

Jimmy Dawkins interview.

In his car, outside B.L.U.E.S, 2519 N. Halsted, Chicago.

June 30 1982, 7.30 pm

What I'm particularly interested in is why black people don't listen to the blues any more.

Well, I don't think that's true. Years ago all the bands up and down Roosevelt Road or whatever, you know - now, there's not many of what we call the Chitlin Circuit. We got Theresa's, the Checkerboard, you know, a few others, you know, but you don't have the avenues that you used to have, they used to be all black anyway, and a few whites would come in, like Bob Koester and somebody else, you know. Now it's moved, the whole thing just flipped like a coin, you know, the black musicians are playing in the white clubs, that's owned by whites. So I don't think that the black peoples turned their back on the blues. It's that... it's not really on the radio no more, on FM. And also it's dangerous times - people now, white and black, are going to the liquor store and the grocery store, are buying their liquor and stuff, and going back home, because it's dangerous. You know, knocks on the head, and you break a ten-dollar bill at the bar table now and you can't walk out the door unless you pay for protection. We even played places that you park your car and you're forced to pay some punks because you want everything to be OK when you're in there, so they wants to carry your guitar - they mean well, they're just trying to make a buck, I guess, but - you know, you give them fifty cents to carry your guitar, help you carry your amps in, and then they say 'Well, we'll watch your car, if...' You know. Because if you don't, what's going to happen? Maybe they'll bother it, maybe they won't, but... So all this got something to do with your black audiences not being in the places, and a lot of black people don't feel sometimes that they'd be welcome. Because right now one of my bands that I booked, this past weekend, they played a place out in Sedbury, Sunbury, one of these towns, and I'm not a manager, I'm more like an adviser to her, but she wanted me to come out and be there with the band, because they felt a little uneasy about being out there. Also, the way the place is, with the band mixed, with a black bandleader, if I come, they thought I should not bring a woman with me, at least if she was black, and especially if she was white. It goes way back, you know, they used to tell us, 'If you all gonna play here,' if we was at a white place, 'just the band come.' And most times the band was always black, and you'd get shelved off into some sad boot, in some room built on to the bandstand. Then they'd send this guy in to take orders of what you want. That was right here in Chicago on Broadway and North Clark Street, in the sixties and the fifties. Luther Allison, myself, not together, but my band, his band, Freddie King, we always played them, you know,

not always, but we played them some times. Well, you know it go on, it's a fact. Prejudice? Where you been?

I'm from England.

Yeah, well England is one of the most prejudiced countries in the world. It's very prejudiced. You know, it's a fact of life, it's not that you have anything against anybody, it's just that you see it the way it is. I was in England in '72, '73, I don't know now. I did England two different times I think. I was treated real nice. As I say, I think it's one of the most prejudiced countries in the world, but I have a lot of friends there. I made friends there - Mike Vernon, different peoples, studio peoples, music peoples - and I was treated great. It's not someplace I'm singling out, because I found prejudice... you see, anywhere a black man go he's gonna know he's black. Because you're always reminded of it. Some sentence, some joke, something that somebody's always letting you know. But that's their hang-up, you know I don't worry about it. It's just like any other sickness. If you hate a man because he's short or he's black or he's red, then you're sick. So, that's the way I see it. Same as a illness, same as being constipated or having a high fever, you're just sick, it's just an illness. Busted appendix, so you got a busted man - you're sick. I could never hate a person because, like I say, being short or too tall, or whatever.

You will have to admit that the blacks have veered away from the blues. Your audiences are predominantly white. Predominantly - the bands have bought into the white audiences' territory. We are exposed to the media of the white more than we are to the black areas. I think it's a thing of what you're exposed to. They listening to all the top forties and top one hundreds, and the Lightnin Hopkins music don't get on the air, and the Jimmy Dawkins music don't get on the air, so they listening at the be-bop wax all day, so that's what they buy, and that's where they go. A lot of these bands, groups I'll say, Bootsy's Rubber Band, whatever you got, they playing what they call funk now - everything's funk, and boody-rompin' and bompin', so I mean it's just an offshoot. I know what you're maybe driving at is this thing about blues music oppressed the black people, make them feel depressed, maybe.

I have read something about that.

Well, I think it was a thing of pride, instead of being ashamed. And not trying to mix the two words, I think at one time blacks was thinking that blues music didn't take much education in music - anybody could just sit on the back porch across the potato field and pick a guitar, blow a harmonica, and moan the blues, some toe ache, or something hurting, you know. So they wanted to move up in to a calibre that they figured was a rich man's music more, I guess maybe. But I don't think it was just anything down against the blues, but - don't want to be associated with anything that seems hurting all the time. And in recent years blues have come out and been some of the most popular bands' music, like the Rolling Stones and peoples like this, have made it popular.

So we got black peoples especially coming back to listen at that blues. But now it's such a fusion, also. Somebody might say they don't like blues, and yet they'll listen at the Rolling Stones, and the same people, my children, buy records by Elton John, whatever, you know. So it's a fusion. I'll say blacks ain't supporting it as much as I think they should, but also I think it's because of the media. Especially black radio's not really pushing it. We got some old diehard disc-jockeys that really laid with us and stayed with us, and they love the blues and they really push it, like Big Bill Hill when he was there, Purvis Spann's still there, Bill Collins, we got peoples that's really right there with us, and others across the country and across the world.

What's happened to Big Bill Hill?

He's a preacher now, he's one of my best friends. About five years ago he walked away from it, he wanted to be with the Lord, so Jesus Christ - who is the greatest - took command, he let him have command. So he just plays spiritual records. He's still on radio, WOPA, no not WOPA, but something, I can't think now. Hip Linkchain can give you more information about that. Bill Hill is a great guy. A well-respected man. Made a lot of peoples, he made Little Milton Campbell, he made Albert King, he made Elmore James. He made them known. And Koko Taylor, and the big record that was Bobby Gentry's, Ode to Billy Joe, Bill Hill took a liking to it and just played it and played it, and then he made other disc jockeys start picking it up. That's what got it to going. And it's one of the biggest things in the world. And Bill was not on a big major station, either - he was suppressed.

The sixties was a bad time for the blues, wasn't it?

I didn't think it was bad, I thought it was the time blues started getting some recognition by the white boys, like Clapton and so forth, kicking it off, you know. I think each thing plays was a help to each other. Clapton and what do you call him, one of them died, Mike Bloomfield, people like this, and the harmonica player, I can't think his name now, Butterfield. That mainly was a big help for the blacks, you know. A lot of people say the Blues Brothers, God rest his soul, Belushi, they did push the blues in their own comical way, and they did try to credit the black people who wrote it. I know they cut some soul and funk tunes of Isaac Hayes and whatever, which is not down blues we're talking about, but they did do Mel London's songs that was covered by Junior Wells, you know, Messin with the Kid. So I can appreciate the white recognition in doing the numbers. Like Rolling Stones tunes is patterned, when they do the blues tunes, it's patterned after Howlin Wolf. It's a help, it's a big help, it got us recognition, some, them saying, you know, 'I like Howlin Wolf.' I don't think it's any negatives or any positives all the time, I think both can help each other. If I don't sound too screwy, here.

But that recognition wasn't till about '68, was it?

I don't know exactly, because I wasn't paying that much attention. You know like around here was Freddie King, Magic Sam, Otis Rush and myself, and Earl Hooker, and we was playing, and mostly we played was the black clubs, until we

started doing concerts. I worked on the biggest festival, one of the first was Ann Arbor in '69, helping bring in black musicians, with John Fisher, and I forget the other guy's name that was helping run it. I helped select and bring in musicians there, for that. So '69 was a big year for musicians, the blues musicians, the black ones, to get going some recognition. Luther Allison got his pick-up there, even my recognition come up better, Freddie King, certainly. So I would say '68, '69, started with the concerts.

The young blacks started listening to soul music in the late 50s and early 60s. Soul has a very different approach to life than blues - it's more aggressive, forthright...

There's more money spent behind it. If you put the blues on the radio, and the TV, and plastered it around, it would go too. But the exposure's on the faster music, you know, they're singing a lot of times the words you can't make them out for to save your life. But it's the kids, if they can boogie, and boogie-woogie, and boogaloo on it and whatever, it was a thing, I guess, still is, I guess. Blues has always been, you know. It's kind of like the basics. Because it's feelings. It's always there, and peoples always can reach back and get it. It's just like a kid grow up and he go off and get him a three hundred or three thousand dollar a month apartment. But he got a little five dollar a month house back home, a room in his home, that he can always go back to. The blues, peoples feel like they can always reach back and get it. So I think it's the same way, a kid, if he get him a five thousand dollar a month apartment, he feel like he can always go home when he lose this. So I think it's kind of taken for granted, you know. Because now, and in the past few years, peoples come up to me and they say, 'Where's Muddy Waters, he don't play no more.' Especially blacks. I say he's in the universities, he's travelling, he's doing better than he ever did. 'Where you play at now? You still play music?' Yeah, I play. 'Where?' Wherever I can, you know, I'm playing colleges, I play across the country. Do a few tours in Europe, France or Germany or somewhere. 'Oh, I don't see you no more on Roosevelt Road, I don't see you no more, you won't play for us no more.' Because they kind of went in the house, you know, and the radios don't... not many more clubs is really pushing it. So it's just exposure, I think. And like I say, the life now done changed, in general. It's more peoples afraid to walk, they used to go out to clubs. They come out now to a club, and you get your tyres stolen... different things, you know.

Why this change?

Why? Because Jesus Christ said it, two thousand years ago it was predicted by God almighty, in the books of Malachi and throughout the books, that times would get worse, and especially two thousand years ago, before Christ returned to the earth the second time, the world's going to get completely violent, you got wars coming, you had World War Two... you know. It's all in the Bible. You living in the last days. You believe in God?

No.

Well, it doesn't matter if you believe or not, God won't fall out of the sky

because you don't believe in him, he's still in heaven. It's already predicted, so it's all in the Bible. Your last days are more turbulent, look at wars everywhere, earthquakes. You had more earthquakes since two thousand years ago, when Christ was born and died on the cross, than you ever had in the whole four thousand or six thousand years before. You see. Because he said, turbulent times. Nations, all of it. It's just all in the Bible. That's why. That's the direct why, it's more worse now and violent now. People don't care nothing about each other. Maybe you can hear your people, relatives say they used to could leave their doors unlocked, and used to could walk, but you can't no more. A little baby born today is much more smarter than I was or you was when you was a baby. In a short time, a year's span, he's got a lot of sense, he know a lot of things. It wasn't like that. Used to be five years old before they learn how to say maybe, 'Mama I want a cookie.' Now they can tell you to go to hell when he's one. Because the Bible said he'd be weaker and wiser. You never read a Bible? Well, that's where your creator's word is. He's your God whether you believe in him or not. What I believe in is Jesus Christ.

I've been looking through some of your song titles. We've got 'Welfare Line,' 'Blues in the Ghetto,' 'Ain't never had nothing'...

Well, they're about the life today. Big Bill Broonzy, somebody that's older than me, would have to talk about mules and ploughshares and whatever, and I'm living in the Jet Age. I talk about riding on a 747, or jetlag, or whatever. I'm not talking about hooking up my mule and ploughing all day, and how tired I am, you know, got to go home to a potato dinner at night. It's a whole different age. So what I write about and what I think about is what I live, what I'm exposed to. So I feels what I play, and what I play, that's what I feel. A lot of peoples always say to me, why don't you smile, why don't you jump around, you know, give a little more action in the music. But it's not me, if I feel it I'll squat maybe a little bit, or grind with the guitar maybe a little bit, bow with it in a sense - but I don't clown, because I don't feel like it. I feel what I play. So I'm playing you know, I'm working. I don't have such a hard time myself, never did. I picked cotton when I wanted to, I did not have to, I wasn't raised on a farm. My life was OK, I didn't have no brothers and sisters, so my daddy and mother could prepare and, you know, do OK for me. So I didn't have the hard times. But you can sing about them, and I lived with them, and I seen the depression, and what happens to one black person or one poor person, whether he's in France or New Zealand or Italy, or wherever, it still happens to me, because I feel that black or white or any colour, any time a man falls, and die or hurt, or laying on the streets - part of me is there. Because he's a man. So I talk about the things that are, I guess. My music is mostly what I feel. Like the record 'All for business' when I used Otis Rush and some of his band members, at that time we had a governor in who was really depressing to the poor peoples, especially the ones on welfare and the sick peoples, that needed the doctors and the medical cards - Governor Ogilvy. He's still in politics here in Illinois

Nobody could be worse for riggings, and black peoples and poor peoples. They really oppressed the peoples that needed help. They was completely prejudiced, specially against black peoples and specially against anybody if he don't have money. So I wrote about things like that. There's nobody, like riggings, can say he's justified in what he's doing when he's starving peoples and making peoples go through hard times just so they can get medicine for their sick bodies and kids. It's a terrible thing. My last record, Hot Wire '81, just released out of France, that's one record I was talking specially about riggings. It was cut last March. I think it's called Rough Times, on my new record, Hot Wire '81. It's on the Isabel label. That's what I write about. I can ride around, and fly around, and drive cars - I do what I want to do. But I don't forget. It never stop affecting me, what happening to other people, because I don't feel right if somebody else is not eating and I can eat. I'd rather give them my plate, or whatever. I'm with people. I mean, there's poor peoples here always, and always will be. I'm one of them. But I just like to help; if it's in a song, or I can give somebody a dollar, or whatever. They say I have a stone face, but I'm a marshmallow or whatever is soft inside, because I like to help people. My band, see, I'm always kicked around too for having a mixed band, but I'm my own man. I hire whites and I hire blacks - I don't have time to look for colours, I look for good musicians. Rich, he's a young kid, he's been with me now for near seven years. My drummer, he stayed in France for a few weeks, Jim Shooddy, he's white. Now you look at a white musician - they're interested, they're good enough, I don't care. But a lot of times you get blacks who say, 'Well, why don't you give some of these poor blacks a job, they'd love it, you know, they need it bad.' And then you get the whites that come up and say something to some of my fellers, say, 'Well, why you playing with these niggers, you're too good, you should have your own band.' You get it on each end, you know. Like I say, that's only ignorance. But I'm my own man, like I say. I do what I want to do, as long as it's in the law, and as long as I'm not hurting somebody, I don't want to offend no one. But nobody tell me who to hire in my band, club owners or nobody. If he work out, he work out. I spearheaded one of the biggest things, taking black musicians mixed with white musicians into Europe, because the promoters always kicked against it. Bring black musicians, don't do this - and I took who was in the band. Ever who was in the band, that's who go. Other than that, the hell with you. Play your own fucking concert. You know, I'm at home, I don't have to go to Europe. I don't have to go nowhere. I don't feel like America is so lacking that I got to go anywhere. I love to go to Europe, I love to play my music anywhere, but I don't want nobody telling me that I can't bring my drummer because he's white... I don't like that. If a black musician is in my band and he's doing his job, then he can work. But if a black musician is there and he's not doing his job, then I don't need him. And so with the whites, you know. So I hire musicians, I don't hire coloured peoples - peoples for their colour. I appreciate any promoter that would think of me and let me work for them. I can appreciate

that, but I think he should appreciate me having enough sense to know if my band is good or not. If I felt that it's not qualified, then I don't want to bring it anyway. I'd rather just come and let him put a band behind me, if I felt that he was the best choice, but I think his job is being the best promoter. He can be a better promoter than I can, and I think I can be a better bandleader than he is. Leave it to me, and leave it to him. It's just the way I feel about it.

Do you regard yourself as a West Side man?

Magic Sam, Freddie King, Luther Allison, Jimmy Dawkins, we West Side. The music is different. Magic Sam and we, we more or less created the West Side sound. The one-rhythm sound, bass drum and guitar. Freddie King was more BB King oriented, not just the raw West Side sound. But Otis Rush and Junior Wells and Buddy Guy and them, that's South Side - bigger bands and bigger sounds, and horns and pianos and whatever else you could get in there. The raw sound is the West Side. That's the whole difference. It's strained, you know.

I was reading in Mike Rowe's book something you said about filling in an imaginary horn section with the guitar sound - partly because you couldn't afford to pay a horn section.

Which makes for an interesting sound.

Right. That's the way we did it, because you had to do that because you didn't have it. It made a good band, you know. Luther Allison, I started him out as my bass player, but last time he played here he had to play with three pieces, because his rhythm man stuck him up. So I was here all night because we was leaving the next day for Europe, and he had to go back on the experience of using the three pieces. That's what I'd have to do tonight if Rich suddenly bust an appendix or something, I'd have to go back on the experience of the fifties and sixties with three pieces, see. Sure we had to play hard and we had to play the rhythm, and we only know two or three chords. That was the difference in it - the South Side bands had the money, and they was paid per man more, or whatever, so they had the horns and the pianos. The names was known too - Magic Sam, he had a name, and Otis Rush, but Sam could play with three pieces because that's the way we was doing it first. So that's the way we did it. And you had a lot of three piece bands around, I'm just calling the ones that's kind of known. A lot of them now I can't think of - but that was it. You had to play hard, and you had to play all night, and sometimes you stayed five or six months, maybe a year. And you couldn't go in every night with the same shit. That's why I say, a lot of times we bringing these superstars, they bring them in for one night, and he's got every damn thing that's made up there with him, you know, ten or twelve horns, and rhythms and everything else up there, and he's a superstar. But put him out on one club, for one week, with three pieces, and see how much superstar, and how much guitar, and how much harmonica he can blow. You'll find out. See, people like Earl Hooker, and Magic Sam, and Freddie King and myself, we had to play all night, we didn't have it like now, where you starts at nine-thirty and ten, and go to two. Most of the clubs stayed open from nine, you started at nine, and you stayed up until four and five on

Saturday night. And you went up and down all night, and you played different shit all night. Because you had to. You wasn't pressured, I mean, but that was your job - we wanted to. So you learned to play the tunes on the juke-box, and whatever you had there, and make the sounds. Because you had to, because you wanted to sound as best you could, and not play the same song all night. And you did it with three pieces. Later we started adding a horn with the three pieces, and after that it went to the keyboards, then into the rhythm guitars. That's the thing, you know, that's why I feel relaxed - I can take a jet to Europe or anywhere, and I feel relaxed going in with my guitar and me, or going in with the band. I always rather have my band, but I'm saying I can do it, because I got experience. So those hard times I'm very proud of.

Is that too energetic now?

Well, it's a different age. If you can have a band, the sound is always better. And you don't have to work as hard - it takes a lot of energy to do that, a lot of concentration. But like I heard Luther Allison playing the other week, here, he sounded good, I mean with the three pieces. He had to play harder than when you heard him over there, because he had to concentrate, and he had to play the keyboard changes and the sounds, you see - the pressure.

Hip Linkchain was saying to me how he preferred to play these white clubs now, rather than the black clubs in the fifties.

Well, over the years your values change. Hip was one of the main ingredients of the West Side. Magic Sam, he was right there with us, Hip Linkchain, and Freddie King, and all of us. But now you got a different thing, because everything change. The clubs have changed, the clientele have changed, you know - it's just different now.

He was saying that a white audience is more receptive - that in a black club, no matter how well you're playing, no one would come up and tell you, whereas in a white club it seems to be the opposite.

Well, I don't think anybody giving you anything for nothing. The black peoples came, they paid their money, they sat there. At that time they drank more whisky, because you could order half a pints and fifths and quarts, and they'd sit. A lot of time maybe they didn't talk, or say a lot, but they appreciated it, by spending their money and staying there with you. And they supported us, they came out, every weekend there was bands dotted around, specially Chicago here, and they was there. I just think they appreciated it. I know they did. They hollered and cheered, and you'd have little cocktail parties, and blue Monday parties, and you always had a house full. Now you got - what you got? Educated college white kids, being newly exposed to the blues, a lot of their friends bringing them out to hear it because we're playing in a white club. Might have wanted to hear it before, but it was in a black neighbourhood, and a black club, and they was told, don't go down there because the blacks all carry knives and will cut your throat, take your nuts out, and all this stuff... It's just a

different value of appreciation that's shown. But I don't think the blacks have turned their backs on the music, at all. No, I don't think so.

Guitar styles. Who did you listen to, when you were learning? I just heard music on the juke-box and the radio. I listened to Guitar Slim, you know. He was from Greenwood Mississippi, used to cut in New Orleans. But I never had any favourites, and I never had anybody I idolised, but I thought Ike Turner was good, because he had a lot of sense. He's a smart man, and he made it big, you know, with the Ike and Tina Turner thing going. And I thought Freddie King was good, and I think BB King is good, but I always thought that every man was good at his thing, and that's what I don't like to try to play nobody else's music. I play their songs, but I don't like to imitate. I always wanted to be picking, and playing, and trying to sound... I never did like the idea of copying. I always felt that each person should be his own individual man. So that was all that was; I didn't have 'favourites.' Each person offers something different. Freddie King is good, you know, he was good; he could fake, he could play and could jive, he could really move an audience. Buddy Guy is good, BB King is great. I'm not meaning he's better than Freddie by saying he's great, but I think all of them are good. And I think that my thing is... I work hard, and I always like the sound, and I like top-quality instruments, and I just like to always try to give my best on the stage. So I concentrate a lot, when I'm playing. So I guess my 'favourite' is to just try to do your best, make a sound, make it good, and hope the people like it. I'm going to have to get inside now.

One more thing. When Frank introduced us, a couple of weeks ago, and said 'This guy's from England, he's writing a book,' you said, 'Everybody's writing a book.'

Well, these books, I see them a lot. What I was maybe saying was about we never get any benefit out of them - they write about us, sure, that can help us, exposure. Not that they make a million dollars or anything, but what I'm saying is that after they get the interviews and things, not even one of them ever writes to you and says, 'Hey, I sure appreciated you doing that, you know, and if anything is ever made, I'll give you ten dollars, in fifty years from now, give it to your great grand kid.' Nobody ever said anything, you know. Not that we're looking for anything, but sometimes just appreciation, like... I appreciate that you take your time to write about music, and listen at it, and so forth, even if you get pleasure out of it, I still have to appreciate it because you don't have to do it. So many peoples listen at it, and they don't owe us anything either, because you pay your way to come in, and you buy a record, then you did me a big favour already, and I can appreciate it. But I think if it come to the place of being exploited, and if somebody sold a million copies of a record on you, then you at least should get a little royalties. So believe strongly in the copyright thing, you know.

A lot of people have told me of the difficulties you get, extracting what's yours from some companies.

Yeah, you do. Yeah, that's bad. But I guess the record companies feel if they

spend the money and pick you up when you're unknown and nobody wants you, then I think some of them think they should have all of whatever that's made, from you, you know. Maybe it's not true, I don't know.