Audiotape Log

Accession number: ???????????

Researcher's name: Justin Wallace

Event: Interview with Herbert R. Wiley

Place: 1101 Jackson Ave., Oxford, MS

Date: May 23, 2007

Co-workers present: Mark Coltrane, Miranda Cully

The following is a catalog of a tape-recorded interview with 64-year-old Herbert R. Wiley at the Parish Baker Pub at 1101 Jackson Ave., Oxford, MS. The interview mainly concerns Mr. Wiley's background in music, though much information regarding his life in and around Oxford in other regards is given.

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• Mr. Wiley was born on Jackson Avenue in 1942. His parents are Edna and William Russell (WR) Wiley. They lived in a duplex owned by W.R. Bowles, next door to Mr. Bowles' son. Mr. Bowles raised W.R. Wiley.

• Siblings: 1 brother, 3 sisters. 1 sister is still living. William Rodney Wiley is a research scientist in Washington (died 1996). Barbara Wiley taught Mr. Wiley in school (Oxford Training School).

• Mr. Wiley and his siblings all attended Oxford Training School (now Oxford Elementary). [aspects of education at that time, such as pre-primer, are discussed]

• Russell Wiley grew up on the Wiley Farm, and began working for an Icehouse at an early age. [Mr. Wiley reads some brief excerpts from a typewritten article on his father and grandfather] At age 9, he began working at W.R. Bowles Shoe Repair in Oxford. W.R. Bowles taught Russell Wiley his trade, and he took over the shoe shop after him. Eventually, Mr. Wiley took over the shop, in 1969.

• Mr. Wiley's first experiences in music were at age 12, when he was living in Freedman's Town (now Martin Luther King Drive). [Herbert drops his papers, and stops to pick them up] Mr. Wiley remembers learning how to make a diddley-bow, and describes how it was played.
At age 14, Herbert got his first guitar. At age 15, he saved his money and bought a Silvertone steel-stringed guitar. [talks about teaching himself guitar, tuning, and chords, and mentions some names of musicians at that time]

[lots of squeaking from the back door, where some bar workers kept passing through during this point]

Herbert’s family had a history of music, including his grandfather (who owned a barbershop next door), father, and sister. His grandfather, Rufus Threikeld, sang with a barbershop quartet. His father sang tenor, and his sister (Barbara) sang with the Rust College a capella Choir. His sister was the only one who read music.

Herbert took music at Rust College, and learned trumpet. He also learned some piano at that time, and sang in the school choir.

Mr. Wiley’s grandfather did not approve of the blues [Herbert talks about church music vs. blues at that time] The same grandfather had partly founded the first African-American church in Oxford (Belfret Church?) in 1867. [more information about church music at that time, with a demonstration] That church has since moved and is called Burns United Methodist Church; Mr. Wiley is still a member.

[ELAPSED TIME: 20 MIN.]

[interviewer lost his place, and Mr. Wiley mentions that we’ve gotten off-subject]

Mr. Wiley’s first memories of performing music were in a band he and a cousin organized when they were in high school. [talks about instrumentation and songs, with a demonstration, and performances]

Mr. Wiley’s first professional performances were after his high school graduation in 1962. He went to school in Tuskegee for a year, but didn’t stay. A year later, he formed a group called “Little Henry and the House Rockers,” in which he played drums. At that time, they started playing at juke joints in the Oxford area. [short explanation of Oxford Training School’s name change] In 1963, he and the band director started a group called “Wiley and the Checkmates,” (a different band). Their first performance was at the high school prom that year. This group played in locales such as Batesville and Tupelo. [explanation of a term, ‘hamburger money’]

[ELAPSED TIME: 30 MIN.]
[sound of a car alarm in the background]

- Herbert quit going on the road in 1970, after he had his first daughter (his second child of four). In 1966, he had gotten married to Lena Washington. Since that time, they have gotten divorced, but are good friends. [more information about his ex-wife]
- Children: Herbert Jr. (drummer), Kimberly (took piano lessons, but wouldn’t cut her fingernails, and sings), Damon (guitarist), Brandy (pianist). [more information about church music vs. blues]

[ELAPSED TIME: 40 MIN.]

[started to talk about how “Wiley and the Checkmates” got started again, but ran out of tape]

[END OF SIDE ONE, INTERVIEW CONTINUED ON SIDE TWO]

[the interview does not continue at the very beginning of side two. Fast forward until voices are heard (3-4 mins.)]

- Herbert and the owner of Longshots (George) re-organized “Wiley and the Checkmates” after Mr. Wiley was overheard playing bass in his shoe repair shop in 2000. [lengthy story relating this information]

[loud voices as a couple of guys walk into the bar, bar owner tells them they are closed, and they leave]

- Herbert remembers how he met the members of the band and what kinds of music they played. They produced their first CD shortly thereafter.

- In 2002, Parish bought the front part of the shoe repair shop to open a bar. In 2003, Mr. Wiley sold the entire property to Mr. Parish.

[ELAPSED TIME: 50 MIN.]

- “Wiley and the Checkmates” plays soul, essential blues, and rhythm and blues. [explanation of the different genres and examples given, Mr. Wiley taps his foot] They also play several ballads and other original songs. [singing demonstrations, and names of his co-compositions given]

- “It’s gonna come back,” Mr. Wiley says, talking about soul music and the scene today, “It’ll never die.”

[sound of siren testing outside]
• “Wiley and the Checkmates” have played nearly every bar in town, as well as in New Orleans (LA), Tuscaloosa (AL), Little Rock (AR), and other places.

[ELAPSED TIME: 60 MIN.]

• Very few bands are playing the types of music “Wiley and the Checkmates” are, today. [Wiley talks about the instrumentation of other bands, synthesizers, etc.]

• Mr. Wiley thinks that Oxford is a musical town, and attracts many big names. He compares the atmosphere of Oxford to that of New Orleans. [Wiley also talks about the recording studios in town]

• “I don’t care what nobody say, I think the roots of music came from New Orleans and Mississippi.” [Mr. Wiley talks about music in the South, different genres, and common misconceptions of origin]

[interviewer asks for questions from co-workers, and Mark asks some questions]

• Mr. Wiley continues a tradition of past musicians with showy clothing. He remembers that pimps used to dress in fancy clothes, and he tried to add this look to his show. “You can... have one of the best voices in the world [but] if you don’t have any showmanship, you’re just standin’ there.” [he talks about other musicians famous for their showmanship]

• Most of the members of Mr. Wiley’s original group are dead, now. Herbert keeps in touch with some of them, and only two (including himself) are still playing professionally. [Mr. Wiley talks a little about playing at fraternity houses on the University of Mississippi campus, Dr. Khayat (chancellor), a couple of injuries while dancing on stage, etc.]

[ELAPSED TIME: 70 MIN.]

• The bar, Longshot, is being closed down, a development which has caused Mr. Wiley a good bit of sadness. [Mr. Wiley talks about his last performance at Longshots]

[interviewer asks Mr. Wiley if there’s anything he would like to add, Mr. Wiley tells us to buy his new CD when it comes out, and gives some information about it]

• “Well, I hope you guys got something outta this.”

[interviewer gives closing statement]

[END OF INTERVIEW]