They need a fast turnover.

L: Maybe you just said it. Like you said, old blues, thirty years old, still sound the same way. Now you can play an old pop record -

A five-year-old pop record, and it sounds stupid.

L: - it sounds, like you just said, it sounds stupid. Out of date, stupid. Did you see that programme last night? What was it, a guy over in, that's King somebody, from, where it is, that country over there? Where they're Africans, they're not Africans, Nigeria? He's got about twenty or thirty albums out, selling like I don't know what. They done out the guitar, he plays guitar, and horns ... they're Africans, me and Bobby was watching, they from Nigeria.

R: Nigeria, they're Africans, they are.

L: He got about twenty or thirty albums out. He's making alot of money.

R: What kind of music is he playing?

L: He playing something, but they're going for it. They say whatever it is, it's tied up. He a king. Got his own studio, he got his own club, but he goes throughout the country and sing and play. It say the Americans afraid this music will catch on over here, say it'll knock a lot of people out of work, 'cos it's not consisted of nothing but drums, and like tenor saxophone, and one guitar.

Did you hear any of it?

L: Mhm. It's pretty good. I don't know what he's saying, but he's getting down, they falling out. You know, he's mumbling something. But he's a king. What country is next to Nigeria?

Ghana?

L: OK, that's where he go, all through there, touring the country. That's where he's working, he left his nightclub to go to Ghana, to entertain over there. He's a king,

turban on, and a robe - he's a king, in his country. But he got his own studio, so he's in the studio - he done made something like twenty or thirty albums in the last year, and they all of them did well. It told how much it cost him, money per album.

R: You know what I think that has contributed to, it's something new, something different. People have a tendency to jump on the bandwagon. That's what it sounded like to me, this African king that you're talking about. I haven't heard it. But when I was in Las Vegas last summer, there were some African troupe, dance, musical troupe, I'm not sure what it was called now. But they did a show at the Riviera, I think it was, one of those big hotels, you know where they have nightclubs? And they had singers, and the dress, the costume, the attire, was just fantastic. They were all arcepella, no instruments, none, but the drum. And was called Ipi Tombi. Have you heard it? If it ever comes to town, see it. They were fantastic. I wonder if it's the same kind of music that Lee Shot was talking about. They were great.

L: He's singing, they got tenor saxophone up there, and alto, and all drums.

R: They didn't have any instrument, with the exception of the - it wasn't a drum, what do you call those African ...

L: Congo.

R: ...with your hands ...

L: That's a congo.

R: Oh, OK. It was that, and then they had an instrument like a ... you know what a washtub is? OK. But they had a put a stick down there, and some kind of top, and they pulled it up and down, and they made music with that. But they didn't have the traditional instruments that we know of, you know, the horns and the keyboards and stuff like that. It was really interesting, we had a ball. Yeah, they were South Africans. One of the things that surprised me about it, too, see, I was telling you coming on over here, my geography is really bad - I knew that, from what I had read about South Africa, that blacks were not supposed to be able to do these things.

Waitress: They weren't supposed to do anything - James Michener.

R: Right, exactly. But then when you see these people over here, this dance troupe... but the people who wrote that thing, that play or whatever it was called, were white, you know. It was a woman and her daughter wrote it. As a matter of fact I have the programme at home, I brought the programme with me. OK. I've butted in again, excuse me.

L: You saw the other day where they got this Sun something over there in South Africa, right? You saw that with me. There don't be no prejudice, they all go to this big resort, swimming, Africans in there, all everything.

R: Call it Sun City.

Yes, I've heard of that. People go there to gamble.

R: It was on Sixty Minutes. But I was just sitting there like with my mouth hanging open, to see these people all mixing together, when you read about this stuff, where blacks are not supposed to be out after dark, or whatever. And blacks and whites were dancing, you know, like you would dance with me, or a black guy would dance with a South African white lady, you know, you just didn't expect to see that.

L: But getting back to the blues. Now, I really think radio hurt the blues. I'll

tell yo why. When I was a kid growing up in Mississippi, we had a radio station we'd listen to, it went all over the country, called WLAC out of Nashville Tennessee. They was on with country all day, and they would come on with rhythm and blues about seven o'clock in the evening, til three in the morning. Six days a week. Guy named John R. "Boss" Allen. But anyway, they sold records, they had record houses, wholesale record houses, but they would play records, all rhythm and blues and blues records, whatever, and sell it. They'd mail all the catalogues.

Out of the Radio station?

Yeah. This is what brought Muddy Waters to be a star, Howlin Wolf, Elmore James - this was it. Then Al Benson, who was on here in Chicago with WGES, I think that was the call letters for it. Al Benson, I'm talking about when it was coming up growing, this is what happened. I'm talking about when I can remember, 1951, 1950, I was a small kid, but I can remember, this all my people and everybody in the community, and when I went to Detroit, we used to listen at WLAC out of Nashville, because they wasn't playing blues in Detroit. They used to hear WLAC all in Korea. Yeah. Anywhere there was water that station went. Wherever there was water you could pick up that radio station. So we listened at it in Detroit. I remember Guitar Slim had a record out called 'the Things I Used to Do'. It stayed number one for a year. A new record. Weren't no comparison, weren't all the competitive thing out here, that everybody's singing now. The producer, he produces a while, and he stop producing and he go to singing, he makes a record. His writers makes a record. So it's just so competitive. Then you had Hank Ballard and the midnights, Fats Domino, I'm just naming a few, Laverne Baker, Clyde McFarrell, Jackie Wilson was in and out with the Dominos, you know, Clyde used to sing with them, Jackie Wilson too. Chuck Berry, Howlin Wolf, Muddy, Jimmy Reed come along in the early fifties, out of Gary, John Lee Hooker, the Boogie Chillun - this is the onliest record he had out for years. They made that one record on him, and he lived off that record for years. He was living in Detroit, year in and year out, you'd go and hear John Lee Hooker, this is his stick, Boogie Chillun, that's what he had.

Yeah, he cut it about ten times, kept doing it.

I know, I know. Sonny Boy Williams, 'Don't start me to talking.' Well, you can say, twenty-five artists, and all them wasn't blues artists, some of them was rock'n'roll and pop artists, and that was it. But now, they go up in the millions. You know, so to get a record on the radio, it's a problem.

Well, now there's more artists and less radio...

No, there's more radio.

R: More radio than it was then.

L: Yes, mm, there's nine radios in this town that plays R&B.

R: And there's more black radio stations now than there was then.

But they're not playing blues.

L: They're not playing blues, that's what we're telling about.

R: That's what we're talking about.

L: But like you was saying, I can't get play.

R: I think one of the other things, if I can just interject this here, is that, you

know, like Lee Shot was saying, everybody's starting to sing, everybody wants in the studio to cut a record, nobody takes any care. You know. They don't produce excellent material any more. I've got some artists that I work with, and I won't call any names of course - I played the record and it sounds like kids out in the alley banging on garbage cans or something. That's what I mean, you know? No pride in their work. 'Yeah, we're gonna cut a record.' It's important to have a record.

L: That's 'cos it's blues - it don't have... see, blues are pretty. Blues got pretty music, pretty lyrics. Like country and western, see country and western got some of the prettiest lyrics there is.

R: You gonna tell him about your country and western album?

L: I got an album, Country Disco. I got a country western tune on that I did, Charley Pride did it, 'Afraid of losing you again'.

R: Can you believe it? It's true!

L: But country and western tells a story, and blues tells a story, but you got cats running in, say, 'I'm gonna cut me a blues.' You got a lot of guys can't even play the blues. They tell me, 'I can play the blues.' They can't play the blues. The blues is hard to play. The blues is something you got to feel, it's perfected, and it's hard to play. It's not no thing you can jump up and jump all over.

R: That's what I was talking about, a lot of people do that.

L: And you can't do it like that.

R: I'm sure you probably run into that too Alan, since you been going to the Mines and other places, you have the guys ego-tripping...

I've mainly come across that in white bands in UK, who've watched their rock heroes soloing for ten minutes, so they solo for ten minutes.

L: Well you've got that like that here. You've got very few guitar players that can really straight-out play the blues, a lot of 'em just (?) it. And I don't even have to walk in, I can tell you from the outside if they can play, I don't even have to see 'em. They got a cat here named James Wheeler. He was in the business before I was, he can master guitar. Hear what I'm saying? He can play the blues

I haven't come across him.

He been playing for years. He's good. No stumbling, the clearest notes - this is what I call a guy who know what he's doing, you know what I mean, just play with no stumbling, the notes are clear, play right on through to the change, no stumbling in it, you can hear just as clear, this is what I call good. Wayne Bennett, LB Johnson - these are good guitar players.

What about somebody like Hound Dog Taylor, whose trade mark was a really dirty sound?

He was a novelty. He was a novelty guitar player. He wasn't a guitar player. Wouldn't even know what key he's playing in.

Is that not blues for you, then?

Well you can say that it was blues, but he was a novelty. Earl Hoser. Tremendous, master guitar player. Could tune his guitar up while he playing it, and never stop the music. Didn't know his name, if he saw it on the wall, till his later years,

if he didn't see his picture with it. Could play bass, guitar, organ, piano - could fix 'em, could tune 'em. You understand? This was a musician. We dropped a organ down in Cairo, and it just fell apart, every spring, every key, everything fell off. We picked it up in a pile. The next evening Earl Hooker put that organ back together, and tuned it. You tell me that wasn't a genius. I just give credit where credit is due. I don't give everybody who say they're a blues player who's up there keeping up noise. Anybody can keep up noise on a guitar or bass. Got a cat here used to do all my sessions with me, named Bernard Reed - he one of the greatest bass players there is. Play anything - jazz, blues, soul - anything you want to play, he can play it, whatever.

What's he doing now? He seems to have faded a bit.

No, he's still recording, he went over to Japan with Syl. This year, I think. For your tenor player, you got two here. My favourite, though, is Gene Bart. Baritone and tenor. He just came off a tour with the Rolling Stones for sixty days. The other one here is Sonny Seals, tenor player.

I remember guitar players more than tenor players, for some reason.

Yeah, right. But if you see Gene Bart, you won't forget him. Why I say that, because blow his saxophone just like a man picking a guitar. He's that distinctive, that grabbing. When he takes a solo on his tenor saxophone, you'll know he's got a solo. That's what it's about. Yeah, Hound Dog, I remember, I wasn't even in the business when I used to see him down on 38th and Cottage Grove, Ricky's Show Lounge. Then was the days Magic Sam was starting out, my cousin was playing with Magic Sam - Smokey Smothers? Yeah, that's my first cousin. So I'd be round with them, you know, and Hound Dog would play that little funny guitar. But he was a novelty.

He lasted a long time for a novelty.

Well, he was unique, couldn't nobody play it. See, when you got your sound, that can't nobody lock into - 'cos he played with a clamp, which years ago that went out with the guitar players, they all of them used to play with clamps, but Earl Hooker. So they learned how to play without a clamp, so Hound Dog was the onliest one with a clamp, so that made him have a unique little sound. But he couldn't play no guitar, but he had a good little sound. His sound sounded great. 'Cos he'd always keep him an extra guitar player you know, to keep him on the track - 'cos he'd get off of it, yeah. But I respect him for that. I respect a man, you know your limitations, and you don't get so big where you figure you don't need the next man, he knew he needed him another guitar player. But you get some of 'em say I don't need nobody, and they can't handle it.

Yeah, not many can handle a small set up. The West Side guys used to do it.

Yeah, when you playing with just bass and drums and yourself on guitar, you gotta work hard. You don't have nothing going on but you three. When you stop playing chords and go solo, there ain't nothing going on but the bass and drums - no keyboard to fill in or nothing. Hard work. But that's what I was telling you, there's not out a few guitar players can play like that and sound good, still.

Jimmy Dawkins and Luther Allison both say they're too old for that now. So they've got bigger bands. But they could do it.

Another good guitar player that died, Freddie King. Wasn't no hell of a singer. What he could sing, he could sing, but he could play his guitar. You didn't get a chance to see him - he was a performer. He was the onliest guitar player that weighed three hundred pounds that was a performer. He'd set the stage on fire, the whole house would go up, because he'd clown with his guitar, and he'd dance, and he could play his guitar. That's his brother, was playing with Mighty Joe, Benny. That's who was playing bass with him. Now you imagine the two of them on the stage together. Benny plays with Mighty Joe Young, that's Freddie King's brother, they're half brothers, you know, they got, well, I guess they got the same mother, they had different fathers, 'cos Freddie's got a dark skin and Benny's light. But now, if you see Benny - I told her, 'cos she saw Benny, now you imagine Freddie and Benny on stage together, 'cos Benny clowns with his bass. They energetic on the stage, you know, and they be playing their instrument. We saw him at Fitzgeralds, didn't we? He opened the show up for Mighty Joe, he was playing, the bass, the organ and the drums. He got a standing ovation, playing his bass. He plays his bass like a guitar player. He been doing that for years, when he was with Freddie. And you imagine four cats like that on the stage, they just tear houses down.

Waitress: What happened to Chuck Smith, is he still around?

L: Chuck Smith? Did he blow tenor?

Waitress: Tenor sax, yes.

L: Tenor saxophone, I haven't saw him. Yeah, I know who you mean. But like this cat, man, Freddie King. This other boy plays good, but I don't see him that much, he was working with Bobby Bland, his name is Johnny Jones, from Nashville, and Mel Brown worked with Bobby, they plays good too. But these are guys, I'm talking about Freddie and them, for years right here in Chicago, I see 'em every day, see 'em play, I know they can play, anything.

D'you think Freddie King was better than Magic Sam?

For his guitar? Oh, yeah. Sam had his style. But what I call good is a master. Keys, don't make any difference. See, you got some guitar players can't play in but two or three keys. But Earl Hooker, Freddie King, these guys, don't matter what key it's in, they get down. They master their guitar, they don't let the guitar master them. See, this is what I'm telling you about. Sam had his style, and I love him, he could sing, he had that little style, he played Easy Baby, you know how he played his guitar - he had a little style, but when it come down to stomping them blues, Freddie King'll play that guitar.

What about Buddy Guy?

Fair. He clowns with the guitar. But I want you and me to be honest, I love him, he's my partner, but I want me and you to be on the same level, is what we talking about. We talking about showmanship with guitars, or playing a guitar.

I'm talking about playing.

He's good, yeah. But he's no Freddie King, though. He was no Freddie King, and no Earl Hooker. See, when Freddie King and Earl Hooker would come in the house, and

all the guitar players there, you couldn't get none of 'em to go up. 'Cos they knew if they go up, Earl was gonna go up, after them. So you couldn't get none of them to go up. This is the truth. Jazz guitar players was afraid of this man, and he don't play jazz now, he play blues, but they was so afraid of him that they wouldn't go up when he was in the house, the jazz guitar players. We used to go down to 47th and Indiana, there was (?) Jazz. Phil Upchurch was down there, Wayne Bennet used to be down in there, all your little jazz players. Earl Hooker would walk in there, they'd call 'em all, they wouldn't go up. 'Cos Earl would go into that jazz house on Sunday evening, and pick up that guitar, and have them all falling out of their seats playing the blues. 'Cos he was that unique with a guitar, he'd make the guitar sing, whatever the song. If he wanted to play, "Darling, I know it's going to work out fine, da da da da..." he'd play it! "Da da, da da da da da da da da..." You know, he could play it, make the guitar talk. And they was afraid of him, he could play a guitar. See, I worked on the road with him for about three or four years, so this is what I'm saying, this is what I'm talking about, we're talking about cats that really can play a guitar, and master guitar. We know everybody plays one, holding it in their hands. I'm talking about a master guitar player, these are master guitar players I'm talking about. LB Johnson is a real good guitar player, and can sing good. He sings and play good, tremendous well. But he won't do it, some kind of hang-up, you know. He could be really good.

Fenton Robinson's pretty impressive.

Yeah, he got a pretty voice. He plays to me like a cross between T-Bone and somebody, he got a unique sound. I heard a record on him on XOL, but I don't know what it was. But when I heard the solo, before he was singing, I said, 'That's Fenton Robinson,' and when he got through that's who they said it was. And Bobby King. He's been off the scene a while, since he's been sick, he played on my record 'Welcome to the club,' and 'Tore Up,' I recorded 'I'm tore up' over again, Ike Turner and Billy Bell had it out. Bobby King played on that, and 'When you move you lose,' and 'Don't miss me my love.' He got a solo on there man, a blues solo on 'Don't miss me my love,' it'll send you up the wall. Now he could play. But he's been off the scene, he was slipping my mind, he's been kind of sick.

Yeah. I was talking to Bob Koester about him.

Yeah, he could do it, he could play his guitar. See, this is what I be talking about, because I came up in this, all my cousins used to play guitar. Not Big Smokey, his brother, the one that used to be my bandleader, Little Smokey - but now he could play, but then he just got so he didn't care no more.

Big Smokey went through some bad times too, drinking too much. Well they took their self through there, they ain't really had no bad times - no badder than I've had. I've got an album, fifteen records out, and I don't drink whiskey, you know, I'm going through that bad time, I don't use dope, so you just have to face it. Life ain't no bed of roses. You got to work hard for what you get. See, Big Smokey got an album out and a lot of forty-fives. See, I'm the one told him, I said, 'Now you need to quit drinking, and go back to playing your music,' I say, 'cos this ain't nothin' you're doing.' He used to be real energetic up on

that stage. Yeah, he used to do Muddy Waters. He used to work with Wolf, and Wolf used to make him go up and sing Muddy Waters' tunes. You know, at Sylvio's, they had Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Elmore James, each one of them would work a hour apiece. So when it's Wolf's time to go up, Wolf would make Big Smokey sing Muddy Waters' tunes, he could sing 'em. You know, you can't keep nobody from singing your songs! So when it was Wolf's turn to go up, Smokey would sing, 'I'm a man, I'm a rollin' stone,' he'd be walking the bar playing his bass. And they used to have a knock-down drag out down there about that, yeah.

Was Wolf on first?

Yeah, Muddy was the star, Wolf was on first, or Elmore James, one of them, but anyway, he'd send Smokey to sing Wolf's tunes, you know they'd sing about three tunes before Wolf come up, you know, do a bout three songs. But they had a thing for years, man, they had a thing for years, nobody'd ever told you that. Those cats, man! But the harmonica player they was all afraid of was Little Walter. You know, Little Walter was working with Muddy, till he made that 'Juke.' That was their theme song for years.

That was a big hit.

Yeah. And then he got out on his own. Muddy had, I forget who were his harmonica players, but later years he got James Cotton.

He had Junior Wells for a while.

Yeah, early years, right. But he had another harmonica player after Junior, and then James Cotton come in, and stayed till he went out on his own. But I don't know who was back with Muddy then, cos I was too young to go in the joints, but my auntie used to have to go over there and get Smokey, you know, cos we were staying with my auntie. And they'd be wanting to start a whole lot of stuff about that singing on that stage, you know. But he used to do it, man. And he just started drinking, after him and his wife separated, he just went all the way down. Used to be so sharp... Smokey musta had twenty suits. Smokey would go out the house in the morning time with a suit and tie on. He'd come back in the evening before going to work, he'd change into another suit and tie. When you saw him, that's the way he was.

Do you know of Good Rockin' Charles?

Harmonica player? Yes, he used to be around with Smokey and then on 47th.

I've heard that he was pretty good in his time.

He was. He was real good in his time.

He's a sad story.

R: I wonder what makes people do that.

Well, if you've got all that talent, and people come to hear you play, and you're still making no money, it must be pretty depressing.

L: It is, it is! Hell, it's very depressing. You got a house packed, and you entertain 'em til they're howling, everybody just falling out, you're knocking 'em out of their seats, then you have to go to the boss, and they give you that little bit of little old money. They done made money. You can't go up and not do a good show (just

because you're not getting paid much) and say it's not my fault if you ain't getting your money's worth.

Lefty Dizz does that sometimes. Last weekend at the Mines I paid my four dollars, and I'm sure he thought we were all stupid for doing so. He can make it sound really bad, sometimes. Usually I like what he does, but having paid four dollars it made a difference.

You see? See what I'm talking about? If you didn't pay, it wouldn't mean nothing if he didn't do nothing, but you done paid for this man to entertain you, play his guitar and entertain you, and he ain't doing it, your four dollars is gone. That's what I'm telling you. Me, that's why I don't like to sit in. OK, you sit in - say if you're in the audience, you're from England. You might have come over here, 'I want to see Lee Shot Williams. I might book him.' OK, they call me up as a guest, I really don't want to be up there, so I'm not going to really perform, because I'm not working. See, this is bad about going and sitting in. See, when I got a gig, this time in the evening I start hyping myself, so I hype myself all the way up here, so when I hit that stage I'm on fire, 'cos I gotta reach you, and I got to bring this trouble and misery out of you, you done had a bad day, I got to bring it out of you, get you into the groove. But if I don't know nothing about I'm going up there when I get there, then they call me right up, I ain't hyped myself up, so I can't do no show for you.

I've heard others saying that if you sit in too much people will get used to seeing you, and when you get a gig they won't bother to come out.

No, they won't come to see you. It's bad for you, if you're not working you're not really supposed to sit in.

But the other side of it is the need for exposure - if people see you, maybe they'll like it.

Yeah, a lot of them do it for that reason, I don't do it for that. When they put my sign out, that I'm working, you come and see me, I'm going to try to entertain. She got me to go up on a couple. But what happened was, we went by blues alley about this time in the afternoon - I was recording - so she asked the band if we come back, would I do a number. He said yeah, so in the meantime that I was riding round, eating dinner and stuff, I was hyping myself. Time I walked in the door, the man called me up, the minute we got in the door, he went up and say, 'Lee Shot Williams, how about a round of applause.' Nobody knew me at that place. You know, they Southern honkeys, and they ain't like the blues lovers up here, man, they as cold as ice, you know, 'Hey, how ya doin' buddy,' you know they got still that hate for blacks. So a few of them clapped, and I could see as I told her, I said, 'I'll get 'em.' But in a few minutes I had 'em this high. When I came down, they all came up, 'Buddy, you really sounded good, I like that. You all right, you all right.' I done been going about twenty years, I can deal with any audience. Any kind of audience there is, I can deal with it.

What are the differences between a white audience up at the

Kingston Mines, and a black audience at Sylvio's, say,
twenty years ago?

This a difference, a great difference. Black audience is hard to please. See, a lot of guys go to the Kingston Mines couldn't really work in the black clubs today. They'd run 'em out, throw 'em out of there, man. This is why I can work black clubs or white clubs, 'cos I do a good show wherever I go.

So does that mean that in the fifties and sixties in the black clubs, the music was really better than it is now?

Yeah. You had to work, man. Oh, man, you had to work, yes sir. See there's more people playing up in the white clubs, call themselves playing the blues - they wouldn't have picked up a guitar back then talking about going and playing up there. You had to play and sing for those people, man. Those people was spending their little two dollars to come in, man, but that was big money. Some of these jobs was paying a dollar-fifty an hour, 'cos I was working for a dollar-fifty an hour in 1960 and 61, before I started singing. So you must pay two dollars of that, to come up and hear somebody bullshit. They done took a hour hard labour from you and then some, about a hour and fifteen minutes' work. Now that ain't including your drink yet. See, but now a person makes ten or twelve dollars an hour. But then, you imagine, a dollar and a half an hour, you had to work a whole hour hard labour, then you walk up here to a cat you done paid two dollars at the door, two for your lady, that's four, and you all got to get a drink, you all ain't come up here to hear bullshit off your money. So they had to work. Like all your big stars working harder then than they do now, BB King working harder, though BB working hard now. But I mean then, BB working harder then than he do now. Cos, other words, he don't have to work as hard now, cos they know him and they love him, they waiting for him, but then - 'I wonder what he gonna do?' You know. He get up, he had to work, man.

I've got his Live at the Regal LP.

I was there, I was there, backstage. Purvis Spann introduced me one time. I had that LP. But Spann brought him on. He had to work, man. It was a great LP. 'Ladies and gentlemen, how about a big round of applause, for the king of the blues, B.B. King!' The band here, da da da, he come on, Every day ... he worked. He told me, he said, 'I'm afraid to go out to them kids out there, they probably won't like the blues.' It was five or six-thirty in the evening, there were kids still in there, he tore them kids up, man. You hear the audience, how they's howling? I was there. I used to get every show, backstage.

R: Yeah, me too. I was in the audience. Any time BB came to town, I was there.

L: You saw the white boy the other night, they had him on Johnny Carson's show? He plays just like BB King. They had BB up, they called him up and talked to him, gave him a BB plate. He can play, the white boy can play - but he just don't have the sound that BB have on his guitar. I saw him and Bobby - what's the name of the theatre? I keep calling it wrong, in Memphis. Man, Bobby came out, Bobby worked. BB came out, standing ovation, he works hard.

He's still doing 300 nights a year.

Yeah, he's energetic on that stage, that's what I like about him. Albert is energetic

on the stage.

Yeah. I like watching him with his band. He's always angry with them. I've never seen him look happy with them.

Me neither. I seen Albert many times. I've never seen him happy with the way his band play. You know, you can imagine that one day you would see Albert, he would be happy with his band - they never playing right. He's always howling at them. If he wouldn't do that, the audience wouldn't know that they's not playing right. He turns all the way round and look at the band, and he cusses...! If I could see him one time with his band, and smiles. You never see BB do that. When BB get a round of applause, he say, 'Take a bow, gentlemens!' If BB's band make a wrong note, he look around at them and smile. And that ain't they know they're gonna get fired. He don't have to frown up. They ain't gonna get fired. The bandleader's gonna fire 'em, 'cos that's already understood. Yeah. You don't do that. You done rehearsed, you don't have to play for Willie John, Billy Jones, you don't have to play it for nobody but BB King. So there's no excuse for you to mess his music up, 'cos he's paying you good, and all you got to do when you get off is go home and go to bed and go to sleep - the next night you playing with BB King. You ain't playing with Bobby Bland. You don't have nothing to remember but his music. And he don't clown, he don't frown, you see him smiling. When he look around, they done messed up, but he smiles when he looks around. But Albert, 'Sonofabitch!' He cussin'. (To the waitress) Don't take that away right away, I might eat that. 'Cos we're probably gonna stay here till about twelve. What time do you get off? Eleven, twelve? We'll stay here till twelve, till you get off. OK?

R: He's always teasing somebody. He went to Doctor Pellagrino's office last night, the nurses ask him his age, he told them he was sixty-nine.

L: They asked me how did I stay young, I say well, I go down to hot springs, I go down to Jackson Georgia, and I stay in them pools, and I said I got a young girl, eighteen. 'She go round with you, that old?' I say, 'She loves me.' 'She don't be ashamed?' I say, 'She proud to have me.' So they call Ruth.

R: They believe him.

L: So Doc come in, he say, 'When is your birthday?' And I told him. 'Why they got this sixty-nine years old?' I made it so convincing, I didn't smile, I said I got this eighteen year-old girl, she gives me that energy. But I like music, I like entertaining. You have to like it, you want to be anyone.

R: You can tell when you see him perform. You coming up to the Mines tomorrow night?

L: I don't know it's going to be at the peak, but I'm going to do my best, because I haven't rehearsed it with the band.

Which band is that? Yours?

I guess I'm going to have the house band.

Well, they're pretty good.

R: Well, it won't be like usual, because you haven't rehearsed it, and they don't know your music, do they? I know how their concept is, where they can pick up, whose band is that, that can pick up anybody's music?

L: Johnny's band? Yeah, that's Little Johnny Christian. I did a thing down at the

Majestic over the weekend, I used his band, and they're good. They're young, too, but they can play, man. This little guitar player, if he don't go off the beat and start using dope or drinking, he's going to be good. I don't know his name, I only met him twice. But he's good, man.

There's a lot of good young guys. It's encouraging.

R: Well, there's Michael.

Michael Robinson? Theresa's.

Yeah, that's him. He played with me one time, he can play.

Have you heard Lurrie Bell? He's up at Biddy Mulligan's tonight. Don't he play with Billy Branch? Yeah, I met him at S.L.U.E.S. Yeah he can play too. The blues is coming back in, strong. If it wasn't for cats like Purvis Spann in these different cities, the blues would have been gone. That disco - whoever programmed that disco, which I know it was a white man, the same one did rock'n'roll - put it in. See, when they put it in, they do it to death. They put that disco in, they open up then disco joints - \$250,000. Here a black says I've got a disco joint, he got a light up in the ceiling, and a record. That's not a disco place. Disco place, the whole walls be moving, the lights all in the walls, the floor, but see, he's not going to spend that kind of money. What I told 'em they had, a lot of 'em got offended - 'Well, my disco, I would have a band' - I said, 'You ain't got no disco, you spinnin' records.' That's all he was doing, like the record house back in the sixties, that's all they was doing, they didn't have no disco places. I haven't seen but one here came close to a disco, and that was -two, the Sheba, and the Godfather, they changed it to the High Chapparal, now. Now it had the floor, the lights, all round the wall, the pictures moving on the walls. It costs a lot of money, though, and a black man's not going to open a joint and spend that kind of money from day one. See don't nobody do that but the Big Boys. And they got 'em all over the country, see. I went in a place down in Florida, this guy kept saying, 'You gotta come up and see me man, I want to talk to you, I got a joint.' The minute I walked in the door, I said to my partner, I said. 'This ain't the right place.' Stools at the bar cost at least five hundred dollars, had the arm on 'em, like you was sitting in your easy living room chair. Got five bars. Chairs at the tables the same way - big tall cushioned back, arms on them, carpet on the floor this deep. Liquor store right there, in the front where you come in the door, every bar you can't see the wall for the booze. A row of Cutty Sark, a row of Johnny Walker Red, a row of... you know. That takes a lot of money to open up a joint like that.

What was the Regal like? Was it a big place?

Oh, yeah. It was a theatre, it had two balconies, first and second balconies, then the main floor. Oh yeah, huge. They had twelve or fourteen stars, and all their bands, they had dressing room for all the bands, and all the stars had a separate dressing room.

So apart from BB King, who was playing places like that?

Everybody. Everybody who was anybody. Sam, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, anybody you could name played the Regal. A dollar and eighty cents to go in, and see a movie and five shows a day. When the show go off, the movie come on. Through the week they

did three. On Friday and Saturday and Sunday, they did five shows. No, Sunday they cut it back down to three, but Friday and Saturday they did five shows, starting like one-thirty that day. You could stay all day and all night. Over and over and over.

Where was it?

Forty-seventh and King Drive. It was South Parkway then. It's a big old building there now. They should have kept that place. Out front the big neon sign with all the names on it, going around. And a lot of people came from everywhere, north, because they'd get off that el right there at Calumet and walk right over there, come from all parts of the city. And you could tell when there was a superstar there: they had lines from the middle of that block all the way back around 47th down to Vincennes, three deep. BB would draw them like that, Temptations, Jackie Wilson draw them like that. Who else was popular, draw 'em like that back in them days? Rain, sleet and snow, and they're standing in them lines. I just thanked God I could go in the back door.

There's nothing like that now, is there?

No. Now, I really think that hurt Chicago too, as far as entertainment. Because, see, that was too much entertainment to see for a dollar and eighty cents, and a movie. You think about it. You could stay there all day long, you could go and get you lunch.

R: But then, back in those days, a dollar and eighty cents was a dollar and eighty cents.

L: But it still was too much entertainment. OK, you got BB King, the headline. Next is the Dells. Next you might have a pretty popular group, maybe the Contours, maybe Gladys Knight and the Pips, on down the line. You see what I'm saying? You got maybe eight or nine star acts, and all of them burning on stage. I know what you're saying, it was a lot of money, but it was too many stars for that much money.

R: They would have comedians too, I remember seeing Pigmeat Markham, and those guys.

L: Right, Pigmeat and some of them guys would be on some of them shows. This city just flooded out with the entertainment, peoples just got it in their craw, they got full of it, because they saw anybody in the world that was about anything, they had it all over the world, they had it in Baltimore, Washington DC, New York City, here, they started it in Detroit at the Roxy, they started it over there too.

So there was a circuit.

Right, seven-day stands. New York, they used to do ten.

Did they pay a lot?

No, not a whole lot, but you had to play it though, because the kids got a chance to see you, and that's what bought your records. It was a thing you had to do. If you didn't do that, you wasn't nobody, if you didn't play them theatres, see? James Brown was the one took the cover off entertainers not working, because he worked so hard, he worked so hard to entertain the people. That's why all the entertainers started to dancing and moving on stage. They used to didn't do it, but James Brown went across this country doing it. He he wet down to his shoes. He paved the way.

I used to think Junior Wells was pretty cool, and then I saw

James Brown on TV.

Well, James Brown got that from Joe Tex. Joe Tex died, you know that. You don't know Joe Tex? He made 'I Got You,' 'I ain't gonna bump with no big fat woman,' he had a lot of records out. He died about two weeks ago. Well, James got that mike thing from Joe Tex - pushing that mike, and dancing and stuff, but Joe didn't never get as big as James. Joe was a entertainer. I saw him in 1963, this man was an entertainer. In Atlanta Georgia, the Royal Peacock was fifty percent white and fifty percent black. They was changing over down there, and them white girls was all over Joe, I said, 'Oh Lord, they're going to blow this place up.' Joe was killing them. He had 'em crying, he had people crying, President Kennedy had got killed, he marked President Kennedy, he could do Elvis Presley better than Elvis Presley could. He had five or six bags. He went off the stage, 'Ladies and gentlemen how about a round of applause for Elvis Presley!' he'd come on with his guitar, with his collar turned up, do Elvis Presley to death, man. He'd go off the stage, they'd lead him back, 'Ladies and gentlemen, how about a round of applause for Ray Charles!' they'd lead him to the piano, he'd sit down there, go to scratching like Ray, play the piano just like Ray. Then, 'How about it for Jaaaaames Brown!' and he'd hit it, man. This cat, when I saw this dude, man, I sit there amazed. This was the only entertainer - no, two, him and Brook Benton - if they charged me, I would have paid to go see them. If they wouldn't let me in free, I'd pay to go see them. Nobody else. But Joe Tex, man, was a entertainer. Them was good days back then, but the entertainers wasn't making much money. Well, I guess the cost of living wasn't as high, they was making nice money. BB gonna make 800 a night, he had a 12-piece orchestra then bus driver, bus on the road and all that, for 800 a night. Now he's making 8000, about 8500. He showed me some contract where he made 15, 16000. But basically, he's about 85, 9000 a night.

But he works for it, doesn't he?

He deserve it. He's got a lot of years, and a lot of records out, he's got a lot of years. He deserve it. They gave him the Elvis Presley award, him and Jerry Lee Lewis, down in Memphis the other week. They played at the Rivermount, him and Jerry Lee Lewis was on stage together, Lewis was playin piano, BB was playing the guitar. We missed it. Had it on the 6 o'clock news, it was big in Memphis.

R: But we'd just gotten there. I was so upset about that.

He was at Chicagofest, did you see him there?

R: No, I don't go to those things, there's just too many people there, I can't deal with that kind of crowd.

L: Ol' blue eyes was there, wasn't he?

Yeah, he blocked the traffic, got his \$250,000.

See, I'm like this. The governors, and your presidents, and your congressmens, and all those kind of people, I let them change the law, I don't deal with that. Stevie Wonder shoulda came on and worked for that \$180,000, got out there. Maybe a couple of years, we might have us a black Chicagofest. You know - he didn't hurt Mayor Byrne. Shit, she got Frank Sinatra, and had just as many people.

R: Well it was probably better because of what Jesse did. If I had been organising

that, I would have had it just the opposite. I would have said, OK, I' gonna send for 39, 59, 100 buses, from Alabama, Georgia, Texas - black folks - and we're going to the Fest. How many whites do you think would have gone?

There were white people who were saying thanks, Jesse Jackson, I'm now going to go to the Fest.

Exactly. If I had been doing it, I would have told them, hey, I'm gonna bring black people to the Fest. Then the whites would have stayed away.

L: He didn't do nothing, but knock some black entertainers out of some money, that's all he did. And the name of this game is money and trying to reach your goal. See, Martin Luther King, he never did, he did things like if the garbage people was in trouble, the unions, he wouldn't march and stuff like that, he didn't deal in stuff like that, that's petty stuff. Like I was saying, you let somebody else do that, that's petty stuff like what Jesse's doing, real petty.

R: Well, Jesse is a crisis-oriented person. You don't hear too much of him until there's a crisis, and then he jumps in there and gets his name known. And the people he's boycotting the Fest for are still on the housing board - that was supposedly to be the reason for it, you know.

L: I couldn't see no connection with the housing board or with the Chicagofest. He ain't did nothing to her. Or when they wouldn't let nobody ride the buses, King would come in, when they didn't want nobody to ride the buses, wanted them to get in the back, he came in, that was something, helping to stop the prejudice, bringing it up front. But what Jesse did out there was nothing. Like she said, them people are still on the board. Like she said, people said, God, I'm going, them blacks aren't going to be there.

I couldn't believe that. Some guy in the northern suburbs said that on a radio show.

R: Did you read Royko's column that day? This is exactly what he was saying too. And I work in the western suburbs, all out Belleview, Broadwood, Westchester, some of them are lilly-white suburbs, and some of the people that I talked to said, yeah, I'm going now. A lot of the people I work with, mostly people I work with are white, I work in a department, there's three blacks, and there's 27 of us in there - but most of the time they don't realise that I'm black, you know what I mean? I'm just one of the workers, and they will say things to me, and 'Oh my goodness'.

L: But back in those days, in the early sixties, I liked the bands then, because black bands had more pride for their music than they do now. We all wore uniforms. My band had green and black uniforms, so I would have on some contrast to them, I was the leader, singer. All bands had uniforms. Now you see bands on stage with blue jeans, head rags round their heads, caps, -you couldn't go on the stage like that. We wasn't working white clubs then, we was working black clubs, they wouldn't allow it, you couldn't go up there like that.

R: You remember...? What's the name of that lounge...

L: The Southern Lounge in Harvey. He was very upset with the musicians up there with blues jeans.

R: He told me, he said, 'When Lee plays there, make sure that his band doesn't look

like that.'

L: I just think an entertainer - OK, that's what it says, 'an entertainer.' So you is the public, you sitting in the audience, you came to the show to be entertained. You know, me up there looking like I just came out of the steel mill that day, and I'm supposed to be an entertainer. You know, you don't dress like that. You not to make a difference between the band and the audience, so they even look like them, you say, well, that's the band. You know, when the band come in the audience, you don't know who the band is unless you know 'em personally. You know, so we didn't do that in the sixties, you couldn't do it. All bands was uniformed, all bands had something on that matched one another.

R: That's like I was saying earlier, with the records, people don't take enough pride in their work. They're not entertainers any more, they just get up and do something.

That may be the influence of rock music. In the sixties, the average rock musician was trying to look like a working-class kid, so maybe the black musicians decided to try it. Could be sub-conscious.

Waitress: Would you like some more coffee?

R: I'd like some water.

Waitress: Water? Whatcha gonna do, take a bath?

L: I don't know the lady's name, a guy gave me it, she talks kind of like a white lady, she's 32 South Randolph, a booking agent. I'd never met her, I didn't know if she was white or black. When I calls her, I told her my name is Lee Shot Williams, I told her who told me to call her, she says, do you band got uniforms? I said no, but I was going to get them some. She said yeah, 'cause it make me so mad, these niggers walk around with these head rags on and blue jeans - so I got offended, kinda, you know. But she was right. And I said, are you white, she says no, I'm black, I books the finest of hotels, and my band be in tuxedos, and they be clean. I cannot book nobody looking like they just come out the steel mill, she says I can't even abide that. She said, I'm gonna have to come and see your group, so I said, well don't come right now! I'm just telling you the truth, they're not dressing like that. I never did call her back. She said if you get 'em uniforms, and call me, I'll come down and hear 'em. Have you ever been to Fitzgeralds? The Fitzgeralds people is different in night and day then the Kingston Mines. The night of this I happened to go out, and I wore my suit. She had a nice dress on. We walk into the club, just about all the dudes in there with suits on, their ladies with nice dresses on, you understand? This is a beautiful place, and it was different in night and day, from Fitzgeralds and the Kingston Mines.

I like to see that sometimes. Junior Wells, when he plays, he always looks sharp.

L: Yeah, but the band don't. You know, you're out front, here you is, kinda sharp, and everybody in the band, one got on blue jeans, one got a headrag round his head, one got a cap on. So hey man, it's all the way out the top. You know Mick Jagger, Mick Jagger don't wear them cut off pants and jump shoes, with 80,000 people out in

front of him. He can do that, because this is the way he do.

R: Have you seen Otis Clay's band? You see how they dress.

L: And Professor was out there, and I told professor, Now you know better, the way you dress, you know better. And he say, well the other guys... But hey, still don't dress like they do, and at least the man can say, well one of them up there is clean.

R: That was the night he had this leather cap pulled down, dark glasses, and one of those old greasy like work jackets, and all of them look horrible on the stage.

L: Everybody in the audience pressed out in their suits, the ladies with their dresses on, a great Christmas party going on, the stage lit up like a Christmas tree. She asked them about putting me up there, and he said yeah, but if he bring a band looking like that, I won't let them work.

If Sammy Fender's playing with you tomorrow, he'll be dressed.

R: Doc did say the house band. It'll be Sammy, Covington, Bobby probably...

L: He wont take that cap off. Bob Anderson, he ain't gonna never take that cap off. He used to play with Little Mac Simmons, Mac used to make him dress. I ain't saw Bob's head, I ain't saw him out from under that cap in at least 12 years. How can you go on the stage with a hat on? Unless it's a costume. I used to go on stage with a hat, but it was made like my suit, it was made out of the same material as my suit. Now after I do a couple of numbers I would take my hat off, I had a cane. Everything was matching. I haven't saw him with that cap off in years, man. Junior Wells used to do his hats so nice, his hats used to be so neat, Junior was a neat cat, man, I haven't saw his head in ten years, he wears his hat, that derby...

That's a nice hat. That's a \$75 hat, that one. He's a pretty cool guy. He wouldn't give me an interview, though. I had to talk to his lawyer, who never showed up.

R: He's that way, you know. First time I met Junior, Doc introduced me, said I was the one who was going to be booking bands out of the Mines. I never did understand a word he said. He was growling at me!

L: Lawyer never showed up, huh?

Yeah. I put my gun in my pocket, went down on the el, and no lawyer came.

L: That's funny. See, I told you they were spaced out, they are spaced out in this town, they are spaced all the way out. That's why I'm trying so hard, I told her - I wants to elevate, so I can go abroad. See these people here depresses me, lot of musicians depresses me. What I know their capability are, and what they're doing, it depresses me to see 'em. When I'm abroad, I see a musician, I don't know him, so it don't bug me. But these cats, I know what they can do, but they won't do it. That's why I want to go abroad. I want to get to Japan, so bad. I'm big in Japan.

They pay well there, I hear.

L: Yeah, they do. I'm gonna try to get over there. I did a show down the Checker-board, when I came off this Japan guy ran up to me, grabbed hold of me, You Lee Shot? I didn't know nothing he was saying, he wanted a picture with his wife,

wanted to take a picture with me.

Where's this magazine from?

R: Japan. Open it up, you'll see.

L: It's got my whole story, let me see it, let me show you my story. They got all of my records though in English. They got every record I ever recorded. And they got a story, but what it says - I don't know. You got the other two magazines? Otis Clay gave me these...