

SHAKE 'EM ON DOWN

By Chris Smith

One of the events I was looking forward to at the Knoxville Stomp in May 2016 was a screening of this documentary on Fred McDowell, introduced by Scott Baretta. As it turned out, I had to leave in time to catch my flight. The pressure of time turns out to be relevant in other ways; having been screened by PBS, the film is now available to view on-line at the url below, but – as also noted below – for a limited, albeit at present a fairly long period. The producers are in talks about a DVD with extras, and if it ever comes to pass, readers will need no urging from me to buy it.

That, I suppose, is a spoiler, since it gives away this review's conclusion – that 'Shake 'Em On Down' is a splendid account of McDowell's life, music, and cultural significance in both his community and the wider world. It naturally includes a great deal of invariably captivating music, although sadly there are no complete performances, presumably because of the expense that would entail. A cavalcade of thrilling moments begins about as well as it could, with the song which gave Fred the nickname his neighbours used, and the film its title; it's performed at Newport in 1964, with 'the cast', as Alan Lomax refers to them, proving his point about the blues being dance music. I've written elsewhere that when the needle goes down on a McDowell LP, or a CD slides into the player, it's always like hearing him for the first time. That goes double when the visual dimension is added.

Narration is supplied by a parade of talking heads, each adding relevant commentary or information to a largely chronological narrative, which also ably delineates the context of McDowell's music, from Gravel Springs house parties to Newport and the folk revival, and on to Europe and the British blues boom. All the interviewees – and this is not something one can often say – make worthwhile contributions, whether extensively or briefly, and whether they're remembering Fred as a recording artist, on stage in America and Europe, or (like R.L. Boyce and Esther Mae Wilburn) as a neighbour in Como.

Singling interviewees out unfortunately means omitting mention of others, but it's important to note the recollections of Bonnie Raitt, whose friendship with Fred was clearly one of the most significant personal, never mind musical, events of her life; of his manager Dick Waterman; and of Shirley Collins, who was there with Alan Lomax in 1959 when



Mississippi Fred McDowell, circa late 1960s. From the B&R Archive.

McDowell's amazing music was first recorded. Collins's memories of that revelation, and her delight when recalling it all these years later, are among the film's most stirring moments. On a less exalted plane, Val Wilmer's anecdote about what happened when Fred lost his bottleneck is also very cherishable.

Historical, cultural and musical commentary is supplied – again, alongside others whose names I regret having to omit – by David Evans, Bill Ferris, Tony Russell, and Dom Flemons. At this point, it's perhaps worth noting that Mick 'n' Keef, who would have got far too much interview space if this had been a BBC production, appear only in a clip, 'short, but nonetheless nauseating' (Michael Flanders), of the Stones committing indecent assault on 'You Got To Move.' Still, as Fred said, when presented with ten grand or so in publishing royalties by Chris Strachwitz, there are reasons to be 'glad them boys liked my music.'

If I have a small reservation, it's that the years before 1959 are dealt with rather briefly and generally. I realise that a lot had to be packed in to the film's 56 minutes, but viewers may get the impression that not much is known about that part of McDowell's life, whereas we know that before settling in Como in the 1950s, he spent several years in both Memphis and Hudsonville, north of Holly Springs, where Junior Kimbrough grew up. One wonders whether his combination of drone-based riffing and singing slide fitted seamlessly with the 'hill country blues' he encountered in Tate and Panola Counties, or came to dominate them by sheer authority and power. Probably a bit of both, I guess.

The important point is that 'Shake 'Em On Down' admirably conveys both the magnificence of Fred McDowell's music and the enthusiasm which it aroused in everyone who encountered both its sound and its maker. This review began with remarks about the pressure of time; I conclude it with the thought that 'time's winged chariot' only let the wider world encounter Fred McDowell in person for just over a decade, from 1961 (when 'Sounds Of The South' was released) to his death in 1972. When Shirley Collins and Alan Lomax met Fred, she'd recently been overwhelmed by the deep, archaic musics of Sid Hemphill, the Pratcher Brothers, and Ed and Lonnie Young, and was not in the mood for modern, familiar blues; but as she says towards the end of the film, 'Supposing I'd had my way, and said, "No, don't want to record Fred – don't want to record this young man; let's leave it as it is," what a poorer place the world would have been ... It was from his heart, wasn't it? His soul.'

Produced by Scott Baretta and Joe York; directed and edited by Joe York; streaming until 2nd March 2020 at: –
<http://www.pbs.org/video/reel-south-shake-em-down/>

MISSISSIPPI

FRED MCDOWELL

HALCYON PETERBOROUGH

SHAKE DOWN

MON 3RD MARCH

3rd March, 1969. Courtesy Gerard Homan and Shakedown Promotions.