

Fenton Robinson Interview.

At the Blues Stage on Navy Pier, ChicagoFest.

August 13, 1982, 2,30pm

Yeah, I play blues. I like blues, I been playing 'em a long time. But also I like jazz, you know. And I like soul music, also.

It's obvious when listening to you play that you have a very wide range of styles. But is it easier to make money as a bluesman, these days?

Well, that depends on certain things. That depends on your contacts, your agent, your travel, who you know. That depends on a lot of things. There's blues in jazz, there's blues in soul music, there's blues in country and western, also.

So you're just billed as Fenton Robinson, and you go out and do your thing?

Yeah.

I'm a little concerned about the future of the blues. A lot of musicians seem to be doing the same thing that they and everyone else has been doing for twenty years.

Yeah. [The future of the blues lies in the hands of the musicians. If they want to elevate it, you know, and carry it farther, then I think it'll go farther, but if they don't try and do anything about it, it's gonna stay here. It's going to stay in this one place for ever.]

I think it's in danger of doing that.

Yeah.

You're not a Chicago man, are you?

No. I grew up in the South.

Who did you used to listen to?

Well, there were several guys playing blues when I was a kid growing up, but my influence was T-Bone Walker.

Off the radio?

Yeah. [There was a small town down where I live, down in Leflore County, Mississippi, I used to go down and shine shoes on Saturday and Sunday, and I would listen to the jukebox, you know, And there was John Lee Hooker, Lightning Hopkins, T-Bone Walker - well, you can name many, but T-Bone was my favourite, because he had the smooth style, I like that style better.]

In the old days you used to play in places like Theresa's and Pepper's and you used to play in the South a lot, and your audience's then were black, weren't they?

Yeah, I worked in the South, I worked Monroe, Louisiana, Bastrop, Louisiana, Lake Charles, Louisiana, through Texas, some parts of Tennessee. and I worked Arkansas, Missouri. Well, I worked white clubs in the South.

I didn't know there were any. Playing blues?

They was playing rock'n'roll. They was playing Little Richard, Fats Domino, and Chuck Berry.

I'm interested in the change of audience. I know you're not just a blues man, but this is the blues stage, and if we forget about Jesse Jackson, they're all white people out there. But 20 years ago, they didn't know the music existed.

No, twenty years ago, they knew blues existed. They didn't know anything about the blues, but they knew it was there. You know, it had to be cultivated, and given to the public's eye, where they could see what the blues, feel what the blues were. Now that the blues is known all over the world - I couldn't really say where the blues are going.

But why the change?

Well, there's many reasons. Wherever the money lies, that's where you'll be participating, in anything, you know, blues jazz or whatever - whoever spend the money. And the black doesn't have the money to spend, on blues or whatever.

But he never has, has he? But he used to listen to blues. He listen to blues, but he didn't have the money to spend to elevate the blues, as the white man does.

Meaning record companies?

Yeah, so that makes a great difference right there. But the blues came from the ghetto, so we'll always have access to the blues, because we're somewhat the creator of the blues. But we don't have the money to spend on blues. And that's one of the reasons that the blues is not as large in the ghetto as it is downtown. I will say it that way.

I agree with you there. Economically, black people seem no better off than they've ever been.

Right, right. We're having economical problems. I couldn't pay Frank Sinatra to come down on 43rd Street. But he come ahead to the Fest. That's why he's making his money! I couldn't pay Aretha Franklin to come down over there. She could come and play, but she would make more money over here. So we're having economical problems, sure everybody wants to make more money, why you can eat. Because I love to eat. Well, the blues, it'll grow, grow, if someone - you have to grow it, you have to cultivate it yourself. If you don't try to put anything into whatever you're doing, it's gonna die, man. And I see that coming. Yeah, I see that coming. I see that coming.

Could you expand on that?

Well, I say it this way. The guys that want to build something new, nobody want to take a chance. Nobody want to spend money, they want to keep the same thing, the same vein going. But there's gotta be a change. That's just like Ray Charles and Stevie Wonder. Ray Charles was really hot, but now it's Stevie Wonder. Ray Charles got his bag, but Stevie Wonder's really hot.

He's the one that's moving.

Yeah. So there's got to be a change. Somebody gotta do it, I don't know who. But I'm trying to do something.

People are maybe going to have to realise that you can't do twelve-bar blues all the time and expect it to sound different. The blues is a pretty small music...

How do you mean, small?

Instrumental forms, styles. It seems like it's all been done before.

No, that's what I'm saying. It's not what people say it is, it's not what people think. Blues is jazz, and jazz is blues. If you want to play that form - see, there's different forms. If you want to play that form that way, it's cool. Just like you hear that (Hip Linkchain's band, in the background - Baby Please Don't Go), if you want to play that form, that's cool. There's different forms, there's different chord progressions that you can use, and it sounds great. I use them all the time. You can study, you can go downtown and buy you a book, and study some chord progressions, and use that, you know. You don't have to play that same thing all the time.

You've done some serious musical training.

Yeah, I've studied for a long time.

I presume that's helped your interpretation when you play. It's pretty obvious that you know more than three chords.

Oh, sure. I know many chords!

What do you reckon about this boycott?

Oh, I don't know. I never go into politics. You know, I stay mostly with music and religion. I never deal in politics. Look like everything is OK. Seems to be.

It seems to me that Jesse Jackson is assuming that the black musicians can afford to stay away if they feel like it.

No, you have to work. The musicians that have money, they can let a gig go by. But I'm a poor guy, I need the money.

You'd recorded a lot before you recorded with Alligator, hadn't you?

Oh, sure.

Did those records improve your career in any way?

No, I haven't had an improvement for a while. I seem to have a problem getting with the right company. I want to do some good recordings. I don't know, I just don't know what to say about that.

I think your Alligator recordings are really excellent.

Yeah, they are, they are. Like Son and Koko moving good. Lonnie Brooks is moving good. So it's just a matter of opinion, I couldn't really say.

What's it like playing for a crowd like that? Are you used to it?

Yeah, many times.

How's it different from a club, for you?

Oh, it's no problem, it's no problem. You know, large crowds, small, it doesn't make any difference. Even in my bedroom I play the same way.

I've heard some people say they like it more if there's a big crowd.

I don't know, I can concentrate better if I have a nice crowd, you know, a nice crowd, not a real wild crowd, but a nice crowd, yeah.

What's this crowd like?

It's nice.

I understand you're a Muslim.

Yeah. I accepted, '69.

I haven't met too many musicians who are Muslims.

Oh, there's quite a few.

I've been reading about Malcolm X, and the black Muslims.

No, people say 'black Muslim' but it's not black Muslim, it's just Muslim. A muslim is a Muslim. [A man believe in God, you believe in your creator, we all are Muslims.] Most people won't accept their creator. God named all of us Muslim, Muslim people, but most people won't accept his love. You have Buddhists, you have Christians, you have what have you. Some they accept God in different forms, the way they see it, the way they see God. [It's just, I believe in God. I worship my creator. I know I didn't create myself, it's impossible. You're supposed to worship your creator.]

Malcolm X talked a lot about Christianity being the white man's religion, and he was very believable.

Christianity goes back. It goes way back, it goes back much further than people realise. I couldn't say it was a white man's religion, but it's a religion that came a long, long time ago. Now where it came from, it had to be a disagreement, I don't know, from the right or from the wrong, or whatever. Just like I say, everybody lives the religion that they want to live, like Buddhists, Chinese religion, whatever.

He was arguing, correctly I think, that the white man represents

Christ as a white man, when he wasn't, in fact.

No, he made a image, he made a image of a white man, but God is just - you can't make no image of God. You can't make no image of God.

Yes, in Islam there's no images.

No, no images, you can't make no image of God. That's one thing someone done. A Caucasian or somebody, made a image, a man of God. See, God is not a man. God is a mind, is a force. So you couldn't very well take me, take myself, and put me on a poster and say, I'm the son of God. OK. If people keep saying and believing that I'm the son of God, then I will destroy a nation of people with my skin colour. See, the skin colour, that doesn't make a man. Mind makes a man. And once we find out that mind makes a man, mind means man, then we won't have no more problem with this

skin colour. You see, almighty God created all colours, see? The fish in the sea are different colours. The flower bed are different colours. If He had created all of us the same colour, then it wouldn't be beautiful.

That's a good way of looking at it.

Yeah. Say if your whole body was the same colour - if your hair was the same colour your face, and your eyes was the same colour your hair - what would you look like?

Pretty boring.

Yeah! That would be pretty boring! So it's man doing this, he's doing this, so that shouldn't be - a man is a man, regardless. I'll die. You'll die. It's no difference. You live a certain length of time, and you die; I'll live a certain length of time, and I'll die. OK, we go back to the same dirt. What I'm saying, they say 'To hell with that.' People don't think of that. But we have a racial issue in the whole world. And if somehow we could solve that problem, of that hatred - see, that hatred lives between to colours, like this. It lives, and we can't get away from that. You go all over the country, and you'll see that, you'll see the racial barrier, the colour barrier. That's the only problem we have.

It's the root of a lot of problems.

Yeah, that one problem. If we could get away from that, then -

It would be nice.

Yeah, it would be real nice. Real nice. So I think that's the only problem we have.

Things have changed a lot for black people in this country in the last 20 or 30 years, haven't they? I don't know too much about it, I'm not even from here, but it seems that it must have been pretty bad, and it's not that bad now. But I'm not trying to put words in you mouth.

Yeah, I know, I understand what you're saying, but I see a human being as a human being. I know there's some men superior to my mind, and there are some men superior to your mind, because almighty God creates wise men. He creates wise men, there's no doubt about it. You take some guys can go in that tractor there, and fix that motor, and I can't do that. Maybe you can't do that. That's what we should be dealing with, we should be dealing with the mind. Not this - this skin colour. Skin colour's no good. You might see a man over there, green. What you going to call him? That's a green guy! See, I'm a Muslim. Alan, I'm a Muslim. I don't hate. I know people may think that I'm in that area, but I'm not. I don't think of skin colour, I don't hate anybody. You got good Caucasians, you got bad Caucasians, you got good blacks, you got bad blacks, you got good Puerto Ricans, you got bad Puerto Ricans, you got good Chinese, you got bad Chinese. You got good and bad people, all over the world. So it's no difference there. So no prejudice. I don't hate anyone. I'd marry a Caucasian woman as quick as I'd marry a black woman. I have a son fifteen years old by a Caucasian woman. Doesn't make any difference to me. I don't care about that. People may look at me, and say, 'Well, there's a Muslim, he hates white

people. Man, that's the sickest thing I ever heard of.

Malcolm X used to preach hate, but he mellowed out towards the end, and began being pretty sensible.

Well, that was false doctrine, you know, false teaching, that's all that was.

I'd like to finish by asking a really cliched question, since we're on the subject of skin colour. I hear some really good white musicians playing blues, but sometimes I wonder if they have the right to play the music. It's black music, isn't it?

Anybody can sing the blues that sing the blues. If he can sing the blues, he can sing the blues. Elvis Presley proved that.

In Europe, people tend to have a colour problem when it comes to blues.

Well, I can understand that. They would rather see me play the blues because that's where it came from, you understand. They'd rather see you play country and western, because that's where it came from. People identify themselves with their environment, you see? If you came from my environment, you could play blues as good as me. But you didn't come from my environment. It's been proven. If you was raised up in the ghetto, you could play blues as well as I can. Charlie Musselwhite, you've heard of him, and he was raised up around the ghetto.