



# 'Everyone Making Money But Me' Henry Townsend Interview



Henry Townsend, St. Louis, 1987. Photo: The Bill Greensmith Collection.

**H**enry Townsend was born in 1909 and died in 2006 aged 96. He was interviewed on 10th October 1993 for Art's radio programme 'Two For Blues', broadcast on WORT-FM in Madison, Wisconsin. Henry, was then aged 93. He was still sharp and was still playing the occasional gig around St. Louis at the time of the interview.

**AS:** One of the outstanding things about you is that you have had records issued in the last nine decades, that's more than any other bluesman or even non bluesman. That's some accomplishment. And you do it on both guitar and piano.

**HT:** That's the longest in the history of recording....

That's an amazing accomplishment. Why don't you tell me about when and where you were born?

I was born in 1909 in Shelby, Mississippi.

I understand you moved out at a very early age and headed to St. Louis. Why did that come about?

Well, my mama used to use snuff and I was about nine years old. I was going to blow some snuff into my cousin's eye, we was very young about nine years or ten years old and blow it into my daddy's eye, but it blew back into my eye. My daddy saw me and said I would 'get something later on' and I didn't want that! So I decided to get out.

**NB:** Bill Greensmith says Henry told him: 'I blowed snuff in my cousin's eyes and my daddy told me: 'Well, I gonna whip ya.' And he didn't get to me that minute, so I didn't give him no chance. I caught the train. I didn't

know where I was going – I didn't care. I knew I wasn't gonna stay there and get a whooping."

**How did you get to St. Louis – by train?**

Yeah, that was my first trip. I hoboed over here, I rode a train over here. As any lost feller would do I got off to wanderin', with nothing in mind and nothing in sight. I just came over to St. Louis alone. I didn't give it much of a thought.

**How did you survive those early years?**

Well, I was running around. I happened to locate the neighbourhood I was supposed to be in. It was a downtown place and it wasn't too hard. You could pick up a few dimes, there was always something, some errand somebody wanted you to do. Of course I didn't have a station there or a place to stay, it was kind of like an overnight thing. Back then there was real courtesy toward kids and I got help in a lot of ways. I thought I was more or less independent, but now that I understand it I wasn't so independent. In my mind I was but I was gettin' help in a number of ways.

**Tell me about when you first picked up a guitar?**

Well I don't remember too much, I can give you what I remember. There was this youngster when I first come up in Illinois from the south – his name was David Perchfield – he was playing good guitar at the time. He was one of the people that made me. He made me push more forward.

My father played an accordion he had a buddy who played guitar – that was my first desire to play a guitar. Those sounds just took me away, the guitar sound did. I promised myself I was gonna play one when I come to St. Louis, when I could get hold of a guitar. The first one I got I guess I was too anxious. I faulted the guitar, not me for not playing for me and I stupidly busted that up! It wasn't long before I got that replaced. I went from there, started up with musicians, those who would accept me.

**Who would you say were your big early influences?**

Well there was two or three people, I could say there one who took me under his wing and help me out – we called him Dudlow Joe – Harry was his first name. He walked me through a few things he knew and I was still associated with with David Perchfield. The other was Son Ryan, he was a strong guitar player, but he never recorded.

**NB:** According to Little Brother Montgomery and Willie Dixon, 'Dudlow Joe' was a term used for Boogie Woogie in Mississippi. In 'Deep South Piano: The Story of Little Brother Montgomery' (1970, Studio Vista), Karl Geir zur Heide wrote that Little Brother Montgomery stated: 'We were playing all those kind of basses down there, way before ever it came out on records. I used to only play a walking bass with one finger then, but after I got up around twelve, fourteen could double up and play with all of my



Henry Townsend and Roosevelt Sykes, circa 1970. From the Bill Greensmith Collection.



hand. We called it Dudlow Joe." Karl Gert zur Heide writes that Willie Dixon stated: "They used to call boogie piano Dudlow Joe in Mississippi. I didn't hear it called boogie till long after. If a guy played boogie piano they'd say he was a Dudlow player."

**Were there any artists out there who were famous that you considered you copied yourself on?**

Well yeah, Lonnie Johnson was out there when I got started. He and his brother James – we called him James Steadyroll. They lived in the St. Louis area. They was the strongest and after they recorded, they, well that was it, they kinda took over in that field.

**When did you start playing the piano and who gave you tips on that?**

At that time I met Roosevelt Sykes, he and I worked together. He was from St. Louis also and he had made that number 'The 44', which had put him on top. I didn't work with him on that as I didn't work on that recording session, but I was working with him locally with him at all times.

We made an agreement that we would teach one another. I taught him guitar, he recorded with the guitar, and I recorded with the piano, before we got separated.

**You did a lot more piano than he did guitar over the years...**

Yes I would have to admit that I did a lot more guitar than I did piano. He kinda gave up on guitar but he could play guitar pretty well.

**When did you become a professional?**

Oh I really don't know, I was just following through with it and doing what I could do. Locally here some guy from Columbia Records was looking for musicians and I was fortunate to be picked out of a dozen or so. I forgot his name...

*NB: The person referred to, according to Bill GreenSmith's biography of Henry, was: "Sam Wolff, a Jewish fellow with a record store at 1319 Biddle Street, and he was the person responsible for me recording for Columbia Records."*

**Can you tell me about that first session you recorded for Columbia – in Chicago in 1929?**

That was at 666 Lake Shore Drive in Chicago. That was my first recording of course. I was like any other guy who went into a studio and had never been in a studio. I was shaking and nervous and all of that – I did what I could do – nervous as I was. They thought enough of it to release it. It must have done fairly well....

*NB: This was the original address for the Merchandise Mart in Chicago. At the time of its opening, it was the largest building in the world with four million square feet.*

*Although the Merchandise Mart didn't officially open for business until 1930, recording studios on the 21st floor of this building opened in October 1929. Henry recorded a four song session there November 15th 1929.*

The address, 666 may have significance due to its biblical reference as the 'number of the Beast' in the book of Revelations, chapter 13. Recording in a brand new studio in the high up (for the era) world's largest building must have left a lasting impression on Henry to remember this detail after all of those years.

**Did you recall hearing it around St. Louis?**

Oh yeah. That was one of the problems – if I had just known what to do to get a fair deal it would have been better for me but I didn't and I went on through life doing such things you know. Everyone making money but me. I didn't get an education – that was one of the major things.

**You went on to record for Paramount in 1931 here in Wisconsin. My understanding is that there was doubt if it got released or not. But then they found it back in 1995 ('Doctor Oh Doctor'/'Jack Of Diamonds Georgia Rub', Paramount 13097). I saw a picture of you with it.**

I don't know how it come about but they found a copy! But one of my records was released under Henry Thomas's name. 'Sick With The Blues' is its title – that's mine. The other side was by Walter Davis. (Bluebird 5411). I don't know why they did that.

**There was another artist - Henry Thomas. Why did they change the name - were they trying to fool the music listeners...?**

I knew Henry Thomas, I really don't know the reason why they were released as by Henry Thomas - all I know there was something wrong when I saw the label.

*NB: These are two other sides cut for Bluebird by Henry Thomas, released in December 1933.*

**You backed a lot of people, like Walter Davis, you made every recording with him.**

He done pretty well with the piano, he earned what he got – he did learn to be a good piano player. I gave Walter his start. I was on almost on every recording he made. A lot of people thought I started with Walter. He done pretty well. He was playing a lot like me and Roosevelt you know and I told him: "No you don't do that – now that you know your piano you should do what you can do for your own self." Same thing that I had to do with my own self. I used to be like Lonnie Johnson.

**Walter Davis – I noticed that on his first recordings Roosevelt was the piano player.**

Yes, Roosevelt played in these recordings because Walter could not play the piano at all at that time.

*NB: The first and second Walter Davis sessions for Victor in 1930 and 1931 have Roosevelt Sykes on piano and Henry played guitar on the 1931 session. Davis played piano himself from from his Victor session in February 1935. Henry appears on guitar on a number of Davis sides cut for Bluebird.*



From the Bill GreenSmith Collection and B&R Archive.

**I read in the book you did with Bill GreenSmith that Walter didn't do any performing to speak of.**

No he didn't. Maybe that was one of the reasons he is not as well known. I don't know...

**There is an interesting story in the book where you and Walter were travelling around in the south and met somebody who claimed to be you. Did you go and introduce yourself?**

No, no....!

**You mention Roosevelt Sykes, you recorded with him and did some performing with him over the years?**

Yeah, I performed a whole lot with him. I didn't go too much on his gigs outside (St. Louis). A few before he got real famous. Went to Memphis a couple of times. But after he got his band together I just didn't feel up to that travel too much. Travelling was pretty rough. So I didn't travel too much at that time. I was doing pretty well, so I just stayed on in St. Louis.

**You also recorded with the Sparks Brothers.**

That was one of the greatest tragedies that happened to me. I recorded with the Sparks brothers – I recorded with Aaron, he done a song from me, 'Everyday I Have The Blues' – Aaron sung that song and like I said, knowing nothing how to hold things or tighten up on things – it got away from me. My name should be on that original label. But I can't find that anymore. I played for him on the original recording.

*NB: Henry played guitar on Aaron Sparks' (as Pinetop Sparks) Bluebird session on 28th July 1935 and on Milton Sparks' session for the label on the same day.*

*It is important to note that Henry claims to have written the song and played on it. His song writing credits would have earned him a lot of money given all the artists over the years who have recorded versions of this blues standard.*

**Just think if you had the money B. B. King got for that or whoever did get credit for that.**

No, B. B. – he done something but – he probably got something for performing that, but it wasn't his. Memphis Slim claimed it. He's the one that got the credit for that.





Tommy Bankhead and Henry Townsend at the Technisonic Studios, St. Louis, 1960. Photo: Charlie O'Brien. From the Bill Greensmith Collection.

Another person you did some recording with was Big Joe Williams for Bluebird...

'Baby Please Don't Go', he and I are both on that. He and I used to play and swap verses. I helped write it but didn't get credit for that. I was there - I kinda composed that before we went in. Big Joe couldn't read, so we couldn't write it down, but he had a good memory. We did that about 50-50 with that.

NB: Big Joe Williams recorded with Henry in February 1935 for Bluebird. Williams first recorded 'Baby Please Don't Go' on 31st October 1935, but 'Blues & Gospel Records' does not list Henry on guitar and there is only one guitar on the record. However, Henry may have been involved in the song's composition and he did record with Big Joe.

Sonny Boy Williamson was another guy you recorded with?

Yeah, I did some stuff with him - John Lee Williamson and Robert Nighthawk. He was in the session when we did that 'Everyday I Have The Blues'. He was Robert Nighthawk, he was Nighthawk ever since I have known him ....

When you listen to early Nighthawk he doesn't play that slide - he does more finger pickin'.

Yeah he does more finger pickin' on the bass part of the guitar. He could play a little slide all the time. But he didn't think his slide was perfected enough. But when he settled himself down in Chicago he had met somebody he had known in the south - in Clarksdale - Muddy Waters. He kind of schooled Muddy Waters [in guitar playing]. I don't know how much he learned but I know he got some schoolin' from him.

I'd like to talk about some St. Louis artists. One thing I noticed is St. Louis is more well known for its piano players than its guitar players. Why do you think that is?

Well, I don't know but you're right the way things is. You know years ago the piano was the most effective because way back the average person didn't hardly know anything about an amplifier. And that piano could be heard. And we used to do things like put that piano on a truck and haul it around.

Roosevelt Sykes, Henry Brown and so on we get on up and that was advertising. Some guys participated - like Rogers, he was a trombone player. The guitar was too weak to carry too far. I guess that was why - maybe it had nothing to do with it.

Henry Spaulding did a song called 'Cairo Blues' (recorded for Brunswick in May 1929) and you kinda took over that song. Your version of it is pretty darn good.

Well, that's his song. It's crazy, it's done different each time I recorded it. All I know is I hear the sound and I go with it.

Tell me about Charly Jordan...

He was in my opinion a good guitar player. He played a little different style. He went with Peetie Wheatstraw. He was a piano man, he was both, he was a guitar player. He was very famous around the St. Louis area.

How about St. Louis Jimmy - Jimmy Oden and Speckled Red?

While he was in St. Louis he and I worked together, but his fame wasn't all that great. He left here because he was in a little trouble. He was working for some guy and what happened he left here because he took some guy's stuff without consent. He made that 'Goin' Down Slow'.

Speckled Red - I didn't associate with him too much. One number that he made was 'The Dirty Dozens'. Henry Brown was another piano player. Brown and I done something for Michael Stewart for Adelphi.

NB: The album, 'Henry T. Music Man', was recorded in 1974 for Adelphi with Stewart as 'Backwards Sam Firk'.

J.D. Short - I understand you didn't get on with him so well.

J.D. Short, I never did understand his moody ways. I never did see the reason why the way he felt about me. He stabbed me a couple of times. I ended up in hospital for a week.

NB: Henry got revenge on J.D. Short. He shot him in the groin and left St. Louis for a while. The full story of the relationship with J.D. Short is told in Bill Greensmith's biography of Henry, 'A Blues Life', page 47.

Art then tells Henry about the UK Catfish CD, 'Henry's Worry Blues', by Henry Townsend and Friends (issued in 2000) on which J.D. Short is one of his 'friends', much to their amusement.

You went in the army during World War Two, but I understand that you didn't last too long.

No I didn't last too long. I didn't have the need to last too long!

After that you moved to Chicago and played on Maxwell Street.

Well it was pretty good. When ran low on money you could do that, pick up a couple of dollars. Course when I went there John Lee (Sonny Boy Williamson) was there and he knew all kind of things. So when I went there I was short of money so he told me 'Cmon let's go there', so we did and it was easy pickings and at that time you could get three or four dollars pick up on the street, on the street corner.

I understand you used to have competitions against each other.

Yep, the old time bands used to do that. I played a competition against one of them old fiddle guys, I don't know his name. Everybody would come along - the big guys were already there.

Art asks Henry did he play with Robert Johnson.

Henry says he did play with Johnson at a 'speakeasy' or a 'house'. Bill Greensmith identifies the house as Ernest Walker's, 1118 Jefferson, St. Louis, sometime in 1935.

When did you move back to St. Louis?

Well I was there about 1945. I stayed in Chicago about a month. I was always in and out of Chicago, I never called it my hometown. I was working a day job. I opened a little ole business and that was my day job.

In the late 1940s you recorded a bunch of things for the Bullet label with St. Louis Jimmy, Roosevelt Sykes and Walter Davis - do you remember much about that?

Well, I don't remember too much about them. I remember I recorded with Sykes on 'Candy Man Blues', I recorded with him. St. Louis Jimmy, they gave him a claim on one of my records. I don't know the song.

NB: The song cut with Sykes was 'My Sweet Candy' for Bluebird, from 1933. The Bullet sides were cut in 1948/1949. Bill Greensmith says the song referred to is 'Now I'm Through', which was cut by Henry Townsend (vcl/gtr) was issued as by St. Louis Jimmy, (Bullet 291), and recorded in Nashville, 1949.

You recorded with Walter Davis on his last recording session, 'Tears Come Falling Down' (RCA Victor 1952).

Yes, that was my song. I got credits with that, I got copyright on that. I didn't cut anything where I was the leader.

How did you connect with Sam Charters and do your first LP? That one you did with Tommy.

I don't know - they come looking for me! Bankhead played bass on that record.

NB: 'Tired Of Being Mistreated' (Bluesville BV/BVLP 1041) - recorded in 1961.

You recorded with your wife Vernell on later recordings.

Yep I did vocals and guitar with her. We played everywhere together - she was a professional vocalist. All over Europe - everywhere.

I was listening to the album you did for APO ('My Story' issued in 2001). You sound like you almost get better.

Well if you work often enough it's just like a practice I guess.

Well I have caught you every year at the Chicago Blues Festival - last time I saw you played piano.

Well I switched over to piano, much easier to play piano. I use a guy called Ron Edwards on slide and he does a lot of that stuff, he works pretty good. That's why I don't play too much guitar. But I have to do the guitar for people who come to hear me.

I noticed you are getting recognition with a star on the St. Louis Walk of Fame in 1995.

Well it makes me think that my efforts are not in vain. It means I just didn't come on the scene. I still perform and I have been to Europe. I turn down a few 'out of states', I don't travel by myself now, I like to have somebody with me.

Henry Townsend continued to perform for three years following this interview. His last recording session was 'Last Of The Great Mississippi Delta Bluesmen: Live in Dallas' for the Blue Shoe Project. Henry died just hours after being the first person to receive a 'Key' at Grafton, Wisconsin's Paramount Plaza Walk of Fame at age 96. He was scheduled to perform at a blues festival in Grafton that weekend. At the time of his award, he was the only surviving blues performer who recorded for Paramount.

Further Reading:

Bill Greensmith: 'Henry Townsend - A Blues Life' University of Illinois Press 1999.

Bill Greensmith: 'Henry Townsend Paramount Discovered', B&R 98.

Bill Greensmith: 'Henry Townsend Honoured' (St. Louis Walk of Fame Star), B&R 103.

Neil Slaven 'The Sound Of That Guitar...Just Penetrated Me Like A Bullet' Henry Townsend biography review/feature, B&R 146.

Alex van der Tuuk: Henry Townsend On Paramount, B&R 213.

Ray Templeton: Henry Townsend Obituary, B&R 214.

Transcribed and edited by Tony Burke. Notes and additional information by Bill Greensmith and Art Schuna.