

Oliver Davis Interview

At the Delta Fish Market, Jackson and Kedzie, Chicago.

September 15, 1982. 4 pm.

Well, I been liking blues all my life, but I really got into them only about eight years seriously. At my old place, used to come down and just practise, just a bunch of amateurs, you know, amateurs, like me, used to follow Muddy Waters and Howling Wolf, Hound Dog Taylor; and I followed all these guys around. We used to try and play what they were doing, and after we got used to doing what they doing, then here come maybe one guy, he'd come in, he used to play with one of these groups, you know, like Ted, he used to play with Hound Dog Taylor, Willie James, he used to play with Muddy Waters, and while we were rehearsing and practising, they would come in, and they would play the part that we was trying to play, and it led from that, this that and the other, we were practising, practising, practising, until we wound up with the whole group over here.

What do you play?

I play lead guitar, slide like Elmore James. Try to play.

Have you sunk a lot of money into the music here?

Well, look around, you can see the equipment. About \$15,000 of equipment here and in the next room.

So you're fairly determined to make it a success.

Right, right.

How do you see the future? The blues seems to be having a bit of a comeback right now.

It's hard to have a comeback in a black neighbourhood. I'm the only one I know in the whole of Chicago that's got blues outside, outdoors. The biggest blues headquarters in Chicago, outdoors, indoors too, because I've got a concert there every week. And where most places may have one show, may call in Bobby Blue Bland, or somebody, John Lee Hooker, maybe once in a year, maybe once in three or four years. But we got constantly blues, with guys like Sunnyland Slim, who's sitting out there right now, every weekend, Friday and Saturday.

Looks healthy.

Oh yeah. Over here. But nowhere else on the West Side. South Side, unless you pay five or six dollars to get in, two or three dollars for a beer. Listen to 'em right here, it's free, bring the whole family right here, anybody can come here, you're obligated to pay nothing.

It obviously helps the business at weekends.

It don't help the business that much, because after all, I put live fish in there, and people can't get in the parking lot to buy fish, they go off somewhere else to buy fish, you know, because you can't get in the parking lot for the people that want to listen to the blues, they're just standing in the lot. It don't help the business, not really.

But you get through a lot of cooked fish.

The cooked fish, it would help it if we stay open after nine o'clock. After nine

o'clock it would help it. I just like the blues. I can get up at my house in the morning, put on a couple of JB Hutto albums, Howling Wolf or somebody, while I'm taking a shower. Kids have gone to school, I can leave the door open and listen to it, and I can leave home feeling pretty good. And then I come right down here, right back into it. Love the blues.

I read that you were planning to get a club.

Well, they said that. If I wanted a club, I could go on right into it, no problem. I don't want a club because I don't want to make any money out of it. We have a blues band, we travel around, played the first blues festival in Mississippi, in 1978. All of the money that was made went to the guys in the band, and I can name all of them if you want me to. We had Mojo on bass, Willie James on lead, Highway Man singing, Detroit Junior on piano, and we had Ray Scott on drums. I played slide guitar. And we had the best show in the whole set right there, 1978, the first blues festival that was ever played in Greenville Mississippi. And all the money that we ever made on any of the show that we done, I just give it all to the guys, because, you know, I don't need it. Even though I sponsored the trip down there, and all the way back, and all the equipment.

The blues needs that kind of input. You're a businessman first, right? So you can finance things like that.

I just really love the blues.

Don't you think if you had a club you could help even more?

Like the North Side clubs, they have music every night. I don't know if they're making money.

Oh yeah, those clubs up there are for making money. But this is not for making money for me. It only employs the guys that's playing in the band, and I pay each and every one of them that play there, out of my pocket. And I have it as a service to the community.

What if you had music every day? I'm thinking of what it used to be like on the West Side.

Well, that would work pretty fine, it would work real good if I could do it, and pay 'em every day - which I can't afford to pay 'em every day. If I could afford to pay 'em every day we would have it every day, because I could stand here every day. I love it. As far as I'm concerned, music, blues against disco, there's really no comparison. Disco you've just got a bumping beat, dance, and that's it. But blues, it tells a story, you know, it tells a story. Like overseas, that's one of the places where blues is really selling, and you get paid for a record, if you got a record, they selling records eight or ten dollars a record. It's good money for a blues player, and if blues players had that kind of money, they would be in good enough shape to do what they want to do. Now they go overseas, blues players go overseas, they make a thousand dollars a week, and then they come back, it's all gone in three days, if they stayed three weeks, it's all gone in three days, because they got back bills to pay.

Do you have to have a special licence to play outdoors?

Don't need no licence to play outdoors. I tried to get a licence to play outside,

and you don't need no lisenec for private property, if you're not charging them admission, and you're not selling any alcohol. I'm not selling alcohol, all I'm selling is fish, we only do one thing.

Are you from the South?

Greenville, Mississippi. Home of Eddie Shaw, Hound Dog Taylor, and I don't know how many more blues players.

When did you come to Chicago?

I came in '63.

Why?

I don't know. I came just to make a regular living for the family, you know. Mother and father are right there in Greenville right now. My father's a musician, down there for years, down there in Greenville Mississippi. He plays Dixieland jazz.

That's interesting. Someone like me easily forgets that there are other types of music in the South.

Oh, no, you got all kinds of music. Fact of it is, my father had a marching band at three different schools, a regular band, that's where I learned the tempo, the beat, and the timing. A marching band, that's where I learned my timing, to play in a band. I been affiliated with music all my life. Like when I was a kid, I used to like blues, because I used to go and put five cents in a box, a jukebox, and it would play a 78 record. To listen to blues, like Muddy Waters, Little Walter, Jimmy Reed, and Howling Wolf. At that time. That was the only music on the jukebox when I was a kid, in Mississippi.

How many people have you got working for you here?

Right now we got eight people working in; when we got a blues band out we got about fourteen.

Has business been picking up since you got the bands?

Not really. The business have picked up, but we got a lot of friends that come around from our home town and different places. Naturally, any time that you got some kind of entertainment where people can stand around, the crowd brings business in. It's like Barnum and Bailey. Hell, the elephant that time, big tall elephant, brought a lot of people there to just see him. He wouldn't do no performing, but a beats that big brings the people. So any time you got anything that bring the people around, naturally you do a little more business.

When did you start bringing fish up from Mississippi?

I got started bringing fish up from Mississippi two years ago. I bought my own tractor, and then I worked, and I bought my own trailer, and next I bought my own tanks to go on the trailer, next I bought the pump to keep them alive, and fixed it up.

One reason for the blues' decline amongst black audiences, I think, was the wish to forget the past, the rough life back home in the South.

I didn't have that rough a life down South. In fact I didn't see a rat or a roach until I come to Chicago. A lot of people that's left Mississippi don't want to go back, but the big est majority of them, they want to go back. They want to move back

because the minimum wage in Mississippi is the same as it is in Chicago. You got a bunch of people that wants to go back and live, because they know it's just as good down there, and better.

And the weather's better.

The weather's much better. Right now, it's really all right. If you call hot weather better, it's better. No snow in Mississippi.

I was glad to see Delta written up so big outside. Like you're proud to be from there.

Right. Well, we named this place Delta Fish Market after the Delta. After all, I'm from the Delta. And we named this fish market after the Delta because we go to the Delta to get ninety percent of our fish. On my own truck, and my own driver, we go to Mississippi to the Delta area of Mississippi, to get fish. So we named it the Delta Fish Market.

But it's more than a fish market. It's like a meeting place. It is, a meeting place for the blues players, and all the old blues players, most of them, are from the Delta. Again, ninety percent of the blues players are from the Delta that come around.

But more than musicians come here. Don't a lot of people come on a kind of nostalgia trip?

They feel at home. They feel at home when they come here, it's like a nostalgia, because, you know, you think of the old times, you can hear the old time songs the musicians play, and they feel at home.

Which is rather different from ignoring the blues because they don't want to be reminded.

Well, a long time ago they didn't want to hear the blues. But nowadays, most youngsters that's in a band or anything, a little rock'n'roll band, or rock band, disco band or whatever they got, they like the blues because they found out, most of them found out, that it's easy to play disco, but it's hard to play blues. When they first listen to the blues and don't even practise, they say, oh, I can play that, we can do blues. But they can't really do it, because it's harder than the disco, and rock. And we try to keep it alive, right here at the Delta Fish Market.

You are conscious of doing that?

Oh I love it, not to take any money. We play up in Wisconsin different places, and I have never accepted money from a blues band that I have put together. I never accepted any money, but I always pay the players off. So I gotta like it.

What's wrong with making some money?

I don't need the money. I'd just as soon go and play it, like the shows we did at the Pelham Hospital. And I had a tough time trying to get the guys that play in the band to go out and do a show free. But we finally done it, we played benefit shows at the hospital out in Maywood, free. As far as I'm concerned, if I needed the money I probably would play for the money, but I don't need the money.

Most blues musicians do.

Oh, most blues musicians really are in bad shape. Really in bad shape, unless you get to the bigger guys like Muddy Waters. They well off now, they got just about

what they need. And they won't play in the black neighbourhoods, because there's no money to pay 'em. Now playing here, with a guy like Sunnyland Slim, he play for me, he don't charge very much. If he's not doing anything, not out of town, he'll come down here and play - because of the friendship thing.

Do the musicians realise the community service aspect of the set-up?

The musicians, yeah, they realise.

It's good to be seen.

Right. They want to be seen, and they want to be heard.

Have you had any feedback from them about you helping the blues in this way?

Oh yeah. All of them agree to that, all of them.

So do I.

I appreciate that too.