Field Notes for Herbert Wiley Interview, May 23, 2007

Conducted at Parrish Baker Pub, Oxford, Mississippi

11:00 am - 12:30 pm (time approx.)

Interviewer: Justin Wallace

Sound Engineer: Miranda Cully

Observer: Mark Coltrain

As I arrived on the Square in Oxford, Mississippi this warm, hazy May morning, close to the lunch hour, I was surprised at how easily I found a parking spot—right across the street from Parrish's. I got out of my car with notebook and pen in hand and walked across the street to where Miranda and Justin were waiting on the bench that sits in between Parrish's and the now defunct Longshot bar. We greet one another and attempted to enter the front door of Parrish's. It was locked. I had just seen a blonde girl exiting a side door of the pub so we tried it and found that it opened to an empty bar where the bartender and cook were getting ready for another business day, mopping floors, wiping down tables, stocking booze and food for the lunch and afternoon crowd. We introduced ourselves, told the apparent head honcho why we were there, and asked if Mr. Wiley had informed him about our interview. Indeed he had. The fellow, whose name I forget, was very cordial and bade us sit down and offered us a drink. We all declined, content to sit and wait for Mr. Wiley's arrival.

Parrish's is about what you'd expect from a college town bar with a little bit of a unique quirkiness about its walls. It is a long and narrow establishment with a front bar and back bar. There are two entrances/exits: one in the front and one in the back for easier access, I suppose. There is a television in front and back up overlooking the bar. Many bottles of liquor line the shelves behind each bar—though the front has more than back bar. And around the front bar, on a shelf inches from the ceiling, Parrish's fairly extensive for here bottled beer selection lines the wood. Bathrooms are situated in the middle between back and front bar. Aside from bar space a few tables and chairs pepper the establishment. And supposedly, there is never a cover charge, despite live music, to enter here.

A few minutes later Mr. Wiley strolled in casually, greeting the bartenders. We all introduced ourselves and went into the back room where Mr. Wiley wanted to do the interview. It took Miranda a few minutes to set up, so we all four chatted while she did. Mr. Wiley walked back to the front to get a drink, some red tinted liquid in a rocks glass. Thankfully, the bartender and cook had finished setting up the back bar where we were getting situated and at the moment were up front. An air
conditioner hummed consistently in the background. Miranda commented that it might present a problem but once we were set up, it really didn't seem to.

Miranda, Justin, and Mr. Wiley all sat at a small table, next to a curtained window. Miranda sat across from Mr. Wiley and Justin sat diagonally to Mr. Wiley's left. Mr. Wiley swiveled slightly to face Justin but was still within microphone range. I sat at a table behind (or across from or next to, depending on how you look at the room) the trio so I could observe officially.

Once we got our sound levels all checked, Justin began the interview. We spent a lot of initial time on Mr. Wiley's early life in and around Oxford and LaFayette County. And the distractions began. I was initially worried about conducting our interview in a bar (and former shoe repair shop that once belonged to Mr. Wiley) and my worries sort of came to pass. We had bartender and cook back and forth because the kitchen with squeaky door was located in back bar. We had car alarms, Oxford's annual Wednesday noon tornado siren test, noisy customers wandering in and around, noise of conversation, television, deliveries, and general banter drifting back from up front, and of course, still the persistent hum of the air conditioner. The distractions weren't horrible. They didn't make the environment unworkable, but they were noticeable and aggravating nonetheless.

As I mentioned, Justin first focused on Mr. Wiley's early life, family, education, and they gradually moved towards later life up to present day and his resurgence with the current incarnation (in name only) of Wiley's 1960's soul band, The Checkmates. Justin's technique was very methodical and detailed. He often stopped Mr. Wiley to ask for exact names and dates and correct spellings. I thought the technique very effective.

Things were winding down as we moved towards the 12:30 pm hour. I asked an additional few questions about Mr. Wiley's flamboyant performance outfits and about any future recording projects and that pretty much wrapped things up. The interview ended, Miranda and Justin broke things down and Mr. Wiley led me up front to show a framed, red-tinted 45 rpm record along with its sleeve that he had recorded a few years prior. We chatted with the bartender and a few customers who had drifted in during the last few minutes. We walked back towards the back bar and encountered Justin with the consent form.

Mr. Wiley sat down to look it over and hopefully sign. I checked the clock and realized I had to run, so after thanking Mr. Wiley and the bartenders, I quit the scene pretty fast.

Considering all the distractions, I thought the interview went very well. I mentioned to Justin later, that I was biting my tongue because being the music geek that I am, I really wanted to jump in at certain points during the interview but
he got a lot of useful information out of a walking, talking resource. All in all, a Wednesday morning well spent.