

Jimmy Walker interview.

At his house, 750 E 46th St, Chicago.

September 17 1982, 4pm.

I'm 78. I've been 78 since March. Yeah, see, I was born in 1905, March the eighth. They always have a birthday party for me up there, (B.L.U.E.S) infact sometimes maybe it takes from March to maybe June till I get around to everyplace where they have a birthday party for me.

It's interesting that while most blues musicians came up to Chicago in the thirties and forties, you've been here almost all your life.

Yeah. I been here since 1907.

What was Chicago like in 1907?

Oh, well, see, I was small then. My mother brought me here when I was little, see, and I was raised by a Jew. See my father died when I was quite young. I was about six years old when my father died, between five and six. My mother had it pretty hard. Maybe she would make at times about two and a half a day, sometimes a dollar and a half a day. Of course rent was cheap, you see, I think you paid about twelve dollars a month for rent.

Where did you live when you first came here?

I was living on 18th and <sup>(Federal)</sup> Butterfield. I started with this Jewish fellow, out at the store. I always wanted to work, see. I never been in jail, nothing, and I've always wanted to work, see. So I got with him, and I went with him that day, when I run off on him, you know, so I asked him if he would let me work with him. Oh, well, yeah, he'd try to help me out.

How old were you then?

Mmm, I was about seven years old. I left home then, and started messing around with him. He sent me to school, and I'd work in the afternoon, and Saturdays I'd work all day, on the wagon, see. He knew just about how much milk you'd want, see, maybe you'd take just about a half a dozen bottles of cream, you'd take maybe three dozen quarts, maybe half a dozen pints, and we'd take that round. And if you wasn't open, we'd just set that out, you know, set that in front of the store door, see, and go on ahead to the next place, you understand. And then I got smart, see. I knew where all the stores were, so I would go ahead on ahead of him, and I'd go in the store, and get up all the bottles, and bring all the bottles outside to the kerb, and then when he came, I'd put the bottles on the wagon, put the empties in, and he'd tell me all the milk he wanted, how many milks he wanted, how many creams he wanted, how many pints he wanted, and I'd go back out and get it, and bring it in. I used to go to a synagogue out here on 53rd and Michigan, see we lived on 53rd, East 53rd Street, and I'd go to a synagogue, see, out there. I had a good time. I had everything a poor boy wanted.

You were living with him?

Yeah, I was living with him and his wife, and at the weekend he'd take me back

and I'd see my mother, and this was alright with her, because things was kind of tough then, see, and people didn't have no money. So we made it alright. So finally, I guess I must ahve been about eleven or twelve years old, he opened up a store himself, a delicatessen, down at thirtieth and Indiana. At that time, see, no coloured on the East side of State Street. Meantime, my mother moved, down to 27th and Dearborn, and I'd help out in the store. If I did something wrong, he'd punish me, he wouldn't let me work. That's the way I got punished. I had to stay there in the store, see, and I didn't want to stay in the store. I don't know. His wife was alright, but I liked it it outside, see, and I'm still the same way now. Heck, I've been here thirty-three years, right here in this apartment, but it's hard to keep me in here. Had you not said you'd be here around this time, I would have been over there. (Fire stat ion) I just left from over there. Heck, I eat over there, I sleep over there, you know what I mean? What the heck. I have it pretty rough sometimes over there, some of them cats, you know man, they think I should eat all the time. I have a problem with them, see, they think I should do nothing but eat, but I don't want to eat. Man, we have a time. They watch me like a hawk watching a chicken, you know what I mean, so I don't get sick. If something happen to me, if I get sick or something like that, they grab me up and run to the hospital with me. I'm not used to that, see. I was telling a guy, I stepped on a nail downstairs, that was in a board, and the nail went through my foot, and come out at the top. And I put my other foot on the board, and take my hand and pull my foot off this nail, see, pull the nail out. And I didn't say nothing to nobody. I just went out that door there, and scratched me up some dirt, see, pulled my shoe off, scraped it back to where that I could see the hole, and take that dirt, and pushed that dirt in the hole, stopped it from bleeding, just pushed that dirt in the hole, put my shoe back on, and went on, started walking, didn't say to nobody. Say you'll need to go to the doctor. I didn't say nothing to nobody like that, because I didn't want to go to no doctor. I don't want no shots, see, you don't give me no shots. That's for lockjaw, see, they want to give you something to keep you from having lockjaw, see. I didn't have no lockjaw. That foot didn't even swell up.

Is it OK now?

Yeah! I got a place on this foot that I got in the mill, pouring steel. That was back during WPA days, I got a job at this foundry, and the mould busted out, and the steel hit the top of this shoe, burned right through, and burnt a hole in my foot. And by the time they got my shoe off, the damage was done. And I take some sand, some of the sand there, and let that sand just sift down in that hole, and fill that hole up with sand, packed it with sand, and went on about my business. Yeah. So I imagine I'm lucky to be living.

You're a tough man. You're healthy.

Well, I don't know. I had a haemorrhage, and they couldn't stop it, so they operated on me. Can you see that scar there? They cut that vein going to my head.

A brain haemorrhage?

Yeah.

When was that?

Oh, about fifteen, twenty years ago. And the operation was done to me on Monday, Monday morning, and when I woke up, they had a big patch on me, tape, see, and I asked the doctor, I said, 'What's this you got on me?' He said that's where we operated on you, and we put that on you to stop you from setting up an infection. I said, setting up an infection? I said, man I'll be rotten by morning. He said, no, you won't be rotten by morning. I said, OK, you think I can go home by Wednesday? He said, yeah, OK. He come back the next morning to see how this was. And he caught a hold of the tape he had, and he lifted up the pad - and all the stitches was in the pad; the scar was just like you see it now. I didn't know this. I said, Doc, you think I can go home Wednesday? He said, I guess you'd like to go home now. I said yeah. This is Tuesday. I said yes, I would like to go home. He said, well I guess you can. And by the time he'd walked about twenty-five feet, I'd got up and washed up, put on my clothes, and I was on my way downstairs. And he said wait a minute, you can't go yet. I said, well, he doctor told me I could go. But I didn't know you had to sign out of there, I wasn't thinking of that. The doctor told me I could go, so I'm ready to shoot out of there. They tried to give me blood. They couldn't give me no blood. They tried three different types of blood. My body won't take it. So they charged me for the blood. This was alright. The doctor told me they couldn't use it. So after I was home about a week, they sent me a cheque. I had paid for the blood, you know, and they had sent me the cheque back, because I couldn't use the blood. I went back to the doctor, he said you promise me you'll come back Thursday, I said Yeah. So that Thursday I went back to his office, he had seven doctors there to look at me. They want to know, what kind of guy are you, any way? We open you up one day, you heal right back up the next day. I'd noticed, when I cut my hand or something like that, it can be laying wide open - I go out and get me some dirt in it, and go on about my business - and about three hours from that, you couldn't tell where I was cut.

You're a lucky man.

You telling me. I don't know myself. I wonder myself. Back around 17/18, guy used to come from New York, a female impersonator, he was a black guy. He called himself Gloria Swanson. This guy that played with him, his name was Willie something, I've forgotten now what his name was, his last name, and he played the piano for this guy Sam, and he always pleyed down there at eighteenth and State Street. And I always wanted to learn how to play, and I had been messing around on the piano, but nobody ever showed me anything. This guy used to show me, he never used to be here more than two days, and I'd catch him where he was rooming. And finally I run into another guy, Lorenzo Murphy, he had been playing a little bit, so he tried to show me a little. His uncle was a piano player, and he had been playing around bog bands, around Canada. So he showed me one piece. I can't play it now, I might be able to start it, but that's about all. I don't remember what it was, it's been so long I can't even remember it. So from that, I got that little bit. Then I learned that you could play whatever you talked. Then I got on to humming, play what I hummed, and from then on, after I really got that I could play it, then I really went on talking, see.

How old were you when you started?

I was about 17. See, I left this Jew right after it. I was about 17 when I left him.

What job did you get then?

Oh, I didn't have no job then. It was mostly house rent parties. Times was hard. You got 50 cents a night. Sometimes, if they sold enough moonshine, you got maybe a dollar. Yeah, that was good money. You could take a dollar then, and go to the store, you couldn't hardly get back home with the food, see? Like a lady asked me the other day - how in the world, like they got all these different things going now, striking on these schools, everybody's all upset. This world is big enough for everybody. The only thing what's happened, you got a little bit more that I've got, so you want to guard me up, because I don't have as much as you. You want to take what little I have, you understand, so this'll make you bigger. And the next guy that's a little bigger than you, he'll come along, and he'll want to take what you've got, and what you've done got from me and everybody else, you understand, to make yourself a little bigger. This is what it's all about now. But back then, people didn't go hungry, people wasn't hungry like they are now.

A lot of people came up from the South around that time, looking for jobs.

Oh, I imagine they were looking for jobs, a lot of people came here from the South. But my mother brought me when I was very little, and I don't know anything about the South. Heck, I've been here in the city all my life. See, I have a farm, but I don't know nothing about no farm.

Where is it?

Up in Michigan. Eight-room house, big farm, 52 acres of land. I got that almost 25 years ago. I rent it out, yeah. I go up there every now and then. My wife was up there see, and after she left, I was in Miami, playing down in Miami, see, so when she left I got a divorce from her, and I went on and rent it out, because I knew I wasn't going to stay there. I don't have no time to fool with it, because I'm in and out, and sometimes I come here, stay here maybe three days, four days, sometimes maybe a week, gone maybe two or three weeks, four or five weeks, all that kind of stuff. I don't have time, so I just rent it out.

Pretty good way of making a living.

Well, I do pretty good here, see. I want to get out of here, I'm kind of tired of it now. See, this is holding me a little too close. Of course, I'll go when I get ready, you know, and I'm thinking of it. I want to move, see, I want to be able to do like I want to do, and when I do, I don't want to have nothing to hold me back, like I come over to your place, and I've got this back here, something I didn't do, or something may go wrong with this, or something may go wrong with that, you know. But I promised this man's wife that I would stick with him, and as long as he's here, I'm here. See, me, I'm the last one in my family. I got a lot of people down south, they don't even know me. I talk to them only by phone, but to actually know them, no. They don't know me and I don't know them. I have a first cousin that lives over here on the West Side. I saw him for the first time last week. He sent me a picture of him and his wife and daughter, and now O probably won't see him. I got

fourteen daughters here, thirty-six grandkids. So I get along pretty good, I thank God, that he's made it possible for me to survive, and I have no problems with nobody, I try to get along with everybody, and I treat everybody like I want to be treated, and this is the way I get it. All I do is play my music and go about my business. Take like Billy, (Branch) now Billy went to Washington DC with me, he's been playing with me about ten years. I ain't never had no falling out practically with nobody. Last fight I had, I bet you it's been 20 or 25 years, yeah, with anybody. I don't have no problems.

Anyway. You were 17, and playing at house rent parties.

Oh, they played house rent parties then, besides going round up and down Federal Street, and Dearborn, State, La Salle. At that time, there was quite a few piano players round here. They had Johnny Jones - not the Johnny Jones probably that you know - another Johnny Jones that put out this 44 Blues.

Didn't Roosevelt Sykes do that?

Oh, this was even before Roosevelt started playing. Roosevelt wasn't nothing but a kid, see. This guy got killed out there at 51st and Federal. We was at a party, and the lady come, and she thought that her husband was gone to work, and she come there, and Johnny was sitting there on the piano, see, sitting there on the stool, playing, and she's sitting there on the piano wrong side of him, see, and this guy came in, and say, Ha, this is why I can't keep my wife at home, see, and he outs with the 45 and starts to shooting. She jumps up and run out the back door, and he shot Johnny, sitting on the stool. And he jumped up, and Johnny started to running too, he runs to the front door. And when he gets to the front door, there were a little porch, and steps, running from the sidewalk up to the second floor, see? And you could go round the side here, and walk under them steps and go in on the first floor. And he walked to the door, and when he walked to the door, he stumbled, and when he stumbled, this guy shot at him again. He fell, and he just rolled all the way down them steps, all the way to the sidewalk. He's dead, then.

When was that?

Oh, that must have been around '24, '25. See, things was still tight, see, they were selling moonshine then. Yeah, I was selling it too, shoot. But I never give no parties, you know, I didn't have no reason to give no parties, see. I had big connections, you know. I had some big stills, I was doing all right. And every time I think about the house, I could have bought the house for three thousand dollars, a three storey building. This white fellow - he know me - I was working for him, but I wasn't making moonshine for him, I was making moonshine for myself. But he didn't know that I was making moonshine, so I was renting apartments out, and all he wanted was the money, he wasn't interested in what was going on, because it wasn't hurting him any, you know. I think all he had to do was pay a little water bill, and that was about it, see. But I rent seven rooms, \$12 a month. And he told me he'd sell me the place for three thousand dollars, and I give him \$150 down, and \$50 a month. But I didn't have nobody, you know what I mean, that I could trust to be in with me, and I didn't know. So I didn't bother about the place. He tried to make me buy it. He said, when you get through paying me for this one, he said my

mother and me's going to California. He lived out here on 61st and Evans. He said I'll let you have that one out there too. Now I'm not thinking, you know what I mean? Heck, I guess they could've taken all that stuff away from me now. All that moonshine, I tell you. I had so much stuff up there one time, when they broke me down, it took them four days to throw the stuff out.

What do you mean?

Well, I had a fire there, see. What a guy did, I tried to help him out. He had a bunch of kids, and I tried to help him out, so I rented him the second floor - I lived on the first floor - and there was a dumb elevator chair, that's the way we'd pull our sugar up, we'd pull our sugar up and let it down. Well, I got tired of that, so I got a guy over here on State Street, to make me a big still, see. He made the still, it was so big we had to take the window out to bring in half the still, and then he'd come there and he'd put it together, see. Then we was playing pretty good. See. like you for instance, you got maybe like 25 or 30 people following you around, you know, wherever you go they always want to go with you and have a good time. So what the heck, I'd have maybe 15 or 20 people following me, and maybe the other piano player, maybe he's got a few guys following him, you know. OK. One of your friends going to have a party. OK, you would tell me, and I would tell my friends, and tell the other piano player, and they would all come over to help out. This is how people lived here. This is why I said, nobody was hungry. Nobody got hungry, because everybody helped out.

You mentioned some of the guys you learned from. What was going on then, musically?

Well, I had nobody to actually teach me anything, I learned practically on my own. I'd listen at the guy's style, but I have a style of my own. I haven't heard nobody play my style. Take like Fats Waller, you don't hear nobody messing with that stuff - that stuff is too rough! Another guy you don't hear nobody messing with either, of course you don't hear too many of his records, that's Earl Garner. He died here about a couple of years ago, but nobody playing his stuff, nobody don't fool with it. There's another guy you don't hear nobody messing with, a blind guy...

John Davis?

No, John Davis couldn't touch this guy, neither Ray Charles. They couldn't touch this guy.

You can't remember his name?

Not now. He was supposed to be the world's greatest pianist. He was blind, born blind. he's dead now. He's the onliest man that had a concert downtown by himself. This was about thirty years ago. I can't think of his name. Oh, he played some tough stuff. There's a few guys that try to play like me, but you got a job on your hands, see, trying to copy, because they don't understand. See, I don't play nothing twice the same way. I play it different each time. I don't care how many times I play it, I play it different. Because it sounds better, when these changes come, I make them, and they sound better. Were you at the Fest?

Yes. I was a long way off, but the sound system was excellent.

I couldn't see you, but I could hear you.

Yeah? At the country Club, we was out there with Sonny Stitt, Count Basie, and somebody else was with us. We was all on that same ticket there. I tried to get some tapes on it, I don't know. I play my stuff a lot, so that I can, you know what I mean, still appreciate, you know? I'll show what I mean. (Plays). I just wanted to show you. I do my own thing. I don't be bothered about doing somebody else's, because it don't work out. You see, I have something like a record that's playing...

In your head?

Mmm. And I hear the thing twice before it comes out. See? And then the next time I hear it, it sounds a little different. Other words, the way it sounds to me, it's like you, you hear it the first time, understand? Then when you hear it the second time, you can tell me what you think about it the first time. You know what I mean, whether the first was better than the second. This is the way I gets kind of screwed up sometimes, because I be, you know - 'That don't go that way. That don't sound good, that's not the right sound.' If a guy's playing with me and he don't get the sound right, I don't want to play. Because I don't want you to sound bad, and I don't want you to make me sound bad. See That's the way that goes.

You used to play with Lonnie Johnson, didn't you?

Yeah, I played with Lonnie for a while, and Big Bill, and Johnny Temple. Lonny'd just quit playing violin, see, he used to play violin with Bessie Smith. And when I tell people that they say it's not so. You know who's got a record of Lonnie Johnson playing with Bessie Smith? Jim O'Neal. That's very strange? Well, that's way before you was thought about! I'm thinking about going down there and maybe try to bring her back - Ma Rainey. You ever heard of her? She's still living, you know.

You sure?

Yeah. She's in Atlanta. She's in a wheelchair. She's still singing the blues too. Yes sir. She was somewhere here, somebody had her here, messing around, and they carried her there with this wheelchair. Had her singing the blues. Heck, she was even on TV! You missed that. She was saying she'd be singing the blues as long as she lived. I might bring her up, and I might keep her around with me for a while. See, there was four of them. There's Bessie, Clara, Ma Rainey, and ... Mamie. Yeah. Mamie died a long time ago. See, they all come up there, in Atlanta. I had intended to get a hold of of whatyou callem when I was down there, and I might still do. Try to get some of my people there, you know, try to get them to talk to her, and maybe I'll call her and talk to her, and if she'll come, heck, I'll go down there and get her. That would be pretty good.

You're talking about a mess! That would really be a mess. You ain't got nothing to sing like her. Yes sir, out of all these chicks, you ain't got nothing to sing like Ma Rainey. I'll tell you another gel who was down here doing pretty good - Big Maybelle. That other chick too was doing alright. She died last year. I got a video tape of where she played with me. I was the last one she played with. Arlene Brown. You've heard of her. You never heard her sing? (We look through records)

Do you like the Rolling Stones?

They all right.

(Firemen invade) You have a lot of fun with those guys, don't you? I'll tell you something. You see, you don't meet too many guys like me. See, I can say anything I want to say to them, they can say anything they want to say to me. You know what I mean? They only say they don't want nobody to say nothing to me, or try to get wrong with me, see, cos they'll go to war. And the same way with me, I don't want nobody to mess with nobody. And you either. See, ain't nobody going to mess with you. If I was to get into something outside there in the street, every one of those fellows would come out of there. You know what I mean? They don't want nobody to bother me, and I don't bother nobody, and they know I don't bother nobody. Like I say, I go over there, all they want to do is eat eat eat! I don't want to eat. See, you're invited, come on over and get something to eat. What the heck? I can't eat all the time.

Well those guys are putting out so many fires they have to. Ah, no. Sometimes they go out of here and go around the block. Check a box or something, somebody maybe hit it, and come right back here. OK then, what do you want to ask me now? You must have seen the blues changing while you've been in Chicago.

Well, the blues change. But the change is a higher pitch. You take this higher pitch that they're bringing the blues into, it's not the blues.

What do you mean by higher pitch? BB King?

Now, BB King, he's playing mostly on one string. There's a lot of people that's trying to play the blues, and they're trying to play like BB King - and they're not playing the blues. See, you get right down to the facts. You take old records like these old 78s. There's nothing hardly that you hear today sounds anything like one of them 78s.

Do you like BB King?

Yeah, he's alright, ain't nothing wrong with him, see he changed the style of playing, a little, to upraise the younger people. But I take care of young and old. I don't care nothing, it doesn't make any difference to me. I take them all in, see. Young and old. So this way, you're not discriminating nobody, you don't leave nobody out.

What about during the forties, when people like Muddy Waters arrived in the city. Didn't he change it some?

He changed it a little, yeah, not too much, he didn't change it too much, but he changed it a little. Even to me now, I don't play the blues like it's supposed to be played. No. See, because I've got an up-tempo.

And that's not proper blues?

No, that's not proper blues. Sometimes the reason I don't play, the reason I don't get down into the blues like it is, because when you really get out in the blues like it is, partner, you will cry behind them. Because the blues is something that you live, see. You take the people over there in those countries that's starving and having a hard time, like even now to get water, and get a little food. That's dying from starvation, and all this. Now those people are having the blues, you understand? Now you wouldn't consider me having the blues, you wouldn't consider

yourself having the blues, you wouldn't consider somebody else having the blues, you know what I mean, where that they've got money, and they're able and capable of getting just almost anything that they want. See? It would be hard for them to have the blues.

So are you saying that this modern blues that you hear is not true blues?

No, this is not real blues, see.

Have you ever played proper blues, then?

Yeah. And I can play 'em now, but I don't play them, because everybody's playing this up-tempo. Every once in a while you run into somebody can play those really old down-home blues, and every guy that you listen to, he has the blues standing up, and the next thing, the thing is out, too loud, whatnot. Other words, what really has killed the blues is by it being electrified. That has did a little something to the blues. It has killed it to a certain extent, and it has improved it to a certain extent. You understand? Because, you take a lot of people that listen to a guy playing the blues. He can come along with a acoustic guitar, understand? And he can draw a crowd. They can't hardly hear him, but he can draw a crowd.

But maybe not too much nowadays.

Oh, yeah. A guy that plays acoustic guitar now can draw a crowd. But electric is more louder. You can hear more of it. Like I was telling a guy out there at this country club. This monitor that he had there with me, he had it turned right on me. I don't like that. You don't turn no monitor right on me, see? That's no good. Up there at the Jazzfest, you know where they had that monitor? I had it turned on a 45 degree angle, sitting right in front of me, but on a 45 degree angle. Other words, it passed me. I don't want nothing jamming in my ear like that, see, you won't hear a thing.

Do you prefer to play on your own?

Well, I can play with a band. I'd like to have at least one man or two. Drums and a bass, or just the bass man.

When you started out, doing these rent parties, were you solo?

Oh, well, we started out, we'd just sit up and play, and get to drinking, you know, and stompin' your foot on the floor and hollerin', this kind of stuff, you know what I mean, and playing and singing.

By yourself.

Yeah.

When did you start playing with other people then? I've seen that picture in the book of you and Homesick James. Did you have a band?

Oh, that was in the thirties. There was four of us. We had harmonica and drums. We were holding down two jobs. We would play here, and when we take a 15, 20 minute break, we would go round the corner.

Which clubs were these?

One was on Wells street, and the other one was on Division. We'd play on the corner there, and we'd play at one, and when we'd come down for a break here, we'd go back

around there and start! We was doing allright. I wasn't making no money. No. We'd get five or six dollars apiece. Wasn't too bad. But we did all right, we managed. Managed to survive and go ahead on and get through with it, you understand.

You've played rent parties in the twenties, and last month you were at the Kool Jazz Festival in Grant Park, and twenty thousand people were there.

Man, there must have been more than that at the Country Club. I mean, people had binoculars, trying to see me. See, when I started tickling the piano, everybody get up there, and they want to see. But you can't see.

But what's it like for you? How do you feel, playing for twenty thousand people?

Oh, yeah, I'd play for fifty thousand people, wouldn't make no difference to me. You know, that's all right. As far as the people are concerned, the bigger the crowd, the better I feel. Yeah. The bigger the crowd, the better I play. Sometimes, you know, I'll tell you; when you have a big crowd like that, and people enjoy; you see, I enjoy doing things for people. I enjoy trying to help people. And when I can take those keys, and make you feel good, feel like I do, then I'm happy. See? Yeah, that is a good feeling, a real good feeling. Do you know there are some people that never smile. You know, I've seen people, where the people, I know, hate black people. You understand? But this is all right. See, I don't worry about nothing like that. That's something I don't worry about. See, because, you know what? I tell 'em this, I tell everybody: Way I was raised, I don't know nothing about no colour. I look at you as a man, as people, and I try to treat you that way. It's just that easy. And all this stuff you got, you try to go to work you understand, somebody wants to go to work, and who shot John this, and who shot John that, don't need that. See? You can live here on this earth without that. I remember, I know, when my mother was living down at 27th and Dearborn, and the man taken me back to see my mother. See, whites was living next door, understand? And blacks was living on the other side of them. Blacks was living across the street, and whites was living next door, and all that. And nobody had nothing to say about it.