

Carey Bell Interview.

At his house, 6249 S. Elizabeth, Chicago.

August 27, 1982, 3pm.

You're going to Europe in November. What do you think of the European circuit? Is it worth doing?

Oh yeah. I'd rather play in Europe than play in the United States. I make more money.

I've heard people putting it down, saying they trek you around in a bus, and don't pay you very much.

Well, actually, number one, they can't make that much money in the United States. And number two, they ain't got no bus to travel round in, and it's just the thing, you know. When they get back they say they ain't going back. And somebody come over and book 'em again, they go back. When I first go to Europe, I didn't make but two-fifty, a week, for a whole week, and we played every night.

When was that, 1970?

1969. So they'll go. They just like to talk a lot of stuff. They will, that's what it is, that's what it is. You can't make two-fifty a week here in the States - unless you got a big hit record out. I don't have a big hit record out, but I do have a couple of records out, they're not hits, and the money's alright, you know.

Have you got royalty agreements with those records?

Oh yeah.

So every time they sell one, you get something.

Yeah.

That must be pretty nice.

Yeah, it ain't bad.

A lot of guys just go for a flat payment at the studio.

Well, I never did that yet, and I don't think I never will. If I can't get no royalties, I don't want to record. You could, a lot of guys done did that, I know that. If there's enough money up front, you could do it. But you see, what's happening, if you do your own material, you don't want to do your own material and don't get no royalties. If you do somebody else's song, just change the beat, just change it round a little bit and make it different, it's OK with me, I'll just get a flat rate. But if I do my own material, they have to give me royalties, or I won't do the record.

Do you write a lot of your own songs?

Well, for Rooster records I did.

When's that one coming out?

Ah... last of next month, I think it is, I don't know. Hard to tell when. You know how it is. They release it when they think it's about the right time.

That seems to be a good-quality label.

Well, they're going to push it anyway, because it's a small company. Now, if I recorded for Columbia, or ABC - they don't have to push their records, if they don't want to. Because they got enough money, they can afford to do it. But a

small company, to get their money back, they've got to push it. Like, OK, for the musicians, got to pay them, studio, got to pay that, and you got to go back in the studio for the mixdown, and all that stuff, then they got have the record pressed, they got to get the jackets - so that's a lot of money. So they got to push the record, all in order to get their money back, before I get anything. See, their money comes off the top.

But you get some payment beforehand?

Yeah, I get paid for the session. And then after everything is all over, and they got the record out, I don't get no money, until they get their money off the top. When they get their money off the top, they send me a statement, what's owed, I get royalties. And go on from there.

So it seems to be better for an artist to record for a small company.

Yeah. Because if they scuffle up enough money to do it, they gotta hustle to sell the record. They've got to stick the record in every little place they can get it in, and that'll make their money back. Now, where it's good on my part, I can get gigs, because I got a new record out. Understand what I mean? I got a new record out, and I get pretty good gigs coming in.

When did this European tour thing, with whole busloads of musicians, begin?

I really don't know. I think Willie Dixon, with Memphis Slim started that off, years ago, even before I was... didn't nobody know me, because I had a factory job. But Willie Dixon told me they started it off.

Who was organising it?

The same people that organise the American Folk Blues Festival, the same people.

Who are they? Americans?

European. They were Germany. You ever heard of Horst Lippman? He was here not too long ago. I did an album for him, on his label, L&R, that's the label. So I just did that not too long ago. I'm leaving on the 28th of next month, and going to Frankfurt, Germany, for three days, and then I come back, and the album will be out there. When you get there, you could probably catch it back home. That's three days, then I come back, and I leave the 30th of November, going on the American Folk Blues Festival.

What's the circuit for that?

All over Europe.

How long for?

Three to four weeks.

It sounds like hard work.

It is. That's why the guys talk about this bus. Half of them don't want to fly, they're scared to fly. I'm scared to fly, but I fly. And I like the bus. I see more.

How many gigs a week?

Every night. Different places every night, yeah.

And the money's OK?

Yes, it's alright, it ain't bad. It ain't bad at all.

I have a note here that you were in Europe with John Lee Hooker in 1969, and later in the same year you were on the Festival.

Was that his own tour, separate?

Yeah. I was playing bass for John Lee Hooker at that time. That was his tour, right.

People like me read a lot about the blues dying. What do you think about that?

Well, it's slow. But it ain't gonna never die, no way. Because you got a lot of young people like blues. As long as there's younger people liking blues, people my age, you know - it ain't going to never die with me. Look how many more peoples younger than me likes the blues, and trying to play the blues, and they will play the blues, because they ain't gonna stop till they learn how to play the blues.

But there doesn't seem to be as many young people about now as there were when, say, you were twenty.

When I was twenty years old - let's see - the blues was happening. Because you could go on every goddam corner, and find a blues band. When I was twenty years old. Right here in Chicago. But what happened, everything got all - I don't know. They tore down a lot of buildings and stuff like that. I don't know. Only thing I say, blues ain't gonna die. As long as I live, I'm gonna play the blues, anyway.

Yes. I don't personally believe it is dying, but people get depressed, and say it's not as good as it was in the fifties.

Well, most of the old people that was doing something, they done died. The young people's got to bring the blues back to life again. That's what I think. If enough young people got up and did what they're supposed to do, they could bring the blues back.

Do you think the audience is there? The young blacks on the streets with their big radios aren't listening to blues.

They're not really listening at their mom and dad, either. So they ain't got time to listen at no blues. The only thing they got time for is try and get them a joint and smoke it. Yeah.

Can they be converted into listening to blues?

Put 'em all in a big place, a big old arena or something, they'll like it. They will like it, they enjoy it. But as soon as you get through playing, you know the first thing they're gonna do? Find them a reefer. And put them big radios back on their shoulders.

What were you like, when you were their age?

What I was like? I was following behind Little Walter and Sonny Roy Williamson, and all them kind of people. That's what I did. I can't smoke. I smoke regular cigarettes, but marijuana, I can't do nothing with that. I don't like it, you know.

It seems that radio airplay is what's needed.

That's what the blues peoples need. They need some radio play. We got a station now, they play blues. They play it late at night, and they play it in the morning. Only one station doing it.

Is that Purvis Spann?

Right, right. So they playing the blues pretty good now.

But that hardly seems enough.

One station can't do it all. Got to have some more stations.

Big Bill Hill used to have a good thing going, with live broadcasts from clubs and things.

Sure did. I used to work for him too. We had a good time.

I would like to see that happen again. Live from the Checkerboard, or something.

That would be good, yeah. And another thing they don't do. They do not advertise, like on TV? Rock'n'roll, gospel, soul, they advertise it on TV. They don't say shit about blues. They don't advertise no blues records on TV, but all the other rock'n'roll, soul, whatever you want to call it, they advertise it.

I don't understand that, because it just needs the exposure and people will buy it, because it's good music.

Right. We probably won't find out, either.

Thing about blues is, you can listen to a record Sonny Boy did in 1950, and it sounds as good now as it did then. That means it's a good music.

Better.

Better than most of what's going on now, yeah.

Right.

I was up at Wicker Park on Sunday, Lurrie and Billy were playing. There were a lot of young blacks enjoying the music, which was good to see. Normally, in the Kingston Mines, there's not many black faces. It's depressing.

Yeah, I know. That's just the way it is. I used to play in clubs that had no white faces, period. Black got to use their head, they're stupid. Over half of them, they're stupid. Ain't no way in the world you can do anything, without the white faces. Black don't own shit. When he go to work, he go to work for the white man. Only way you can make a living, yo gotta go to work for the white man. So the black ain't got sense enough to know what's happening. The white want to hear the blues, but they're scared to come into the black neighbourhoods - 'cos that's where the blues was, at one time. So they wasn't coming in the neighbourhoods. What the hell you come in the neighbourhood for, if you're going to get beat up? You know what I mean? So they wouldn't come. So, after things change, and change, and change, so anybody want to hear the blues, they have the black to come in the white neighbourhood - play the blues.

To me the South Side is a big adventure.

That's what I just told you. The black ain't got sense enough to do nothing. On their own. They're just a big fuck-up.

I can't agree. In the fifties you had black people playing black music for black audiences, and it was fine. What went wrong?

I can't answer that question. Only question I can give you on that - the black is stupid.

I can't agree. The black is screwed by the white pretty regularly but...

If he had sense enough to take care of his business, he wouldn't get screwed.

Are the North Side clubs paying more?

Oh yeah. Yeah. The black clubs ain't gonna pay you nothing. First thing they tell you - 'Well, we didn't do so good in here tonight. But I bet you next week, it'll be loaded.' You can tell when you ain't going to make no money. First goddam thing he do is bring you half a pint, and two cherries sticking up in it. And four or five glasses for who in the band. 'We didn't do so good tonight. Be better next week.'

How much would you get if you played a night in the Checkerboard?  
Twenty-five dollars.

Really? That's incredible. And what do you get if you play in the Kingston Mines?

Fifty.

Is that for you. or the band?

No, that's for me.

Do they pay the band, or do you pay the band?

They pay the band.

So that's not too bad.

No, I know. That's why I try to stay up that way!

I didn't realise things were so bad in the South Side.

No, it's bad all over. A couple of years ago. I was getting a little more. But - ain't no jobs! That's another thing - people ain't working. And they want to go out, but they ain't got no money to go out with. So that cuts down on the club business, cuts down on the musicians, and everything else. I'm not kicking on fifty dollars, fifty dollars is all right with me. At one time, I wasn't making but fifty cents a night, and half a pint of whiskey. Sometimes I wouldn't get that, play all night long! Oh yeah.

For you as a musician, is the atmosphere in the white clubs different?

I prefer playing in a white club. They appreciate the music more better. Like, they appreciate it more than the black peoples do. You play all night long, you never see a black person do one of these here - (Claps). Maybe every now and then, or late over at night, they get boozed up, they might do it. I say they might.

But they must still enjoy it or they wouldn't come in.

Well, they might. Can't never tell. They don't show you nothing, they don't say anything, so you really don't know.

So it's better for you to know ...

Right. It make you play much harder, and more better, and stay on the set more long!

I was wondering. Sometimes I think that the whites in the North Side clubs have just gone along to see someone they've heard of, and they clap out of habit. But in a South Side, the

audience knows all about the blues, and if they hear something good, and like it, then it really is good.

Well, up on the North Side, they know about the blues. In fact, actually in the schools now, they're teaching blues. Lurrie and Billy Branch, they work just about year-round for Urban Gateway. They go from school to school, just the two of them, and play.

White schools, black schools?

All of them, oh yeah. It's good. So they know about the blues. And so much is happening in the last couple or three years, like Chicagofest and all this stuff. Were you here for Chicagofest? Right, they got a blues stage, they got all kinds of acts down there. They know about the blues. The blues and gospel will never die. Some people maybe think it's going to die, but it ain't gonna never die. Blues'll be here when me'n you dead and gone.

That would be nice.

Yeah. Sure would.

What do they pay, Chicagofest?

They pay like six or seven hundred for two sets. And you pay the band off it. Any time you work for something like that, or a college, it pay way more money than a club do.

Because there's more people. I didn't like it, there were so many people. It's not the best place to hear blues in Chicago. Hard to get a good sound, 'cos you're on the outside, and you got a million peoples down there, and you probably got a sound man don't know what he doing, sometimes. It's kind of a problem. Any outdoors concert is a problem to hear what you want to hear. Almost have to get right in the middle, I think, got these big speakers on each side, you almost have to get right in the middle to hear the whole thing. Get on one side, sometimes you won't hears the rest of the band. You just hear a part of it, 'cos who mixing it.

You and Big Walter were very close. weren't you?

Oh yeah. I used to live with Big Walter years ago.

I saw him at B.L.U.E.S a few times when I was here in 1979.

Yeah, he was a heck of a harp player.

The album the two of you did, I really like.

Yeah, me and him sat down and did a lot of rehearsing on some of that stuff. Some of the stuff we did off the top of our heads. The part that we rehearsed I was playing bass - I'm playing bass on some of that album.

I was reading something Bruce Iglauer wrote, and he said that Big Walter was not comfortable as a leader, only as a side-man.

Well, that's his version. I don't know. I don't know whether he feel that or not. But to me, he was OK. Walter's nervous anyway. He need some pills. His nerve was gone. But we made it.

We were talking about the economy. You have been better off, have you?

We had quite a few gigs last year. Kind of fell off this year. Gotta be, only way

I see it, it's gotta be that. Ain't nobody got no jobs.

Can you remember the good years and the bad years for the blues?

It seems that it fell off in the sixties.

Not really, not for me. I haven't had a band. I just had a band a couple of years, two and a half years. I was working with the big guys, like Muddy Waters. Willie Dixon, Howling Wolf. They always had work, so I was steady making money. But it fell off the last half of last year. I had the band together about two or three years. And this year - this is the worstest year I had, since I had the band.

Are other people in the same position?

Other bandleaders? Some of them, and some of them ain't. Some of them got lucky and got a little record out, and doing pretty good. And the next thing, it's according who your agent, too. You don't have a good agent, a good mouthpiece, you gonna fall low, I don't care what you done made.

Is yours good?

Well... they learning. They're an agent in an office booking rock and jazz. Only one person in there booking blues, and that's Marilyn - card's here somewhere - but she's doing a pretty good job.

Don Leavenson.

You ever heard of him? It's a lady books the blues. Well, there's two in there books blues, and she's trying to get it together. Jim O'neal is associated with them.

Are you a South Side man? You said you didn't play on the West Side.

I used to live on the West Side. Yeah, when I came to Chicago I lived on the South Side - when I came from Mississippi - and then moved to the West Side. I played all over Chicago.

Is the music different on the West Side? There's various theories about it.

Not for me it ain't. You got a bunch of harp players on the West Side too.

Yes, I think it's mainly guitar styles that people talk about.

What's happening, where the styles come, is everybody is playing what they know. 'Cos you cannot play what you don't know. When you're learning, everything is different. So if you got a style of your own, that's what you learn. The next man - 'Well I don't want to sound like that, I want to learn something else' - he got a style of his own. All guitar players got a different style.

To me a lot of them sound the same.

Well sometimes they do, but when they want to play to be theirsself, they got a different style.

It's necessary to copy somebody in order to learn.

That's what you start off on.

A lot of guys I've seen seem to start off on BB King and then just stay there. Who did you start off on?

I didn't, I started off playing western and country. When I first started, on my first harmonica. I played western and country, doing the train. That's what I started

off on. Then I left the train and I started to learn something else, you know...  
listen at the radio and records. I was listening at Hank Williams, all them guys.

When do you first remember playing blues?

Around '53. I was playing gospel too. I play a little jazz too.

Jazz harmonica is pretty rare.

Yeah, that's what I'm doing - I'm leaving the 28th of next month, for three days.  
I'm playing with a jazz group. Used to be Duke Ellington's band, yeah, I'm playing  
with them guys.

When I see you in England I'll ask you how that went.

Yeah. I'll be there sometime in November. Germany will be the last place we play  
at, wind up in London. That be the last concert, then we come home.

Do you like to play London?

Yeah, I like to play Europe period. Only thing I don't like about London is it's so  
foggy. You don't never see the sun!

Don't you like to tour the U.S.?

I can't make as much money in the U.S. I make more money in Europe than I do here.

There's some kind of American circuit, with Tramps in New York  
and the Zoo Bar in Lincoln...

Yeah, I ain't but too long left the Zoo Bar.

But there isn't a circuit like the European one you're going  
on.

No, no. When I played the Zoo Bar, little club. When we're playing in Europe, all  
concerts. I never play a club, on this particular tour, the American Folk Blues  
Festival, we never play clubs - all concerts.

Who's going?

My son's going. And the rhythm guitar player, Eli. Billy Branch is going. They got  
some peoples out of New York that's going. They got some peoples out of California  
that's going. I don't know who yet. I won't know until I get there.

Well, I hope you have a good time, make a lot of money, and  
come back rich.

Oh, nobody comes back rich, but it be something. I have Christmas money, and stuff  
like that.