Amy O'Neal Interview.

At their house, 2615 N Wilton, Chicago. September 18 1982. 3 pm.

I understand the Magazine's about ten years old. It's actually twelve and a half.

How did it start?

(Sigh) I hate interviews. I've done this so often! I keep trying to think of some new angle to talk about. We've been publishing for twelve years off and on. And we got interested in blues, Jim and I, through the Animals, the Rolling Stones, the Beatles - the great British invasion here opened our eyes up to the American music that we didn't know existed. And we noticed that what little information there was about blues was coming from Europe, and that didn't make any sense! So basically we just decided to start publishing. Nobody else was doing it, and we thought we knew what we were doing, so we did it. Jim and I were both going to college, at Northwestern University in Evanston.

Did you live in Chicago before that?

I grew up in the suburbs here. Jim's born in Indiana, raised in Mississippi and Alabama. He came up here to go to school.

Have you ever made any money out of the magazine?

Not from the magazine, no. It's bad enough trying to sell a blues record, but a blues magazine is so esoteric. Nobody in this country, I won't say nobody, but the vast majority of people in this country, they might know what blues is, but they don't give a damn about it. If they do care about it, they're probably black and can't read. This is terribly simplified, but it's true. It's very very hard to try to get people to want to read about the music, much less listen to it. So unless you're a scholarly maniac to begin with, you won't be interested in reading the magazine. So we never sell very many. It takes a tremendous amount of just physical labour and time to produce the magazine, because we do it all ourselves, to cut costs. So we don't publish as often as we can, and you know, we like all the picky details that nobody else cares about. So it's not a mass-market magazine. We've tried to put it on newsstands here, in this country, and it bombed. In American terms, it did not go over. It was a disaster. And the way distribution here works with magazines, you print up x million copies for you fancy distributor, he puts them out, if they don't sell within two weeks, they grind them into pulp paper - so you've lost your investment on the printing, you can't get them back to re-sale - so we guit doing that.

When was that?

Let's see, we started that with issue number 17, Esther Phillips was on the cover, that's how I remember, summer of - I can't remember what year, I'd have to go look at the magazine, but it was years ago. Years ago.

So that was kind ambitious, hoping people would see it and pick it up.

It was naive too, it was naive. And since then we've learned not to be too sensitive

about the fact that it doesn't sell, and it doesn't make money, we just scrounge other ways of making money to keep going. Many of our projects actually subsidise the magazine, rather than vice versa.

A bit like the shop subsidising Delmark.

Yes, exactly.

If a magazine is so difficult to sell, and a blues record is only a little less difficult to sell, why did you start a blues record label?

Because we still knew it would be easier to sell record than magazines. And we'd been, you know, sort of verbally producing records for different companies for years - "Hey, go record so-and-so"- and the record company owner would go record so-and-so, and we just had always wanted to producerecords any way. And we'd been on the fringes of that business for so long, we didn't have any trouble knowing how to do it. Mick and Cilla Huggins of London are our partners in Rooster Records, and they also want to start a record company, because they're also starving to death. I don't know if they'll like he saying that, but we're all in the same boat. But anyway, they wanted to cut Eddie Clearwater. We'd wanted to cut Eddie Clearwater for years, and been trying to get Koester to do it, and Bruce to do it, and whoever produces blues records to cut Clearwater. They never took him seriously, but we knew he was a damn good songwriter and performer. So Mick and Cilla actually came up with the seed money, to start the record company, and we just became partners, and proceeded. You know, it's just the same thing, we wanted to do a certain job a certain way, we couldn't talk anybody else into doing it, so we did it.

And when was that?

Let's see, we startedtalking about the last time we were in England, which was '79; the record didn't come out for, I think, at least a year after that. Officially we've been going since about, what, 1980.

I know you've got Larry Davis as well as Clearwater. Who else? We have cut a record that isn't out yet by Cary and Lurrie Bell. We just cut a Magic Slim record, that'll be out before the Carey and Lurrie. We've got tons of masters that other people have graciously given us because they want to put their records out too, and they don't have the money! We have a bunch of Arkansas field recordings; we have some old master tapes from the fifties and sixties from St Louis; we're distributors of a record label called Ice Cube, which is run by AC Reed, who's a blues saxophonist, and Casey Jones, who's a blues drummer, and their record is doing at leats as well as any of the Rooster items, strangely enough, and that album will be coming out, it's supposed to be out in October, but we don't have the jacket to the printer yet.

That's the one with I'm fed up with this music on it?

Yes.

So you've got more than you can handle on the abel at the moment. I suppose it's asking for trouble if you announce that you're going to start releasing records, because everyone has something they want out.

You got it! Every time we go out to a club, somebody comes up and says, "Hey, I want to cut for you. I can make your record company a star." You know? We can make money together, blah blah blah. That's the hardest part, fielding enquiries like that, from musicians that we know are worthy, but we might not personally want to put on the label. That's a diplomatic problem.

Yes, people ask me for interviews, instead of the other way round, sometimes.

You got it, same idea. Another funny thing along those same lines is many many musicians want to be on the cover of living blues - because they think it will make them instantly famous and rich. And they don't understand the editorial method of how we pick who goes on the cover, they want to pay a hundred dollars and get on the cover, and you can talk till you're blue in the face and they can't understand why they can't be on the cover if they pay the money. And of course we won't take the money. It's really strange. Bizarre.

That seems to be a common syndrome.

The thing that's so pathetic about it is that we can't make anybody a star. We don't have the power, they just think we do.

What is your circulation?

It's about six thousand worldwide. That's not very big, it really isn't.

I asked Junior Wells to talk to me, and he wanted ten percent of the proceeds from my book!

This is very common. How are you going to pay him anyway? Most of the blues people that we've worked with over the years have been incredibly kind to us, they really have, we could never do it without their help, and without their optimism. That's one reason why we continue, because even though we aren't going to make much money and we can't pass on much of the proceeds to them, they have such faith in us, it would be such a betrayal to quit. It really would! You can't imagine, it's like - it's very much almost a religious experience, it really is; they have such faith, and we have to keep trying, just because that's what you do.

Have you thought of quitting?

Oh, I frequently do. It drives me crazy! Yeah. Because we're on this magazine, we have incredible files. We have a musicians' file for blues musicians around the country. We have everybody's phone number and address. We have booking agents coming out of our ears. We know what clubs book blues around the world, we know what promoters, so everybody calls us to find out how they can get in on it - so we're on the phone half the time, not publishing! It's very time-consuming, it's very aggravating work, it really is, especially when you don't make money off it.

Sometimes it's good for the soul to do it; but after all these years, you get a little bit more realistic, I think.

Yes, a blues magazine is the kind of thing you'd think of when you're at college. A pretty neat thing to do. Did you think you'd be up to your neck for the next twelve years?

I knew I wanted to continue, but I also thought it could be more viable than this, frankly. It just isn't, but that's ... showbiz! We just sort of deal with it. We

still feel very very strongly that so much is left to be done, documenting the nusic. And this means talking to musicians, and if not publishing their stories, accumulating information on tape, and photos, and writing, and paper, and whatever. Which is why the house is all full of crap. This is all blues memorabilia and posters and magazines and photos. Everybody from around the world sends us their clippings now, so we have all this stuff accumulated. We just still think it's a worthy cause.

It is. You're in a very strong position, as the one magazine left. I don't know what's happened to Blues Unlimited Well, they're still around, but I don't know if they're not as crazy as we are; they actually have a larger editorial committee, and maybe they just don't get along, or don't work constantly at it like we have to. I don't know.

They have jobs, I think.

Oh, they do. I think Jim and I are the only people in the world attempting to be viable blues journalists, and making that a career, as opposed to doing it as a sideline and having some more intelligent job. I do a lot of outside typesetting, so we can eat, frankly, so we can pay the mortgage, so we can make the car payment - because only so much of it can come off the top of Living Blues. So yeah, I typeset at least 20 hours a week for other people. There's so many time factors involved in publishing the magazine, and trying to live, too, so we don't publish as often as we'd like to, because we have to live. Does that make sense? You know, it's a constant trade-off. Jim does a tremendous amount of consulting work with people starting up their record company - Tell me how to get my record pressed, or Come do a symposium on blues for us, blah blah. And he has tons of research he'd like to do, but hasn't been able to get away and do the time. Transcribe the interviews he's got, you'd be amazed. We've had sort of volunteer tape transcribers over the years. They usually do it once and quit, because it's such thankless work. First you have to learn how to understand a black Mississippi accent. Make sure you have a real good map of Mississippi near so you can figure out the towns! We have to do that a lot.

You're interested in the whole picture. When I interview someone I'm more specific, because I'm leaving the whole picture to people like you!

Oh, swell! Don't take us too seriously! Well, there has been a whole shitload of stuff published on blues in the last twenty years, so in that sense you at least have something to fall back on. And if you have ever seen the first few issues of Living Blues, you'd die of hysterical laughter - they are so primitive, and so naive, they're almost embarrassing to look at. We didn't know what we were doing, we just thought we knew what we were doing. But nobody else was doing it here, so we had to start someplace. One of the reasons we started Living Blues, and you won't like this, was that we always thought Blues 'nlimited was kind of a bizarre magazine, because they concentrated on old records, and we wanted to concentrate on thelive club scene, that we knew was happening. So we just said, We can do a better job. It's still sort of a different viewpoint over in England, how they

examine the music, and Europe in general, as to what we see because we're smack in the middle of it, whether we want to be or not. So there are different sides to the story, and they're both right, I think, but they're very different.

Yes, in Europe, being isolated, when you read about someone who was born in 1910 and you hear the stuff he did in the 30s 40s and 50s, you tend to get a little idealistic, and are apt to make sweeping statements about modern Chicago blues.

... There is quite an interest in blues in Japan. There used to be one pretty much for real straight blues magazine coming out of Japan. Which of course we couldn't read because it was in Japanese. Real strange to look at, very strange. But they've pretty much branched out, they're into soul music and reggae and God knows what else now. But there was also, I'm not sure if they've published yet, an upstart rival faction wants to do strictly a blues magazine, and one of their people came over early this summer to do research, get advice. We told him don't do it! But I don't think they've published yet. They wanted to do strictly a blues magazine. But they like a different kind of blues than English and Europeans - they like a lot more soul-influenced blues, which is nice. A bit more contemporary in attitude.

Lurrie's just gone over.

They're a real interesting group. Hard to book, though. Oh, that's a whole other ball game. You don't want to know about booking blues. It's just horrible. It's an even worse way of trying to make money than publishing a magazine, trying to book a blues band. Oh, God, yeah. Oh, I tell you. Most of the clubs don't want to book a blues band unless they're extremely well-known. So you get the five Alligator acts booked all over the country and around the world, and nobody else can get a toe-hold. And then it's all these starving blues people that just come up to us and say, "Hey, I'm a blues player. Bruce can get work for his people. Why can't you get me work?" You know, as if we had time to book all these people too. But then people do call us all the time to get booking information. "How do I book so-and-so?"
"Um, he doesn't have an agent, we'll call him for you." Etcetera. It's a real strange way of making money. You have to spend fortunes on phone bills, and then the gig'll fall through at the last minute. It's very very difficult. Bruce Iglauer is the most successful in booking blues bands - I think in the world.

What's he doing that's different?

Actually, he has a limited perspective, though. He could no more book Little Milton into a black club that fly to the moon. That's a whole different sub-level in the blues world here. I'm sure you've noticed, there's the North Side clubs that book Koko Taylor and Albert Collins and Son Seals and that's it, and then there's the black clubs that book Little Milton, BB King, Bobby Bland, etcetera. And the twain don't meet, they really don't. And that's one of the things, Living Blues keeps trying to bridge that gap, which is hard to do. I think we do it in print. We don't do it in reality.

I've never seen Little Milton.

Oh, he's wonderful. But he's a very black act. He will not go un and do four sets in some little joint paying him four hundred dollars a night. But to many blues

artists, that represents success, because they've crossed over the fence into the white, honky appreciation, whatever, and they think they've made it. But they know, on the other hand, deep in their hearts, another way to make it is like Little Milton has - work on the Chitlin Circuit for a million years. But he still has hit records on the black charts. Son Seals has never had a hit record on the black charts, probably never will. It's something queer. It really is, it's a very funny scene over here. And that's one way we can tell, as far as I'm concerned, the country's not integrated. It never will be, until all those barriers are broken down.

Do you think there's any chance of this happeneing? I think so. But it's going to take years and years and years and years. It's taken us twelve years to make a dent in the black scene. Do you know who Purvis Spann is? He didn't start taking us seriously until last year. And we've been knocking on his door for years, trying to get in touch with him and whatever. That's what I'm saying. He doesn't understand where we're at, and we don't quite understand where he's at, even though we're both professed blues lovers. It's queer.

I'm going to try to see him.

You should. Or at least talk to him on the phone, if you can get a hold of him. He's a promoter, and he promotes blues for the black market, strictly. He isn't into booking anybody up to the Wise Fools. He puts on these massive shows, with fourteen blues stars. In Chicago, he's done them in Memphis. I'm not sure if he does them in Mobile, or if he's just hooked up with the DJ in Mobile. It's almost a travelling package tour of blues acts. You know, it's Little Milton, Bobby Bland, Albert King types. He's booked Koko on them occasionally. But they're very big black nightclub acts, and very different.

My problem is that I don't anything about them. Because I'm white.

You got it! Yeah, we can still observe like hell and everything, but I wouldn't say we know either, to be honest. One of the nicer things that's happened though, over the years, is that those people, if you pester them long enough, they do take you seriously. But it's taken us that long. Do you know Syl Johnson? He has been a very hot number in the black r&b circuit, not even blues. But he's discovered his blues roots, and now he's helping us out with his black connections, so it's working out real well. You should go see him, he's beautiful. Brilliant singer and guitarist. His hit records have all been pretty much straight soul records. But he comes from a long line of Mississippians. He had two brothers, Jimmy Johnson of course, and Mack, he played bass with Magic Sam for years. And Syl has just finally realised that Jimmy and Mack have been playing the white side of the fence, and he's never gotten over here, you know, he's just starting to figure out that racket. He's interesting to talk to just for that. He's smart, too. Real interesting guy. He runs his own record label. You could a whole different story from him. Shama.

It is interesting, this family, separated professionally by this invisible wall. I was wondering if perhaps he's thinking his brother's on to a good thing, and he wouldn't mind a shot himself.

He's wondering now, yeah. I don't know if he will or not, but he's noticing something weird is going on. I don't really know what he thinks a bout it, intellectually or emotionally, I just know he's been very nice to us, and is trying to figure out what the hell's going on, up in this end of Chicago!

What did you study at college?

I was in, you'll never believe this, radio, TV, film. Because all I wanted to do was get on the radio and play blues records, which is extremely naive, oh brother!

That's all I want to do. I'm going through my naive phase. Ah yes. Well, you have to go through it. I did have a little radio show. But I pretty well outgrew that too. It got, I don't know, frustrateing or something. Jim is a for real legitimate journalist, he has a master's degree in journalism, and if he ever wanted to hold down a straight job in journalism he'd do wonderfully, but he's not intersted.

Well, if you're both managing to eat ...

Well, so far so good. He is a meticulous writer, he really is. I'll give him a little plug here because he's not here to say it himself and he wouldn't any way, but he's a maniac for all the facts, and he makes sure he gets them right, and he cross-checks and everything, he's really good. He cares about getting the facts straight.

He is what is needed in a field researchedby hysterical, enthusiastic middle-class white liberals.

Yes. Also, after a certain point you can figure out when an artist is bullshitting you, when you interview him. That takes years to develop, that talent.

Yes, I've read a few of my transcripts. Johnny Littlejohn was not the guy Elmore James copied!

Your best bet on that is to talk to five other musicians, and they'll tell you what a liar that guy is.

Yes, He also probably didn't write Hideaway.

No, I don't think so. I'm not sure Freddie King did.

Hound Dog's supposed to have done it, isn't he?

Yeah, and Magic Sam had a big piece of the action too, and that's where Freddie probably picked it up, or his version. But he got the hit off it.

Well, it's just a modern equivalent of Robert Johnson cutting half his stuff from common material. It's nice to see it still happen. Not if you're trying to make money, though. Well, this

is a nice place you have here. Did you say you'd bought it? Yeah. We've been here about six years. I'm glad we came into this neighbourhood when we did now, because prices have gotten just ridiculous. We couldn't move in here to save your life, we couldn't rent here, any more.

I wasn't sure what to expect when I went up to see Bruce. A modest skyscraper?

Bruce is by far doing the best financially, with all the package blues mobiles. He's going to cry on your shoulder too, he probably has, oh I'm so poor...I can't make any money either. But he's doing better than anybody else. Hell, he's got three

employees, full-time! We've got one part-timer, and we can barely pay him.

Do you pay for articles that are submitted?

We're hoping to. We've been talking about this for twelve years too. This is not for publication, this next little bit. Jim is down south at the moment, talking to the University of Mississippi, who is desperate to acquire our archives. Which means I can clean out the house. All this paper junk, and all our records and everything, they want it. Which is wonderful. But they're also hoping to figure out a way to help us keep publishing Living Blues. On perhaps more than just a shoestring budget. We might be able to hook up with the university non-profit postage situation, because Living Blues is basically educational anyway, etcetera etcetera. I'm not sure what's going to happen. After all these years. If we'd had a ny sense in the first place, we'd have started out seeking non-profit status, but we were dumb again - we really thought that it would be a commercially viable operation, and at that point we didn't realise we wanted to do it full-time, so it didn't matter at that point that it were particularly. It's just over the years it's eveolved. It's really a hell of a lot more than a full-time job two people can handle.

If your archives went down there, would that mean the magazine would have to follow?

We don't know. We are certainly not relinquishing editorial control. This is one of these fine points we have to work out. Very fine. And we're absolutely opening negotiations at the moment. We'll see. We hate the business end. The business end is God-awful. We pay ten thousand dollars a year postage. You know. Incredible. We have a cheap printer, actually; he's up in Wisconsin and damn good and we've had him for twelve years. And we can barely afford to pay him issue by issue to keep the damn thing in print. Incredible. The postage and the printing are the major causes. Neither Jin or I could ever work out what we spent, time, material, labourwise, on the magazine. You couldn't really assign a salary to it that would be intelligent or reasonable. You couldn't pay me what I'm worth! Does that make sense? That's probably an egotistical statement, but... the hours we put in. One of the reasons we're moving upstairs is because, the fact is, it's a 24-hour a day job, and we're eating here and sleeping here too. We get all these phone calls at stupid hours, you know, from around the world: couldn't get away from it. They know we're here. They know they can call us up any time, you know - finally I just had enough of it, gotta be able to get away. We have an unlisted phone upstairs, it's wonderful.

Such as it is. We pretty much let Clearwater do it himself, because he knew what he wanted, and he knew what we wanted, which was a fairly solid Chicago blues album. He picked the sidemen, he wrote all the songs but one, rehearsed them, went into the studios, lovely session. It reallywas. The Larry Davis was a whole different ball game. Larry is not a songwriter. Jim went down to St Louis and cut the album over a period of ten days. It took for ever to get that one together and released. Oliver Shine had more to do with producing that than either Larry or Jim did. Oliver knows about how to manufacture a more commercial black blues-oriented record. I'm sure we could od it, but it wouldn't be quite as good as what he did. He pretty

masterminded that one, put it together. Jim and I did the mixing, however, and there's a hell of a lot to be said for a record when you mix it, because you can totally screw u a great session if you mix it wrong. What else have we done? The Magic Slim was a piece of cake, because Slim is very much like Eddie - he knew what he wanted to do, and he went in the studio and did it. We suggested some songs to him, of course. We suggested some songs for Larry. And he did them.

were you aiming any of them specifically at the black market? The Larry Davis, definitelly. Because he is not actually the type of blues artist that your average Chicago blues fan will go nuts over. He's very much a more southern style, contemporary blues artist, and even Clearwater isn't that type. Clearwater is a West Side Chicago rock'n'roller. He can play like Muddy Waters if he wants to. Larry can't. Larry is in the BB Albert King Little Milton school of blues, and that is not fashionable here in Chicago in the white market. It really isn't. To a degree, we're trying to open up everybody's ears to that variety of blues. I think white blues taste in Chicago, for the most part, is about 15 or 20 years behind what is legitimately happening in the blues world. They go nuts over Muddy Waters and Little Walter, which is an old fashioned blues style, let's face it! The current thing that's happening is more like what Larry Davis is doing. And we have got some airplay on black radio stations with Larry Davis, which is very gratifying. Spann likes it! Spann plays it! That's such a trip! That's such a thrill to hear him play a record that we produced, on black radio. It's like complete Euphoria, I've been listening to Spann for, God, 17 years or something, and he would no more touch the Clearwater than fly to the moon. As for the rest of them - old fashioned shit, he won't touch it. It was very satisfying, ego-wise, to us, to have him play that.

Is it selling?

That's all a matter of relative numbers and everything too. I would say it's doing pretty darn good, but it's certainly not on the charts anywhere, it's not as good as what Bruce does, marketing his albums to 90 million college students that we maken't been able to reach yet But for an independent record company in the States in the Middle of a recession, we're respectable. We had a little trouble keeping it in print for a while, because we got so many orders at first. I know we've gotten rid of at leats 2500. And if you're selling that many in a year you're doing pretty well, independent record-wise. Yeah, I'm happy with it.

He was at the Mines last month, backed up by the Allstars, so he didn't sound too special to me.

Part of that was financial, of course. Those people play the Muddy Waters song bag. It's not really right, it's unfair to Larry. But it's often what happens in this world, you mis-match the bands. It happens all the time when you send blues musicians over to Europe. You know that. Larry with his own band is entirely different. To see Larry Davis properly you ought to go down to Houston, in some black joint, at four in the morning particularly, and then you'll find out what he really sounds like. See, his act doesn't translate that well to the white audience, for that reason. Which is why I'm pleased the record has sold as well as it has, and as far as critical comment, it's been for the most part, favourable.

So what's next?

Magic Slim is coming out next, but actually it should be the Carey and Lurrie album, because that was recorded first. But the Magic Slim's coming out now because he will be in Europe in a month or whatever, and Mick and Cilla are trying to make a killing. You know, at leats they'll have something to sell when he's over there touring. Carye and Lurrie are a whole different ball game too. Their record was a bitch to produce. I did not have an opportunity to go to many of the session because I was home typesetting earning my living! Mick and Cilla came here specifically for the sessions, and Carey and Lurrie and Eli are all brilliant musicians, but - I don't know if you're going to publish this part or not - their heads are not on very straight. They don't rehearse. They get in there and wait for the lightning bolt to strike. In the studio. You know what studio time costs? So I was sort of discouraged about that one, but it'll come out in the mix, we haven't mixed it yet, so I don't know if it's good or bad.

Who else was in the band?

John Erwin was on bass. He came down from Canada for the session. Figure that out. Weird, weird, weird. I can't remember who was on drums. It was, so to speak, their working band, but they don't work much. They're hard to book too, real hard to book. Carey drinks a bit now and then. Eli is a wild man. Lurrie's great but his head is swelling.

I really like all of them.

I do too, but the sessiom was just bizarre. I wanted to kill them. Why didn't you practise at home, you jerks? We told you to. You know, we tried to have some rehearsals with them andeverything... oh, Cary had to work on his car today, he can't rehearse. So frankly, I don't know whether to be cheerful or not about that one yet. It's too soon to tell. We'll do our best. We ought to do some more overdubbing, I think! The one person I really like in that family is Carey's wife Dorothy. You met her? She is something else. That is a for real Chicago ghetto style family, on a typical day. You really got it there. Which is good, I'm glad you did that.