

Sunnyland Slim interview.

In his car, at the Delta Fish Market, Jackson Boulevard, Chicago.  
June 25 1982. About 5pm.

Tell me about Airway Records.

Well, I wasn't making any money off the other people. I was really really late, but I'm getting along pretty good with it. I started it late...As far as labels, I had JOB label, that was half of mine, I signed for that, and I started off with him, but we got a little mess-up in the lines, so... I just wasn't interested in no record business at that time, you know. But I've done pretty good with my first album.

I read a story about you selling JOB records from your car, and still not getting any money.

I helped the company. I signed for the label. He couldn't sign for it. A lot of them don't know it, but a whole lot of them like me and Floyd, and Snooky Pryor, and Moody Jones, and a few more. All the rest of them are dead. Yeah, I signed for it, Joe Brown couldn't get till later. I had to sign at 301 Area. I had the papers, but I left the papers at Rockford and went overseas, and I got back the woman had just losed the book. I left them at Rockford Illinois. It was just as much mine as it was Joe Brown's.

Still no money, though?

No, I didn't get no money. I helped him out, until I got tired. He went out of town, I helped him out. I done a lot of things... out in Minnesota, and Iowa, schools and things like that. But I didn't make no money with him. All the money was made - Chess made some of it, and then Joe made a little. I didn't get nothing. I didn't get nothing for recording none of the guys. I didn't get a nickel for recording none of them. I paid the union taxes... I never did get a dime from Joe. Well, only money I got from Joe, once I had a car wreck - at least a girl had a car wreck, and I think I got seventy-five dollars from him once, that's all. Martha had a car wreck, and I had to have my car fixed.

I've been talking to various people, and nobody seems to have made any money.

Yeah, I never made no money with none of them. I made a little bit with Prestige, Hy-Tone... I didn't make shit with Chess. Just session money. And Jewel, I got ripped off with Jewel, and all them companies. Sammy Price, over there, I got a little money out of him three or four times, three or four times a year. I used to get three or four times, that was good. But now, the records all slowed down, but all the rest, Germany, England, none of the rest of them, I haven't made nothing with none of them. Like I told you about Paul Oliver, I haven't got nothing.. he came here and got books; I carried him anywhere he'd got to be, and I was poor. I helped him out, I carried him. And he turned right round - what Little Wolf was talking about -

and cut that record. He didn't do nothing with Memphis Slim. And he released my record and Brother's, the one of me and Brother's. So... I didn't get nothing. And he over there in England. He never gave me a nickel. He been selling it six years, over there in England, six years. I mean, in sixty-two the record he had out, no sixty-three, it was out in Canada. The Doctor told me, he said 'You got a new record, you and Brother,' I didn't know anything about it, but they cut Memphis Slim, Shakey Jake... Willie Mabon... I reckon because they was through with Chess, you know. Yeah, he picked his peoples - me and Brother. Thing been selling ever since sixty-three. I saw it in Canada, they bought it for me. The Doctor, she went and got it. So, you know, I don't let it get me down, but it's the first time I've been this sick in a long time. Since I hurt my hand - hurt my arm and leg in a car wreck - it's the first time I been this sick. The doctor say I got a touch of pneumonia.

How's Airway doing?

Oh, I ain't trying to make no big job, man I just carried some things to Milwaukee, a distributor, yesterday. I was playing a little earlier, I had to get it round, they're selling a little, you know. I got three albums out on it, and a couple of forty-fives. Sarah and me... Yeah, I'm just holding on. I got to try to get me to feeling a little better. I been sweating all the morning, early this morning I was sweating down. The doctor told me, 'You got a touch of pneumonia.' She wanted me to go into hospital.

I also read somewhere that in 1931 you worked with Ma Rainey. Oh, I was just a week with her. I put her down at Little Rock. I was making a dollar a night. Shit, I was making two dollars mostly at that time, when I play a joint by myself, but I just wanted the experience. I liked doing the shows... but I didn't have a chance to make no other tip money or nothing. The side men wasn't making it, she was making all the money. She was making all the money that come in the tents, you know. She was making the white folks they had out there, she had a name, see. And I'd make more money playing by myself than I would be playing with her. I left at Little Rock, and come on home. I was playing in places like Portersville Missouri, and Memphis, and all up and down Highway 61, different places. So many people want me, at that time. I was tired of messing round with her that week. Georgia Tom had quit her then.

You also worked with Sonny Boy Williamson for a while.

Oh, we played parties. Yeah, we played some joints, but we played parties mostly, we made good money, back in the early forties. We made good money, before I started to getting a band together. We was playing here in Chicago. We played on the West Side... house parties, that's where the money was. There was a whole lot of them. Little Wolf's singing pretty good. Yeah, me and Sonny Boy - Big Bill broke that up. He wanted me... so many people

wanted him, I tried to get me into playing the big places, you know, get in the union, I wasn't in no union, you know. I done a lot of recording and wasn't in no union, singing. Back on Victor.

Why was it necessary to join a union?

Well, that's what you had to do, to play. Piano players. you know. Well, it would help you if you would. I'm in a union now.

Does that guarantee you certain amount of money?

No, it doesn't guarantee you nothing. You're supposed to be in some kind of organisation. Union's all right in its place. Nothing wrong with some of the unions. They've been had a union, hoo God... Union had everything sewed up. Yeah, you paid to join, it was good then. It ain't what it used to be, though. But a contract beats a whole lot of things... oh Lord, I feel bad. I think I'm going to the house.

You started recording in '45 or '46, didn't you?

Well, I did some recording before that, but it wasn't no big thing. I recorded in '40 for Davis, a little small label, and I recorded in '44, that's when I started to get known, then - Victor, Hy-Tone... Hy-Tone made my big record, Brownskin Woman, Devil is a busy man. That's the one, the radio take that over. I recorded for the same company as BB and them, with Lloyd Fuller, with Nightlife Blues, Jump Jackson tried to get all the publication of that, but I wrote the song. But I didn't do no big thing until '44.

Apart from today, black people don't seem to listen to the blues any more.

They listen to the blues, man. It's been dead round here. You can't get around here. I could be playing at these joints and that, but it just don't work up to nothing. They don't have no p.a. system, they don't have this, they don't have that. And I just ain't got the time, you know, to play for them. You get more money with the white peoples. It's just a very earthly thing, you got to live.

Is it any different for you, playing for whites?

Well, I played for coloured folks all my life, but that ain't nothing. You just - according to who it is. Some coloured people's all right... you get so much stole... I just quit playing for them mostly.

I play more than blues, if I have to. I play different things if I want to. Yeah, we used to play rock, in 1925. People like me and Sykes and Brother. But it wasn't named... same thing they're doing now, we were doing it out in 1925. '24, '25 - back then.

I've been reading about Beale Street.

Oh, I worked there a little back. I worked for the Hole in the Ground, the Midway. Not much on Beale Street... I worked a little on Beale Street and Wagon Yard, but most was at Harlem out south, out in south Memphis, then out in the country. You get more. You know, at that time you'd get a dollar a night, and you could make two or three dollars out somewhere else

They sound like they were rough joints.

Well, they had a lot of rough joints, yeah. Yeah, it was kinda hard to work for colored people, like it used to be in the forties. When I come here, we'd go to house parties, we'd make good money, they'd pay half to me and Sonny Boy, and we'd get \$25 apiece, in some places. That was a hell of a lot of money, wouldn't make but \$8, the scale for the union. You could do a lot with \$8.

When was it that white audiences started listening?

Oh, the fifties. Late fifties. I mean, me and Big Bill had been playing up there in the fifties, and Big Crawford, for the white folks. It was paying more money. We had to play boogies, and some few sweet songs, and blues, they like that. They got so they couldn't come out on the South Side. You know what I mean? So I made a way for them to come inside of Smitty's Corner, me and Bill did, take care of the peoples, you know. It got to be a lot better.

Today is just one of my bad days.