The first of three articles by Gayle Dean Wardlow on his 1960s research into Robert Johnson, which provide the background to – and a preview of – the forthcoming book, ‘Up Jumped The Devil: The Real Life of Robert Johnson’, by Bruce Conforth and Gayle Dean Wardlow.

FIRST FAIR DEAL GON’ DOWN

Meridian, Mississippi, Spring 1961

“Anybody home?” I called out in my white southern accent as I banged on the front door of the old, wood-frame house. The old piano sat on a corner lot underneath two old water oaks whose branches protruded lazily over the old, rusting tin roof.

“Whatcha want?” an old black woman’s voice asked.

“Have you got any old Victrola records?” I asked. “You know, I buy them old blues records. The ones that played on them old windup machines.”

It was a sunny, spring afternoon in early 1961 and the temperature was nearing eighty degrees. I was searching for old 78 records in what white southerners called the ‘coloured quarters’ of my hometown. Over the past two months, I’d been pleasantly surprised to find that some people still had records from as far back as the 1920s.

I had turned to door knocking in the afternoons to occupy my time, trying to find my purpose in life. Records had been my best friends since I was a twelve-year-old, and I reached for them again like a drowning man grabbing at a raft of old tyres. I planned to trade any jazz 78s I found to a well-known California record dealer for records by Roy Acuff, the reigning king of country music. I had been unable to find many of his 1937-1940 releases.

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“I buy them old blues records like Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith and Leroy Carr.” I explained further. “I’d learned that the names of popular blues singers from the 1920s stirred memories. ‘I’ll pay 25 cents apiece for old records like them. Do you still have any?’

She paused for a few seconds, sizing me up before she responded.

“Old records, you say? Well, wait a minute – let me go look,” she said. “My older sisters left some old records here somewhere, if I can still find them.” As she turned around, she paused and asked. “You say you pay how much?”

I replied quickly: “At least a quarter or maybe 50 cents each. I could pay up to a dollar if a record is in real good shape. It depends on how good it still plays.”

I had quickly learned that elderly blacks were more comfortable if I waited on the porch for them to return, hopefully with some old jewels, so I never asked to come inside. Sometimes, they found ‘them thair old records’ inside an old windup Victrola and occasionally they brought out treasures long ago hidden away in some old wooden cheese crate they’d shoved under an old squeaky, iron bed.

Satisfied, the woman retreated inside and returned in a few minutes.

“Well, I found these two or three,” she said, smiling. “Don’t know what they are, but she played them all the time before she left here to live with her son in Chicago.”

The second record had a familiar blue and gold Vocalion label. I’d had plenty of those by great western swing bands recorded from 1936-40, by the likes of Bob Wills, the Blue Ridge Playboys, the Light Crust Doughboys and, especially, the Crystal Springs Ramblers, one of the bluesy western swing groups of that era.

I looked the label over closer. Robert Johnson. Who was he? I didn’t know anyone who had ever heard of the guy. One side was named ‘Last Fair Deal Gone Down’. The other side was ‘32-20 Blues’. It had to be about some kind of gun, but what kind? I’d heard of .38 and .45 calibre pistols and .50 calibre machine guns from reading World War Two histories, but I had no idea of what a 32-20 was.

I looked up at her, tried to smile and slowly said: “Yes Ma’am. I can pay you fifty cents for these two records. I don’t want the third one. They’re pretty well worn, and I don’t know how good they gonna play.”

She hesitated, and then refused. “Well, that ain’t much money and my son found them two records. I want more than fifty cents for them. I want a dollar for which ever one you want.”

What now? I took a chance on guys I never heard of? I was strapped for money as I made only $10 a week from my part-time sports writer job with the daily newspaper (Meridian Mirror and Batesville News). I wasn’t sure I really wanted either of them. “I won’t know if they’re any good until I play them,” I told her, to re-assure her of my $2 offer.

“Alright then, that’s a deal,” she said. “They don’t mean nothin’ to me anymore. Give me that for them.”

Thrilled that I’d found anything after two hours of door knocking, I tried houses further down the street, carrying the two records under my arm to show what I was buying when I made my pitch. No luck. I’d made my finds for the day.

I was learning that I was lucky to find even one house that still had records. Often, I only saw records made after World War II by Chubby Checker, Sun Records such as Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf. Rarely, did I find post-war and pre-war records together, probably because the style of blues music changed from acoustic to electric instruments after 1945.

After dinner, I retreated to my room and popped Tommy McClennan on my ancient old Newcomb 78 record player. The needle hit the first grooves and ‘Highway 51’ was pretty darn good.

“Highway 51 runs right by my baby’s door,” he began, describing the highway that ran from New Orleans through Mississippi towards Chicago. His singing style – he sounded halfway drunk – reminded me of Wolf’s records with the big, heavy dance rhythm. Obviously, he played with a steel bar. I wondered if he was playing the guitar on his lap, as I reminded me of the sound I got from my 1930s Dobro guitar that I played like an electric guitar. His instrument had a sizzling Hawaiian flavour that I couldn’t get enough of.

I laid the record aside and shuffled the Vocalion on the turntable, wondering what it would sound like. ‘Last Fair Deal Gone Down’ was pretty worm. The black woman’s sister must have really liked it ‘cause it had severely worn grooves. Out jumped a throbbing, acoustic guitar sound that I’d never heard by anyone from Elvis or Jimmy Reed, the two musicians I had known best from my high school days.

Moreover, this Johnson was playing a guitar differently and it didn’t sound like an electric guitar. His instrument had a sizzling Hawaiian flavour that reminded me of the sound from my 1930s Dobro guitar that I played with a steel bar. I wondered if he was playing the guitar on his lap, as I had no concept of bottleneck playing, a term I’d never heard of then. I only knew that steel guitar players used a round metal bar on strings that were three/eights of an inch off the fretboard.

And this Robert Johnson was doing something that made his bass strings sound much louder. I didn’t know what it was, but today musicians call his technique ‘damping’ – placing the palm against the strings to mute the response, to create a heavier dance rhythm. Obviously, he played with intense power, although his voice was not as strong as McClennan’s.

So, I thought: ‘Where’s this guy from?’ I had no concept of what music was native to my state besides Jimmie Rodgers, who was from Mississippi and was considered the father of country music. I had been unable to find many of his 1937-1940 records.

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“I’m working my way back home, good Lord, on that Gulfport Island Road,” he stressed. ‘Hey, I thought, that’s gonna be about Gulfport, a small Gulf of Mexico seaport near Biloxi, the most wide-open town in Mississippi. So, this guy had some connection to my state. I realised he was singing about a railroad, but I had never heard of the Gulfport Island Road. Only the Southern, Illinois Central and GM&O ran through the state.
GET IT OFF YOUR CHEST!

I enjoyed Otis Grand’s article in B&R 335 on B.B.’s ‘Blues Is King’, it was a well-made case but I also found it rather sad, for while I appreciate that it was written from a musician’s standpoint, it somehow typified a view of the blues that is all too common these days. Many listeners just seem to like the way the music sounds and are often obsessed with the guitar elements but take little notice of the singer and the content of the songs. My experience of black audiences does not concur with that of Otis. They certainly don’t ‘scream at everything’ and they rarely if ever applaud guitar solos in the manner of white crowds. For them the singer and the song are of paramount importance and when a verse or a line strikes a chord they respond because it usually represents a shared experience they can relate to.

Too many white listeners will not entertain black blues if it doesn’t feature traditional instrumentation andrecord that has modern electronic sounds and rhythms. However, here, mainly due to economics and changing fashions, is where the new songs can be found with singers performing numbers that actually mean something to their intended audience. Certainly, it is not always brilliant stuff but occasionally something surfaces that is so much better than what too often passes for blues these days.

To get that off my chest and I feel better already.

Dave Williams
Via email

CHUCK AT NEWPORT

I read with interest Howard Rye’s excellent review of the ‘Jazz On A Summer’s Day’ DVD in B&R 336. I was pleased to see ‘Long Distance Information’, my book about Chuck Berry’s music, still gets referred to after all these years, albeit to correct the mistaken identity of the clarinet player in Chuck’s support band.

In mitigation I’d say that a whole lot of water has drained from the swamp since the pre-internet days when I researched the book and the mistake had been spotted some time ago. The main purpose of this letter, however, is not to justify my error but to point any committed Berry fans to Dietmar Rudolph’s weblog ‘A Collector’s Guide To The Music Of Chuck Berry’ http://www.crft.de/ChuckBerry/, probably the best Berry website in the world. In it you can find an updated, searchable, database of all Chuck’s recordings, a whole raft of Long Distance Information updates plus lots, lots more. C’est la vie says this old folk, you know you never can tell what you’ll find.

Fred Rothwell
Norfolk

S H E L D O N STUDIOS IN 1958 CASH BOX

Further to Dietmar Rudolph’s fine article on Jack Wiener and Chicago’s Sheldon Studios in B&R 335, I was checking through some old Cash Box issues and found this interesting piece from their 15th March 1958 issue.

Also, I discovered this one sided Sheldon acetate by

Milburn, made for Ace Records in Jackson, Mississippi. Milburn had recorded it in Chicago circa 1959. This was issued in the U.K. on the Stompin’ CD ‘Sixties R’n’B/Blues/Soul Crossovers’ Stompin’ (E) CD ST 333.

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