Bob Koester interview.
At the Jazz Record Mart, 4243 N. Lincoln Avenue, Chicago.
Thursday afternoon, 5 August 1982.

I was going to school in St Louis U. in St Louis, to take a business course, which I basically flunked, preparatory to becoming a movie cameraman. In fact I have two brothers who are. And I had already got involved in jazz to the extent of collecting records. I was commanded that I must go to a Jesuit school by my Catholic parents, and I picked St Louis U. over Chicago or Loyala, in the south in New Orleans, because I was afraid I'd get seduced into the world of jazz, by the music. So I went to St Louis, where one block off campus Tab Smith was playing, the marvellous alto player, three blocks off campus was a sallon owned by a ragtime piano player named Charles Thomson, who wrote the Lily Rag; two blocks in another direction was a dixieland joint, and not too far away, a quick streetcar ride, was Miles Davis. So what really happened was I got seduced from my studies into jazz, although I can't claim any particular perspicacity in listening, I just liked it, I'm just basically a fan. So instead of a film maker who collects records, I'm a record maker who collects films. And it's really just a slow process, the first year I just went around the second-hand stores looking for records for myself, and like most collectors I'd pick up anything I might be able to swop or sell to another collector to help support the hobby. It's like drug addiction: you become a dealer out of need. And by the end of the year I had met a fellow named Ron Fister, who collected pop music of the thirties, and we sort of went in together to buy collections, and sort of better deals in second-hand stores, and by the end of the year it was called K&F sales, doing business out of our dormitory selling old 78s. We took over the stock of a 78 dealer, Ed Crowder, who gave us his mailing list, and we were sort of in business. And after I had to haul all of that shit out to his house, and neither of us owned a car, so I had to promote car to do it with, when he wrote me, I went home for summer and he wrote me and said, I've found a store, just right next to the St Louis U campus for 40 bucks a month, let's open a store, and I said go ahead. Put some money down, I sent him my half of the first month's rent. And that started it. The label began as a result of that dixieland band I mentioned, that was near the campus, The Windy City Six as they called themselves. I recorded them. The recording session was held sometime in the early winter or late fall of '53, and I think it was 54 before I actually got anything released. I did not have the money to pay the guys, so I paid the studio rent and made a royalty deal with the guys, and later I had a partner who said, oh let's just pay 'em off, you know, clean up that deal. From then on our policy became one of pretty strictly at least union scale, and of course often better,

in blues. I thought this band was just too good to not have a record out. It was really a hobby thing. The cop on the beat in this saloon where these guys played was Charlie O'Brien. He was a jazz fan, he liked all kinds of early jazz - a little bit into blues, not a whole lot - his own personal story was that his parents had been murdered by burglars. This was a man who was really down on burglars. I think it was two separate incidents. He had been raised in an orphan home, and he had this tremendous respect for old people. Has this tremendous respect for older people. And he became a lieutenant, which meant he was a plain clothes man, and he was on the street, and he wanted to use his investigative abilities to dig up some old musicians. Well, we felt we knew where most of the old St Louis musicains were, but we didn't know about all these mysterious names on these blues records. Well, we gave him a list of Henry Brown, and Ike Rogers, Wallace Moore and Edith Johnson, and he found all of the ones who were still alive. He eventually even got over to Alton and located Barrelhouse Buck McFarland. Just missed Wesley Wallace by a few weeks, and learned something about Jabbo Williams. But when he found Mary Johnson, Mary mentioned Speckled Red, and that's how Speckled Red was located, and recorded. And then Big Joe Williams heard about all this - Big Joe can smell a record deal a thousand miles away - and he showed up at my shop one day, and we eventually recorded him.Those were to be 10-inch LPs, recorded I think 54 and 55. We did several sessions, I didn't own the recording equipment, I couldn't afford to go in the studio for these, I think it was $25 an hour, I couldn't afford that. Actually we only pay about twice that much now, for pretty good studios, you don't have to go out and spend 150 bucks an hour, you know, when you're not doing a lot of overdubbing, you're better off in a less expensive studio, less sophisticated, you don't have to put everybody in telephone booths, which is the practise of some of these engineers . So, we borrowed recording equipment and that sort of thing, so there's a lot of different sessions, some of them weren't successful, some of them were, but my agreement was always I'll pay you for what I release. Of course the guys are always hitting on me for money, so eventually everything they have on tape's paid for! So we did those things. My approach to blues was, they wouldn't sell worth a damn. I mean, there were no blues LPs in the early fifties. There was one 10-inch Dial LP by Broonzy, of imported masters from Vogue, there was one 10-inch LP by Brownie McGee and Sonny Terry, there was a 10-inch Sonny Terry , there was a 10-inch Emercee of Broonzy basically doing his folk-music act. But blues as blues, and not as folk music, really didn't exist on LPs. It was part of folk music, like Leadbelly didn't just do blues, and neither did Brownie McGhee for that matter, he had a few Josh White-isms. There was nothing wrong with that, but even that folk music audience was tiny then, after you got past the Weavers it didn't exist. The Weavers had the Gordon Jenkins orchestra, and if people heard the Weavers without Gordon Jenkins they felt cheated. Really, they'd go

to concerts and feel cheated. But the whole Weavers movement might have turned into something, it might have turned into what happened in the sixties, but it got short cut by McCarthyism, the anti-communist hysteria of that period. At any rate, my approach was that I'd record blues, and they wouldn't sell very well, but I'd have no competition. I never got a chance to issue the stuff till after I'd moved to Chicago, which I did in '58. In '59 I bought Seymour's, and you know, I've not missed any meals, basically, since buying Seymours. It was kind of rough when I moved over to Grand Avenue in '61. Seymours was a store that had been started in the late forties, basically as a jazz record store, a used record store, with the accent on jazz, and that had gotten pretty run-down by 1958 because Seymour spent his time writing songs and producing schmaltzy trumpet records. Seymour Swartz, he was always called Seymour, Seymour and his heartbeat trumpet, and I think the records even got issued in England, on Pye, if I remember. Yeah, because he had a deal with Chess, and Chess had a deal with Pye. So Seymour wanted to go, so I bought the store. I'd better not mention the money, because he's still around, and he might resent it. I bought the store for a very good price,and it's been pretty good since then. But the struggle was always to get enough money to record something, and then get enough money to release something, and Delmark, with very few exceptions, has never really had a year in which it's showed a profit. If Delmark's 28 years old, I doubt if there's been more than 6 or 7 in which we showed a profit. And most of those years were years in which we'd make a lease deal with somebody for a flock of albums, and have that kind of exceptional income. We've had records that made money. But for every Hoodoo Man Blues, there's going to be one that breaks even and two or three that really lose money. And sometimes the losers, like Anthony Braxton's first avant garde jazz album, sold I think 200 copies, and then the re-issue sold 2500. But 2500, when you've spent two or three thousand in the studio, 2500 doesn't bring it all back. But I regard it all like buying stock in US Steel or something. If I don't want to operate Delmark, I can lease it, lease enough of the masters, can't make a living out of it, you know, to have justified the investment. The real surprise came when we issued the Big Joe Williams I was very worried because Big Joe lived in California and had done an LP for Strachwitz, and I believe it was the first LP Strachwitz issued, and I thought, Jesus, the market here is going to be for about fifty copies, and he's going to cut that in half, and I'll be lucky if I sell thirty. It went about 600, or 700, which considering I'd recorded the thing in my store, and in the home of a friend, with rented equipment, so I didn't have much overhead, just what I'd paid Joe, so it really was a profitable album. When the Speckled Red came out, I thought it was going to do as well, and I quickly learned that at that time blues fans only listened to guitar players and harmonica players. Speckled Red did very poorly, in fact all our piano records in that 60s period did. They sold better

on the re-issue, and still nothing much. We hit these plateaux as we went along, and the next step was the third album, the legend of Sleepy John. And we had a legend thing going, everybody thoughthe was dead, I had letters from people saying, Koester, what are you trying to pull? Because John's voice was the voice of an old man, even though he was relatively young. I think he was in his twenties when he did the Victor sides, and he still sounds like he was eighty then. Broonzy had said, 'When I was a boy I was on a track-laying gang ' - I don't think Broonzy was ever on a track-laying gang - 'and John Estes was the lead singer and he was eighty years old then.' And Broonzy was older than Estes. Broonzy was born in the 18oos, and I think Estes was born in 1903, 1906, something like that. Broonzy was such a folklorist, folk artist, that he couldn't help embroidering it. So we were really amazed, and that was 1200 or 1300. It's a little hard to tell, because a lot of them were monos, and when stereo prices equalised a lot of them got shipped right back to the manufacturers. Then things kind of did OK, nothing sold particularly well. down through Roosevelt Sykes, Curtis Jones, the second Estes album - a very big disappointment, with mandolin blues at the height of the jug band craze, with Jim Kweskin and the even dozen Jug Band, and every college dorm had a jug band just about, and we put out a real jug band album. It wasn't all jug - no washboards, no string bass - but we had Mike Bloomfield and Big Joe, and Yank Rachell, Hammie Nixon harp, doubling on jug, and not well-recorded, but awfully good musically. A real miracle, here and there. And totally ignored by the folk-music part. Folk music was big business, this was about 1963, 64, and beyond the Kingston trio, and bullshit folk music, you know, pop folk, there was real business in like, the Vanguard thing. Of course, Joan Baez, in the million-selling category, which had lesser artists like Rambling Jack Elliot doing serious numbers, 20, 30, 40,000 pieces, I should think, and the Kweskin Jug Band was a fucking institution. Rightly so, it had good people, Jeff Moldar was in that group, and a lady who now calls herself Maria Moldar, she was Maria Demato then. It had some really good people in it, but what they were doing was basically bad, because it was as if they had listened to the re-issues of jug band records, and then just wrote out the arrangement and then played it. It was really a little more creative than that, but they never seemed to do any tunes that hadn't been recorded by the Memphis Jug Band. So I thought, let's do the real thing, you know, and what nobody quite realised, and many people don't today, is that many of these jug bands never existed except on records. The Memphis was purely a record thing, later they did do appearances, but it was put together to make records, by Victor records. There was all this bullshit about it being a folk art, and I guess it sort of was, but just as a sideline to blues. That was a real bitter disappointment, the more I think about that, the more I get pissed off. And I've since learned stories about certain people who had vested interests in the business

of folk music. I mean, there was one review for a major periodical that was set in type, and then allowed to be killed from pressure from a manager of a group. The group had nothing to do with it, they were innocent of the whole thing, but it just pisses me off. Because we really had something there. We were having trouble. The white blues singers were coming in, the John Hammonds' and Dave van Ronks were dominating the concert scene, and getting gigs, and the Big Joe Williams' and the Sleepy John Estes' were doing about three jobs a year, or they were offered coffee-house gigs for $10 a night, that sort of shit. And it just pissed me off. I dropped out of booking around that point, I said, man, I cannot fight that power structure they got, the Boston Washington New York axis. They were just trying to promote artists they thought were good, but what they were doing to some of the black originators... I got into some very emotional scenes at the Newport Folk festival, 1964 I guess it was. But Europe opened up, and that helped, that helped a lot, because John Hammond Jr never in his life went to Europe, I don't think, unless he did it with his daddy's money, or some of his royalty money from Electra or Columbia. It used to really piss me off. It wasn't the guys that were doing it. And the bad press was always, 'He's a reverse racist, Koester's a reverse racist.' I don't argue with a guy's ability or desire or right to do it, but it was the perfect willingness of supposed liberals, and old left people, to just cater to this fucking dominant racism, that even today is still there in what's left of the folk music world, there's just a lot of not-too-latent racism involved in how they operate. At Old Town school of Folk Music, just as an example, they called up and said we want somebody to teach how to play blues guitar, and I said well, Big Joe Williams is in town, and they said, no no, we need somebody white. He won't be able to teach. He can do it, now Joe's really a great artist... Fuck it! Joe's taught more goddam white blues guitar kids than he should have. He's generated his own fucking competition, and he's done it, just like Junior Wells has, very unselfishly. So they got Bloomfield, and Bloomfield quit after two days. He said, 'They want me to teach them how to play like Broonzy.' They wouldn't accept anybody but Broonzy, because Broonzy had appeared at the school. I'm not down on th Old Town School, but... one thing is the idea that we must take folk music and turn it into protest music, or it's worthless. You know. It's worthless unless it can be used as a political tool. I just think that's bullshit. I think there's a place for protest music, and a lot of good shit was done, from the Weavers and the Almanacs and up to Dylan and beyond, and it will go on forever, and there will always be that kind of music, and it was protest music, but you know, blues singers were not 24 hour a day political artists, political beings. Most blacks, blues singers, singing for a black audience, didn't have to talk about oppression, it's like you don't talk about the weather in a song either, unless you can really do something unusual with it, you wouldn't

talk about it. So those were the frustrations of that period. Then in '65 we recorded Hoodoo Man, by Junior, another big surprise.

Was this the start of something new?

Well, around '63 Muddy appeared at Newport, and '64 I think they issued the record. It came out quite some time after the thing. Several years earlier than that - let's see, Broonzy died in '58 - so sometime in '59 appeared an album called Muddy Waters sings Big Bill, on Chess. Which was probably the first time that anything that could be described as modern Chicago blues was recorded for LP release. And I suspect they went into the studio to do a dedicatory single, and decided to expand it into an album. It did bomb as an album. An interesting thing about Chess records, and this may have something to do with Whitey's ability to listen to the music, although the records were marketed purely into the R&B market, the liner notes were written by Studs Turkel on a lot of those early things. And I think Studs, like he has done on a lot of occasions, and God bless him for it, you know, sort of like a stamp of approval, to the lefties, the old left, Studs is old left, and I've never really had a complaint about him from that. He's one of the few old lefts who doesn't, you know, follow the party line - I sound like a Kansas Republican, which I was once - but you know, I've gone the full circle, I'm not quite ready to go back to sanctifying Joe McCarthy and everything, but I was involved in a lot of the political things in the 60s, you know, and I've finally got so burned up that I've decided that the assholes on the left are possibly more dangerous than the assholes on the right, because at least the assholes on the right, in a democracy you can vote them down, but the assholes on the left are going to wind up in control, and you might not even be able to vote someday. Maybe that is really more of a clear present danger than most people perceive, I don't know. Politics really shouldn't have this much to do with music, but I was thinking the other day when someone else was asking about the sixties, the country blues period. It was a real quick saga, I mean black country blues singers were doing business for a very few years in the early sixties, and after that, if you couldn't command a real good price, you were worth about 50 or 100 bucks a night. I mean Newport paid 50 bucks, but it paid 50 bucks to Dylan too. It was nice. What I heard was they paid Dylan 50 bucks for the day he appeared, and expenses, but they put him up in a fancy hotel. With the blues artists they paid them every day of the festival, and they only appeard once, basically, once and maybe a workshop on another day. But they put them up in this fucking house that didn't have any furniture in it, and they brought in army cots. But it was a hell of a place, man, imagine being in a house, I slept in a room with Sleepy John Estes, Yank Rachell and Hammie Nixon, and in the next room Lightnin Hopkins shared with -I forget, he might have had his own room, and upstairs was Skip James in the attic, at the insistence of his

manager, a lot of the guys had record companies and they apparently hadn't signed him yet, and they watchedhim, it was like the Mafia man, here comes the Skip James entourage! In the back, Jesse Fuller slept in a car with a shotgun by him, he had all the shit in the car, you know, he didn't want to unload it. He was a very paranoid guy. And who the hell else was there? Son House was there, Fred McDowell and Annie McDowell, just a lot of real good people. Muddy wasn't there, Muddy came by. And at night everybody was playing, every room was a different blues group playing, and I think they decided, fuck it, let's get a dollar from everybody who comes in, and I remember an extremely famous white blues singer refused to pay. I'll tell you when you turn off the tape recorder (John Hammond Jr). Refused to pay, and didn't stay in the house more than a few minutes, I said OK, go ahead, you're a celebrity, or something - the guys asked me to collect the money, maybe he thought I was going to keep the money or something. I forget what we did, I think what we did with the money is just buy beer. Basically we wanted to just keep out people who were just coming in for the beer, because the guys had dug in their pockets for the beer. I think Newport had sent over a few cases, but one case for each musician would have been more appropriate. That was neat. '64 was about the high-water mark, that was the year when there was a lot of blues at Newport, and there wasn't too much bread, and the record company never sent royalties, as far as I understand, and the record company issued a two-record John Hurt record, and never did pay the artist, until a law-suit was filed by Crazy Jean Rosenthal of Adelphi records, on behalf of the Hurt estate. The Hurt family, the Hurt wife, who was not part of the Hurt estate for some reason, the benificiary of the Hurt estate was I believe operated by one of the officials of the record company, plus the booking agent who had booked him in his last days. I never got the details, because both sides of that, Dick Waterman and Jean Rosenthal, are both friends. Waterman's more an ex-friend, for other reasons. At any rate, that was the high-water mark for country blues. After that there was a year or two where the white kids dominated, as they had begun to, but in 64 I don't believe any white blues singers played the festival, I guess it was racism, I don't know. And after that, there'd be like one token black blues artist at Newport - this is Newport Folk, not Newport jazz, there's almost never blues at Newport Jazz. Muddy did in 63, by some miracle, but I don't think they've had a Chicago blues band at Newport Jazz since then. 65 was the Junior Wells record, and again I thought, here's a Chicago blues band. I like Junior Wells, and Buddy Guy - the Buddy Guy trio plus Junior is what it really was - we thought Buddy was under contract to Chess, in point of fact it either never was so, and he'd just done one-shots, or the contract had expired, because he wasn't really under contract at the time, he was hoping to get renewed and he didn't. But Buddy had the trio at Theresa's, and Junior was the separately-hired featured artist, which is how Theresa's always

works, there's a band and very often just a stand-up singer, I think Foree has a gig now. And I thought it was a very unique sound, because the Muddy Waters band, and the Howlin Wolf band, which I would love to have recorded, and of course were with Chess, were unavailable, Otis Rush thought he was still under contract to Duke, and I'd maybe heard Magic Sam once. I hadn't heard a lot of guys. Really, I didn't own a car, so I didn't get out much. I thought, well, here's a beautiful sound, and it's getting wasted, because Junior was making 45s for USA at that point, but he had done some session which he had gotten into his 'Ooh, ah, eeh' and Paul Glass was afraid to issue the record because he thought these were sexual sounds, and it wouldn't get airplay, so he didn't want to issue the record. So Junior was having a hassle with him, so I happened to come along at exactly the right time, and he did this relatively quiet record. I remember Pete Welding in Downbeat gave it two stars, said it was a terrible record, it wasn't noisy enough in effect, it should have had another guitar. Well, that wasn't what was going on at the club, and that's what I wanted. And Welding never did like Junior Wells, I never understood, it was almost like something personal, like Junior had shit on him or something in some way - which might be, we're all human. And Pete and I were real good friends, and it sort of singed the friendship, considerably, he was just about ready to move to Californis at that time, I think he had got married. Yeah, the Junior Wells album came out, and it's been a steady seller, I don't think it ever went below 1100 or 1200 a year. It's best year it did about 2500, that was the second year. First year it only did about 1500, and some of that was monos that came back. That was my first modern blues record, and almost the first. Muddy at Newport was sort of a transcription that happened to be made by Voice of America, you know, they have a dispensation from the Union to record Jazz festivals, and the artists could get the tapes, or copies of the tapes, for release if they want. So that was sort of a happen thing, and Muddy Sings Big Bill, I don't know if you've heard it, it's got Buddy Guy playing guitar, and it's a real attempt to make it kind of a country thing, or at least a Lester Melrose kind of thing. I think Willie Dixon played string bass, and if it didn't have Fender bass, then it's not Chicago blues! So we can sort of claim Hoodoo as the first record recorded for LP release. I may be conveniently forgetting when Folk Festival of the Blues was done, which was this album on Argo. It's a marvellous album, but two tracks were not made on location, they had overdubbed audience over studio tracks. The Sonny Boy, because he didn't show up that night, and I think the Howlin Wolf track. But that was a great album, even though it was a little bit phoney. Well, this started a thing. Sam Charters came to town shortly after the record was out, and recorded those three Vanguard things. That led to the whole Vanguard involvement. For some reason, it took the Whiteys a little bit longer to get into black Chicago blues than

white, and really I have to say that the interest in Chicago electric blues was profoundly increased upon the appearence of the Paul Butterfield band at Newport, behind Bob Dylan, when Dylan got into an electric band thing. And I do remember one incident where Bob Shelton of the New York Times came to Chicago with an Irish folk singer to appear at the University of Chicago Folk Festival, which was, is, and probably always will be very ahead of the general run of Folk music taste. Let's see, their first festival was '57 or '58, they had Muddy, the second one had Memphis Slim and Willie Dixon, the third one they had, believe it or not, in '59 I think it was, they had Junior Wells and a blues band. At a folk music festival. And people hated it! He came there, the whole band had maroon livery, you know, uniforms, and Junior did his show that if you've seen you may not like even today, and you can imagine how they dug it at a folk festival, where thay were just beginning to accept bluegrass!

The Hoodoo Man. Yeah. The problem was, it was premature. For instance, the Mississippi John Hurt records in the earlier sixties, I believe sold between five and 15000 pieces. And I belive some of the Brownie and Sonnys, you know, which were very polished, might have hit... not really a nightclub act, but it was too, it just wasn't that phony ... probably those things did in the fives, you know, 3 to 10000. Whereas Big Joe was a little too real, although we did see the day when even records we issued, by Otis Rush and Junior Wells, would sell in excess of 5000 the first year. Jimmy Johnson and that sort of thing. But it didn't happen overnight. I can remember the first couple of years after Junior, the first Magic Sam did 3000, something like that, the first year. And generally, what you sell in the first year is about twice what you'll sell in the second year, and three or four times what you'll sell in subsequent years, but with the Junior it was something like 1200, 1500 the first year, 2500 the second year, and then it levelled down to about 1000 or 1500 a year, 1200 being a fairly good average. So the Chicago thing has remained blacker than the country thing did. It seems weird when you realise that country blues really is the real fucking thing, the real ethnic folk music, and Chicago blues you're starting to elements of jazz, elements of showbiz, elements of record industry influencing the music, and things like that, and yet it's so black that it stays black... lot of white sidemen. There's been some super pop Chicago blues artists, white, you know, Butterfield, Bloomfield, a lot of rock bands that do Chicago music. I remember being put off when Grateful Dead did a note-for-note imitation of one of the tracks on Hoodoo Man, on their first LP, Good Morning Schoolgirl, except when Junior Wells went UH! they went bleh. I bought the grateful Dead just to hear the album, because I had seen a movie that they did, some little underground movie, shown at the old Aarvaark Cinematech, prior to ever having heard of the band, in fact I just sort of put two and two together, it was the name of the movie, I didn't know it was the name of the band. Here's all these kids writhing

around in all the psychedelic lighting and the Grateful Dead acid rock music. That was real music. To me that's ethnic, the San Francisco rock thing. And their Good Morning Little Schoolgirl, to me that's the kind of imitation that is flattery. There were other kinds of imitation, where people would change the composer credit on the record, screw the original guy out, suddenly it's composed by the guys in the band, the manager of the band, or the A&R man of the company, that other rock bands, that shall be nameless, did. There were more than a few cases. Was Iron Butterfly one of the guys who got into that? I didn't really give much about rock. San Francisco did have a thang going, there was a real thing there. I mean there are these blues-influenced musics. Beatles are an example. Their real early records are pretty bad imitation blues. They were much better when they got into their own thing, they did their own shit, they brought their own life experience, their own environmental influences to bear, and a real music happened. But these guys that sit down, and if they sing a Blind Lemon Jefferson song they'll try to sound like Blind Lemon, then they'll switch to say a drastically different kind of voice, an Estes song, and they'll try to sound like Estes, I mean who the fuck needs that? Estes recorded in stereo himself! But that's the sort of thing, and I guess it's better to h have a pop music that's blues-influenced or jazz-influenced than have a pop music that's influenced by, you know, Al Jolson, Perry Como, and things like that. And it's inescapable anyway, it's not a question of whether I accept it, it's going to be there whether I accept it or not. And from Junior it just sort of went on. I never got to record certain guys because, you know, they went on to other labels, or...

Who would you have liked to record that you didn't?

Well, the one big frustration for me, the biggest frustration of all, was Bobby King. I didn't even go see him. I might have heard him and not known who he was, but I don't think so. I think that was one of the great sad stiries of modern Chicago blues. Bobby King I overlooked because I thought well, his name is Robert King, and he's calling himself Bobby King, a kind of a rip-off of the BB King reputaion, and there was a lot of that going on. Finally I saw him sitting in one night, the guy was just fantastic, as a singer, brilliant guitarist, and for me the singing comes first, I've only recorded one or two people whom I'd say were guitarists who sing, generally they've been singers who play guitar or harp or something, piano, whatever it is. And Bobby was really marvellous, and I just never had the bread to do it. And then Madame Morgantini came in and she did it, rather poorly, insisting on these warhorses that she always wanted the guys to do, I guess because they were public domain songs, and insisting on doing it in a tavern, without a crowd - what the fuck? It was just a way to save on studio rent, that's all. And the money wasn't really very good, I guess, but thank God she did it, otherwise Bobby wouldn't have any records. I stepped

aside for a while there, because Tulman was working on a single, with a deal I think probably just verbal at that point, lined up with Henry Stone in Florida.TK Records was a big label then, they're bankrupt now, as most labels are. If they get big enough they get small and disappear. It's like a balloon. That's a real good analogy. I thought, you know, I don't want to stand in the cat's way, and before he could even do that single, he had a stroke, and I guess will never play. He had two problems, he had a stroke, and prior to that I think he got shot. He recovered from that, and got a stroke. The story I hear is he'll never play again. And I just feel horribly guilty that I haven't even gone to visit the cat, because this was somebody that I would see regularly. He was just an awfully decent guy, I felt working with him would be like working with Junior Wells, just absolutely no problem, just go in the studio and do it. And Big Joe was very much that way, although Big Joe could be problems outside the studio, but once you got Joe in the studio, in the old days when he was drinking you had to curb that. But he'd show up sober, and he might have a drink during the session, and he might be pretty high by the end of the session, but he wouldn't show up high and get stupid. You're always hearing stories, you know, the classic black blues artist, the image of the blues artist, is one of the things that does help the white kids, even among black musicians. There are black leaders who hire a lot of white kids because they're dependable, they say. I know one local kid who's a pretty good musician, but unfortunatel he's fallen into the self-destructive behaviour in a ritualistic way of some of these pathetic artists who really haven't ever learned there's another way of living life than just being drunk all the time. So that's about it. The most recent chapter was tha about three years ago we had the opportunity to expand the retail end of the business, the Jazz Record Mart, into the space that I know you've seen. The old store was a different shape, but it wasn't any bigger, it was probably smaller than this little room we're in at the moment, the office. Which is why we put another store out here, because we didn't have enough room at the other place, and I couldn't figure any way to expand it. We had the opportunity to move into the present area, but we had to, like, break up the cement floor, pour a new floor, brick up the windows, glass bricks, tuckpointing. The landlord just completely re-built the roof, and it still leaks occasionally. And it was a considerable investment, I had no savings, I blew my savings when we bought the building here on Lincoln, so I very deliberately set about the destruction of Delmark Records! I had hoped to get it back in action. I thought, well, it would take 15 or $20,000 to fix up the space down there, and then we'll gradually buy fixtures, from proceeds, and we'll gradually expand into the additional fixtures. And we just sort of engaged in this orgy of expansion of inventory that leaves me now owing $15,000 in past due bills on records. Credit in the record industry has always been kind of loose. They always had the saying, the distributor supplies the records,

and the retailer supplies the cash register. Generally speaking you could buy records and sell them before you had to pay for them, and that's more often than not the case, when you're in an expanding situation - I went to a lot of distributors and said look, these records will do you a lot more good in my warehouse than they will in your warehouse, and mostly they went along with it. But things started tightening up, I mean we were entering a recession when I opened the store, moved from 7 to 11 West about two and a half years ago, and we knew that maybe things weren't going to be too sharp when we moved into the back room, and of course the commitment was made, and everything. But basically it was last summer when we noticed that sales weren't - we had no way of knowing what they should be, because they were constantly growing - but it seemed to level off a bit. Early this year, only January this year, did we see months tha weren't as good as the previos year, but when we went into the store, I was prepared to lose a master deal, that I may lose, a deal to acquire some masters. I was prepared to not issue any Delmarks at all for a period of a couple of years. And we have managed to put out a few things, and to record one or two albums. I was even prepared to delete very important albums, like West Side Soul and Hoodoo Man Blues, to do this expansion. I regretted doing that, but when we reissue Hoodoo Man we'll probably have a five or ten thousand piece year on that, and that will more than make up for the sales we missed in the interim, when it was out of print. In fact it's damn good business to do that once in a while with a good album. We find that often when we reissue albums they do better than the first release. Because Hoodoo Man particularly was a case of prematurity. I like to think that some of the interest in Chicago blues might not have been quite so widespread if we hadn't issued the record. You go through Rolling Stone and the only time they'll write about an artist, a black blues artist, is when he's dead. And there was a cult on Sonny Boy, and there was a cult on Walter. You know, Sonny Boy died about the same year we issued the Junior Wells record. I don't think the success of the Junior Wells record is entirely unrelated to that fact. Walter died in 69. They seem to really dig writing about artists when it can no longer do them any good.

It's a sort of romantic hero hangover.

Yeah. 'Gosh, he was nice.' He was just as marvellous a player, and just as good an artist when he was alive. But once he's dead, he's no threat to the Rolling Stones. But the Stones have done some nice things. They never use a black blues artist in the States, but I think Buddy and Junior went to Europe with them, and so did BB King.

The latest one being Sugar Blue.

No comment. He's such a character.

I wanted to ask you about payment. What's the Union Scale?

Well, scale right now, it's so long since we did a session, I don't really know. Steve handled the Jimmy Johnson albums. But I think scale is something like $600

for a leader, for an album, or is that...? That might be sideman money. I don't really know. I know what we pay. We have consistently paid leaders of Chicago blues albums well over scale. Multiples of scale. It's putting their business and mine in the street if I say this - I am aware of LPs for which the leader has been paid $50 or $100, and has been expected to either screw his sidemen or pay them out of that money. I know of albums where guys get no money, they get a record. It can be argued that if you're going to go in a studio - and it's no trick to spend a couple of thousand dollars, even in a modest studio. We used to get sound studios, 45 bucks an hour for an eight-track studio - but the fucking tape ran 50 or 100 bucks a reel. And if you're really doing a nice loose session you don't want to be stopping and losing performances because you're backing up the tape to erase stuff, and believe me at those kind of prices, a lot of stuff gets erased, nowadays. I didn't used to do it. In the old days it was 15 bucks for half an hour of quarter-inch tape, and I'd just leave it on there. I'd just let the fucking tape roll, I was always inclined to try to have the studio to have two quarter-inch tapes, so we could have a record of everything that was done at the session. That would be ridiculous.

Alligator is probably selling more records than I am, but I don't lose money when they sell a record. I don't lose money when anybody else sells a record. I lose money when I don't sell a record that I could sell. like Hoodoo, we're losing money now on records that are out of print, but we're probably losing a lot more money on records that we haven't issued. I got a Yank Rachell in the can, I got another Junior Wells, I got a Carey Bell. No, if I was going through this period with the retail thing, and we had been the strongest blues label in Chicago blues field, which we have never really been - first we had Chess, and then we got Alligator. Bruce will be happy to hear that. If I was Alligator, and I decided to do this, screw the label for a little while, I'd be in serious trouble. But I'm not. I have Alligator keeping the blues thing cooking, while I take this little vacation. We haven't been totally out of it. You'd be surprised by the number of albums we haven't issued - the Jimmy Johnson, the Otis Rush in Japan, and the Magic Sam Live, three packages in three years - but we have reprinted Junior Wells South Side blues jam, with slight improvement I think in cover design, the T-Bone Walker and the Luther Allison, we've reprinted the Blues Hit Big Town, we've re-printed the Junior Wells re-issues, we've reprinted two or three other albums, rather than delete them. So we haven't really just had to delete everything that runs out of paper, it just happens that at the time when Hoodoo Man and West side Soul ran out of paper, I didn't have money to print anything. So our comeback has begun in the fact that we haven't really deleted anything significant in terms of sales. I dislike deleting any record. You're sitting next to a stack of paper that represents the last 600 pieces of paper for Big Joe Williams Nine-string Guitar blues, and those'll go out to California someday before too long, and get jackets

made up - I was going to get them done locally, but it's become prohibitive to have jackets made here. So we haven't really deleted much. I may do JB Hutto's Slidewinder. It's a mediocre seller, it doesn't sell as well as it should, and I think it might benefit from being dropped for a year or two, and then repackaged. But I hate to do it, because it hurts our credibility with retailers, to have things that might be perceived as being good sellers to go out of print. Probably the only place in the country where we could sell Slidewinder would be the East coast, where JB works and virtually lives now. It's a decision I haven't made, we are out of the record, at this moment we don't have it, but I imagine most of my distributors have it. It takes a while for the pipeline to empty out, and on a thing that sells 300 a year, it can take a year. We might conceivably get some overstock returns on that.

What was your last recording session?

Last recording session was Jimmy Johnson's new album, which we did I believe in January and February, or December, January and February. There were three or four sessions, and mixdowns. Recording now can sometimes in volve, even on a blues record, can involve an hour of mix time , an hour in the studio, or even sometimes two hours. I think anything over an hour of mixing versus an hour of recording is obscene, really. You wonder whether you're dealing with amateur musicians. But I'm not saying Jimmy's an amateur. Jimmy's new album is a much more polished kind of thing than I personally could do. I could not produce record like that. Steve Tomashevsky, who's just left us to go to law school, he's been accepted to go to University of Chicago Law School, Steve produced it, and I would have to get him or someone like him to produce another album like this. Probably, it's possible, Jimmy can do it unaided. I do not bring any musical concepts to the studio, other than the idea of recording a band that I heard somewhere and liked. If the musician doesn't have his shit together, I sure as hell can't - I'm no bandleader, I'm not an arranger, I'm no musician. I'm just a fan with a cheque book, usually with no money in the bank. But our plan basically is to issue Jimmy's record, follow it with a reissue of Hoodoo Man Blues, Junior Wells, then something new, maybe the Memphis Slim. Memphis Slim or something on Pearl. We have a lot of product. I could show you 20 really good blues albums that would sell in the 3000 to 10 000 range, we could put out ten, maybe twelve. We've got a Yank Rachel LP, an electric Yank Rachel. We're not going to call it that, not after Electric Sleep, which was kind of a cynical thing on my part, I deserved the poor sales we got on that record. I think the idea was good, it needed more rehearsal, or more studio time, and better editing. Electric Sleep sorta got put down, nobody liked it. It was too country for the Chicago blues fans, and it was too modern for the country blues people, and at the time we did Electric Sleep, that's Sleepy John with Earl Hooker and Sunnyland Slim and Jimmy Dawkins and all these things - at the time we did that, at the time we released it, there was absolutely no market for thirties blues,

you know, the late thirties, the Lester Melrose thirties, early forties. It really isn't quite that old of a sound, but that's about as close as we would have come. If Sleepy John Estes had recorded after World War Two, for Lester Melrose, the record might have sounded like that. Because we had Sunnyland on piano, basically pulling that in. It needed more rehearsal. I'd love to have used Junior Wells on that. Junior played with John, John sat in on blue monday at Theresa's, and John didn't look like much, little guy, old, very helpless-looking, feeble - he probably looked feeble when he was ten years old, from all the stories I've heard - and I think Junior kind of under-estimated him, but before he got through the first tune Junior did something I've never seen him do before, and that's sit in with somebody, who's sitting in. He doesn't do that often, with somebody of lesser stature than say James Cotton or Little Walter, doing duets, or he'll sit in if Muddy Waters would come in, I'm sure he wouldn't mind sitting in. But he wouldn't usually sit in with 'Milwaukee Sam'. That's about it, that story, you asked about the money, and I can't get very specific, but it's good, we pay good money. I'm not into paying performance royalties, or signing an artist to an exclusive contract. I don't think it's a very good deal for a very small label like myself - I get the exclusive service of the artist for one year, and I have to pay royalties for ever. And the artist at the end of that deal might make a flat-rate deal with someone else, who will put his record out on a budget series. We could conceivably put most Delmark records out as budget records, but we'd have to delete a lot of very good records.

So you don't do royalties deals?

We have royalty deals. In fact I should be sitting in there knocking out statements might now. I'd rather talk. But we honour the deals we make. I try not to make deals that will make the record subject to royalties for ever. It would make it difficult to sell the company, if I ever wanted to retire. Royalty deals usually involve five percent royalties, which permits a company to lease a master for ten percent and still pay the artist. Royalty deals involve, usually, front money, sometimes none, deductions for cost of sidemen, deductions for cost of studio rent, deductions for cover disign cost, sometimes for negatives, sometimes for the cost of printing the jacket, the cost of the road tour, the limousines, the whores, the heroine, the cocaine, the advertising. I mean, record companies that make royalty deals very often make such deductions that the artist would be better off to take a few thaousand dollars of flat money. There's one guy, a blues artist, but he attracted the attention of a major company, did an LP, and they charged him two thousand dollars for the three models and the photographer who took the photo, and that's cheap. Three models. And he said, 'I didn't go to bed with any of those girls, and they cost me $300 apiece!' Most artists would be well advised to take royalties deals, if he's dealing with a company that's going to give him a decent count. There are fairly good-sized companies that pull such shenanigans over

royalties. If you got $15000 against royalties, and Koester's offering you $5000 flat. well if you get the $15000, which isn't always the case, if you actually get the $15000, obviously that's a better deal, because you've got the $15000 and you might get the five. But when you hear about money paid to artists in advance of royalties, you very often are not talking about cash money in the pocket, you're talking about a budget. You're talking about a production budget. You're talking about a fee to an A&R man, you're talking about studio rent, tape, sidemen, anything that the company wants to charge against that record, and you get whatever's left! Sometimes there's nothing left. The union would insist on scale as a minimum. My royalty deals, I don't think there's any reason not to say, generally were 5% royalties against scale. with sidemen and studio rent as deductions. I didn't deduct for... oh, I think the first one or two guys who wanted full-colour covers I did, because it was a hell of an expense. You'd put a colour photo on a cover, and it isn't just a matter of paying a photographer a little more money to do a colour shot, you're talking about colour seps, which can run as high as a thousand dollars, you're talking about a four-colour printing job - although now, album printing has got to the point where you can print four just about as cheaply as one - your printing cost is not the main factor. You got these big colour presses, maybe twelve colours on an enormous press, the press has colours so you get the colour you want, if you're using the process right, and it doesn't cost that much more than one or two colours. There's not really much saving on one-colour covers any more. There used to. that's why when we reprint our covers, like Luther Allison, T-Bone Walker, and when we printed the Eddie Vinson, we go with this blue, we use what's called process blue, which is the blue that's used in half-tone colour printing, and it's a nice blue, I like it, and it's almost becoming a trade mark. You see Blues Piano Orgy over there, that's out of print, it occurred to me to put 'orgy' in red, and have 'blues piano' in blue. I don't really know, I'd seek the advice of a good designer. But it generally seems to work when we just put the artist's name in this process blue when we reprint it two-colour. It makes a two-colour job out of a one-colour thing. But if you go to a jacket company, and you print on the cardboard, generally you have to deal in what's called process colours. So if you want an orange, it's two colour, and little dots happen. There's what's called PMA, PSA, what the hell, it's a coloyr system, and if you want certain colour inks used, then you have to go to a smaller press, and generally it becomes more expensive. There is a Canadian company though, that does PMS colours for very little more money than process. I guess they just fit it into a busy schedule. But you might have to maybe wait a little extra, I don't really know.

I've been talking to a musician (John Littlejohn) who's been attempting to reclaim masters from various companies, both here and in Europe. Where does he stand?

Well, the man made the work for hire, and it's up to him to negotiate - I mean, if you sell something, and you do not makeit part of the deal that you get to buy it back if you want to, then you have to go to the man and make the man happy, and buy it back. If you sell a car and you change your mind, it's exactly the same thing. It is a master right. You're dealing with something rather ethereal - with art. An artist is the author of the work. It's like a painter, if he sells a painting, it's exactly the same thing, it's a work of art. He sells that painting and he makes his money, and he goes his way, and the guy gets the painting and he goes somewhere else. Putting a price on art is a very difficult, difficult thing. What a record company buys, they get a property, and the phrase is used - a property. And when you think about all the records that get bootlegged, I mean half the fucking blues records in this store, no not half, a good third are bootlegs. I tell you, more than half the ones in the new releases are bootlegs. Because I keep bootlegs, if a bootleg don't sell well, fuck it, I don't want it in the store. I get money from my store, and I lose money on my label, and I record Junior Wells, Buddy Guy, Big Joe Williams, and I pay them money, and somebody else comes along and decides they want to issue Junior Wells, and there is not much I can do. I have had my masters bootlegged, I have a George Lewis record over here in the Preservation Hall jazz section, and two thirds of it is Delmark George Lewis masters, with audience overdubbed. I've got a JT Brown record, on Flyright, that is a bootleg of masters that I own, that I issued on Pearl. About half of my Pearl album is bootlegged on Flyright. They offered to pay me royalties, I said no, give some money to Brown's widow, and they're supposed to delete it when they run out, but when's that going to be? So unless you copyright a master, and are willing to spend money protecting that copyright, suing people who might bootleg it, you don't really get much. You get the privilege, you get the best source material, but I don't see why an artist should just be able to arbtrarily walk back and get his money back. No artists have ever tried to buy their masters from me. I would sit down and discuss it, but I wouldn't feel an obligation, say 'Here, I made my money, here's your tape.' Because the artist that wants his master back is the artist that can take that master and can sell it somewhere. I mean, Big Joe Williams isn't going to come back to me and say here, give me back my tapes, because there's nowhere he can go and get any money for it. I mean, Big Joe Williams master tapes are worth less money than it takes to pay thestudio rent. And I mean that, really. You go to buying record masters that have been issued, and you are dealing in very small money. The kind of money that's paid to lease masters, like when King records leased the English rights, you would be amazed how little money is involved. It's not a lot of money. Flyright, man, they leased a whole goddam Cobra, Chief, Profile, Age, Formal, Abet catalogue, and I don't believe they paid more than a few thousand dollars in advance. They pay royalties to the guy who owns the master, in the same way I deal with a royalty artist. I pay front money, and a royalty, and the front money is an advance on the royalty. I lease a master

to Peavine records in Japan, and it's the same thing. In Japan you get more money, because the records sell for more money. I have leased LP masters for $100. I did a deal on Australia, $50 an album, for three albums. It was a long time ago, it would be like $150 now. Who are some of the labels this guy is trying to get his masters from?

Arhoolie, Black & Blue...

Well, the time for somebody to do that, to try to buy the rights - he is offering to pay money, is that it?

I'm not really sure. He just wants them back.

He thinks he ought to have them. Well, that's a naive thought. The guy doesn't know much about selling, I bet if he sold a car, or if he bought a car from somebody, whether he felt he had a good deal or not, he wouldn't expect the guy to come and repossess the automobile, as long as he paid for it.

I think his gripe is that he's not getting any royalties. I'm not sure what the deals were...

He might not have made a deal to get royalties. A surprising number of records made for the much-revered Chicago blues labels, R&B labels, were made with no money involved. I've had artists come to me, 'Hey, I don't want any money, I just want a record out.' The idea being that they're so sure that the record will mean instant fame and fortune. The record is a way to get that, so it's worth giving up money. I don't want to name labels, because I only have hearsay, but some labels would have a policy for blues artists of not paying them. Pay the sidemen, pay the studio, use a good studio, but no money for the leader. He might get royalties on songs. In some cases they'd sell the songs, or they'd give up the songs too. Because you're dealing in records that generally sell poorly. The maximum sales potential of an album by a Chicago blues artist, who is totally unknown, his first album, the maximum, I think Iglauer would tell you, five to ten thousand. And that's big, that's with a lot of promotion. I don't think he did more than 15000 on the first Hound Dog, and I doubt that he's done that well on anything since. Maybe, I don't really know, I haven't talked numbers with Bruce in some time. But the nice thing about blues is, they are steady. You know you're going to sell, when you put out a Chicago blues record, you know, if it's anything at all, you're going to do two or three thousand. It doesn't pay everything. If you spent two or three thousand on studio rent, and then you're paying a couple of thousand to sidemen, and then you're paying a thousand or more to the leader - and you sell two thousand records, that's $7800 or something like that, and you're paying freight on the records, you're paying for jackets, pressings - your phone bill, man. I mean, we're inactive, but we have a $150 a month phone bill, or 135 bucks a month, and we're not doing shit. Some of that's Jazz Record Mart business, an occasional personal call on a local level, you know, call my wife, see if dinner's ready - it's just, you're on the phone to the pressing plant twice a month, jacket plants once a month, each, and we deal with three different jacket plants. The shit

adds up, man. There's a perception among certain people that every dollar that a record company makes is free and fair money, over and above what they pay the artist. A lot of musicians think that.

Well, they look at a major company selling a million records, they really can't believe a blues record can sell as poorly as two thousand, or one thousand. They find five thousand unbelievable. I'm sure most of the artists that we record do not believe the numbers. It's another good reason not to do royalty deals. The artist we have never had an exclusive contract with is the best-known artist on the label. Junior Wells. Some of the best records on the label. Never a bad one. And never a squidgeon of paranoia. The bread is there, he got his money. He did get bonuses. Junior got flat money on every record he did for me, probably will always be the case. He's gotten bonuses. At one point we arranged a deal where he got a - which we could have cut ourselves in on, bastards had cut him out. It involved film rights though, so we would have been on tricky legal ground. We just simply had to make the cheque out to Junior, and I know for a fact that he got more money for making that deal than he got for making the Hoodoo Man Blues album. There were other reasons and excuses to give him money - he needed money, he was sick once, I just wrote out a cheque. I don't want to sound patronising, shit, man. And the money he's gotten out of the records - every time we do a new record it costs a whole lot more money - I sort of figure what I can pay him on the basis of a projection of the next sale, plus what the other records would have earned him, if they had been royalty deals. You know. I don't think he's lost any money. Now his great grandchildren may not get any money, and it's kind of nice, because - fuck 'em, what did they do? We have a situation with one artist, where we are paying somebody royalties, and this person (Magic Sam's widow) is not... turn off your recorder a second...