Southern Sound And Space: An Exploration Of The Sonic Manifestation Of Place

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SOUTHERN SPACE AND SOUND: AN EXPLORATION OF THE SONIC MANIFESTATION OF PLACE

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Southern Studies
The University of Mississippi

by

CHRISTOPHER J. COLBECK

August 2016
ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the relationships between sound and space, sound and time, and the influence of “place,” particularly southern places, on the creative process of contemporary musicians. The work also investigates the possibility of a common southern sound or auditory essence which may be embedded within all of the musical genres popularly thought to owe their lineage to the American South. The project is documentary in nature with the written component explaining the scholarship and methodology guiding the accompanying film. At the heart of the work are interviews with eleven contemporary musicians and three scholars of southern culture and history. While the interviews did not articulate the existence of an essential sound transcending southern musical forms, the conversations did reveal expanded conceptions of “place” and multiple interpretations of its role in sonic creations.
**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<td>BF</td>
<td>Bill Frisell</td>
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<td>Chris Colbeck</td>
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is difficult to express how grateful I am to the Center for the Study of Southern Culture. The opportunity to go back to school during my middle years was truly a unique gift, one I do not take lightly, and one for which I will forever be indebted to the Center and the University of Mississippi. Thank you Dr. Ownby, both as a teacher and for the quiet leadership that has created an environment in Barnard where the faculty’s ability to intellectually challenge students is matched only by their collective kindness and generosity of spirit. Thank you Dr. McKee for your extraordinary gifts in the classroom and your tireless effort to keep me and my classmates headed in the right direction. Thank you Dr. Gussow for helping me understand there is more to music than just sound and the scholarly pursuit of all that is involved in its creation is a rewarding endeavor. Thank you Dr. Harper for your patience in seeing this project through, your friendship, and for teaching me the value of capturing people’s stories in pictures and sound. Thank you Dr. Wharton, Dr. Delerme, Dr. Grem, Jimmy Thomas, and Becca Walton for being great bosses the last two years. Thank you to all of the donors whose contributions fund the Center and its graduate students. Thank you to the musicians and scholars who lent their insights to this project especially Charles Reagan Wilson. Finally, thank you to the Center for the Study of Southern Culture for more than an education, but for giving me the tools to more deeply appreciate the things in life I already loved, great books, music and history and the perspective to understand how they all intersect to shape and inform our world.
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VITA .................................................................................................................................. 90
In 1996, music producer Daniel Lanois received some vague, but not exactly ambiguous marching orders from Bob Dylan. The two had been discussing plans for Dylan’s next album which was slated to begin recording the following year. Lanois recalled in his 2010 memoir, he left the meeting with “inspiration and a list of records.” The inspiration came from recent lyrics penned by Dylan and shared with the eager producer. The list, including recordings by Charlie Patton, Little Walter and Arthur Alexander, was to be used as reference points. But what exactly was Dylan referencing? Surely it was not song structure for Dylan had traded in the blues idiom countless times before nor could it be a desire to recreate the technology used to capture these artists decades earlier. Instead, Dylan was trying to communicate an intangible and indefinable quality, a certain sonic texture and feel that defied easy articulation. Lanois, who had spent his life chasing sounds for music’s biggest artists, “listened to these records and understood” (Lanois 145). What Lanois took away was a sense of a certain sound rooted in the American South, a sound the producer had already tried to conjure years before when he moved his recording operation to New Orleans “where the neighborhood is the teacher of music and tradition” (Lanois 97).

Lanois purposefully slotted the subsequent Dylan sessions with musicians owning strong southern musical roots. Memphian Jim Dickinson and Texas native Augie Meyers played
keyboards. The Shreveport son of a baptist preacher, Brian Blade, contributed on drums and Dylan’s longtime bass player and bandleader, Tony Garnier, possessed a musical lineage that led straight to the doors of Preservation Hall. Nearly every genre of music with origins conventionally attributed to the South was represented in the carefully constructed group. The resulting record, *Time Out Of Mind*, went on to win the 1998 Grammy Award for album of the year and reasserted Dylan’s relevance in contemporary popular music. What is most interesting about the process was Lanios and Dylan’s kind of shorthand for understanding a desired sonic “feel” and their belief this feel came from the American South. Equally fascinating was the producer’s attempt to access or channel this vibe by hiring diverse musicians with an assumed shared cultural background. To further add to the intrigue, this marked the beginning of Dylan’s appropriation of Hank Williams’s aesthetic, donning western suits, string ties and cowboy hats while touring in support of the record. Was the aging songwriter trying to further tap into a source of authenticity by replicating the look of the mysterious and tragic figure of rural southern legend? Trying to make sense of Bob Dylan may prove futile, but as is often the case with his life and music, they can inspire some worthwhile inquiries. As a lifelong appreciator of music, a true believer in the uniqueness of southern music, and a fledgling scholar of the ever-complicated idea of the American South, I wanted the challenge of trying to articulate the intangible quality that even one of the greatest wordsmiths could only describe through sound. I wanted to put words to Dylan and Lanois’s shorthand.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: SOUTHERN SPACE AND SOUND

While the nuts and bolts of this project began during my time at the University, the earliest origins of the work go back to Baltimore nearly thirty-five years. As I spent the last year interviewing musicians about ideas of “place,” I recognized my own good fortune in being raised in a place with a local independent record shop just a short bicycle ride away from my parents’ home. The people who worked there not only lived for music, but were happy to spark a similar passion in a young kid by steering him to “the good stuff” in the used album bin. The second record I ever purchased was an off label “best of” collection by Otis Redding. I remember dropping the needle of my Sears stereo and hearing the opening staccato notes of Steve Cropper’s guitar, Otis’s voice vibrating and quietly calling, “these arms of miiinnne,” followed by the rhythm section, and finally answered by the horns. To my young ears, something was just different about this music. It was unlike any of the (now considered classic) rock and new wave songs that blasted from the older kids’ oversized speakers on our street. This music simply made me feel differently. It is a record I still own and it still makes me feel the same way today. Little did I know decades later, I would be sitting in the living room of Wayne Jackson, one of the architects of that very sound, asking if he could help me understand why I felt that way and what did Memphis have to do with it all.
The project began to take shape in earnest as part of my 602 seminar paper with hopes it could become a chapter in my final thesis. I began to think of the relationship between sound and place, sound and time, and how it all might relate to my own imagined essence or “feeling” of certain music across genres originating in South. I had spent a previous semester studying southern musical biographies and recalled the abundance of allusions to natural sounds that seemed to hold some power in many of their early life stories. With my first semester in graduate school dismantling most notions of what the South may even be, I also ventured to explore how and if southern spaces still had meaning in contemporary artists’ creative process. I wanted desperately to find a way to connect all of these factors; sound, place, feel, biography, and determine if any of it mattered to today’s musicians. The resulting seminar paper began with an admittedly ambitious set of guiding questions. First, is it possible to deconstruct music and extract some common auditory essence that transcends the multitude of genres owing their lineage to the American South? Is there a shared southern vernacular or dialect embedded in blues, jazz, country, soul, gospel, and rock ‘n’ roll that runs deeper than communal harmonic progressions or melodic scales and ideas? And, if such a fundamental spirit does indeed exist in all southern music, how do we define it? How was it informed by the South as a specific region? How did the history, geography, and landscapes of the South as “place” influence the creative production of these musical forms? And finally, do these southern places still influence artist who are either by birth or choice deeply invested in them? In short, how did sound and place intersect to inspire something that we may think of as an essential southern sound. The process to attempt to answer these inquiries was anything but straightforward.

I started with a return to those southern musical biographies and added others along the way. I mined them for references to the actual sound of southern home places and any
descriptions of possible connected inspiration. There was a surprising amount of evidence suggesting both place and sound influenced the earliest innovators in nearly all the genres the South claims as offspring. The biographies take the ears of readers to the sound of “whippoorwills,” “hoot owls” and “night birds” filling the air of Loretta Lynn’s Butcher Holler (Lynn 4) and Ralph Stanley’s Smith Ridge (Stanley 2). They also take readers to Florence, Alabama and a “pastoral melody” sung by birds and bullfrogs in what W.C. Handy called “nature’s symphony” (Handy 14) and to the “mockingbirds” and sounds of a “hoe” interrupting the “rhythmic silence” of Sam Phillips’s family cotton field (Guralnick, 3). Follow the biographies further South to Lettsworth, Louisiana and Buddy Guy can tell you the “different melodies made by different birds” (Guy 8). Head back up north to just outside of Brownsville, Tennessee and Yank Rachell spoke of “old wren birds” mocking him as he rested from the afternoon heat (Congress 9). The sounds did not end with simply the natural. Biographies of Jelly Roll Morton, Louis Armstrong, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Elvis Presley are rife with sonic descriptions of places like the sporting houses of the Tenderloin District and the Funky Butt in New Orleans to Haney’s Big House in Ferriday and Tupelo’s Shake Rag. For these artists and several others, the sounds coming from “place” somehow informed their ears and held varying degrees of sway over their creative development. The next step was to find a method to connect sound and place to the manner in which certain music makes us “feel.”

This aspect of the project came to be the most intellectually challenging. The often abstract scholarly understandings of space and place were matched by the equally labyrinthine studies on the psychology of sound. I moved from book to book hoping to find the needed piece to tie the work together only to find new ideas and new approaches to a maddening degree. Over the course of the work, it became clear this component of the project was worthy of its own
study and singular focus possibly for a later date, but I still needed some consolidated concepts to shape the questions I would pose to musicians. I settled on some core scholarship to steady my thought process and give some structure and focus to a study rapidly becoming unwieldy.

The works of Daniel Levitin, Denise Von Glahn, Robert Jourdain, and David Hendy offered a solid foundation from which I could begin to make the needed connections between sound, place, and feel. Levitin’s work provided a rudimentary understanding of the complex process in which our brains process vibrating air molecules into signals of information. What proved critical for this study was Levitin’s explanation of the overlap in brain function linking sound to visual, emotional, and memory based cues. Brain waves stimulated by sound prompt not only sound banks ready to quickly identify recognizable signals, but the same stimuli also unlocks stored repositories of visual, emotional and other connected sense images. According to Levitin, when we hear a bark or a horn, we visualize the associated dog or car followed by an appropriate reaction based on the brain’s subsequent instructions (Levitin 91). Informed by this understanding and applying it to the idea of recorded music, I suggest as example, the sound of a slide guitar could not only elicit the possible visual image of a front porch guitar player or sharp-dressed bluesman, but it likely prompts a corresponding picture of a “place” and all the associative emotions we may have invested in those images. How many films have set a southern scene with the sound of a bottleneck guitar, harmonica, or fiddle drone? This connection also permits the considerations of a temporal quality to sound. When we listen to a record from Sun Studio, our mind likely goes not just to Memphis, but also back in time to the 1950s. All of these reactions to sounds contribute to the way we feel music. Embedded in sonic imagery is the power to access visual, emotional, spatial, and temporal connections to place.
Although her work is largely an examination of the relationship between American landscapes and the classical pieces of music they have inspired, Denise Von Glahn’s *The Sounds of Place* establishes an important theory paralleling Levitin’s science and further connecting sound and place. Von Glahn asserts landscapes themselves create their own “sonic images” that can be later accessed by composers manifesting in their creations. Von Glahn suggests “music captures place” in much the same way painters do. Instead of relying on the colors, shapes, and light, “composers hear the rhythms and timbres of places and recall it in sound.” Von Glahn continues, “although sonic images may be more fleeting than painted or sculpted ones, and less specific than prose descriptions, they are no less eloquent or evocative” (Von Glahn 2).

The scholarship of Robert Jourdain and David Hendy helped make an important link between the sounds of musical compositions, not lyrical content, and the oral tradition of southern storytelling highlighted in Charles Reagan Wilson’s *Flashes of a Southern Spirit*. Wilson proposed, “southern folk culture…was an oral culture” characterized by a “facility with language that emerged from this storytelling and conversation-oriented society” (125). Connecting Wilson’s theory to ideas of music is supported by Jourdain and Hendy’s assertions that music is based on “stock phrases” and “specific devices” akin to elements of ancient epic poems merely organized and improvised upon over time like the crafting of stories (Jourdain 163, Hendy 57). These “devices” or passages are stored in the memory like bits and pieces of centuries-old tales ready to be accessed in the creation of future compositions. This amalgam of music and oral traditions also provided a basis for attempts to get musicians to consider a shared essence or repeated themes between and across genres. Important to these adjoining concepts is a suggested possibility people reared in an oral culture like the South’s, might also be more attuned to listening. While Wilson noted this theory might be “hard to prove,” I incorporated all of these
ideas of oral culture, music creation, and listening into the interview component of the project (Wilson).

David Hendy also importantly noted sound’s inability to be segregated gives it an “intrinsically revolutionary quality.” Hendy proposes “soundscapes offer something more fluid,” they can “shift their size and shape and character moment by moment,” overlapping and “leaching into each other in unpredictable ways” (Hendy 327). This is not a novel concept as many scholars, including Wilson, have acknowledged the importance of the integration of sound long before southern society as a root source of some of the South and the nation’s best artistic achievement, not the least of which is rock ’n’ roll. But while Hendy’s use of the word “revolutionary” echoes much of what has been written about the melding of sounds in Memphis, the home of American Soul and birthplace of rock ’n’ roll, is not the only place where the fusing of sounds created something new. I have learned through this project, places, people, and sounds change and evolve. The birds of Florence, important to Handy and Phillips were in many ways, eclipsed by the radio and television of Spooner Oldham’s Center Star, Alabama. While television, movies and eventually the internet transformed more modern ideas of soundscapes, questions still need to be asked about what sounds are mixing together to shape and inspire new artists. So I began nearly every interview with some version of, “What did your town sound like?”

While this consolidation of scholarship into a few core concepts keenly informed my questions, I was still missing a keystone text to pull these sprawling ideas together. My interview with Bill Frisell was a test run of sorts and I was grateful to begin the conversations with such a thoughtful musician. Although Mr. Frisell had understandable difficulty articulating a definitive connection between place and his compositions, he did confirm the viability of some of the
work’s early components. When talking about southern music he relied on visual images including “some guy sitting outside playing an acoustic guitar” and an “old woman playing fiddle and dancing” (Frisell). Secondly, when discussing early bluesmen, Frisell acknowledged a musical essence stemming from the past, “I don’t want to imitate what those guys did and I can’t, but at the same time, it is very, very clear, to all of us, if you think for a second, that all that stuff and all that music that happened, it is so much a part of everything we do…. it’s a part of everything that I play” (Frisell). We could take the jazz guitarist’s words as a confirmation of thinking of music as a multigenerational epic poem. Finally, Frisell poignantly noted that music represented to him a “model” for how humans could and should relate. Still hoping for connections, Frisell’s insights made me return to the autobiography of early jazz pioneer Sidney Bechet.

Bechet’s *Treat It Gentle*, establishes some precedent for both Frisell’s notions of commonality and the possibility of music being *itself* an imagined place. Bechet believed all good music connected back to what he called the “long song,” and jazz as an art form, became an actualized “place” of meaningful freedom for African Americans. A place that had eluded his people since their arrival in the Americas. Bechet returns throughout his writing to this idea of a “long song” which symbolically goes back to his grandfather Omar, a freed slave in Louisiana. The melody of this song carried all of the promise and pain of African American people and was “a way of remembering something that has to be remembered” (Bechet 202). For Bechet, it also metaphorically represented the foundation and feeling for all music of consequence that followed. Bechet states, “He (Omar) started the song and all the good musicianers have been singing that song ever since, changing it some, adding parts, finding the way it has to go” (Bechet 202). “The good musicianer, he’s playing with it, and he’s playing after it. He’s
finishing something. No matter what he’s playing, it’s the long song that started back there in the South” (Bechet 303). Bechet, in many ways, is suggesting an epic poem of song which transcends time and genre. This idea correlates well with music as part of a larger oral culture. The idea of participating in a tradition of music as sonic storytelling rooted in a long and meaningful history also became the basis for much of my discussion with Luther Dickinson.

Bechet’s vision of jazz as an actual place and Frisell’s similar sentiment about music became concepts I wanted to explore further. As abstract as the idea of music as place might be, I found some corroborating scholarship from Robert Sack. Sack contends place “does not refer simply to a location in space. Rather it means an area of space that we bound and to some degree control with rules about what can and cannot take place.” Sack continues, “as humans we are incapable of accepting reality as it is, and so create places to transform reality according to the ideas and images of what we think reality ought to be” (Sack 4). For the creative soul, the tension between what is and what one believes should be, gives way to an alternative place where an imagined reality can be actualized. For Frisell, music is this created place where things “can rub and there can be tension,” but there is ultimately “harmony” (Frisell). For Bechet, jazz is not merely metaphorical harmony, but a freedom he and African American people have never known, now actualized through sound. While there are grounds to argue other forms of African American music, namely blues and spirituals, reflect an imagined reality or simply a better life, Bechet’s vision of jazz goes further. For Bechet, blues and spirituals still represent a “suffering” and “a waiting” while jazz is freedom now. Bechet declares, “…suddenly here was a different way of singing it. You could feel a new way of happiness in the lines. All that waiting, all that time when that song was far-off music, waiting music, suffering music, and all at once it was there, it had arrived. It was joy music now. It was Free Day…Emancipation… It’s like a man
with no place of his own. He wanders the world and he’s a stranger wherever he is; he’s a stranger right in the place where he was born. But then something happens to him and he finds a place, *his* place. He stands in front of it and he crosses the door, going inside. That’s where the music was that day—it was taking him through the door; he was coming home” (Bechet 48). Perhaps surprisingly, asking musicians to consider music as its own “place” produced some interesting responses.

Keith Richards’s 2010 autobiography unexpectedly inspired a concept that remained a consistent part of my interview questions. Richards suggests his ears were tuned to a certain type of music based on what he was exposed to as a young child. As a toddler, Richards listened to Radio Luxembourg with his mother and was introduced to the music of Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Big Bill Broonzy, and Louis Armstrong. Of the experience the British musician recalled, “It just spoke to me, it was what I listened to every day because my mum played it. My ears would have gone there anyway, but my mum trained them to go to the black side of town without her even knowing it” (Richards 56-57). Is it possible Richards’s lifelong love affair with American blues and roots music was birthed in the sounds he heard as three year old? As the following chapter details, Reverend Hodges forged a similar subconscious relationship with the sound of the piano before he even knew what the instrument was. This line of logic, however romanticized it might be, prompted me to ask musicians if place, had “informed” their musical ears and tastes.

While it is important to outline a sampling of the specific scholarship and thought processes steering this study, the truth is nearly everything I have read during the last few years has in some way shaped my approach to this work. Whether recalled with intent or simply lodged in my consciousness, past scholarship has simply forever informed my perspective. While
I hope a sense of that collective research shines through, the real focus is the voices of musicians kind enough to lend their insights. My attempts at extended theoretical contemplations on sound and place have value and I hope eventually find the light of day, but they muddy what became the resounding discovery from the interviews: places are people and people make the sounds.

The interviews occurred between February of 2015 and June of 2016. My aim was to have at least one musician from each genre with origins attributed to the South. While I am proud of the assemblage of artists in the project, I realize the survey has some shortcomings. Among other things, the work glaringly lacks a female voice, a gospel musician, and a perspective from New Orleans. It was not from a lack of effort. The limits of my interviews were a product of my ambition in who I tried to speak with, artist’s schedules, finances, and often the nature of the project’s focus. Not every manager was interested in their artist talking about the “creative influence of place.” There were also obstacles that arose during the conversations themselves. I had not anticipated a sort of interview persona one or two of the more savvy musicians clearly wanted to fall into. There were a few instances where musicians would recycle statements I had read from previous interviews or fall back into their own personal biographies. Getting them to talk about “sound and place,” at times, proved challenging.

There were matters of overcoming my own inexperience. As a one man crew, conducting an interview and simultaneously worrying about lighting, focus, and noise levels proved problematic and I certainly made more than a few mistakes. Early in the process, my personal and singular vision of the project also interfered with properly listening to what was actually being shared by the musicians. I so desperately wanted Bill Frisell to reply to my questions the way I had hoped he would, I initially missed the depth of his own interpretation and response. Finally, much of this project became the experience of being in these places, connecting with
artists often in iconic studios while trying not to fetishize their work or yield to the indulgences of fandom. While I endeavored to maintain a scholarly gaze, there were moments when it proved difficult. It was nearly impossible to watch Charles Hodges play the Hammond organ in Royal Studios without thinking something otherworldly was happening. I also tried to strike a balance between the project’s goals, what artist may believe, and what may be supported or countered by academics. For example, Fats Kaplin spoke of a “realness” in music connected to certain rural places because it was “isolated.” Immediately, I thought of the works of Elijah Wald, Marybeth Hamilton, Erich Nunn, and Karl Hagstrom Miller who would collectively dispute rural southern music was ever isolated from mainstream influence. While Kaplin’s logic may contradict that of conventional contemporary scholarship, his belief has value for it informs his own attachment and relationship to the music, undoubtedly shaping his artistry. I tried not to privilege one over the other.

Throughout the final months of the process, I benefitted greatly from interviews with scholars Wanda Rushing, Karl Hagstrom Miller, and Charles Reagan Wilson. And while I do not include them here in this collection of musicians’ stories, their insights offered fresh eyes to a project that often suffered from a lack of specific focus and their generous elaborations of their own work proved invaluable in providing further inspiration to the effort. Ultimately, this thesis project is the cumulative result of academic research, scholarly inquiry and filmed interviews that creates a primary document reflective of these eleven artists’ passion and spirit for their music. My hope is their stories will be worthy of consideration by future scholars curious about the relationship between place and sound.
CHAPTER 2

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT SOUND

The following are excerpts from a series of interviews conducted between February of 2105 and June of 2016.

Bill Frisell

The interview aspect of the project began with a stroke of incredible good fortune. I was able to arrange a conversation with jazz guitar great Bill Frisell. Recognized in critical circles as one of the most original and innovative guitar players in music, Frisell has put his unique touch on everything from jazz standards and Broadway show tunes to reinterpretations of the Beatles, Americana, and traditional folk songs. Frisell was important to this study because his chameleon-like ability to defy musical categorization and transcend genre while maintaining an essential core sound suggested a wide breadth of musical understanding and an especially thoughtful approach to his artistry. Equally important, Frisell had been commissioned to write “place specific” pieces including works inspired by Big Sur, California and Hot Springs, Arkansas as part of a project about turn of the century photographer Mike Disfarmer. In 2012, Frisell travelled from Helena through Memphis and the Delta to New Orleans seeking inspiration for compositions intended to score a film by Bill Morrison about the Great Flood of 1927.
When Bill and I met in February of 2015 at Elvis Presley’s former home on Audubon
Drive in Memphis, I was equal parts nerves and optimism. This was my first filmed interview, I
was in Elvis’s house, and Bill Frisell just happened to be my favorite musician. With a
snowstorm looming outside and Frisell’s drummer impatiently waiting to soundcheck, we began
our fifty minute long conversation. I had hoped Bill would share his sense of the commonality
throughout the diverse expanse of music he both interprets and composes and somehow
articulate the relationship between landscape and his creative process. I was also curious how the
Baltimore-born and Denver-raised musician felt about playing music with strong connections to
the South in the South.

CC: “Was there a sense when you were working on the Great Flood project that you were
connecting back to some of the guys that influenced your guitar playing? From the electric blues
guys that ended up migrating to Chicago.”

BF: “At the beginning, I thought I was thinking about, you know, the obvious sort of, thinking
about how the music moved from this rural… I hate to almost, like way over simplification, but
you can say in the twenties you see some guy sitting outside playing an acoustic guitar and then
they get driven out of this land and they move up and at the same time all of this industrial thing
is starting to happen and things get louder, there’s more cars, there’s more noise, there’s more
electricity so you got to plug it in just be heard you know. So again there was this kind of this
perfect setup for the evolution of how rock ’n’ roll music began or blues. And so at the beginning
I was thinking what I might do would be more, the music might follow that path, but then I
realized, wait a minute, there’s no way I can, I don’t want to imitate what those guys did and I
can’t, but at the same time, it is very, very clear, to all of us, if you think for a second, that all
that stuff and all that music that happened, it is so much a part of everything we do. So I thought,
wait a minute, I have to just basically play my own music from now really. I made references to
melody. I used ‘Ole Man River’ throughout, little bits of that. Or little references to other songs,
but I didn’t want to try to mimic what the actual musicians from that time were doing because
there is no way I could ever come close to it. But, it’s a part of everything that I play. That
happens a lot now. You know I’ll play a song of somebody, whatever it is, ….Like sometimes I
have tried to play some Jimi Hendrix songs, but I feel like I can never. Well, there is no way that
you could top Jimi Hendrix. Which is not the idea anyway. But I feel like he’s already in what I
am playing. There are so many of those people that are in us already. So I didn’t feel like I had to
make it obvious.”
CC: “So when you are playing, suppose last night, when you were playing the Hank Williams composition or you played Elvis last night, because you are in this place, ‘the South,’ do you get an added sense of the history or geography of the land and its music?”

BF: “Yeah. I have definitely been affected by that. And it’s almost like I want to, I don’t know what that is. It’s like a selfish thing, I want to play that song here and see what it feels like. It does come into my mind, it’s a conscious thing. But it’s also a subtle thing. As I get older, I definitely notice wherever I am. The place I’m at has an effect on me. And then when you are in a place like this…You know yesterday…” (interrupted by leaf blower) “…But what I was saying before. Being in a particular place, I think more as I have gotten older and just as my attention gets further and further away from just thinking about what notes I am playing. I am thinking about the relationship that the song has to just people or something. Even yesterday, we were in Little Rock and travelled from there to Oxford and stopped in Helena and crossed the river and into Clarksdale and it is like man you can’t help but think about it. I remember the first time I was in Memphis and you start thinking about it, it is overwhelming to wonder how did that happen? So much music happened here. This was not to play, I was just with my wife and we were driving around. We left Memphis and drove down Highway 61 and the first time I saw that Delta, those cotton fields into Clarksdale you can’t help but be affected by that somehow.”

BF: “I think about that more when I am doing music. I did a project on Disfarmer, the photographer, and instead of looking at the pictures I wanted something else. I actually traveled from North Carolina and we came through here again I guess and up through Clarksdale and into Arkansas and then up to where he was from (Hot Springs, Arkansas). I don’t know how long ago this was maybe ten years or so. For me it just gives me more, I don’t know what it is…More ammo. You know in the end it’s just a melody or it’s just notes, but I just feel more of a connection.”

CC: “This influence of place in your music, how does it manifest in the actual sound?”

BF: “In a way I don’t really know. The music is something on its own. You know I write it and I play it. When I am in the music it’s just going. And I don’t know. So I am not even sure really. I am not really sure what the answer is. It’s just by going to those places, it’s a way of getting me, it just gets the engine running or something. So whatever the melody is, I don’t know if it really… I can’t even say where it really comes from if it even really comes from that place. The music is something I can’t explain. I can’t explain it really.”

CC: “So much of your music defies genre. You will take a song that’s a traditional country song or folk song or jazz standard and completely make it your own. But, somehow you are always tapping into a strange sort of collective memory. It has a root that someone can identify with more than just tone. Even though you will take the melody in so many different directions, people can connect to it. Can you somehow define that essence that you have? Or what you’re striving for?

BF: “I think what you are talking about is just … Again, I am not trying to avoid the question, but it’s just… You know I have been playing for more than fifty years and it’d just ‘cause I am
stubborn and persistent about trying to play. Every time I play, I never feel like I am all the way there. There is always something just a little bit beyond your grasp that you are hoping or hearing you know. So it feels like that every time I play. It feels like you are starting over every time you play. And so after fifty years of that and you just keep gathering more and more. Learn more songs and start to see what is common in them. You said ‘collective memory.’ I mean music for me has always been like a model for what humans … you know, just the word harmony, it’s like if stuff fits together. You know it can rub and there can be tension, but it’s just this amazing example of how things can work together. Within the music itself, that’s what is happening, but then in the music community too that’s what for me has always been this…I guess I was just really lucky just to be a part of that as a kid. I grew up in Denver where the older guys would just sort of help you out. What happened amongst the people that I played with and all the stories. You know the more I hear and learn about other musicians like from this area. Thinking about Memphis you know and the way musicians got together it is incredible and it is so inspiring for me.”

CC: “As you get deeper into that sort of discovery, as you are going along, do you feel more connected to this region? With your life’s work in music, even though you are from Denver and have lived in all sorts of places do you feel a strong connection to the South?”

BF: “I grew up in Denver Colorado in what I guess it is the West. You know it had the mountains. Then I was on the East Coast for a long time. I was born in Baltimore which is kind of getting on the edge of it there. I have relatives in West Virginia and I went there when I was a little kid. But then, years later, my parents moved to North Carolina and I guess that is where I really…But it’s not really that long ago if I think about it. That was in the seventies, I guess it is a long time ago. Late seventies they move to North Carolina. So I start going down there after being more like Boston, New York…But, I just remember that sound. You know going into the mountains of Western North Carolina and hearing musicians play there and hearing people sing. It was pretty powerful. You know it affected me a lot. Especially, you know trying to be a hip jazz musician in New York and then you go down there and I see some eighty year old woman playing a fiddle, dancing around and playing this music that was beyond what I ever imagined. And then I start thinking, wait a minute, she’s probably never been to New York or anything, but she is playing some pretty astounding music. Just my awareness started slowly…you know there is just so much stuff.”

BF: “Thinking about that river again, just how is it possible? You know from New Orleans all the way up. Or this Highway 61 thing. You know my father was born in Minnesota at the top of Highway 61. Almost up in Canada like close to where Bob Dylan and you start just looking at this artery that is going through the country and its just overwhelming thinking about all the music that came out of it.”

CC: “Do you feel like it has to do with that place. You talked about Bob Dylan and the Iron Mountains. What was it about that place or maybe the landscape that you grew up seeing in Denver and down the Mississippi. Is ‘place’ influencing the sound?”
BF: “I am saying all this, but I just don’t know. People used to say, you know I grew up in Colorado and it’s like the wide open spaces or the mountains or this or the West and I used to think, what are you talking about. I don’t know. Because the music again is in my and in our imaginations and that is where the real big wide open stuff is. So I believe that is where it really is. I don’t know. But I guess the place definitely can spark something or get you fired up maybe. I don’t know. But I am no kind of expert on anything. In the end, I’m just sitting there trying to play and that’s all I pretty much ever do (laughs).”

CC: “For you, besides your own compositions, the songs that you choose to play, is there some sort of commonality across genres that you think is an essence of good music, good songs? Is it more than just the melody and the harmony?”

BF: “That’s what I don’t know either. You know it if it’s true. You know when it’s true. I don’t know how to explain. The music itself tells you what to do. Or it takes care of it if you follow it. But then you can hear one song… Like today, for the very first time, I heard this new Bob Dylan where he sings these standard songs. And it was like, he was really singing the song. Certain songs you sort of take for granted. Like he did “Autumn Leaves” and it was like wow. I was really hearing the words and you know it sounded like a Bob Dylan song. It’s like he transformed it into this story. Whereas you know sometimes you take stuff for granted. So I mean a lot of it has to do with I guess the delivery of it. How much it means to you and if you can translate that to who’s listening somehow.”

CC: “One last question. You had mentioned how much you enjoyed playing a Hank Williams composition in a place like this. Like you did last night. To you, is there something or is there an essence to music that comes from the South? “

BF: “Well you know there is just so many if you start listing off all of them in just the places we have been in the last few days. I played in New Orleans, I mean forget that. And then here. If you tried to make a list of all the just historic stuff that came from not that large of an area it is just absolutely mind-blowing. So for me to come here. You know I am definitely a tourist. Whatever I said, I grew up in Denver and I am not from here really, but to just be here and then play those songs here, I feel like it is a privilege or something. It is amazing.”
Wayne Jackson

Even casual fans of music will likely recognize the opening horn lines of Otis Redding’s 1966 song “Try A Little Tenderness.” The sound of Wayne Jackson’s trumpet is inextricably linked to the voice of his friend Otis Redding and Stax Studio. Unlike many of the musicians in this study, Jackson did not come from a musical family, but instead the son of a West Memphis insurance salesman and a secretary. Despite a lack of musical heritage, when a teenaged Jackson saw the used trumpet his parents purchased for him, “propped up on his dining room table” he recalled “it just reached out and got in my heart” (Jackson). Influenced by Harry James and other blues and rhythm and blues music coming over the WDIA airwaves, Wayne found his way as an eleventh grader into the Mar-Keys, a local Memphis band. Wayne’s instantaneous sense that his destiny was somehow tied to his trumpet and this band proved correct. A fellow member of his new group was Charles “Packy” Axton the son of Estelle Axton and nephew of Jim Stewart, the ambitious entrepreneurs heading Stax Recording and Satellite Records (Bowman 21). By 1961 the Mar-Key horns along with Steve Cropper, Booker T. Jones, Al Jackson and Duck Dunn became the house band for Stax. After parting with Stax, Wayne and saxophonist Andrew Love incorporated as the Memphis Horns and continued working together. After years of session work in Nashville, Jackson returned to Memphis. Wayne’s insights were helpful in making connections between a southern oral tradition and musical creations. Like Reverend Hodges, Wayne also spoke of genuine love for his fellow Stax band members. Perhaps more than any other artist, Jackson believed Memphis possessed certain mystical and electrical characteristics that profoundly shaped the sounds produced in the city. Wayne’s health was in decline as we met in his home on Mud Island. Sadly, Wayne passed away on June 21st of this year.
CC: “Did you know right away that you had a talent for it? Did you have a sense that this is my calling right away when you started to play?”

WJ: “Yes. I didn’t know it, but I was good. I made a good first chair trumpet for the band. And I participated in the MidSouth Rodeo and I won the talent contest for the MidSouth Rodeo. So I knew I had something special. I played ‘Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White’ and it was good. So I started out my life in a contest and won.”

CC: “That is a good indication you had talent. What were you listening to back then? Were you listening to the radio out of Helena and out of Memphis? What sort of music was informing the way you would create your own sound?”

WJ: “That’s a good question. I listened to rock ‘n’ roll, HBQ. I remember Dewey Phillips out of Memphis and they played some stuff by popular bands. Sher Pink was one. Perez Prado and he had a band and made records. And they were good dance records, Cha-Cha. So we would listen to that and play those records. That was the dance of the day.”

CC: “Did you listen to any blues or jazz or any stuff that was coming up out of New Orleans or out of the Delta or anything like that?”

WJ: “Yes. Chicago and Memphis were our blues stations. WDIA and WLOK were blues oriented and R&B. So we were digging R&B and that was always good dance music. We were kids and we loved to dance so we kept those radio stations on. Dewey Phillips, WDIA, he was on.”

CC: “When did you sense that you could turn this into a profession? While you were in high school?”

WJ: “Well, I was in the eleventh grade I think when I found the Mar-Keys. I went to Memphis and heard these guys playing. They were playing R&B. I decided I could play it with them. Then they asked me to join the band and I did. What a great day that was. I mean, I felt like I had grown up. I was a member of a band. They’d rehearse and play Saturday night gigs. They were good players.”

CC: “In the hours and hours of practicing, was there a sense for you there was an added drive because you didn’t want to do anything else but music? Or was it mostly fun for you?”

WJ: “It was wish fulfillment. I had a car and I used it back and forth to Memphis every time there was a rehearsal or every time we had something to do and I had a sense that it was big. I didn’t know how big and I didn’t know how I was going to do that, so I hung with the Mar-Keys. It was great band. We had a bunch of kids that loved WDIA and we were listening to R&B music and copying Bobby Blue Bland and different ones. We had a singer named Ronnie Stoops and Ronnie was a good R&B singer. And, he could dance. So he got the call to be our singer and he was a good one.”
CC: “There are people that have written what you guys did could have only happened in Memphis because of all the influx of other influences from gospel to country and jazz and blues coming together and met in Memphis. For somebody who actually lived it, is that an accurate sense of what was going on in Memphis? Did you feel all of that or were you oblivious to outside influences and were just doing your own thing?”

WJ: “No. We were the opposite of oblivious. We were tuned in. To WDIA, WLOK, Rufus Thomas. And we were kind of hot in Memphis you know. We were an organized band rehearsing new songs and we were different. So the studio at Stax was happy to have us come in because we could cut a song that might not be a new song, but it was a new band. We had a good time.”

CC: “That is one of the cruxes I am asking. You took a song that maybe somebody else had done and you made it different through specifically your sound. You guys had a sound that was so unique so special. This may be an impossible question, but is there any way to articulate that sound? Can you explain somehow why that sound was so special and so inventive?”

WJ: “I think we were new people at it. We were all learning to play our instruments and play the songs. We were dedicated. We came to rehearsals all pumped up like little stars and it worked for us. There was Willie Mitchell’s band, Bowlegs Miller’s band, they were both trumpet players. And it was sort of why we carried the Memphis sound over into pop radio. I think perhaps we were the cause of Memphis becoming an R&B capital. Because everywhere we were playing for kids and dances, we were playing R&B. We had a three piece horn section and a good singer. The word got out. We were invited to go to Little Rock and play for big time folks and they loved us.”

CC: “When you and Andrew Love came together and the unique tone that you had, did you know immediately that it was special?”

WJ: “I knew me and Andrew had a special thing and that we had to play together to utilize it. I went to see him at the Manhattan Club where he was playing in Willie Mitchell’s band and when I heard him, he rung my bell. I realized here was a special man and when he played the saxophone, he had a special tone. So I asked him to meet me the next day over at Stax. Well he came. We got our horns out and played. The sound that we had together with that rhythm section was perfect. So we knew that we had something special. And we capitalized on it.”

CC: “How about the first time you got together with Otis. Was it a chill bump moment for you all?”

WJ: “Otis knew that our sound was what he wanted as his band. And he was magic. You know he had a magic about him. When he was singing a song, it was his song. And we loved him. He had a special way of talking to horn players. He could come around behind the screen to where we stood and sing us our horn lines for a song. He would articulate them like we were going to play them. So if we could imitate how he sang it, we’d have it. And we did.”
CC: “So essentially he (Otis) was vocalizing what he wanted and so you were imitating his voice to get what you guys were after?”

WJ: “Yeah, and he (Otis) danced. We all liked to do that, play and dance. It was like growing up. So we did. And Otis was our friend. He was a special person.”

CC: “Was there a specialness to the actual studio? Did you sense if you picked up that group of guys and took them to a different studio that the sound wouldn’t be the same? Was it you guys? Or was there an equal sharing in the room itself?”

WJ: “I think that we had a special thing, we did. Booker T. and Duck, Steve. And when we played together, it was a special moment. And when it got on tape and became our records at Stax, they all had a certain thing about them.”

CC: “If you had gone to another studio, do you think you would have gotten the same sound?”

WJ: “Seem like it doesn’t it.”

CC: “I mean same players, but different place, would you have achieved that same magic?”

WJ: “Different machine?”

CC: “Different machine, Different room, different floor, different baffles. Would it have gotten that same, just unbelievable Stax sound?”

WJ: “Well I don’t think you could have changed Booker and the Hammond B3. I think wherever he played it would have been the same if he had his instrument.”

CC: “Wayne, when you were growing up playing in West Memphis, did the surrounding area around you, of knowing that cotton fields were right around you, or the river, or any of that. Did any of that, did you ever feel like that mixed into the way you think about music? Did it manifest itself at all in your sense of music?”

WJ: “It did. The river is such a definite thing. That big body of water moving south, it breaths something in guys because they play a certain way. We call it funky. And they play funkier because of the river. And because Memphis is sitting up here on the bluff. It has that mystique all its own. And we were playing six nights a week in a night club. So we were in touch with people. And we had a hillbilly band. They were country guys and the singing was pop. So we had some jam up bands at the eleventh treble room. We were playing that stuff.”

CC: “If I can reword what you are saying. It wasn’t just your experience next to the river that created the sound it was the fact that you were playing for people who also shared this kind of influence of the river. And so this whole group, not just the guys in the band, but the people you are playing for are all influenced by being so close to the Mississippi.”
WJ: “You know I haven’t heard it put like that, but you’re right. It would influence the whole bunch. It did.”

CC: “What do you think it is about the Mississippi? Is it even possible to articulate what it is about that special body of water that generates this unique feel?”

WJ: “That’s a good question.”

CC: “(laughs) That’s the essence of what I am trying to get at and it is hard for people to articulate it, I know it, but everyone seems to say, ‘yeah it’s something, but I don’t know what it is.’ And if you could at all offer your two cents, I would appreciate it.”

WJ: “I think, maybe, the movement of the water has something to do with our electrical systems and it produces a certain feel. And if you’re standing on the river, and I worked on the river, I was on a riverboat. And I feel like the river had an influence on me. It may have slowed me down a little.”

CC: “That’s maybe the best answer I’ve gotten so far. Somebody saying yeah, it’s palpable, it’s electric, it changes the way my body operates.”

CC: “When you incorporated the Memphis horns, you had this definable sound that artists wanted to bring onto their records away from Stax. I am looking behind you on your wall (of gold records) and I know you were with Peter Gabriel and Jimmy Buffet and Neil Young from all sorts of genres. Obviously you could pick and choose and play with anybody you wanted. Was there a reason you wanted to play with those guys? Was there some sort of connection to a sound that you like that you saw in their music as well?”

WJ: “Yes. Like Jimmy Buffet was a white artist. He wasn’t a soulful guy and he wasn’t soulful singer but his band made him acceptable. We were a part of that. We enjoyed being a part of that. Jimmy was a good boss. He was generous. Paid us well. And he was fun. We’d get to a new town and all hit the beach. He’d have the best restaurants. We’d all go and enjoy the town at the highest level. I’ve got to say I really love Jimmy.”

CC: “You lived in Nashville for a while and the fact that you came back and live a stone’s throw from the river is kind of symbolic in a sense. Was there an aching to come back here?”

WJ: “The music scene in Nashville died. It just went down. We went a year without playing and I couldn’t do that. So me and Amy decided we better move back home and we’re glad we did. The music is not hopping here like it could in Nashville. We could have our horn section booked in four studios in a day. Go from ten o’clock in the morning to two, four, ten o’clock, till I had played all day. That was exciting and fun. Had some horn players up there that were real good…”
WJ: “I always played the same way and I always arranged the same way. As far as the chords in the song. And certain places where the background singers would be going ‘ooh’ and the horn section would be going ‘aah’ That would make it sound big. I enjoyed that.”

CC: “How did you learn that process. Where did that come from?”

WJ: “That process came from working with Otis and Willie Mitchell and Bowlegs. We had a town full of great musicians.”

CC: “So in many ways you as a musician and someone with a defining sound, were a product of the other guys you were playing with. You had said you started so young. You were in eleventh grade when you started recording. So still in your formative years as a musician and you were surrounded by all these great guys. That influenced the way that your came up with your own sound.”

WJ: “It did, yes. Bowlegs Miller and Willie Mitchell both came from the same place and they thought of horns in a certain way. We would be listening to the lead singer for a hook. He’d sing something a certain way and we’d copy it in the horns and make that a piece of us. And it worked. The singer would do something, a few bars later we’d do it. It would become part of the song. Chris, it’s been fun. I was always a good trumpet player and I was aware of what I was doing.”

CC: “Wayne, it has been said that part of the South’s great production in the arts is because it has traditionally been an oral society. All of the great writing that comes out of the South comes from storytelling. All of the great music that comes out is the flip-side of that and of listening to it. Do you feel like at all that your horn playing is part of that? That you are telling a story essentially with your horn. That you are almost speaking in the same way a poet or a writer would write?”

WJ: “I do as a matter of fact. I think that my music is a part of what the South has produced. I am a southern kid working on a little cotton patch, picking cotton, and dating a girl from a little town. So I do think I am a part of ‘the South.’ My trumpet playing somehow fits into the blues singing that I grew up hearing and listening to. And, of course, God is so secretive. He doesn’t tell us why I was suddenly directed to be with Otis Redding and go to his house and be a friend. And he was wild, I mean. He was worth my living in Memphis just to know Otis. He was a wild man.”

CC: “Can you share a story or two? Some of your favorite stories of those early days. There are probably so many that you’ve told so many times, but one maybe that is special to you.”

WJ: “Otis was special. He made Stax happen. He made my life come to life. People want to know if I played on Otis Redding’s records? Yes. I arrange them? Yes. ‘Cause that was my key to the door and I threw it open. Me and Andrew played on every record that was made in the South. We had a fucking career. You just wouldn’t believe.”
CC: “There has been a lot written about the fact that Stax during the time period was a melding of white and black cultures in a very special place. Is that overstated or is that accurate that the success of your songs and the real feel of your songs was a product of that melding?”

WJ: “I believe it was. I am proud to have been a part of something that made a difference in the South and may have made a difference to the cultures. In the Stax studio, we were half white half black. Duck and Booker. I feel a sense of pride and a sense of ‘how did that happen.’ But it did. It was right and we knew it. Andrew and I knew that we were special. White and black, Otis and Jim Stewart, and that we were living a part of something that was unusual.”

CC: “Was it work? Was the black-white dynamic within the studio, was that challenging? Or, the music just took over and everything came together?”

WJ: “Nobody thought that. It wasn’t a conscious thought in anybody’s mind that white and black cultures mixing would make a sound that would be different, but the Stax sound is different and the Hi sound is different. And it was a mixing of the white and black races.”

CC: “This may be an impossible question, but is there a favorite song from that time period that still to this day you feel is your master accomplishment?”

WJ: “Yes. Working with Otis was a master accomplishment. He was a master of what he did. He guided us with his dancing and singing. We’d leave that studio with tracks cut and we knew it was special.”
**Fats Kaplin**

As a teenager in his native New York City, Fats Kaplin became oddly enamored with early twentieth century southern string band music from artists like Gid Tanner and the Potlickers, Charley Poole, and the Mississippi Sheiks. Listening to pre-World War II recordings mined from the city’s Lincoln Center Library, Kaplin taught himself old-time fiddle and banjo, eventually choosing a life in folk music over his classical bassoon training. After joining the city’s vibrant folk scene and finding his way into the company of seminal figures like Dave Von Ronk, Kaplin became a touring musician and at seventeen took his first trip to the American South with Rory Bookbinder to perform with, and bring back north, bluesman Pink Anderson. With years of professional experience in New York, Kaplin moved to Nashville, becoming a session multi-instrumentalist recording and touring with a range of artists from multiple genres including Elvis Costello, the Pure Prairie League and most recently as a member of Jack White’s band. Kaplin was initially important to the study because of his previous acknowledgement of the power of “place” in his creative process, particularly the influence of his wife Kristi Rose’s family farm in Southern Illinois. Our conversation however covered unanticipated subject matter such as ideas of “realness,” “roots,” and “authenticity” which prefigured themes that repeatedly surfaced in subsequent interviews. We met in Kaplin’s East Nashville home.

CC: ”You were raised in New York City and exposed to so many different musical influences, yet you were particularly drawn to early string band music, not bluegrass, but string band music. Can you explain that connection?”

FK: “…I started when I was maybe eleven or twelve years old and started playing banjo. And through that, when I was playing banjo, there was a show in New York City called Rainbow Quest. And Rainbow Quest was on public television. And it was Pete Seeger’s show that he got back on the air because he had been blacklisted from back into the fifties, but he kind of came back and was doing this show called Rainbow Quest. And he would have different artists on such as a folk singer, Odetta, or Jean Ritchie or something and I would watch it because I wanted to see Pete Seeger play the banjo. And he had on the New Lost City Ramblers. And the New Lost
City Ramblers were because his brother, Mike, and John Cohen, and Tracy Schwartz. And when I saw them, and at that time they were young men... and they had at that time, I remember they wore white shirts and like sleeve garters. And they played this authentic, like absolutely like the record, I didn’t realize at the time, but absolutely like the record, string band music, pre-bluegrass stuff. And I was absolutely floored. I just thought it was the greatest thing. And also, you know, it stems from my grandfather, who was a country doctor, and came up from South Carolina, and lived in Bucks County Pennsylvania. And, I used to spend summers with my grandparents. And on my mother’s side of the family, they go back, in the South, to the Revolutionary War, actually. On the Hunters. And my family is this really, you know, kind of whacky family of artists. And, I was always, I think, looking for, I wanted some roots and I felt very kind of rootless, and I latched on to that fact. That on my mother’s side of the family, it went back to the South. So I became, it’s like any of us, if somebody’s from, you know, a small town in Iowa, they don’t want to be from a small town in Iowa, they want to go to New York City and, you know, be in a punk band or whatever. Well, I’m growing up in New York City, in Manhattan, what I wanted to do was, in my mind, at that point I was very young, just becoming a teenager, was to like live in a log cabin and play fiddle and, you know, I don’t know what. But that was my, I just was fascinated by it because you know it wasn’t, instead of going to the Museum of Modern Art, no, I wanted to listen to recordings of Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers. So it’s just the opposite type of thing that I suppose kids are always doing, but just really fascinated me. And I was really drawn to it.”

FK: “So I went down to the Lincoln Center Library and to my amazement there’s all of this stuff in reissues was coming out on “County” and “Folkways.” And I suddenly began to realize, all this stuff is here, and Oh! And, of course, I got out the new New Lost City Ramblers records, but then I realize this is where they got it from. Here’s the original recordings. And I used to constantly go to the library and pull out these albums. And through that, I found and got into, you know, Dave Von Ronk and Jim Kweskin and seeing where it all came from. And through that, going back into early real recordings of, “real recordings,” [corrects himself] early recordings of 78s by these bands, and blues, and roots music, and world music to some extent. That type of stuff. And I should say that my father, we grew up with great music, but he was a great classical aficionado as well as other stuff though. I mean, he was into some folk music, some world music. He was very knowledgeable about stuff like Indian classical music, Japanese Shakuhachi flute music. I mean all of this was like around, so I knew it, but this is what I really latched on to, was this (string band music). And so, I was playing banjo and after seeing the New Lost City Ramblers, or soon after, I got myself some cheap fiddle and taught myself how to play fiddle. Sitting there, sawing away, (laughs) much to my family’s horror, and that’s what I did.”

CC: “That brings the point of the project is place. You have had some really interesting things to say about the influence of your wife’s farm in particular, in southern Illinois. You have said things like quote, ‘the feelings of the rivers,’ or the ‘cornfields,’ or the ‘bean fields’ have influenced you. And I am wondering if you can express how that manifests in your creative process? How a feeling of a place influences how you create music?”

FK: “Growing up in New York City, I was in a real…When I grew up on the Upper West Side and growing up there in the, you know, sixties and seventies, it was a real melting pot. I mean
our neighborhood that I grew up was primarily a Puerto Rican, Dominican, working class neighborhood. So, you would get on a Friday night, starting when people got home, and my room was right on the air shaft and the air shafts are those where all the buildings come like this [hand gestures together] and reverberate, just blasting salsa music, you know from the seventies, which was big. And you’d hear salsa music and people would be sitting out way late into the night, sitting out under street lamps, playing dominos. And, kids would be, I mean little kids would be out running around at one o’clock in the morning because…This is all summertime generally it would be, but that was like, you know. They’d be taking naps in the afternoon. Everybody would cool off, you go out in the street, people playing salsa music. So you had that going on. Just the sounds of that. I’m listening to the sounds of 78s or I’m listening to Jim Kweskin Jug band or something. Then, right underneath of us lived Johnny Pineapple and Anita Pineapple and he had Johnny Pineapple and his Hawaiian Review. This is true. It sounds like I am making it up, but they were the Pineapples. And, they would go out in a little van, a very small paneled van and they would go out and play like lounges and stuff like that. They’d go out for a while, they’d come back. But he…I still have some sheet music that he signed over to me, he gave to me and signed. And he was very elderly at that time. But you would hear sometimes coming up through the steam pipes, would be, they would listen to Hawaiian music. So you’d get this Hawaiian music floating up, you got salsa music going on, you got string band music going on all of this hodgepodge of all of these musics. And we are talking about places and New York City was so much of that kind of place…”

CC: “Is there a connection for you between music we think of that comes from rural places and music that is somehow more ‘real’?”

FK: “Yes, so I am very fascinated by rural and maybe it’s because the music has become, how would you say… There’s a toughness about it. There’s a… And it’s also because it’s…Like, it fascinates me by there’s string bands from say, like Alabama and Mississippi. Actually some of my favorite string bands are from Alabama and Mississippi. And also even Mississippi fiddle bands or fiddle styles which is completely different from like North Carolina or Virginia. And also, in those areas, they’ll play that style there and then right over here, it’s like practically next door, but they’re doing something different. It’s because they’re isolated. They were much more isolated and that kind of fascinates me a lot. About how it can be so close and yet so…I understand why because they did not have the, you know…That was a long way away, ten miles you know, twenty miles whatever. But that there’s a toughness about it. Rural. I always, when I was a kid I would, I was always very drawn to stuff that was very primitive. I remember that. The stuff that always interested me was primitive fiddle playing. Bands that you could tell that was where they were coming from or blues players like that. And I was always, anything that was slick or seemed to me to be more thought out or easier to take or something, I didn’t have much interest in. Going back to folk music of course, somebody like a Van Ronk, the New Christy Minstrels or somebody like that, it’s like ‘forget it’ you know I had no interest what so ever in it. You know, or Peter, Paul, and Mary whatever even though they did a lot of great… But it just had no interest for me. But it is all the same thing as some kid who is into punk music, it’s the same thing. He would be looking like, ‘I want the real [emphatically], I want this tough band. They only did one record and they were living on the Lower East Side, and you know, nobody knows about them’ thing. And that is sort of what I was doing even though I had no
access to computers or anything like that. But I always remember being drawn to something that was decidedly rough and rural. I can remember listening, getting from the Lincoln Center Library, recordings of Anita Riddle. She was an unaccompanied... she was, at the time, elderly, singing unaccompanied ballads, Appalachian ballads. There was a Folkways I guess recording of this. And just her you know doing you know the ‘Baker Boy’ or something, totally unaccompanied. Used to just drive my family insane (laughs). I was listening to this stuff. But I knew (laugh and parodying voice), like ‘yeah, yeah, that’s like real.’ Like, I was always searching for that. Searching for it in my mind. Though I did find it, I did, I did. Finding stuff when you couldn’t look stuff up on a computers and stuff like that you know finding something like the Mississippi Sheiks or finding the recordings of Charley Poole when I wasn’t quite sure who he was. It still fascinates me, jumps out at me. Some of these people only did a couple of recordings in their life and yet there it is. Like it’s this ghostly, they come back and there they are and they still have the ability to grab you. And I just love that. I do love that.”

CC: “So fast forward to more recent years. I will give you an insight. Bill Frisell in his interview, he does a lot of place specific projects and he immerses himself, what he was saying is that he immerses himself in the place to get what he called ‘creative ammo.’ And here, I read or saw an interview about you going to Southern Illinois, to your wife’s farm. What does that... is there some sort of ‘creative ammo’ for you there? You have place specific songs like ‘Maloney Road’ and ‘Waltz on the Ohio’ that I assume were created there.”

FK: “Yeah”

CC: “It may be impossible to articulate, but can you somehow express what that ‘place’ does for you to kind of inspire you?”

FK: “Sure. My wife Kristi Rose was raised on a farm in Little Egypt. That would be Southern Illinois on the eastern side, the very bottom. She comes from a very close-knit family, cousins and all of this, and her uncles, and everybody and their families. Its large, very, very close knit family. And they’re great people. And the place where she was brought up, we keep, we keep up. And it’s there hours from here (Nashville) door to door. From here to the farm. And you need to go through Western Kentucky until you hit the Ohio River and jump across and then you head up there and it’s there. Why is it? Because to get away... to... I think it was also that being raised in Manhattan and spending most of my life, at that point, in New York City, in Manhattan actually, I always lived in Manhattan. And lived in Las Vegas when I was very young, meaning twenty-one. But lived there for a little while and kind of went back and forth between New York and Vegas and came back. But going back to when I was a kid, that in my mind, that (rural place) was what I was looking for or something. Like this place that is off the beaten track, it’s mysterious. It’s very much home. There’s a lot of family around. It’s very welcoming to me. I mean a lot of people would go, ‘I don’t know why you would want to go to Southern Illinois.’ But there’s a quality to it. It is a very real place, it’s a very tough place. The town, I mean, farm towns around there have lost so many people. But Kristi’s family has survived, the family has survived by being large. I mean they work together. You have to be to survive. It’s always, it’s... there’s a quietness about it and at times, it can be quite, quite beautiful in a certain way. It’s not like that it’s... but you look out the window and just you know, as far as you can see is like a
FK: “Cave In Rock was used by river pirates as a lair and anybody crossing, if you’re going west you’ve got to cross the Ohio. And there’s actually books…I’ve been collecting books on Southern Illinois and there’s one called Satan’s Ferrymen. It’s about these ferrymen who would take people across, but they’d assess have you got enough like with you and then you’d get to the other side and you start traveling that way, they signal and you get waylaid. I mean a lot of stuff there. Mining, ‘Bloody Williamson,’ they call it in Williamson County. Where the Herron Massacre occurred, which was with miners trying to…they brought in scab labor, there was a strike. And it was a massacre of the people that came, the scabs that came in to work. But if you read about it. It is like what was going on. These miners were trying to, when they brought the scabs in and all that, it meant that their families wouldn’t eat. So people became desperate. But it’s got mining, it’s got all this historical…very interesting. But a lot of…it’s a very, kind of…it’s by the Shawnee National Forest which is where the farm is, very close to there. A place called Giant City State Park and Garden of the Gods. And these are places where geologically…The giant boulders and stuff, which are huge, the size of this room and bigger, they split, they split apart. And when they split apart so much that when they were first discovered and people started. You can walk through them and they will split and it’s almost like you turn a straight corner and walk that way. They called it Giant City because it reminded them of like walls of a city. And it’s these strange, mysterious places that are around there. Though it is not for everybody (laughs).”

CC: “So in some ways though, the landscape and the history of the place is akin to what you were looking for from a very early age in music.”

FK: “Yeah.”

CC: “It’s mysterious. It’s rough. It’s difficult to define.”

FK: “Yes. Yes”

CC: “It’s out of the ordinary.”

FK: “Yeah, it is. And it’s also…yet it’s also like a, yet there’s like a refuge also. It’s a place that’s like…I don’t know, I feel…when I am up there, I feel safe. Yeah, it’s like…”cause nobody’s going up there (laughs). And it’s great for working. It’s just simply great for working.
Because at night you can hear coyotes howling sometimes, and owls. It’s just great, you know. The neighbors next door have cattle now. They went back to having cattle. You have these very happy cows that are just wandering around, very close by actually. They come up by the fence and go back. Its things that I was looking for I guess. I hadn’t really thought about it that much, but it’s that kind of…Its rough, it’s mysterious, it’s comforting, it’s good for work. That’s why.”

CC: “You, I had read that, and you had mentioned it today, that you started as a touring musician at just an incredibly young age. And, I think you said your first trip to the South was to Spartanburg South Carolina? With Pink...”

FK: “That’s right. It was to see…It was with Roy Bookbinder, and to go down and meet Pink Anderson and bring Pink Anderson up. And then it was my first…really like…Yeah, thats right, we got him up and we played at a club called…it was like two or three nights…And it was his first time that he had played in years and years and years. And it was at a club called Salt in Newport, Rhode Island. And we were the opening act. But I had never been South.”

CC: “Right. During that trip South, have any musical revelations? Or have any epiphanies? Get a sense of seeing places that had inspired you as a kid?”

FK: “Yeah. I mean, definitely. To go to South Carolina, which is where my grandfather came from. And to be in South Carolina. I had never been south before, though all my interest in all this…I wanted to go south, but I was, you know, seventeen, I went down. And then to, you know, meet Pink Anderson and Pink is over there and his friend Peg-leg Sam, is that right, yeah. And, I mean these guys were living in, you know, shacks. I mean absolute shacks. And I had never seen anything like it, you know. Because, you know. Dirt roads, chickens, and you know, Pink hanging out on his front porch, you know, picking a guitar. It was stuff that I had seen photographs of, but you know. And I’m a kid and I was kinda trying to take it all in, you know. And I was quite fascinated by it and it made a real impression on me. A little scary, you know, but yet it was stuff that I wanted too.”

CC: “Did you feel like you were getting close to the real that you had been looking for?”

FK: “Oh yeah. I mean, going down to get Pink Anderson and talking to those guys, that’s real (laughs). It was real deal, you know. And it was great. Actually one of the very first, really, really early couple of things I did, I think it was, with Roy was…I played at Max’s Kansas City, we played, at Max’s Kansas City opening up for Sonny Terry and Brownie McGee. And you know, of course, I knew recordings of them and then to open up for them. And then the next day, it got reviewed in the New York Times. It was a really great review. I’ve still got the original review (laughs). And it was like, that was huge, you know to me.”

CC: “I guess, right, I guess what I was trying to get to and you may be the perfect example of a counter to it, is…You play with a wide range of artists and what a lot of what academic people would say…I don’t consider myself a wholehearted academic, but so many of music from jazz, blues, country, everything that you would be able to play, has some sort of origin or root in the South. And I was thinking, is there a connection between all of the music that you like…that you
could somehow articulate…that isn’t the blues scale or certain progressions or something like that… Is there an essence to the different music that you play? But you may almost be the counter because your musical tastes are so worldly that you might not think of music as being regional at all…”

FK: “Uh mm. Well…Yeah, there is a lot, there is a lot from the roots in the South. From early jazz, blues, string band music. Those are the things that are my absolute beginnings and why I started playing. I mean it’s like that is why I started playing music, period, was because of that. And other forms of music interest me, but that is the reason I started and they do have roots in the South. I think what it is, it’s a music…and this is going to sound…it’s been said so many times about something that’s like…there’s a directness, there’s a realness to it. There’s a…I don’t want to say authenticity because that’s eehh, not really the right word because something can be not…can be totally…You know, I’m not from the South, I’m not from the South and never claimed to be…in my youth I guess I wished I was from the South, but that’s not why I’m…There’s like a realness about music. Or you can tell there’s a realness about it. It’s somebody just, it’s…that’s it, it’s real. There’s not a… Whatever it is. It doesn’t matter what form. And that’s a hard thing to put your finger on because there’s not a criteria particularly for it. There’s you know just something so visceral or something real about it. And the same is with art and the same as with say early cinema… (very animated) There’s a thing about it, that is, you just know it comes from the heart. It’s real. It’s not authentic (uses finger quotes) because authentic means… that gets a little academic. It’s just real. And there people…that you just know and there are other people that it just doesn’t…It might be pretty good or it might be technically amazing …and there’s a lot of that, I mean a lot of that out there. Stuff that’s technically astonishing, but leaves me absolutely cold. I mean I just couldn’t you know. It’s fine I guess. It’s amazing, whatever (sarcastically, laughs). You know, it doesn’t do anything, other than the technical aspect to it that I can appreciate, but other than that it doesn’t. There was a roadie who years ago, I was touring, but the roadie was talking about something, we were about to go on, and he said, ‘Just remember, you rock, or you suck’ (laughs). ‘You rock, you suck, there’s nothing else,’ And he walked off. And I always go, you know that’s probably really pretty true. You either got it or you ain’t got it (laughs).”

CC: “So in the end, what you would try to sum it up, if possible, it’s this indefinable or indefinable ‘realness.’ Which is just impossible to express. You just know it. It’s a feel. An indefinable feel.”

FK: “Yeah. it’s like…”

FK: “…with visual arts, from my family, like what, what makes, what makes this artist or this painting jump out at you? Well, I mean you could…What is it about it? It’s hard, you know if you want to…If it’s a nineteenth century academic work, I suppose you could sit there and talk about perspective or whatever, but then you know, you’ll have a piece of folk art or modern art. I am actually quite fascinated. I mean folk art is…I love a lot of folk art. Primitive art. Folk art. What is it that makes it…It’s just, you can’t…It’s hard to define. Or a piece of modern art by somebody that can be quite strange, you know. Or the works of Joseph Cornell you know, who did the stuff in boxes, the little um. He did these…He did assemblages and he is really, really
interesting to me. And he worked out of Queens, New York. But he put stuff in boxes and, and, these strange objects in boxes. I always remember, I always loved his work. And, but what makes it (motions forward with hands) that? What makes it that? It’s hard to just explain. It’s just got it. It’s just this strange, you can’t define it thing and the same with music. Why is it…Why is it good? It’s just anybody, when you’re listening to music, when somebody’s really doing something or trying to convey this and it’s…I appreciate that. I mean, and then there’s stuff that, that’s, Oh, it’s not really so much…It’s a hard thing to explain. Because I am saying it, I was going, ‘You know that’s not really right, that’s not exactly right.’ You know, it’s not from the heart. Well, who am I to say it’s not from the heart. It’s a hard thing to describe, you can’t. You can’t explain it about the music that, why it grabs you and what makes it real. Other than it just being to me, this music that is just really, that’s real. And it could be anything. It could really, really be anything. And I can appreciate it for being real. And somebody trying to, as best they can, express themselves I suppose. I mean, there’s a CD called, it’s a three CD set, it came out called To What Strange Place. And it’s the Ottoman diaspora from…All these recordings that were done from like the Turks, Armenians, and Greeks. And it’s all these 78s, early recordings when they came over from these places and they were recorded in either New York or Chicago. It’s a fantastic set, but I mean some of that stuff…You hear like just a fiddle player and some woman just, you know just this song of longing for home (hands for emphasis). And that’s it and it was recorded someplace in Chicago with what there was. To me, there’s something that says like, that is as powerful as it gets. Personally, for me. I mean, it is so emotional and so, and good. I mean it’s great also. But it’s powerful, and it’s real, and I can still hear like, they still cry out you know from those records. That’s what moves me.”
Matt Ross-Spang

Grammy Award winning producer and engineer Matt Ross-Spang was raised in Germantown, Tennessee and began hanging around Sun Studios at the age of fourteen. His interest in the old studio, curiosity about recording, and persistence resulted in an internship at Sun at sixteen which ultimately directed his life’s work. Referred to by Peter Guralnick as a “sonic archeologist,” Matt’s knowledge of vintage equipment helped restore Sun technologically to its former glory and his passion for the old way of recording has kept the spirit of the studio and more recently Sam Phillips Recording Service alive. As well as being an historian of Memphis recording, Matt was able to articulate how certain recording techniques can add a feel of realness in modern recordings hearkening back to an era that is often perceived as more authentic. Matt also made connections between recording, the communal aspects of storytelling, the power of Memphis, and a chain of shared and learned artisanship linking Sam Phillips, Rick Hall, Willie Mitchell and their engineering disciples today. We met in “Studio A” at Sam Phillips Recording Service in Memphis.

CC: “One of the things that comes up in Peter Guralnick’s biography of Sam Phillips and comes up in other interviews is the idea of sonic explorers trying to find a “real sound.” You have been doing this for a long time now and had great success are you still a sonic explorer? Are you still trying to find new sounds?”

MRS: “Certainly. It’s funny Peter Guralnick called me a sonic archeologist. So I guess I am going backward. I am exploring backwards in time. I remember when I first started at Sun, the engineer who taught me everything at that time, James. He was a great engineer, but he was more from the ‘Beatles-on era’ kind of guy…and your engineering is a part of what you love, what you listened to all the time…So we would use a lot of microphones in the studio. Not as many as people were using in New York or L.A., but a lot of microphones. And I was reading and listening and Sam did all that with four microphones or less and it’s an amazing sound. When you hear ‘That’s Alright Mama’ or Howlin’ Wolf, your neck hair stands up, it jumps out of the speakers, all these things. It evokes all these feelings. And we had twelve microphones or sixteen microphones and we couldn’t get anything that moved me like that. I also think when you listen to records in the fifties and sixties, and it kind of stopped in the seventies because everybody started deadening everything, but you could hear the room… You knew it was a Phil
Spector record the minute you heard it. You knew it was a Sun record the minute you heard it. You knew it was a Willie Mitchell, Al Green record the minute you heard it. And I love that. I think that’s amazing. Too many times a producer or an engineer tries to put too much of their own stamp on a recording and it affects the recording. But they were able to make a unique sound and part of their sound without hurting the song. It wasn’t like the song suffered to make it sound like it was done at Sun. And that always fascinated me. I just love the way those records sound. They have their own unique thumbprint on American music and history… For the most part I was always focused on that unique identifying thing that was magnifying whatever the artist was and evoked a feeling. I just loved that. To answer your long question, I don’t think you are ever satisfied. That’s what’s fun about this job. I could mike the drums the same way every session, in the same room with all of the same equipment, but because it’s a different band and a different song, it will be different. But that’s what’s fun is getting a different band every time coming up with new things. And accidents happen and you get something really hip. That’s what I love is always trying to find something new. And by something new, maybe something they did sixty years ago that no one has tried again.”

CC: “One of the things that is coming up in this study is that sound has temporal qualities. And it can transport you from today to past time and past place. I know you have said you are not trying to bring people back to 1953, but is there a sense with your equipment and approach to things, you are bring people back to a different time and what is that feel?”

MRS: “I think it’s mostly about trying to pull something out of the artist. When you have a computer and when you have an ‘undo’ button and a ‘redo’ button and you have these things, then people get lazy. Like I couldn’t spell restaurant the other day and Siri wasn’t helping me and it was miserable. Before that I could spell restaurant no problem always writing it down, but now I don’t write anymore so I am not constantly using that part of my brain… I think that’s the same with performing. When the singer knows that one three times ago was good, just use that. Back then they couldn’t do that. They had already spliced the tape or gone over the tape. So I use that same equipment or that same mode of working to really pull something out of the artist… Just seeing a computer in the room registers with them that they can just sing it again… I am just trying to pull the most I can out of the artist in a performance. So I use different modes to do that. I think a big part of that sound from back in the day, is because they’re all performing live in the room together. That’s why we do music. I didn’t do music to sit in a booth and play something by myself without the band even there. Then they come in the next day and critique it. That’s not fun at all to me. I think it’s all about everyone coming together, all of them on the same wavelength, and trying to capture that. It can be difficult and it can be really easy. That’s the goal to me and I think that’s what people equate to the old days because it sounds like everybody in a room together. But I think it is super important…gives it a timeless quality… that’s what I strive for. I try to find something that transcends trends or decades. It is unique to what it is.”

CC: “Does Memphis still have a vibrant music culture? What makes it different?”

MRS: “Certainly… This town was built on ‘it doesn’t matter who you are or where you came from, what matters is the music’… But after Martin Luther King was assassinated most of the
business left this town. We don’t have publishers here, we don’t have record labels here, besides a few small ones, don’t have managers here, don’t have booking agents here. But what we have is incredible talent that all they do is they love music. When you go to other cities like Nashville or New York, or L.A., you have people that love the music, but you also have a lot of people that are burned out and they’re just trying to get paid or whatever. In Memphis, all you have are people that are doing it because they love it. If they wanted to make money, they would get out of Memphis and go someplace else. I think that’s an amazing part of this place…It’s always been an underdog and it always will be. I just don’t know what to say. It’s incredible.”

CC: “So there’s still very much that uniqueness that keeps it still a creative place for musicians?”

MRS: “Oh certainly. And there’s something in the water. Sam came here he said because of two things, all the talent he heard on Beale Street and the Mississippi River. There’s something about the river. You know they talk about the river at Muscle Shoals, the Tennessee River. The Mississippi River, there’s something about being next to that big old thing that changes everybody. There is something about this town beyond all that. Something ingrained in the land that’s just incredible.”

CC: “When you bring artists who are not from Memphis in to record with you here, do they have a sense of that? Is there a mystique about?”

MRS: “Yeah. They come and they see how different it is. They say ‘Everyone is so nice here and everyone is so laid back.’ Personally, I’ve done sessions in Memphis my whole life and I went to Nashville, Richmond, or wherever to go make a record and it was a complete culture shock to me how different it is. Here it’s like ‘Will cut it again, don’t worry, we’ll get it right, we’ll cut this again till we get it right.’ And up there it’s much more fast-paced. Everyone is more worried about time. There’s unions up there so you have to do everything in three hour blocks and stupid stuff. Every three hours you’re supposed to take an hour break. Everyone is in a hurry and there’s a lot of ‘Fix it later in the mix.’ ‘Oh, that vocal is good, but we’ll pitch it and tune it and time it’ and all this junk. And down here we’re like ‘Ah man, let’s go get some fried chicken and some mashed potatoes and we’ll come back and get it right. And it’s laid back and everyone notices, I’ve never had someone leave and not at least think about moving to Memphis. Or can’t wait to come back.”

CC: “And does that feel somehow transfer into what you guys create together? The sound?”

MRS: “I think so. Look there are studios everywhere. And everyone records in home studios now too. But where else in the world can you go to but Memphis, Tennessee where we’re standing in Phillips Recording Service right now which was built by Sam Phillips. This is where ‘Wooly Bully’ was cut. This is where the Yardbirds cut ‘Train Kept A Rollin.’ The great Jerry Lee Lewis cut great records here. Charlie Rich. John Prine did ‘Pink Cadillac.’ ‘Mr. Bojangles.’ Huge records were done in here. Three blocks over is Sun Studio where rock’n’roll was created. Ike Turner and Howlin’ Wolf created some of the most amazing blues. About two or three miles that way (points west) is Stax which is were real American soul happened. About two blocks from Stax is where Royal Studio was which where Al Green, Otis Clay, and Anne Peebles had
all their hits. Over that way (points east) is where American Studio was, which had more hits than any studio in Memphis. That’s where Neil Diamond did ‘Sweet Caroline.’ The Sweet Inspirations, Elvis did ‘Suspicious Minds’ and ‘The Ghetto.’ Ardent is about two miles that way (points east) and that’s where Big Star and ZZ Top did all their records. The Gin Blossoms, REM. Doug Easley had a great studio about two miles that way (points south) called Easley McCain. That’s where Wilco did AM. Sonic Youth, Cat Power did some records there. Modest Mouse had their big record there. It was like the Indy place to be. Jeff Buckley cut there.”

MRS: “All of that is in Memphis Tennessee. We have maybe twenty big professional studios here and probably fifteen of them changed the world at different times. It’s not like when you go to New York or L.A. Most of those studios look the same. You go in and it’s the big old SSL or Neve console, there’s a vocal booth, there’s a drum booth, it’s got the same like Sharper Image or Target acoustic tile in there. And you don’t feel anything. You come to Sun, and it’s all 1950s. You come here (Sam Phillips Recording Service) and it’s 1970. You go to Easley and it’s very much like a ‘90s cool, hip indy studio. You go to Ardent, it’s the classic big studio. You go to Stax. All these places are time capsules and they changed the world in some way and that way is still going on. And so it brings something out of you and that’s unique to Memphis and Memphis alone…”

CC: “All of these genres that get attributed to the South. Is there an essence that runs through all of them?”

MRS: “It all came from people. It came from their fingers and their throats. That is what I would say. I was never one of those people to or really cared to go, ‘Oh that’s a pentatonic scale and that came from…’ That completely bores me to tears. It all just came from people and the South is where all those people got together. They were poor. All we had was music. You know that was free. Music was free. Everything else costs money. That’s where it all kind of melted together.”

CC: “Can you talk about the feel of studios?”

MRS: “Yeah. When you walk in here (Sam Phillips Recording Service), you feel something immediately. And that’s something you can’t teach or build or buy from Home Depot. A lot places get that wrong. They have all the nicest equipment. They’ve got the best cappuccino machine, the best console. They’ve got all the newest computer toys, but you go into the room and you don’t feel anything. And in here, you don’t need to bring in candles or you know patchouli, whatever that’s stuff called. You just come in and automatically just feel something. And this room has it more than Sun to me. I’ve never been in another studio where I don’t want to leave. Even after like fourteen hours of being here, I still want to kick everyone else out, put on a record and lay here and listen. I come up here all the time even when I am not working. There’s just something about this place that calls to me and it calls to a lot of people. You can’t fake that. You can’t buy that. You can’t manufacture that.”

“It’s something about Sam. I have a theory on Sam that’s kind of like Jedi. Sam is Yoda. And when you talk about engineers you talk about who they learned from. Like Jeff Powell, an engineer here, he learned from Tom Dowd. So it’s like Obi-Wan learned from Yoda. You know
he learned from the master and Sam was the master. From Sam, we got Jack Clement. Sam was
certainly a character and Jack Clement was very much a character too and a great engineer. And
also from them came Jim Dickinson who was a huge character and an interesting producer.
There’s this little lineage that comes all from Sam. Sam was kind of the father of it all. And from
that you know Rick Hall wanted to be Sam Phillips when he started FAME. Jim Stewart saw
what Sam Phillips did and started Stax. Chips Moman saw that and started American. All these
guys came kind of from Sam. And the same with Willie Mitchell. All these guys came from
Willie Mitchell when they saw what he did. It’s pretty amazing when you trace it all back. It all
comes from here.”

CC: “So when did you start in that chain?”

MRS: “James Lott who was the engineer then (first time Matt recorded at Sun). He had been
there about twenty five years. He fascinated me. He was a character too. He wore a beret. He just
cussed incessantly. He maybe was a little drunk at the time. He smoked in the studio and called
you ‘Babe.’ I mean he was just an old sixties cat. That was equally as fascinating to me as the
faders, and the knobs, and the reverb, and the delays and stuff. He fascinated me. My friend Billy
Swan, who had a number one record years ago and is a character too. He told me this years ago.
He said, ‘Matt, engineers are the coolest dudes in the room.’…James and I became lifelong
friends and he is somewhere between a father and a brother figure to me. But he taught me a lot.
And he was really what fascinated me at first. At fourteen I didn’t really recognize the power of
Elvis or Howlin’ Wolf or anything like that. I was just trying to record our little demo…But
because of that, I got super into the engineering side. I started interning with them when I was
sixteen. That’s when it started taking over. And then I felt the power. And Cowboy Jack was still
alive at that time and Jim Dickinson was still alive at that time. So they would come in and I got
to learn from them in bits and pieces. Hang out with them and soak all of that stuff up. That’s
when all of that started really manifesting in me.”

CC: “To me if somebody believes it’s magical, than it has an effect. Have you had an experience
in the studio where somebody came into the studio and they were completely inspired by the
place and it brought something out of them that was unexpected?”

MRS: “I definitely think so. I had an artist come by named Margo Price…I didn’t know this at
the time or I wouldn’t have charged her, but she was a struggling artist, her and her husband. Her
husband plays bass in the band and they cowrote all the songs. They have a kid together. They
believed in this record they had written so much. They didn’t have any money. There were no
labels interested. They pawned off her wedding ring and they sold their car to come make this
record…I didn’t no they did that or else I would have been like, ‘just pay me whenever’….They
came in and we booked three days. Which is a short amount of time to do two or three songs let
alone a whole record. This is at Sun…In three days we tracked the whole record. It was a
magical experience…The first song she had was a six minute song about her life, about one of
her sons passing away, about her dad losing their farm and going to jail. I was tearing up on the
spot. And every song after that was just as incredible. We did it all live without headphones.
Which for most people is impossible these days. And we capture, I think, that sound. It sounds
like Sun. You can tell it was cut at Sun, but at the same time it sounds correct for her songs, her
voice…Usually you get one lightening in a bottle, we got ten or eleven of them in three days. It was just a world wind…Jack White’s Third Man Records heard it and the loved it. They bought the record ‘as is,’ no changes…it has completely turned her life around…That was one of those moments where they came in. She came to Sun for a reason. She was thinking about going to Muscle Shoals, she picked Sun. She came in and just like those guys (old blues performers) she performed on the spot. That’s one of my favorite moments in the studio.”
Dale Watson

Dale Watson may just be the living embodiment of Bill C. Malone’s description of honky-tonk music. During the course of his life and career, Watson has known hard labor and heartache, struggled with alcohol, became an ordained minister, and spent time in a state mental institution. Although born in Birmingham, Alabama, Dale’s early childhood was spent in North Carolina where he was surrounded by the traditional country music of his performing father and the bluegrass sounds of his neighbors. After the Watsons again uprooted, moving this time to Pasadena, Texas, Dale legally emancipated from his family and at the age of fourteen, struck out on his own. In Texas, Dale was exposed to the western swing of Bob Wills and the ever-present sounds of Tejano culture. Groomed in Texas’s tough “chickenwire” honky-tonks and country and western bars, Watson learned the value of the “groove” and the importance of keeping people dancing. Leaving behind his job and the brutal heat of a Shasta Bottling warehouse, Dale joined his brother’s band and his life as full time musician began. After years in Nashville and Los Angeles, Dale returned to Texas, making Austin his home and when not touring two hundred dates a year, Watson is a fixture at the city’s storied Broken Spoke. Disillusioned by the current state of music produced in Nashville and passionate about keeping the roots of early country and western swing music alive, Dale has championed his own created genre called “Ameripolitan.” Watson was important to the study because his music is, in many ways, a product of the sounds and culture of Texas. As a musician who has mastered the art of performing, Dale was also able to articulate the different ways in which music is received depending on “place.” His perspective on what constitutes “real music,” the importance of “roots,” and the necessity for songs to find human connections were also valuable. I met with
Dale, a true storyteller, on his tour bus after he and his band, the Lone Stars, performed at Beale Street’s Blues City Cafe, in Memphis.

DW: “I had been exposed to bluegrass growing up in North Carolina. I had been exposed to Roy Acuff and George Jones with my dad’s music. Buck Owens. But then in Texas, I got exposed to Bob Wills. Which you never hear, never hear him east, anywhere east, southeast, northeast, you don’t just hear Bob Wills. That was the biggest thing to me that was the blaring difference was Bob Wills was everywhere. … Ray Price, he did a tribute album to Bob Wills which I gravitated toward. Ray Price I loved. My dad used to play Ray Price too. He had albums. His (dad) albums became my albums. His influence of all the George Jones, Hank Williams, Roy Acuff and Ray Price were mine as well. But in Texas though, the honky-tonks I grew up in, it was more on a one to one level because I heard all these bands that played around that played Bob Wills and Ray Price and Johnny Bush, who I would have never heard of in the east. My dad told me about Johnny Bush, but he was a musician so he should know about him. So to tell about me growing up in Texas, I can’t leave out the part where I was born in Birmingham and the music I was exposed to in North Carolina because when I went to Texas all this new stuff I discovered that I never would have found on the East Coast.”

CC: “Was there music out on the street, in the honky-tonks, that wasn’t coming from your dad. Was their Mexican music?”

DW: “The Tejano or Mexican influence was one of the biggest adjustments I had to make as an individual as a person as a family. The big influence of Tejano and Mexican music you can’t ignore so it had to influence my music as I grew up in Texas. It doesn’t translate when you go east. A little bit west, but I am telling you it’s just a Texas thing…Don’t get me wrong, my music is not, you wouldn’t listen to it and go, ‘Oh my god, this guy has got so much Tejano influence.’ I’m just saying it’s there. You can’t ignore it from a musical standpoint.”

DW: “Another thing in Texas you can’t ignore is the dancers. The music that you make, the albums you do are really… You think about that when you do an album, ‘Is that song something a dancer can dance to?’ You never worry about that on the East Coast. In Nashville, they don’t care whether you dance to it or not. They go, ‘It’s the song, the song, the song is so holy.’ You know what, the song is important, but it’s not that fucking holy. It’s not! Sometimes the groove is really important, you know. ‘Rock Around The Clock’ isn’t some masterpiece. I don’t even know what a masterpiece song is. But, the fact is the lyric was enough, the vibe was enough. And that’s my opinion, music is a communication. Both of them together is what makes that connection, person to person, musician to listener. Come on, Boom Boom Boom Boom, Dah Dah Dah Dah, Boom Boom Boom Boom Boom. That’s all you need to hear. Everything else is just… It’s all about the connection.”

CC: “So when you are fifteen, and you decide to become a pro musician, is that because you realized you had this god given talent? Or was it you didn’t want to do the other jobs in Pasadena, and you saw this way out of your town? What was the driving force?”
DW: “I realized I was going to do music for a living not when I was fourteen and did my first paying gig. Behind chickenwire I might add. It was in La Port, Texas. I was behind chickenwire. I was just doing a duo. There I was on acoustic guitar, the guy playing bass was in a wheelchair, he was disabled. It was a torrential flood night in Texas. Which we had them every now and then. They actually paid us double if we’d quit and go home (laughs). Texas has taught me, the honky-tonks, with the chickenwire, all that kind of stuff, being as young as I was starting out, taught me as much not what to do as what to do. I was fourteen at that time, but not until much, much later did I realize I would do this for a living. I actually wanted to go in the military. But I had an injury to my eye that kept me out of it…So, I was in Shasta Bottling Company, there in Houston, Texas. Working for them in a warehouse and it was brutal. I made about one hundred and eighty-five bucks a week working fifty hours in the 117 temperature in the daytime, 112 at night. It was awful! Then I got an offer for a job in my brother’s band, six nights a week, in a bar, playing four hours making three hundred fifty dollars. Which was almost three times what I was making. So I thought, I’m going to take the easy way out. And the fun way out. So I started playing music.”

CC: “In the classic sense of musicians from the earliest time of popular music, it was a way of doing something that wasn’t so brutal. The blues guys that eventually made their way out of the fields. The guys who made their way out of the mills of the piedmont and ended up in Bristol performing. For you it was very much a chance to do something very different than maybe what your life might have been had you not had this talent?”

DW: “Yeah, I agree with the similarities you are talking about. But one thing important is, I really feel one hundred percent blessed. I am so lucky man to do what I do for a living and love what I do. At the same time, it’s the easy way out. You know like water flowing. I couldn’t go in the service. I was working at Shasta Beverage. It was a hard, hard job. I would keep having to do stuff like that. But then I was able to do music. I was musically inclined.”

DW: “I’ll tell you this, when I started out, there is no doubt that I sucked. I was so bad. I was such a big Elvis fan and I would mimic him on all the songs. I was such a big Merle fan. Your problem is when you are such fans of these people and they influence you, you run the danger of mimicking them. One thing I learned as I got older, was I’m not alone in that. I don’t put myself on the same plane of these guys, but George Jones and Ray Price, if you listen to their early recordings, they sound like Hank Williams and Roy Acuff…You listen to their early recordings, they are absolutely putting that in there, that influence. But then, later they found their thing. And I feel like I found my thing…I don’t feel like I am an original guy at all. I am more of a derivative guy. Singer as well as writer, but I am O.K. with that…The best quote that applies to me comes from John Lennon. John Lennon had a quote that said, ‘We tend to imitate our influences and our lack of ability to imitate our influences, therein lies your originality.’ In other words, I can’t sound like Elvis. I can’t sound like Merle. I can’t sound like Johnny. I can’t sound like Conway. I can’t sound like Ray Price. So in that inability to sound like them guys, is my originality whatever that is. I think that sums it up. He was a genius for coming up with that definition. When I heard that, I was O.K. with whatever it is I sound like right now.”
CC: “So you have coined this term ‘Ameripolitan Music.’ Can you describe what that is for people who have not seen you play live where you give an explanation?”

DW: “Ameripolitan music is original music with prominent roots influence. It is such a finite definition. There is no room for anything else left or right of it. People say isn’t that part of Americana and no it is not. I like a lot of Americana music. I don’t want to put anything negative on it. At the same time I want to tell you the difference between them. Americana is original music with folk and rock influence. In my opinion, Americana starts with Woody Guthrie…goes to Bob Dylan, Steve Earle and that type of thing…they (Americana) have a lot of guys that were rock ‘n’ roll chart makers…Bruce Springsteen, you know. Come on. They are more Woody Guthrie than Hank Williams…So, Ameripolitan starts with Jimmie Rodgers. goes to Hank Williams, goes into Kitty Wells, goes into Loretta Lynn, goes into Ernest Tubb and moves on to Merle Haggard, Lefty Frizzel. Ameripolitan though, is different from what country is because I don’t even know what the hell that is right now. It just makes no sense to me. If you ask where the roots of country music are, they are in the air. They have no fucking clue where they come from. Rascal Flats sounds like Boys to Men to me. I can’t tell the difference. I don’t know the difference. Taylor Swift sounds like Madonna. I don’t know. I have no idea. I can’t tell the difference between these people. But there was a time when you could listen to a song and from the first note you knew if it was Merle Haggard, Buck Owens from the singer to the guitarist, to the musicians, the steel guitarist. …Nowadays you can’t tell…It’s about the identity and that’s the key word. Identity seems to be missing in what was country music and Ameripolitan is taking it over. Ameripolitan is original music with prominent roots influence.”

CC: “So, your music incorporates a lot of the themes that go all the way back to the Carter Family. This idea of lost love, missing people who are on the other side, rambling, drinking, this kind of contentious relationship with god.”

DW: “Sure.”

CC: “Was that a conscious decision or is that just your life experience that comes out in your songs. I know that is a weird question. But do you have to play in those themes to be in the music you are in. I don’t mean ‘play’ as disrespectful.”

DW: “No, no, no. In my opinion, that’s where the huge difference between what Nashville is doing and what a real artist does. A real artist. Not a manufactured artist and that’s the difference. Man, I don’t know of anybody out of Nashville, and that sounds like a bash, but take it, you deserve it Nashville. You deserve that fucking bash. You deserve it. I don’t know of anybody out of Nashville that’s really a true artist. You don’t write something because, ‘Oh, this will be a hit…”

DW: “I think anybody can tell if you are real or not. I’ve been in the place where you have to be with three other people in a room in Nashville and write a song. I have actually been in a room with three other people and we were supposed to write a song about how it felt to be a teenager who got pregnant. That was supposed to be the theme…because this is the way they do this stuff. They pitch this stuff. You need to write an ‘uptempo power ballad ala Melissa Manchester
meets, the redhead, Bonnie Raitt …one of them said let’s do a song about a teenager who gets pregnant. I said, ‘I’m out.’ I said, ‘This is blowing my mind.’ … Myself, I was a young husband with a baby on the way, but I just said I have no clue. I cannot put myself in that place. I can’t. I don’t care. I’m just not that creative. Apparently you people are creative enough to do that.”

DW: “I only write about what I know about. And, I know the struggle with god. I know the struggle with doing right and not doing the best you can do and the failings of being a human being. That’s what I write about. Anything I write about whether it is the struggle with god, struggle with love, struggle with being a good person, it’s all real. But the problem is, I really feel it’s so sad how watered down it is getting. There is just no way to be one hundred percent proof. Actually no, I take that back because if it says one hundred percent proof on the bottle, that means it is only fifty percent. Hank Williams is two hundred percent proof. And that is what I would strive for. Carl Perkins, two hundred percent proof. That is the goal, but I am telling you right now, you don’t hear that today… The closest you are going to get is in Ameripolitan music.”

CC: “The idea of the ‘real’ has come up in these interviews all of the time. Some of the musicians I have spoken with connect the ‘real’ with ideas of rural places. Connections that music from these rural places is somehow more real. Is there a connection for you between rural, particularly the rural south, and what’s real. I mean you mentioned Hank Williams and Carl Perkins. They’re coming from rural places. Is there some sort of connection?”

DW: “You’re asking me about origins and my opinion. All I can go on is my opinion. All I know is the roots of what my dad taught me, the people around me taught me. I just can’t help but think if we didn’t have southern roots, music would sound really different. When you go North, even the Polka music up in the Midwest and the Nordic influence, it’s totally different than when you start hitting Appalachia. Then you go southern and get the black influence from Africa even. I am only saying this in a layman’s term and an ignorant viewpoint, but I’ve travelled enough to realize the difference that the north and the south have on music. It’s important. They are original in themselves. But I’ll tell you this, rock’n’roll would never exist if it weren’t for southern influence. It wouldn’t. Rockabilly wouldn’t exist. Probably western swing…because the northern music didn’t have, pretty much, the uneducated roots influence. It was more educated when you go up north. And that’s only my opinion, but it’s also my observation as a person. I don’t ever consider myself educated, but I do consider myself observant.”

CC: “When you think of music that you are drawn to that has a ‘feel’ is there a defining feel to it. Apart from ‘real.’ Apart from beat. Is there just something that touches you inside? It could be any genre.”

DW: “The music that does touch me is any genre. What you probably wouldn’t think of me as being a fan of, I love Chet Baker, Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra. There is music that affects me and draws me to it that is not of my genre that I perform and put my records out in. But there is one underlying similarity and the thing that always is there, always is there. Again, it’s that vague realness, but it is the roots. That’s all I’m gonna say. You can tell when it is rooted. It has got roots. Elvis was inspired by Dean Martin. Dean Martin was inspired by Bing Crosby. There’s
roots and roots go back. And you can do that from anything from Chuck Berry to Bob Wills, Milton Brown and the Brownies. There is always roots. That is the bottom line. When it don’t have roots, that’s when I am not attracted to it. And I can tell when it has got roots and I think people can tell too. Not the masses. What they’re showing on T.V. and they do on American Idol, and all that stuff. That’s diluted stuff the masses buy. Quite frankly, if you are them people that buy American Idol music, you suck. You don’t get it. Look into deeper stuff. You actually don’t get it. Now you’re hating me, I don’t give a shit. You don’t get it. If you actually look and listen to real music, then you will hear it. What you’re hearing is the roots. That will flip your switch.”
Charles Hodges

Raised as part of a large musical family in Germantown, Tennessee, Charles Hodges, along with his brothers “Teenie” and Leroy, helped define the sound of Memphis soul as members of the Hi Rhythm Section at Royal Studios. As a child, Hodges found a steadying comfort in sound of the piano and his natural pull was soon guided by his father, a professional blues player. Following his older brothers into his father’s band, Charles also played jazz, rhythm and blues, and gospel around Memphis. After finishing high school, Charles got his big break when O.V. Wright asked him to join his touring band. Forced to leave the road due to illness, Hodges was courted by Willie Mitchell and invited to reunite with his brothers who had become members Mitchell’s studio house band. The addition of Charles’s expressive Hammond organ and Wurlitzer piano playing slowly transformed the group. This new sound helped Ann Peebles, Al Green and many others to the top the charts while simultaneously forging the unique soulful signature sound of Royal Studios and Hi Records. Reverend Hodges discussed the relationship between storytelling and music and his approach to accompanying a singer. His personal story highlights the integral role of family and a community of musicians in his development as well as the influence of Memphis in the melding of genres that became soul music. Charles articulated the creative power generated by the history and feel of a room and the role of people in the creation of that sound. Above all else, Reverend Hodges believed “a spirit” from a higher power and a familial love shared between musicians worked in tandem to provide the root of their enduring sound. Reverend Hodges spoke with me from behind his Wurlitzer at Royal Studios in Memphis.

CC: “Was it your dad and your mom who taught you how to play? Or did you pick it up on your own?”
RH: “…this is a really fascinating story. My aunt, one of my dad’s sisters, she had a piano in her house. We would go up on the weekend when he wasn’t working or doing things. And they would play cards and of course do a little drinking and stuff like that. They would put us to bed and I would hear a piano. My dad playing piano. So one day he decided to get a piano. He got a piano and he played and I used to love that sound. And the house caught on fire. So it destroyed the piano. So now, for a long time, I’m confused because I don’t hear this sound when I’m put to bed. I’m around six or seven years old, somewhere in there or even younger. One day when I was eleven years old, my dad bought another piano and he brought it in the house. When they go it settled where he wanted it, he got on it and started playing it. And just like something opened up in my head, ‘That’s the sound I used to hear when I was little.’ When he got off of the piano, I got on it and started banging on it and stuff…My dad didn’t bother me… As time progressed, I started picking out little things on the piano. And my dad never did bother me.”

“One day, I was on piano and my mom done had a hard day and she didn’t want to hear no noise because I’m more banging than playing. So she asked me to get off of it…But I really wanted to be on it. I had been in school and been through my hustling and bustling and school and stuff. I’m finding out now this piano is kind of settling me down. I had to come up with something as to how I could play this piano. So my spirit said to me, ‘Wait till your dad come home.’… So my mind wondered, ‘How am I gonna tell when he’s coming home and get on the piano? So it (spirit) kept talking to me, ‘Hear the door slam on the truck’ and he came in the backdoor. My mother would hear him and she would be getting his dinner ready. We would’ve eaten ours. So it (spirit) said, ‘Wait till you hear the door open.’ When I heard the kitchen door open, I got on the piano. Then my mom says, ‘Charles didn’t I tell you to get off that piano?’ And my dad said, ‘For what? How’s he gonna learn? Leave that boy alone and let him play.’ He would hear me do something wrong and he would say, ‘how did you do that?’ I would show him and he would get over my shoulder. He say, ‘Play it again.’ And I did and he’d hit my hand and take my hand back. And then he’d say, ‘Do it like this.’ That’s how I learned. He didn’t bother me until he knew this is what I wanted to do and I appreciated him for that. And that’s how we got started.”

CC: “You coming up in Germantown, were you not exposed to Beale Street? A lot of musicians say they were influenced by hearing stuff on Beale Street, but you were away from there.”

RH: “Nah, but we would catch the fifty-seven Collierville I think. It was a bus (laughs). A city bus would run from Memphis out to Collierville. And we would catch that bus in Germantown, come down on Beale Street and we went to the movies and stuff. And we would sneak around and try listen to this music…in different clubs. They knew that I played ‘cause I’d been playing, like I said, since I was sixteen, but they couldn’t let me come in, you know because they were serving the alcohol, unless I was playing. But like when Ray Charles and Ben Branch and these different guys, these big bands would come in and I would have to go and visit them. I would go up and they would say, ‘Charles you know we can’t let you, but come on, come on. But just stand close to the door.’ And I would hear them. Nah, I was definitely aware of it.”

CC: “When you were young, you knew music was something that calmed you down, but you also recognized very early on that it was going to be a career path for you…”
RH: “When I started traveling, my dad was the first one I went out with. I was about thirteen or fourteen years old. (Brothers) Leroy, the bass player on all those records (Hi Records) …and Teenie, his name was Mabon, but we called him ‘Teenie,’” they played with my dad’s band first. They left and formed another group called the Impalas. So I was going around with my dad and when he got tired of playing, he would set me up on the piano and I would play. When I got in high school, I loved the blues, always loved the blues, always will love the blues, but I wanted to play R&B. You know because I’m starting to hear different things on the radio. My dad played like the ‘Ki Ki Boogie,’ the B.B. King stuff, Bobby Bland, you know he played that stuff, but I wanted to do more like something like we would do with Al Green. I wanted to get with Willie Mitchell and play instrumentals stuff. …”

CC: “Is there any way you can articulate what that Hi-Rhythm Section ‘sound’ was? People talk about Memphis as this melting pot of country, blues, gospel, and all sorts of things that come together to make this kind of creole that is soul. Can you describe what that is?”

RH: “Yeah. It was a spirit. Our spirits. The drummer, he wasn’t a biological brother, but he was a spirit brother. Matter fact, Teenie, Leroy and I adopted him as our brother. Archie Turner on piano and Michael Allen, when he was with us and myself. Teenie, Leroy, Howard, and Hubby, we were spiritually brothers. We loved each other in way words cannot ever betray it. I can never tell you how much we loved each other. And by us being genuine in doing what we did, ‘cause didn’t any of us take music, we didn’t read music, it was something that came from our heart, from our soul, from our spirit. I knew what the bass player was gonna do. What the guitar player was gonna do. I knew what the piano player was gonna do. I knew what the drummer was gonna do. And they all knew what I was gonna do. And then when we did it, didn’t anyone get in anyone’s way…”

CC: “It has been said the Hammond organ is reminiscent of the human voice and out of all the instruments used in soul music it may be the most expressive. Is that something you feel? And my follow up is you are playing in this group with your brothers and your making this sound that defines Memphis. Yet you are so expressive on that instrument. Did you feel like that was a way for you to express yourself personally even though you are in a collaborative effort?”

RH: “Well, what really got me to playing like that, I like playing behind voices. I love lead singers and Al Green was the epitome of it to me. I used to love to hear what he say and then I would come back and compensate. You know. I would drive him so to say. If he was gonna get slack on me, that wasn’t gonna happen because I’m gonna be on him like, you heard that phrase, like a duck on a June bug. That was what I wanted to do. I wanted to make the lead singer more out front then myself, but I knew that I had to be in the background in order for it to happen… I would love to listen to the lyric, what he said. If he’s talking about a beautiful person or something, his love life, I would try to make my organ feel like that, you know. That’s how I capture that.”

CC: “It is amazing to me that the city of Memphis produced two of the greatest organ players of all time. Is there a sense that this city contributes somehow to the way that you play? I know you rightfully believe that it was the love between you and your brothers and your bandmates and the
spirit. But the fact that everybody came from Memphis and had a collective understanding of music, did that effect you guys at all?”

RH: “Yeah. Well you have to first understand Memphis. Memphis is a place where it was very racist. I’m not about race. I don’t see color. I might say ‘white,’ might say ‘black,’ or whatever. But in my spirit, I see people. I see human beings. This white man, Ray Franklin (helped Hodges into Memphis Music Union). He was the same way…And he would tell us and say, ‘Hey, this ain’t gonna be like this always.’ He’d say, ‘They gonna let people go where they want to and talk and walk with whoever they want to.’ And I think maybe in my music, I wanted to find a way to draw people together. You know music is a universal language. I was hip to that when I was a little boy. I felt that god wanted to use my organ to bring people more closer together. When you can do things like that, you stand a chance in moving to the next level.”

CC: “Al Green wrote this really fascinating essay decades ago about the certain sweetness that you had to your music and he attributed a lot of it to what we were just talking about, this longstanding connection to hard times for black people in America and for black people in the South. Do you agree with that? And is there a connection to all of that that comes out in the way that you guys were playing?”

RH: “Well, yeah I agree with it. I agree that there were hard times and still is matter of fact. But it’s not like it was back in the seventies and the sixties. But you know you need to go through something in order to know you need to do something about it. We can sit and look at things, but if you don’t go through it, you don’t experience it, you can walk away from it. Or you can say, ‘They need to do something better,’ but you keep on doing what you’re doing.”

RH: “But in our music. When we would have some rough times on the road, you know we had some rough times on the road, and different things would happen. We would just come back in the studio and say, ‘O.K. guys let’s forget about all this stuff that’s taken place, now let’s cut a record.’ And it might be there underneath, you know. What you feel on the inside is gonna come out one way or another and perhaps it came out in the music.”

CC: “So regardless of the troubles that were happening out in society, when you all could come here and play your music, you could express yourself and that somehow came out in the way that you were playing.”

RH: “It came out in a loving way. If you noticed we never recorded anything foul. Or negative. It was all about love. You know and it would just come out in the music.”

CC: “And where does that love come from? Is that connected to the church? Is that connected to the way you all were collectively raised?”

RH: “It’s connected to god. It’s connected to god. It’s connected to the higher being. It’s the spirit that dwells within us. Jesus said that if you worship god, you must worship him in spirit and in truth because he is a spirit. So when you can get in touch with that spirit and then you find out that it is real, like have and like we did, then we have no problem in letting the spirit do
things. Let me put it this way. The music that is done today, mostly, it’s like mechanical. They use Protools and all these things. The way we did it, if you had a song, ‘I Love My Baby,’ and you walked in the studio, if you had a guitar or just had a piece of paper. If you had a guitar, you would play. ‘This is the way I feel like it should go.’ We would get around you. We would listen to your story. And then, we’d go decide and we’d put the changes to it or the chords to it. Have you sing it and if it matched Willie would hear it, say, ‘O.K guys. That sounds good. Let’s try it.’ And then we would play it. There was no rehearsals. No rehearsals. We did it from the spirit. You told us your story. You didn’t even have to have it written on paper…we’d put music to it.”

CC: “For you all, playing music was a form of storytelling, a community activity.”

RH: “It is. That’s exactly what it is. It was our Rembrandt. We painted a picture with our music. That’s why it was so successful ‘cause we painted a Rembrandt. People could hear it. They couldn’t see it but they could hear it. And they could make it to be what they wanted it to be...Can you imagine the number of children that was conceived on that music. Because it was so beautiful, so loving, when they wanted to make love, they wanted to hear the music. It just takes you to another level. It was a spirit connection. We connected through the spirit. This is my first time seeing you, but I imagine you liked the music so we were spiritually connected through the music. There was something that you heard about this music that wanted you to do this interview with me. I am hoping and praying that you were sent by god because I believe that you was. Just because you don’t hear the music being played, but the seed has been planted. And the seed is growing.”

CC: “The music had this sexual, sexual is probably too strong a word, but loving. And so many write about this contradiction between the secular and sacred music and people that have to choose between one or the other. You never had to.”

RH: “I don’t choose between it because I know it’s music. I know it’s music. Whether it’s secular music or gospel music. I play organ in my church every Sunday. You know, I play different, but guess what, they love to hear me play. That’s what they want to hear. They want to hear me play...God give everyone ability to do something. He give everyone a talent. This is mine! This is my ability, the way I play, god allowed me to play that way. If he wanted me to play different, I believe I would play different...”

CC: “With all of the history of this place (Royal Studio) and all the music that has been created here. When you see an artist that comes here to record. Do you see this building inspire them? Do they play better than they would someplace else?”

RH: “I believe so...Just about everyone that come in the studio, they feel some kind of spiritual energy. Rod Stewart...Keith Richards, Bozz Scaggs. They come in here and they just feel energy to do something in this particular place. And when we do it, they can’t believe the outcome...Everyone that come in, they just love the feel that they are getting in this studio. I think it’s on sacred ground so they say.”

CC: “And you think it comes out in their performance? That feeling.”
RH: “Yes sir. I think it does. Just knowing that they are in Royal Studio. Just knowing where they are and they let the rest of it take over.”
Jeff Powell

After studying electrical engineering and music at the University of Missouri, Jeff Powell left behind a small rural town in his native state of Missouri and hitchhiked to Tennessee to enroll in the University of Memphis’s recording program. For the next thirty years Jeff produced, engineered and assistant engineered music in nearly every major studio in Memphis as well as working in London and Los Angeles among other cities. In recent years, Jeff has acquired one of the few remaining vintage lathes allowing him to cut vinyl from his home base at Sam Phillips Recording Service. Jeff is a natural storyteller with plenty of tales from his work with a wide breadth of artists from the Allman Brothers and Bob Dylan to the Afghan Whigs and Primal Scream. Jeff provided great insights into how recording studios can take on the personality of a city, how artists can be driven by a building’s history, and how the atmospheric feel of a place can physically and creatively alter sound. We also discussed the parallels between creating music and telling stories. Jeff’s understanding of the importance of the human element in making ‘real’ music was also illuminating. We met in his cutting room at Sam Phillips Recording Service in Memphis. During our interview, “Studio A” was being used to mix unreleased Elvis Presley recordings so naturally the temporal quality of music surfaced during our conversation.

CC: “How did you end up doing what you’re doing?”

JEFF: “The first time I ever went to a rock ‘n’ roll concert, I faked sick at my parents’ twenty-fifth wedding anniversary and stuffed my bed, climbed the fence from the cow pasture to my awaiting friend and went to the Checker Dome in St. Louis. When I walked in the building, Thin Lizzy was playing opening for Journey no less and it blew my mind. I’d never seen anything like it. I’d always been a huge music fan. My mother was a music teacher and the family was very musical anyway, but that blew my mind and I had to have something to do with that. The first thing was I wanted to be a rock star, but that was pretty clear, pretty quick that wasn’t going to
be the case even though I play. I was fascinated by the technology. I would look at those big soundboards at the live concerts I would go to and stare at the back of record albums and just think how cool that was. And how cool it would be to be there when it happened, to record things….There weren’t any recording studios as far as I knew in Missouri at that time as far as I knew…”

CC: “So you came from a small town in Missouri of three thousand people. So much of your job is being a listener. And I am mining these old biographies for examples like W.C. Handy and Sam Phillips talking about the sounds that they heard in Florence. Was that small town making you a better listener?”

JEFF: “We had one AM radio station called KPCR. Cow Pasture Radio. And it was literally in a barn in a cow pasture and my parents weren’t country music fans. I didn’t have the cool older brother who hit me to all the stuff. The music was pretty terrible growing up, actually. So, you know depending on where you driving around on the country road, wherever we could pick up KSU 95 out of St. Louis which is the classic rock station now. That’s where it all came from, you know. And going to rock shows and finding out about bands through friends and it was all vinyl and cassettes back in those days.”

CC: “Was there music in the town. People playing music in the town?”

JEFF: “Not really. Just square stuff. Church, WASP white-anglo- saxon-protestant all the way. Growing up in a small church too. I learned harmony and stuff doing that. Then there’s high school choir that I was in. But no, it was like they say in that movie, ‘I was abused as a child, mostly musically.’ I was late and when I went to college you know, ‘Bam’ there was everything and I soaked it all up like a sponge. All my new friends that I made there had all these different things I had never heard of. It was a running joke. They would say here is something you’ve never heard of and I soaked it up. Absorbed it all.…”

CC: “You then come to the University of Memphis, enroll in the program and end up finding your way into Ardent. Did Memphis as a town really inform your ear? And inform the way you hear music?”

JEFF: “Absolutely. More than any place I have been in the world. When I moved here, it was fascinating that you could go to any bar no matter big or small or whatever, there was always a band playing and they were always good…It’s still like that…I always tell people when the ask about Memphis, ‘You can go to a Holiday Inn buffet line and hear a band that’s better than most stuff you get in nightclubs in a lot of other places I’ve been. It’s real.”

CC: “In all of the interviews I’ve done, everyone always talks about ‘the real.’ What is that to you? Can you articulate what is real music to you?”

JEFF: “That’s a good question. I think it definitely correlates to what I call the chill factor. Things that you can’t fake. Things that get into you in a way that cause a chill down your spine or causes you to have goosebumps. I don’t know anybody who can fake that. I don’t know if the
best actor in the world could. But it washes over you and evokes emotion whether that’s joy or sadness. It’s anything in the music whether it be the words or the sounds that make it seem like it’s your own thing. It’s special. It’s your own interpretation of what or how it affects you. That’s what’s real to me. I’m always looking for it.”

CC: “You’ve recorded everywhere. London, New York, big cities, LA. Does Memphis have a realness factor unmatched by all those places?”

JEFF: “Absolutely. You know I’ve had a lot of great experiences and been really fortunate to travel around the world recording. There is, not just in the studios, because I’ve worked in all of them in Memphis, it’s the people, it’s the musicians and different configurations that you put them in. It’s taken me a long time to figure out that a studio really is a collection of the people that work there and that reflects why people come there to work. Way more than what kind of microphone you have or what kind of tape machine you have. And Memphis is known for that…The musicians are what make Memphis such a real place. They tend to do ‘head’ arrangements here. Which means they may scribble down the chords on a piece of paper and have the charts, but most of the time, they’re listening to each other. Whether it is a band that has played together for a long time or whether it’s people I’ve cast together as a producer. I think that’s a big part of the job of the producer is casting those characters…and that is part of what gives a sense of being real.”

CC: “Part of this project is connecting what you guys do in the studios to what the South is known for in literature terms. This great storytelling, but people are telling stories through sound. What the project is revealing is without engineers there’s just live music. The stories don’t get spread to other people. How do you see yourself in that process of storytelling through songs?”

JEFF: “I see it in both ways, even verbally telling stories and in song. You know when we get together, music producers and engineers and students and teaching. I was an adjunct professor for a while at U of M. But even when I work with clients, I tell stories all the time. People will ask about some record that I worked on and so I will end up telling some story or something that happened. But through song, that’s what we are doing. That’s what we’re getting paid to do is you’re making recordings. You get to be there when it happened and that’s there forever. I think about that a lot as more and more of some of the older musicians I’ve worked with in this town are passing away, you know, they’re not really gone. I can go hear them whenever I want to. You spoke of Charles Hodges, I was very close to Teenie, his brother. You know we talked on the phone all the time and he was close friends with my wife too, Susan Marshall. The day of his funeral, which was very sad, I had to come back into the cutting room and cut a vinyl record…I was cutting an old Anne Peebles reissue. And there he was. I was like wow, we just buried him a few hours ago and here he is so clear and so lifelike and so emotional. You know, it choked me up. It was a beautiful thing to realize he’s always going to be here. I can put this record on any time I want to and hear Teenie. And hear his little subtleties that he did that made him Teenie Hodges.”

CC: “Is that something that you have you always been conscious of? One of the things that keeps coming up is the temporal quality of a music. In many ways a recording is a time machine that
takes you not just to a different time, but often to a different place. If I am in New York City and I hear a song from Sun, I knew it came from Sun and from this time. Have you thought of those odd different world qualities of music?”

JEFF: “Oh yeah, very much so. They say that your sense of smell will trigger your most memories. You can smell something that you smelled as a child and remember a place. My grandma’s house you know. That kind of thing. I feel like music is the same way. I don’t know how you quantify it to say that smell is more than the emotion you get from music. But it’s absolutely the time of your life, the soundtrack of our life and that includes where were you when you first heard that. Or what song was playing when some event happened…”

CC: “You have recorded everybody in major cities around the world, is there something different about the way a southerner tells a story through music.”

JEFF: “Absolutely. And I can say that because I grew up in Missouri. My hometown, if I got in a car right now, I could get there in five and a half hours. It’s way different just that far North than it is here. And in a good way to me and I love it. Dare I say there is a difference in the race relations. The African American population is much higher here than where I grew up. And I think those cultures blending is definitely what started blues and rock ‘n’ roll. Everyone knows the history of how all of that started and you can argue it all came from Congo Square and up the river, but it’s true. Without the tumultuous past of the South and the civil war and all those things. It wouldn’t be what it is. Everything wasn’t nice and rosy and perfect here and it still isn’t. But it’s one of the things I love about this city because people express themselves about that through music. And it goes all over the world and it makes Memphis this crazy magical place that people want to come see…It’s different here and it’s a good different.”

CC: “You’ve said that there are even atmospheric qualities to Memphis, the heat and the lack of air conditioning in some recording studios affect the mood of the room. Can you elaborate on that?”

JEFF: “I think it’s something that isn’t talked about nearly as much. I’ve noticed it when I’ve worked in New Orleans. Between New Orleans and here, the air’s thicker. Without getting too much into the physical properties of it, but you know sound waves are moving through the air so whatever is going on in the air, is going to effect the sound. There is a ‘thickness’ historically to recorded music in New Orleans and Memphis. And in the South in general. I’m not sure when air conditioning became so popular in everyone’s home whether that was the fifties or sixties, but it was expensive you know. And again, recording studios were these places that most people couldn’t afford to go into. You had to be good enough to get a record deal to get the label to pay to get you in there. I think time of day. If you had to wait till the evening to record where it cooled off a little bit. The equipment was all tube stuff and it got hot. So you were literally sweating over your work. I think maybe in the studio, comfort might be overrated.”
**Luther Dickinson**

Born in Rossville, Tennessee and moving to North Mississippi in his formative teenage years, Luther Dickinson offers one of the most unique perspectives in the study. The son of “first-generation” rock ’n’ roller and Memphis piano great Jim Dickinson, Luther absorbed an education on the roots of music both at home and during his informal apprenticeship at the feet of North Mississippi hill country blues legends Junior Kimbrough, R.L. Burnside, and Otha Turner. Between work as a touring slide guitar player with bands like the Black Crowes and his owns solo projects, Luther fronts the North Mississippi All-Stars with his brother Cody. Luther’s thoughtful analysis of the role of “place” in his creative development, music as a form of storytelling and part of a southern oral tradition, the need for a perpetuated repertoire as roots, and musicianship as a craft best passed down from hand to hand, proved to be invaluable. Luther’s ability to connect the human element of musical history and tradition with contemporary sounds became a meaningful turning point in the project. We met at Sputnik Sound in Nashville, Tennessee.

CC: “You were born in Tennessee, but you came to North Mississippi at kind of that critical time in your life. Those early teenage years. Can you talk a little bit about that time period?”

LD: “You know my father Jim and my mom, they were Memphians, they grew up in Memphis, but they raised us in the rural areas outside of Memphis. Rosville…The cool thing about Rosville that struck me and one of the first things that made me focus in on Mississippi Fred McDowell, besides he was a great guitar player, but I was really young when I saw on the back of a record that he was from Rosville. I thought ‘Oh man, that’s cool, this guitar player on this record is from our little bitty town.’ And we didn’t even live in town then. We just lived in the woods on a gravel road.”

LD: “My brother and I, we just grew up playing by ourselves…I remember one time we were in a ditch beating on the dirt with sticks singing ‘Rock around the Clock.’ Mom and Dad came walking up and dad said, ‘Yeah, Yeah, that’s pretty cool, but you got the lyrics wrong.’ He was a stickler for lyrics. And we were going to this strange little school and that’s why we moved to Mississippi, for the school system. The famous Mississippi school system. We moved to Hernando Mississippi when I was twelve.”
LD: “It was right around that same period of time, my dad was doing this film called, *Crossroads* about a guitar player studying the blues. That movie really turned me on. I grew up around the blues from my dad, his friends and the record collection. I was even playing it as part of the early things we learned like Furry Lewis and Bo Diddley as young guitar players. That’s what they taught us. But that was my parents’ music you know. But that movie! It is so funny to say, but seeing Ralph Macchio in that movie *Crossroads*, I remember asking my dad, ‘Yeah, that blues is pretty cool, you got any tapes I could listen to?’ And he turned me on to the early stuff. So, I was twelve years old, we moved to a new place where I didn’t know anybody and that’s when I really started practicing guitar. It was the perfect zeitgeist of everything coming together…Of summer of just practice, practice, practice. I trained myself to practice. I practiced before school. I practiced at school. I would sleep after school and stay up all night practicing. Go to school and sleep, come home and play guitar. Just play guitar, guitar, guitar. You know I was listening to punk rock and heavy metal, but also I was listening to John Lee Hooker, Howlin’ Wolf, Muddy Water, Jimmy Reed, all the classic blues stuff. Right living there in Mississippi. It was really cool.”

“To backtrack, my dad and his friends The Bohemians in Memphis in the mid-sixties, they were part of the Memphis country blues explosion. When Furry Lewis, Bukka White, Reverend Robert Wilkins, Fred McDowell, and Nathan Beauregard, all these cats were rediscovered and pulled out of obscurity and pulled out of segregation. The Bohemians and the blues masters, rediscovered, came together and started doing the Memphis country blues festivals in the Overton Park Shell. And that was awesome, man. You had the first generation rock ‘n’ rollers turned folkie mixing with these blues masters and they were so glad to get to know one another. They were playing in coffee houses and different gigs. So, we had learned a lot of that repertoire, we were exposed to a lot of that repertoire and that phenomenon from my dad and his friends.”

CC: “Through your dad, you were exposed to so many different kinds of music. He was producing all sorts of stuff from the Replacements to everybody. Still your life has been drawn to the blues. What is it about it that makes you stay so connected to it. Even though you can play any type of music, you have turned blues into different things, you are still at the heart…. Can you articulate that?”

LD: “Right. You know growing up around dad, he taught us. Once we started playing music together, he started teaching us, he taught us all types of roots music. That was how he thought he should train us. Blues, early rock, R&B, gospel, Dixieland, a little jazz. He taught us as much as he could. He exposed us to a lot. His record collection was amazing and it’s still amazing. He would tell you, ‘This record collection is a wealth of knowledge.’ It’s funny, I still am drawn to the same records that really struck me when I was a kid. Early Bo Diddley, early Muddy Waters, early Howlin’ Wolf, early Jimmy Reed. I just love that stuff.”

CC: “Can you say what it was about it?”

LD: “Yeah. What happened that blew my mind, was that a few years later, in the mid-nineties, Fat Possum records turned on the whole world to Junior Kimbrough’s Juke Joint, R.L. Burnside, and Otha Turner. I was making my way there. I knew Otha from the Memphis festival scene. I
would see him every year and I got to be closer and closer to his family in my teenage years… but I had never seen R.L. perform…never been to Junior’s…but Fat Possum man, they turned us all out…After I got out of high school, I delved in… I was like, ‘This North Mississippi blues scene is amazing.’ Through my own personal experience. Once I started playing guitar for Otha, he was so thrilled because I had been studying Fred McDowell. Little did I know that Otha and Fred…. Fred lived in Rossville and moved to Tate County just like we did and he and Otha were neighbors and best friends.”

LD: “Otha kind of took me in….and later Kenny Brown hired me in 1997 to go on the road with R.L. and Cedric and I had never been anywhere. I’d been to Fayetteville, Nashville, Oxford, and New Orleans. That was the scope of my experience. Man, R.L. Burnside took me through Philadelphia and New York City, up to Boston, Toronto, Montreal, down through Chicago. It blew my mind. This is the music from home. This is the blues music that was so personal to me. I didn’t know that people in Boston would line up around the block in the snow to see it. We were opening up and playing with R.L. It blew my mind and changed my life. And Kenny Brown taught me how to tour and ever since then I have been on the road. Which really changed the whole game.”

“There were a few wonderful years where I was home studying, hanging out with these people and I learned the music they taught me. It was funny man. Junior Kimbrough would sit down and teach you by hand. He taught Gary Burnside how to play note for note what he wanted and Gary would teach me. R.L. would just let you jam with him. R.L. would invite Cody and I to play at Big Mamma’s birthday parties… and R.L. would sit in the lawn chair and request that we play his songs and then just sit there and laugh at us while we played them. But that was his type of teaching”

“So it was these personal experiences of going down to Junior Kimbrough’s. Junior Kimbrough’s Juke Joint in the mid-nineties was southern blues heaven. It transcended the southern experience. Because here it was, beautiful underaged girls from Ole Miss dancing with gnarly old farmers and big church ladies down at Junior Kimbrough’s Juke Joint and they’re selling moonshine in the parking lot and the music is so wild and psychedelic. You know the art reflects the culture reflects the art and the music. You know, what is it about the North Mississippi Hill Country blues that makes it so droney or so timeless, or so different or unique? Well it’s modern, its current and its drenched in corn whiskey you know which is a whole other type of vibe. It’s like music based on an experience. The feeling of being in that situation makes you play a certain way. And you know me, I grew up taking LSD and experimenting. The wasted youth and lost apprenticeship years, but it made sense to me. It’s all going to the same place. Whether you are playing with Phil Lesh or playing with R.L. Burnside or Charlie Musselwhite, you know, we are all trying to find same plateau of, not enlightenment, but a feeling of transcendence within the music.”

LD: “What was so wild for us and blew my mind and my father’s mind was that he learned firsthand from Bukka White and Furry Lewis and then we learned firsthand from R. L. Burnside and Otha Turner. And you know he (Jim Dickinson) didn’t think that would happen. He would say that was a miracle for his sons to have that same experience that he had. Because roots music be it bluegrass, or gospel, or blues, or rock n roll, or whatever, it’s a craft, it’s a trade and it’s best taught passed on hand to hand you know. You can study it by taking the record back and
hitting rewind, but it also really helps to sit there and watch somebody and feel it coming over you. And have that just pure feeling of surrendering yourself to the experience… And idolizing this guitar player and just like studying it and sing along to every word. You know that’s how tradition and craft and that experience is passed on.”

CC: “Did you recognize as a young man, when you were becoming a part of this community, what a gift it was? Did you recognize it while it was going on?”

LD: “Definitely. It was an amazing, mind-blowing experience because I was aware of the phenomenon. I grew up being a student of my father and his friends and the lessons and the life that they built from the exposure and the education from the bluesmen that they were around. So when it happened to us, I totally cherished it. The reason it meant so much was because Otha Turner was such an amazing person. He was like a grandfather to me. He was so kind and so wise and so much fun to be with. He was so exceptional. There’s no one on earth like him. It is amazing that his granddaughter Sharde has kept the fife and drum tradition alive and she is an amazing musician. But like me, you know, she is a person of our time and the music evolves within us. That’s what keeps it alive and healthy.”

LD: “Otha. Man. He lived on a self-sufficient farm. He had a very disdainful perspective on modern life. He was an amazing American experience just sitting on his front porch… Like my dad. He was an amazing person. A first generation rock ‘n’ roller. A session musician who played with Bob Dylan and Aretha Franklin and the Rolling Stones. Albert King and Albert Collins…produced records…And a great storyteller and teacher of Americana and rock ‘n’ roll history. I always knew it was special and cherished every moment of it and listened. I just sat at the feet of the elders and encouraged them to talk or play and sing. That’s why it feels so good to keep them alive and keep them with me you know.”

CC: “So it is as much about the people of the place. Could you have had that same collection of people in a different setting and would you have come up with the same thing?”

LD: “It’s funny traveling the world and you get to know different cities. And it’s the people, that make up the communities, that make up how you feel about a place. Getting to grow up around R.L. Burnside and Otha Turner and hear their ancient wisdom and the blues poetry that they lived in. The vernacular from which their art sprang, it was totally unique to that time…What happened to us, we hit the road. We put out our first record, our life changed and we hit the road, and we lost touch with everyone. Then everyone started dying. Junior, R.L., Otha, our father. It’s terrible, but the music keeps…O.K. so we left home, but every night we play music from home on a stage and that music is our home. We take this all over the world and put this out there and share it with people. That’s what I learned from R.L. He could be in Boston, but it felt like he was sitting on his porch playing guitar and telling jokes, you know. So we carry this with us and try to keep that feeling alive.”

LD: “The music can change and evolve, but what has to be protected in traditional roots music is the repertoire. My dad and his friends were song collectors. R.L. Burnside was a genius with lyrics. And in blues communities, people do different versions of the same song. Like back
home, if you play a party in North Mississippi you have to play ‘All Night Long’ no matter who you are or who you’re playing for. And everybody does it different and that’s the cool thing. Or ‘Poor Black Mattie.’ Junior did ‘Poor Black Mattie’ different than R.L. Burnside, different from R.L. Boyce, different from Randy Burnette. And how ancient are those lyrics, you know? Who did those originally? Or ‘Shake ‘em on Down’ from Fred McDowell. My version of ‘Shake ‘em on Down’ I took from Bukka White, Fred McDowell and R.L. Burnside and put all my favorite parts together. So it’s the repertoire that has to live on and be protected.”

CC: “In interviews you’ve mentioned the importance of coming across Alan and John Lomax’s work. One of the things that keeps coming up in these interview is this idea of what’s ‘real.’ So for you, is the ‘real’ that repertoire?”

LD: “One of the first records I grew up listening to was Children’s Album from the Alan Lomax’s Sounds of the South, Atlantic compilation, a five record series that is still the basic foundation of what I like, my tastes and my aesthetic. It is still my favorite sounding record. And Ry Cooder, he was into that record. He and dad had that in common. Chris Robinson from the Black Crowes, we had that in common. We knew all the same songs…This collection of music touches on all of the branches of the southern roots music tree and the repertoire. It’s just an amazing experience. You know, my father passed those records down to me and I still go back to it for reference.”

CC: “We talk about in literature this idea that the South was built on an oral tradition of storytelling. You are not writing books, but you are very much a storyteller not just with lyrics but even with the sounds you make. Are you conscious of that? Are you conscious of keeping stories going?”

LD: “Yeah definitely. You know. My father grew up pre-T.V. listening to the radio and he just had a great way with words. He had a great memory for words. He was a stickler for lyrics. R.L. Burnside was a genius with words, man. He knew so many songs, so many jokes, so many poems and stories. He was just a wordsmith and extremely intelligent fellow. Hilarious. And Otha Turner, just spoke in that ancient vernacular that sounds strange, but once you look it up, it’s more proper than normal modern slang. Some of the really old rural sayings go way back. Beautiful, beautiful language. So growing up around that, the language of my elders is such a wonderful thing and I draw from it as a songwriter. I draw from conversations we had. Advice, Otha, R.L. or my father gave me…”

LD: “But what happened to me after everyone started passing away. …It dawned on me that Casey Jones, Stagger Lee, John Henry, once upon a time, they were just men who walked the earth. It was the songs and the folk legends that made them folk legends and folk heroes. So I said, ‘Man, I’m gonna write about my people.’ You know I am going to write songs about my community. Write about Kenny Brown, Otha, these hilarious people. And after dad passed away, I wrote a whole album just celebrating he and the whole cycle of life that we are experiencing. I think that’s when I really stepped into the tradition of southern songwriting tradition. Actually participating in the tradition. It is one thing to play all those songs in the repertoires that our
elders collected and passed down, but then to write something that moves people and celebrates people from home and means something real to me, that really feels good.”

CC: “So in a sense, ‘real’ is also a connection back to the place of home.”

LD: “It’s a funny thing. You know I mentioned the music we play on stage night after night is our home. But also the music connects us to our elders that we played this music with. I always, always feel my father’s presence when we play and sometimes I can feel R.L. or even people that you didn’t know. I think the musical spirits like the music and they come to it. And you know I’m conscious of it and I’ve got the antenna up and so you draw them in and so it is a deep experience for me, even if it’s just in my own head, you know. Singing songs from home that I learned from my elders or songs I wrote about home for and about my elders it just means a lot to me, you know. And some music is just playful rock ‘n’ roll or just jump blues or whatever, but we’ve learned that it has its place, but sometimes you just have to keep it real.”

CC: “Where does the guitar come into this tradition of storytelling other than something to tell the stories over. Your slide guitar work is so expressive, do feel like it’s another form of communication? Not just background for the song, but communicating something deeper with your playing? Particularly slide guitar.”

LD: “I love writing songs and playing songs that I like and you have to sing to do such. And I am not a natural singer…but I can sing with my guitar especially with the slide. The slide is so great at emulating the voice and drawing from all of the emotions hidden within these twelve frets. There is so much to work with in between the cracks. Like Thelonious Monk on the piano, he was trying to vibrate those microtones. And slide guitar will just give you goosebumps like voice.”

CC: “Is there a place for you that you draw special inspiration?”

LD: “We built a studio that was my dad’s dream in Independence, Mississippi. The Zebra Ranch. It was an old barn that had been converted into a ramshackle house that they bought and we sound proofed it and we made so much music there. I call it now the Zebra Ranch Electric Church and Fellowship Hall because we made so much music. You just go in there and fall into it. It is so great to have a physical structure that you can go and that you have to go work there. It is a powerful thing to have that actual physical home base. I don’t go there to do nuts and bolts songwriting, shedding or rehearsing. We go there to record music and that’s what it’s meant to do you know. I love that place dearly.”

CC: “Is that sound…obviously you knew what you were doing when you put the place together, but is it feeling a connection to your dad that brings out extra sweetness or soulfulness?”

LD: “Definitely, yeah. The whole place is built around his aesthetic… The whole place was dad’s shrine that he built to himself that he collected. And built around the aesthetic of order within the chaos. You walk in there and yeah, you definitely feel dad’s spirit. There are pictures
and portraits of him. There’s this one beautiful portrait of him that Duff painted and sometimes when things are going a little haywire, the portrait will just jump off the wall (laughs).”

CC: “One thing that comes up are these spatial and temporal qualities to music. It can take you to a different place and take you to a different time. When you go on the road, next week you are in Europe, you are taking your home with you. But there is also this idea that music is also your place. Do you ever feel like what you do, this is my place in this world? I’m sticking my flag in this world with music. Does that make any sense. I know it’s a weird question.”

LD: “No, it definitely makes sense. You said it well. It’s like it doesn’t matter where you are as long as you have your guitar. It is like your family. Like when my wife and children come meet me, I feel at home. As long as we’re together, I’m at home. Or as long as I am playing my guitar, I have a sense of comfort and a rooted sense of home from which I can spread you know…..”

CC: “Taking us all the way to the beginning of the interview, you mentioned playing with sticks in the dirt. A lot of the music we think of as being the essence of American music comes from rural spaces. You came from a rural space, you were a part of community that came from a rural space. Can you elaborate on that connection? We think of Handy and the birds in his biography as his first music. Did where you came from tune your ear to hearing a certain way?”

LD: “Definitely. You know when you hear the train blowing in the distance or you hear the birdsongs in the morning or the cicadas and the bugs at night. Or you smell that air. I was hosing off my daughter’s Radio Flyer wagon. And at the studio we have my dad’s old Radio Flyer wagon. It’s rusted, but it’s from like World War II era. Something about the smell of the water on the thing, it took me back to childhood. And you hear those sounds and it is a beautiful thing to be able to draw upon that. So you try and give those experiences to your kids…”

LD: “When I first got a guitar, my mom talked my dad into tuning it to an open chord and showing me Bo Diddley. That’s still the main tuning I use. Open, not standard, but open. Just striking that takes me back to being five years old….I think definitely great music can be born from urban experience as well, but so much of American history, the music our generations grew up fascinated with, it’s all about moving to town. You know what I mean? Be it Johnny Cash or Robert Johnson or Muddy Waters. It’s the combination. That’s the magic of it. None of the music that we love stayed there. Even Doc Watson. Doc Watson was an electric guitar player playing hillbilly jazz when he went to his first folk festival and realized there was an audience and appetite for that homestyle music that he grew up playing with all his neighbors. So he became like the Carter Family. Like A.C., he became a song collector and went around and collected all the songs and became Doc Watson. But he travelled the world doing so. It’s a combination of having that upbringing and then having the gumption to carry it forth. World boogie is coming.”
Spooner Oldham

Already touring the southern college circuit as a quiet teenaged ace on the Wurlitzer electric piano, Spooner Oldham was an experienced musician when he started hanging out with Tom Stafford, Billy Sherrill and Rick Hall above Stafford’s family drugstore in Florence, Alabama. The group of aspiring songwriters and musicians would form the foundations of FAME music publishing which eventually spawned the key creative forces behind both FAME and Muscle Shoals recording studios (Guralnick 179). Born Dewey Lyndon Oldham in Center Star, Alabama, Spooner, by the age of eighteen, was playing organ and piano on FAME’s earliest recordings including breakout hits by Arthur Alexander and famously adding his organ to later successes like Percy Sledge’s “When A Man Loves A Woman” and Wilson Picket’s version of “Mustang Sally” both released in 1966. Although Oldham wrote hits of his own with partner Dan Penn, he was best known for his work as a sideman with a jaw-dropping list of credits which include work with Bob Dylan, Aretha Franklin, Neil Young, Ry Cooder, Linda Ronstadt, J.J. Cale, and Jackson Browne to name just a few. Apart from Oldham’s unmatched experiences in popular music and his vital role as one of the architects of the FAME and Muscle Shoals “sound,” he was important to this study as the counterargument to romantic notions of the role of “place” in the creative process. For every claim by Wayne Jackson that the Mississippi River makes you “funky,” Spooner sheepishly declared he gets everything he needs from his own “fingers and brain.” Oldham also reinforced the recurring theme that music is a part of an oral tradition often passed through family generations. And, while he did not subscribe to mystical power of place, Oldham did acknowledge the inexplicable amount of talented and ambitious musicians that populated the Shoals area during his formative years. I met the 2009
Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee for lunch and an interview at the Joe Wheeler State Park in Rogersville, Alabama.

CC: “When we talk about where you are from, this Florence and North Alabama area, we think about W.C. Handy and Sam Phillips and in their biographies, they talk a great deal about the sound of the place. Before you even get to Muscle Shoals and help create that sound, you are from Center Star, Alabama. Can you think back to when you were a kid and what the sound of that place was like apart from music?”

SO: “When I first started hearing music live, my dad was in a band with some brothers and friends. So as a youngster, a little toddler, I got to hear a band in the house and out in the yard. I think about Ron Howard’s statement when somebody said, ‘What was it like to be a child actor growing up?’ And he said, ‘Well I thought everybody was a child actor.’ So I felt like everybody had a band in there house which I later learned that wasn’t the case. I adapted pretty young to the sounds of bands close up. And that was good for me I think. It didn’t frighten me you know… My grandmother and granddaddy Oldham in Wheaton Heights, Alabama a lot times they’d (father’s band) play there in the living room or out under a shade tree in the spring outside. Yes, so that’s where I first heard a lot of music I guess. Of course daddy’s career (in music) was interrupted by World War II, he went off to that.”

CC: “What did your dad do for a job?”

SO: “Well he was nineteen when he volunteered for the army. He was a paratrooper and went to the Battle of the Bulge. So he didn’t have much of a career life. I think he was headed for the music business. They had auditioned for the Grand Ole Opry, which was a big deal back in those days, and passed and offered a RCA recording contract. I said, ‘Dad, you all ever record?’ Only one song at a real local radio station. They paid five dollars and recorded one song. I think my mom has the acetate, but it’s all scratched… So when he came home from the war, he had gotten hit in the head over there and it formed a tumor. And after a year at home, it hemorrhaged and paralyzed his right arm and leg. So he had to give up dreams of music. Which is sort of sad. He went to business school and got his certificate in accounting, but never did anything with it. He got a job with Alabama Highway Patrol as a radio operator.”

CC: “So for you, really early, on this idea of being a musician as a professional was laid in your head.”

SO: “Well, you know I didn’t know all the possibilities. I just knew that I wanted to play music and write songs and do recordings with singers. That was the initial inspiration and that happened pretty young. I remember when I was maybe fifteen or sixteen, I what you call overdubbed the Hammond organ on ‘You Better Move On,’ the Arthur Alexander record. Which was one of the earlier records out of the Shoals area. And then the next one I over dubbed on was ‘Steal Away,’ a Jimmy Hughes record, a Hammond organ. And that was in the early days of overdubbing. But I played along with the band that was the house band at FAME.”
SO: “I remember looking at the record industry charts and ‘You Better Move On’ was a ‘breakout release’ in Baltimore. That was the first notice of that record. I thought that’s interesting, you know that’s a long way from here and it’s not the South. And the next thing I remember as far as music being a universal language kind of thing was that the Rolling Stones and Beatles started covering Arthur’s songs, like ‘You Better Move On.’ And they were youngsters, The Beatles and Rolling Stones. I thought well, I’m in that same age bracket and they’re way over there and we’re talking the same language really. They like what we’re doing, and vice versa. So my world got small pretty quick. Large and small at the same time. That was good.”

CC: “Can you talk about your first piano and how your basement became a place where you went and practiced and what I think you referred to as ‘a private heaven’ at one time. And also the other influences. I’ve read where you have mentioned you were hearing church music, the Grand Ole Opry on the radio, you were hearing rhythm and blues, Ray Charles, Jerry Lee Lewis, all sorts of stuff. If you could talk about how that came into your consciousness.”

SO: “I remember getting my first piano in Center Star, with parents blessing. Me and Bill Patton and another friend, we’re gonna get it down in the basement. We got down the steps, and got down to the entrance of the basement and it wouldn’t fit the door. So I went upstairs and asked mom and dad, ‘Can I knock out a couple of blocks in the wall so it could fit in the door?’ We got down there and set up… I think that was my first songwriting kind of efforts… It was sort of puppy love stuff. I was young, I was fifteen, sixteen. I remember one was called, ‘Sweet on Him’ … I asked my sister Judy if she would sing it, learn it and she sang it. Then I put it in my piano bench under there and hide it really. I didn’t really want to share it with the world. Didn’t want anyone to know what I was writing really… It was fun just to escape into my own little heaven almost. Me and the sound of the piano and your brain going trying to create words and thoughts. So that was a good work place for me starting out.”

CC: “When you were teaching yourself the piano in that basement, what was some of the stuff you were trying to figure out? Or did you gravitate toward making your own music?”

SO: “I think when I got the piano in the basement, I pretty much went right to making my own music. Of course I learned, like guitarists, they seem to learn ‘Wildwood Flower’ as one of their first. Me, as a piano player, the first song that I probably learned was ‘Last Date’ by Floyd Cramer. A lady friend in Center Star told me recently that she remembers a cakewalk at the little school we went to. We’d walk around box lunches, I forget the strategies of it, but the music would stop and you’d get to eat the box lunch you stopped in front of. So I was playing ‘Last Date’ I think when all that happened. But I was influenced by the radio. Jerry Lee Lewis, ‘Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On.’ Elvis Presley was starting to come around. I remember on the old yellow school bus, I was about in the eighth grade. I got on the bus and all these girls had these yellow flowers with black ink. I got somebody to share it with me and let me look at it. It said, ‘Elvis Presley, Sheffield Community Center’ a certain night and time. And I’m thinking, ‘Well the boys don’t have one, how did this happen?’ Somebody was out doing some promotion, probably Judd Phillips. So I listened to him. I always loved Ray Charles’s music. His writing and his playing and his singing. And some country music which would have been the Grand Ole
Opry radio. And you could get in the car and flick over to John R and Hoss Allen at WLAC in Nashville. They were playing that rhythm and blues. They were white guys, but playing some deep blues stuff. So I was listening to everything I could hear. I didn’t buy records then so it was by way of either T.V. or radio that I heard most of my music.”

CC: “Your career is about helping people tell their stories. You are arranging, you’re creating your own sounds and adding your touch to help tell things through music. Is that skill of listening really important to the community activity of a band? The ability to listen to one another.”

SO: “Me, being a songwriter of sorts, I understand if someone’s going to play my song, then they have to listen to what I am saying or trying to say. So as a player, a sideman, I always try to put myself inside the song or part of it. Sometimes it was easy sometimes not. Like Bob Seeger for instance. I didn’t play on many of his recordings. But he used to get out his guitar and sing you the song. In the meantime, we’re writing the chord chart. And the next time we’d play it through with him and two or three times, you got your record. Some people it was real easy. They don’t labor the thing. Neil Young was good that way. Lotta names I could throw out, but the thing is, it’s a communal effort and as far as we’re all going for the same end result, which is to make the song sound good and the guy singing it sound good. And I get some of that from my mom, Marie. She was fifty years hairdressing. I was around her beauty shop a lot. And you know, while they’re in there, they want to tell her their life story. It’s just the getting together sometimes is all it takes to get the wheels rolling.”

CC: “We talked about that early experience in the basement. Is there a place as you got older, you went to find inspiration? A place to write or a certain piano you would go to?”

SO: “Place and inspiration. Dan Penn and I wrote a lot of songs together through the years and it would vary. There would always be a good piano. That was the starting point and he had a good guitar. Those were the two thing, pleasant sounds. The room really I guess didn’t matter that much you know. Just getting together and try to write was half the battle.”

CC: “Meeting you for the first time, you are such a humble, quiet guy. When you play the Hammond organ, is that really a way for you to express yourself in a different way. You’re really talking through that organ?”

SO: “The Hammond organ, yeah it speaks for me and to me. I found little booklet in a dumpster…it was a little pamphlet about Hammond organs. I got to reading it. Said it was a clock company and they decided to build an organ. They built an organ. Then they measured what they had done, the tone variables. 265,000 potential tone variables. So, yeah, you can play and make your sound right here with these little buttons. So yeah in a way you are speaking through tones. Find the tone that you are comfortable with on that song. Each song may have a different tone. If you get comfortable and breathe easy and say, ‘Oh, I can live with that. Seems to fit.’ Then yeah, it’s fun. Then three or four or five minutes of playing along with that song and pleasant tones to your heart and ears. Yeah. That’s a moment, that’s magic to me.”
CC: “We talked about instruments, but we have to talk about the room. And a lot of people talk about the studios in Muscle Shoals. Is that a real thing that the room has a sound? Or as you and I discussed at lunch, a product of the people coming together?”

SO: “Different rooms probably do have different sounds, but I think as a player and your instrument go in that room, you adapt to that room immediately. You should be able to. There’s a lot of ways to look at that theory of rooms and sounds and people. To me, the making of a hit record has a lot of factors. It’s probably a good studio and whoever operating it. They may have minimal equipment or the best of all of it, but nevertheless they’re working with what they’ve got. Same with the players. We’re gonna, you know, make the best of this. Even if it’s not wonderful, make it wonderful. So, you can work with a room through your heart and your mind and soul, and your fingers. I don’t necessarily trust a room to give me what I need. I gotta get that myself you know.”

CC: “These conversations with musicians has raised the ideas that music has time and space qualities to it. Do certain songs take you back to different places when you hear them? Or if you are on the road and you play a certain song, does it take you back here. Do you think about coming back to Alabama? (Explanation of Luther Dickinson’s idea about songs and home). So your sound is so connected to here. When you are off on the road with Neil Young and you play your Wurlitzer do you feel reconnected to here?”

SO: “That’s a deep question. Of course, connection with this area is forever embedded into my makeup because I spent so much time here. It would be difficult to take it away from me. Probably under torture, it wouldn’t go away (laughs). So it goes with me everywhere I go. It’s a natural thing. And I don’t ever think about it, being a part of this area, when I’m playing somewhere else.”

CC: “It’s just you.”

SO: “It’s me. With that regard, I tell people that ask me about making records and studios and all that blah, blah, blah, I say, and I believe this with all my heart and soul. You take the right group of people and instruments anywhere in the world, Iceland, cut a hit record. You got go there thinking, ‘We’re gonna do this good.’ Attitude is a big part of it.”

CC: “So in the end, it comes down to the people, their connection, the musicianship. More than any sort of mythical or magical thing in the air.”

SO: “Right. Right. Now some places may make it easier. For instance. I’ve never done it, but if I went to Motown, which I respect so many of their recordings and records, their artists and songwriters, producers and arrangers. It would be interesting to go there because you’re taking yourself from Alabama, for instance to Michigan…So yeah, you’d feel the room. You’d feel the vibe of past things. But that’s just called inspiration. That’s not necessarily borrowing anything or expecting anything from the building.”

CC: “So that is primarily myth.”
SO: “Well you know I can’t say that because we humans are so odd that way. They might have a fetish or be obsessive compulsive. Or whatever drives them. I don’t know anybody like that, but they could be driven by a force that says, ‘I have got to be there to do this.’ You know. ‘I can’t do it anywhere else.’ I don’t know anybody like that, but I believe it could happen that way.”

CC: “Here is an equally abstract question. You worked so hard to create from your heart, your ears and fingers this sound that is so identifiable. For some, that sound actually becomes their own place. Does your sound become your place in this world?”

SO: “I just know when I go to a recording studio or play a live gig, I just hope people will like what I play. And appreciate from whence it comes and where it came from. Or not. Just so that I am blending in and fitting. Noticeable or unnoticeable it doesn’t matter to me. If they notice me as a person and they are liking the sounds. That has always been my thing. The sound is utmost to me. If you’ve got the colored hair or their hair on fire or whatever. Guitars thrown across the stage. It don’t move me really you know. Sounds do move me.”

CC: “What moves you musically? What music still really moves you?”

SO: “A lot of it has stayed the same through the years. For instance, Ray Charles Modern Sounds of Country and Western Music is one of my favorite albums. I still like it just like I did back then. There’s many recordings and songs like that in the thirties or forties. If I liked a song growing up, I can turn it on today and still like it just as much. Some things never change for me. And as far as the new things, I am anxiously waiting to like something (laughs). You know. I’d love to hear something I like. I am always ready for that.”

CC: “Is there a thread that runs through the things you like? A feel? Is the fact that it makes you feel something?”

SO: “Well, listen I love, and I forget who did it, ‘It Don’t Mean A Thing If It Ain’t Got That Swing.’ That’s especially applicable to me with up tempo thing, you know. Slower things, it’s harder to find what makes them swing. Sometimes it’s the words and music. Sometimes you can hear a song and not hear the words almost, it can ring so true to you, to your wellbeing. It’s an abstract thing to me to this day, what makes it all meld together. It’s fascinating to me.”

CC: “I’m guessing I know the answer to this already, but have you taken a moment to think about your legacy? You really can’t listen to the radio without hearing something you played on, wrote, influenced or played with the person.”

SO: “I really don’t think too much about my legacy. One thing I’ve noticed, looking back a little bit. One thing I do like as I’ve played with several first-timers, their first album that did well. You know I’m not going to start naming names, but several. So I like that. I like the pioneering spirit of this maybe something people aren’t familiar with, hearing for the first time in an odd little way. So I like that part of whatever I might have done. And only I may know that you know ‘cause I’m not spreading the word on it. I like that. I also like other people’s legacies. You know,
the Grady Martins, the Floyd Cramers, Hal Blaine. I mean, the list goes on forever of people who made a lot of great records in my mind. So what made them. What made their sound. They were just there everyday. They were playing what they loved to do. Or, you can’t say that across the board, ‘what they loved to do.’ Sometimes it’s almost like you’ve got to talk yourself into loving something, you know. But you make it work. And that’s the beauty of a good player, they make it work. So that’s all I keep trying to do.”

CC: “You had mentioned listening to Jerry Lee Lewis coming up. And when you go to his biography, he says to people who want to attribute his sound to the influences around Ferriday, Louisiana, that no, it was his talent that was the key. And it would have come out anywhere. Do you feel that you are a product of where you came up in Center Star and your experience. Or could you have come up anywhere and had the same feel and sound?”

SO: “I don’t know if where I lived… I’m sure it played a part in how I play and what I think and how I do. Although, a lot of my listening in my formative years was radio and black and white television…. There’s a point that I do appreciate about my upbringing and where I lived was there wasn’t many places to play for youngsters. Or even the grownups for that matter. So what happened is these well-known bands would play high schools. Or if you played an instrument well and were really good and got nowhere to play, you’d go to a talent show. It wasn’t so much about winning that twenty-five dollar prize, but you met players from joining counties that were good. So you had sort of a comparison chart of what was good for the area. Some of the people I met during that, I still know. They’re still great and still good music people. I don’t know how the rest of the world had that growing up thing and what they dealt with as a player. But yeah, that’s one thing I noticed may have been different.”

CC: “I imagine Center Star was a pretty small town. Did that have something to do with it. There wasn’t much to do besides music?”

SO: “I think any child having a parent that’s willing to help their child get an instrument. If they’re interested in something, somehow try to provide a beginning, something they can practice on. That’s a big help and a big starting point for a music person. Without it, it would be really difficult to get going. I don’t know about where I was. Of course, each person’s experience is different… I can’t transplant myself in another town or another state because I wasn’t there. That’s called imagination. I just probably had a unique upbringing and didn’t know it.”

CC: “Before the popular acceptance of the music you all were doing in Muscle Shoals, was there a moment when you knew you had something special? Before people started liking your records, was there a moment just in that room, when you guys knew you had something special?”

SO: “In the early studio, FAME, in Muscle Shoals it was sort of one in the same with something special happened simultaneously with music coming out of there. So it wasn’t too long, in my mind’s eye… The studio had good equipment, good microphone, obviously some talented players and engineers. It had all the right stuff right off the get go. I’m sure it had that ‘tread water’ feeling for everybody ’cause there wasn’t a lot of this going on around here. ‘Are we sure we’re gonna make it?’ But once things started happening, good records, good songs, good people. All
the elements started snowballing pretty quickly. Even though there was a straining point to get it going.”

CC: “So the takeaway of our conversation is it is about the people it’s not about the place.”

SO: “Exactly.”

CC: “So you don’t believe that there’s songs that come out of the river, but songs that come out of people?”

SO: “I never was around the river when I did a song. I mean except three four miles and that don’t count. You gotta get closer than that, you know (laughs).”

CC: “Is there anything to this place, Florence and Muscle Shoals and Center Star. It produced such enormous amounts of creative musical people.”

SO: “That’s a good question. That’s the reason I liked it here. Or did so well here, ‘cause there were musical people all with the same mindset of wanting to play music, make new music, write songs. There was a lot of that kind of festering here, you know.”

CC: “Any reason for that?”

SO: “That’s a good question. I always wondered also. I don’t know the answer. I can’t simplify it and say it’s the water (laughs). Of course, we’re ninety-eight percent water or whatever us humans, but I drink my water out of the well. I don’t go drinking out of the river. So, I don’t know. Food, you know. Always important to humans. We’ve got our own kind of food down here. I’m sure it kept us together. I don’t know if it brought us together ‘cause it was already here. Instruments. Everybody wanted a good instrument down here. I don’t know how the rest of the world was, but if somebody walked in the room or you walked in the room, ‘Ah, they got a fine instrument. That’s just top of the line, that’s the best. I love it. Make good sounds with that.’”

CC: “It was a priority.”

SO: “It was a priority. And they were poor, some of them. Some of us. So that was remarkable. Somehow, they got a good tool to work with.”
**Jerron “Blind Boy” Paxton**

A native of Los Angeles and current Brooklyn resident, Jerron “Bind Boy” Paxton is a leading performer and champion of old-time music. The multi-instrumentalist’s ability to interpret a wide variety of songs from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is matched by his scholarly approach to consideration of their often complicated origins. Paxton was a fascinating character in this study in part due to his performing persona. The musician establishes a claim to rooted authenticity by reinforcing his proud Choctaw, Atchafalaya River and Louisiana family roots. Paxton’s acknowledgement that his “folks were from Louisiana before there was a Louisiana” (Paxton) is cleverly reminiscent of Jelly Roll Morton’s declaration that his family came from “Louisiana long before the Louisiana Purchase” (Lomax 3) tying the twenty-six year old performer to a “place” specific heritage and tradition. Based on Paxton’s personal investment in the history of his craft, he was also able to provide the study with insightful connections between popular ideas of southern music, authenticity, and the palpable power of “place” in performance. We met at the University’s Nutt Auditorium during Paxton’s visit to the World Championship of Old-Time Piano Playing.

CC: “You came up in California, yet you had relatives from Louisiana and along with them and radio, you were exposed to blues and old-time music. What was it about that music that made you devote your creative life to it?”

JP: “Well creative life for my people and my people’s culture, is something aside. You know your creative life comes after your work. And the same with me. You know I was going to work on something else. And music was always something you should have going on, in the foreground or the background. I heard the music of my people, the music that came out of my people, and it stuck with me. Just like every boy should. You should know where you come from before you go venturing out other places. That’s what happened to me. My folks are from Louisiana. From, *from* Louisiana. Choctaw Indians from the Atchafalaya River so they really from Louisiana. So the music that my grandma would sing to me had deep roots from a people you know. From a ‘place,’ I suppose you’d say, but they were from that place before the place had little state lines and things that don’t make a difference to them around it.”
CC: “By participating in this music was it, in a sense, a way for you to reconnect with family roots? Was it a family sort of thing?”

JP: “I don’t suppose. It was a music sort of thing. Everybody listened to music and I had to find my own, eventually and I did.”

CC: “What was going on sonically in Watts at the time? What were the sounds around you apart from the music you were practicing?”

JP: “Well around that neighborhood, you hear a lot of hip hop. Lot of hip hop goes on there. Lots of jazz festivals, jazz music because you know we’re in Watts. I went to school on Central Avenue which hosted jazz and other type of black and creole music since the teens. Same street Jelly Roll Morton lived on too, so a lot of that influence. You can feel it was there. Neighborhood is a little bit depressed because of poverty and things like that. You heard a lot of hip hop, a lot of jazz, lots of blues. Blues was at every house party. Lot of Mexican music. Different kinds of Spanish music. Lots of Creole music was going on at that time. I heard everything. There’s a church on every corner so you hear good baptist shouts every Sunday. Lots of good music going on around there.”

CC: “So are you a product of, or your tastes in music or what your ear got tuned to, a product of being there?”

JP: “Of course. Yeah, yeah. I wasn’t raised under a rock. I was raised in South Central where you’ve got good music.”

CC: “The next question to that is, when you read Jerry Lee Lewis’s biography, and everyone wants to attribute his skill as coming from Ferriday, Louisiana where it was the same thing. It was mixes of different music and he very boastfully says, ‘No, it’s my talent.’ And here you have this enormous god-given talent that you have worked hard to bring along. But if you had been brought up in a different place, would you still have been drawn to this music and your mix of different genres?”

JP: “Well the place don’t make as much difference as the culture. For example, the great migration took a lot of musicians from the place of their origin outward into the world. There was a time when black people in Detroit and Chicago were a big minority. Then all of a sudden they were less of a minority. And their culture had drastically impacted various art scenes and social scenes. And the same is true for everywhere. So it doesn’t matter where you grow up as long as you got a sense of culture.”

CC: “There is a sense that music has this temporal and spatial quality. That it can take you to a different place and a different time. Yet a lot of the music people are drawn to and you’re drawn to, takes us to a place and time that is pretty hard. And I am thinking about southern places or African American places in the first half of the twentieth century where it was a pretty difficult existence. What is it about that, that we are drawn to it? The next part is, how do people
somehow find comfort in that music? How do we find comfort in the music that came from a
time that was pretty rough?”

JP: “Well, I think to get a firm grasp on the obvious or the in-obvious, we’ve got to answer this
question of ‘we.’ I can see based on what’s left of my vision that we might have a different
cultural background. As far as my opinion and how it affects me, it’s just the soundtrack of the
times you know. And the music has in it, and it always, is it’s had the good. And when it sings
about the bad, it doesn’t sing to make you feel better like they say so much about the blues. It’s
just to help you understand it. There ain’t no feeling better when you sing some of these songs.
There’s just, alright, this is what it is. And sometimes just vocalizing it, in a way, becomes like a
prayer. That is sort of what the blues represents to me. And why you get comfort from it, I don’t
know. I don’t get any comfort from it. You know there’s songs I don’t sing because they’re just
the opposite. There’s no comfort in it. There’s nothing but bad memories. I wish some other
people would take a page out of the same book, you know. To be honest, I can’t answer that. I
don’t think so, I don’t think it does. I don’t think it lifts you from that spirit. I think it just gives
you an understanding of, you know, this is what folks had to deal with in these days and times.”

CC: “In a lot of these interviews, these complicated ideas of ‘authenticity’ and ‘realness’ come
up. Is there more ‘realness’ in the music that you choose to play. Early twentieth century stuff in
multiple genres. Is it somehow, I know the word ‘authentic’ is complicated, but is somehow
more authentic music in your opinion?”

JP: “Well one, I play more music than just early twentieth century music. And the other, No, it’s
not more complicated. You want to talk about music from the early twentieth century. Alright,
music from 1901 and music from 1971. They’re vastly different, but who’s to say Marvin Gaye
or Michael Jackson or nobody like that is inauthentic. Play a Marvin Gaye song for the same
people who listen to delta blues and they have the exact same reaction. Like I say, it’s a cultural
sense. You know my grandma would listen to delta blues, and french blues, and country music
just the same as she would listen to Marvin Gaye or Sam Cooke or anybody else. It elicits the
same feeling. It elicits the exact same feeling. Music from 1841, still elicits the same thing”

CC: “Is there an actual place for you where you go to draw inspiration? When you’re working on
something, is there a place you go where you feel some sort of inspiration?”

JP: “Yeah, the internet…I grew up playing music before the internet so I remember digging and
watching T.V. anytime something beautiful would come on. Seeing these films of like
Mississippi John Hurt playing at Newport and hoping and praying they would take him into the
eighties and nineties and that these dudes were still alive. Even when I found out there wasn’t, I
could still go to the internet and see him. I had stacks of tapes of everything I got from
musicians. That’s how I’d get my licks in the early days. Now with the internet, it’s an endless
supply of inspiration. It’s a bit overwhelming at times. There’s too much inspiration sometimes
(laughs).”

CC: “I have never even thought of that. Here we are thinking about these ‘sacred places’ and you
can find it on the internet.”
CC: “O.K. This is the idea of ‘place’ in a different context. Sidney Bechet, an iconic figure in early jazz, said that his music would ultimately not be from a place but be his place. Be his place in this world. And he was particularly talking about African American and Creole people. It was difficult to find an actual place in society, so his music could actually be a place. Do you have a sense that your gift, your enormous talent, that this is your niche in the world? This is your place?”

JP: “I think so. The thing about it that makes me think so is when I play it for people, like you say it becomes a place, but it becomes a place you can invite people into. And it’s fun inviting musicians there especially ones that ain’t been there before. For instance a lot of musicians at this competition, a lot of what they play comes from that place or is derived from that place, but it’s a place they’ve never been. Or knew existed. There’s a lot of European influence on American culture. Which for better or worse, it is what it is. And one of those is labelling periods and all these labels and things you put on there. And for some reason, say we play ragtime and people look for these cutoff points and dates and times. They say, ‘O.K. I play music from this narrow period.’ With no interest in what came before or after. Or how it got to be. Just enough to satisfy a university education (laughs). It’s a big place. It’s a place with a lot of knowledge in it. Like I say it informs everything that comes after. And I like it. I like that place. It’s not the roots, but it’s closer to it. It’s about as close as I’ve come (laughs).”

CC: “How do we reconcile this idea that we want to attribute multiple genres of music to the South. Gospel, jazz, blues, country. We want to say they come from the South, but then there are people who say there never was an isolated South. That it was all tendons of influence coming from all different places. What is your take on that? Is there southern music?”

JP: “There’s definitely southern music. There’s music that we come to identify with the South though it doesn’t come from the South. The banjo is an instrument that comes from Africa then gets Americanized and then starts to represent the South. But then there’s a whole section of history we skipped. It used to represent black culture. Nothing but. Until the 1820s, it was strictly a black instrument. You didn’t see any white faces play it. A hundred years later, the black influence is gone and now the majority of banjo players are white fellows. And so there’s a big swath of history we miss...We could look at on a bigger level and say the same thing happens with the music. People think the music comes from the South because the black people come from the South. I think that’s what it boils down to. You know, the labor force was needed down here so that influence was felt the strongest down here. So what ends up becoming American music, I usually find it to be and there’s some exceptions, but the majority of the time, what we find as American music is black music that’s been hit with this other thing. That’s what it comes down to. Sometimes it no [sic] hit with the other thing. Sometimes it’s just pure black music. Blues, black music. Ragtime, black music. R&B, black music. Fiddle and banjo music, black music. We want to put it with the South because that’s where the Negros come from...”

CC: “So you play all these genres and I was going to ask you if there is a strain between all of them. An essence that runs between all of them, but I think you just said exactly what that essence is.”
JP: “I think with all the musics that come together from different cultures, not just my own…I think when it gets down to ‘folk’ music, not sixties folk, but music of the people that was not designed to be sold, but designed to be entertainment strictly among people. When you get to that level of music, whether it’s from any part of Europe, any part of the Middle East, any part of Asia, there’s always something there that I think, maybe because of the fact that it’s not meant to be sold, is real. I’m not making this for you to like. I’m not making this for you to buy. I’m making this because this is how I feel. And this is how the people feel and I play this and we all sort of feel the same thing so I know it’s real. I don’t know. It’s hard to describe, but you know it when you hear it. I think that’s the same with music from any tradition. You don’t know why you like it. .. I live in a neighborhood in Queens that’s got these Eastern European ethnic groups. And there was this man just sitting with a fiddle and singing and I was like, ‘Oh, I know what that is. I know that emotion. Over here we call it the blues and we play it this way, but yeah I know what you’re doing’ (laughs). I don’t speak Serbian and I don’t speak Polish, but I know what that is….It’s the same thing and its universal. It’s a human feeling. And when you inject that human emotion into the music, it becomes what we love and what we can identify with.”

CC: “So we are obviously in Mississippi. Do you feel anything different when you are coming to these places to play because of your family roots in the South and because the music that you play is, at least theoretically, connected to the South through your own eloquent description of why we think of it as being southern. Do you feel anything different when you come and play your music in these places?”

JP: “I think there’s certain things that connect with people. And when you connect with the people from an area, there’s this back and forth energy that you can’t explain. And that’s one of my favorite things about playing music in the South. I love southern people. My folks were southern people before there was a South. My folks were southern people in Louisiana back when there was an ice age. We go way back. So connecting to the people is one thing. But then there’s certain music that’s connected with the earth… It’s another thing, it’s hard to explain, but you know it when you hear it. The one that that comes to mind for me is the music from Cape Briton. Although it derives from Scotland, but you hear that music and you’re in that part of the world, you say, ‘Oh this matches the land.’ Same way down here. There’s certain songs you can play and this has got to come from Mississippi. This is coming out of the ground. There’s Native Americans all over the Americas that say there is this powerful thing that happens when certain people go learn music. They can take the instrument to the woods and say the music is so strong in the trees that you can hold it up and it will play itself it seems like. And there’s music definitely like that. Not always rural…You go to New York. Orchestra music, that’s their folk music. That music seeps out of the walls. That old brick and mortar is dripping with all this ragtime and hot jazz that comes from there. You don’t know why it is, but there’s this connection you feel. You know you found the perfect piece to that puzzle. It happens. Can’t explain how, can’t explain why, but I know it happens.”

CC: “And that’s what you feel when you come here. You’ll play a certain song here and you’ll feel an extra connection because you get a sense that it comes from this place?”
JP: “Exactly. It’s all about vibrations. If we want to get spiritual and metaphysical and all that stuff. But you know, when the vibrations coming out your instrument match the ones that come out the ground, it’s a special feeling. Like I say, it’s hard to achieve. It’s hard to know. There’s no formula for figuring it out. You just know when you know.”
Robert Boles

Born in Oxford, Mississippi, Robert Boles moved with his family to Toccopola at the age of ten. Having left “their people,” including several blues playing uncles, twenty miles west in Lafayette County and knowing no one in their new community, the Boles family sought kinship at the local Church of the Living God and joined the congregation. During a family visit to a fellowship assembly in Tupelo, Robert heard the sacred steel playing of one of the instrument and movement’s guiding figures, Bishop Lorenzo Harrison. Robert’s introduction to “that sound” and the “message inside it” changed his life and set him on a quest to master the instrument. Sharecroppers at the time, Robert’s father promised his sons a steel guitar if they worked hard in the field. The following Christmas, the Boles brothers received a set of drums and a six string lap steel with the younger Robert relegated to drums until his older brother’s departure for the military. Robert was not only a “sturdy steeler” in his church for over twenty years, but his mentoring of young players allowed the instrument to spread to other area congregations. Robert is important to the study because of his deep belief in the presence of a “spirit” inside the four walls of the church that regularly guides his playing allowing him to find previously unimagined sounds in between the frets of his instrument echoing the spoken word of the congregation and channeling a higher message, one that cannot be expressed by human voices. We met at the Church of the Living God in Toccopola, Mississippi.

CC: “Were you playing music before you started with the Church? On your own?”

RB: “Oh no. My uncles, they all played guitar, but no one played steel. I’ve always heard that my mother used to say that years ago, her brother used to play steel. He lived out in California, but I’d never seen him, but she was telling ‘bout a steel guitar. I had never seen a steel guitar. My uncles here in Mississippi, all they was playing was guitar. And I always wanted to hear steel. When we first come to this church, they didn’t have steel. As time went on and time went on and we kept talking about steel. I think I was about sixteen and my brother in law, he bought a little six-string steel from the Western Auto store at that time. We seen it, but we couldn’t tune it
because we didn’t know anything about it…They had an assembly over here in Tupelo at that time where Bishop Lorenzo Harrison, he was the man that I would say mastered the steel. When he came down to the assembly, we heard the music going. And ever since we heard that, we wanted to play the steel. …We took that little steel and kept fooling with it and fooling with it until finally we could pick up a tune. And so we was kinda like pantomime after Bishop Harrison.”

CC: “What was it about the steel that attracted you so much?”

RB: “The steel was something you just gotta have an imagination. The sound, it was just so different from any sound I heard before. It wasn’t like the guitar. It seemed like when you playing the steel it sending a message. Even if you heard a message talked from the roster and then the steel comes in behind it. It seemed like the message that was preaching, you could play it through the steel. It was a unique sound that just felt like the spirit. It filled your spirit. And when I heard that sound, I wanted that, I wanted that.”

CC: “For you, does it have anything to do with the sound that it almost emulates a voice and the ability to not have specific notes, but slide between them? It is almost as expressive as the human voice.”

RB: “Oh yes. It had a message in it that became clearer. Some of the things that were said and even some of the songs that were sung, if you learned to play the steel, you could find it on the steel and the steel would say the same thing that the message was saying… and the hearers, when they hear it. It seems like it sends a spirit into them. They heard it and then the steel was saying it. I mean it’s unique.”

CC: “So the steel is in conversation with what’s being said from the pulpit or said from the congregation.”

RB: “Right. And I think that’s why it’s so unique. Everybody in so many churches didn’t have a steel and didn’t have a steel player. And I think that’s why the Church of the Living God has grown so big. There was so many people coming in and journeyed until they got worldwide…”

CC: “So back to your childhood. Your uncles who played guitar. What kind of music were they playing and what kind of music were you hearing around your house before you started playing? Was it always just religious music?”

RB: “No. No. My uncles played the blues, they played blues…. My childhood I also listened to popular music. Like I say, my uncles all they played was blues. Actually, I could pick up a guitar and play it before I started playing the steel. And I could play some of that (blues). But you know that never did register when I started playing the steel. Once I started playing the steel in the churches, that music didn’t even appeal to me anymore…”

CC: “The music of the church registered with you. Was there a sense that you did not want to be a part of secular music because of religious reasons or it just did not speak to you?”
RB: “Actually, once I got introduced to the religious music type, the other part, it just didn’t appeal to me anymore. Actually, I didn’t even want to be a part of it anymore And so when I started playing steel, it seemed like the lord started blessing in a way. And as he blessed, he let me play better you know. And then the different sound would go out with a message in it, it didn’t have anything to do with what I used to. It brought me from a long way. Actually, now I have an eight string steel set up in my bedroom. Although I don’t play in service anymore, I have my son, he plays, my nephews play. I’ve got, I would say all totaled three or four that can pick it up right here in this local band. So if someone is out, someone is available. ”

CC: “You said the ‘spirit’ allowed you to get better and better. Have you ever had a moment where you are practicing at home, but in the spirit of the service and the spirit of the message, you end up playing better? Playing inspired things in service that you didn’t know you could do?”

RB: “Oh yes. Oh yes. If you ever play one, you’ll understand. So many times you can hear by ear something that you’ve never played before. Like I say, we all pantomimed from Bishop Lorenzo Harrison. One of the best ones I ever heard play. And so many times you play as the spirit go and as the spirit get higher, one of those sounds could come in your mind and actually you’ll find it and start playing it. And you’ll say, ‘You know I didn’t even know I could play that.’ But through the spirit, he brought that sound on. And that sound that you’ve been wanting to play all the time, well through the spirit you’ll find yourself actually playing it. The spirit really helps out. ”

CC: “Is there something to being open to the spirit that allows that to come through?”

RB: “Oh yes. Definitely. I feel like some people just play. And that’s good. That’s talent. But when you’re playing in the spirit, there’s a difference. There’s a different feeling while you’re playing. You’re playing not just by talent, but your motivating peoples, your motivating yourself, through the lord. You see there’s a message that has to get through and sometimes words can’t do it. And to me, through the steel music, it will bring it down. And it will get your heart to where it will have a repentant mode. I feel like that’s a plus.”

CC: “Some of this project is about this idea that the South is this storytelling culture and it always has been. Apart from music, it’s just a region that enjoys and appreciates storytelling. And part of that is the ability to listen. Do you feel like growing up here, you were a better listener than maybe had you grown up someplace else? A lot of what you’ve said today is about listening and hearing something else and adding to it, repeating it. Did growing up here make you a better listener and better musician?”

RB: “Really I do. I do. To me growing up here is really like a test for so many things. Sometimes the environment really hinders a person and what he needs to come out of him. And I feel like growing up here, mostly everybody was on the same level. As Christians…Like I say I moved from Oxford. That’s where’s my original peoples. My grandfather, my uncles and all. And at that time, they was playing blues. And you may get there and you may try to dance and do that or
whatever. But growing up here, after we moved, there was no one we knew, I probably would have never known anything about the steel on this level. But we came here (church) and the motivation that god has planted in me has a whole lot to do with your character. And to me it’s unseemable [sic] in the way it makes you feel. Even when you are not playing it. Or even when you meet peoples. There’s a message that has already been implanted there that you can carry with you to work. Carry with you to wherever you go…”

CC: “This church has become a huge part of your life. If you had stayed in Oxford, do you think you would have found your way eventually to the steel?”

RB: “I feel like I would have, but it would have been later in years. Because at this time now we do have a church in Oxford. A Church of the Living God… And the young man who plays there is from here. He lives here. He learned here. His father is a musician here. And he has another son and he played here. Same thing, they play steel. So I feel like when god blesses you with something that’s good to carry his word. Through not just speaking, you should share it….I’m just thinking God gave me strength while I was young and I was able to do this and pass it on to some youngsters by showing them the talent and what it means.”

CC: “How about the fact that Toccopola is a rural place. And you are outside a good part of the day doing your cattle work. Does that come into play at all with your sound?”

RB: “So many times when you’re doing stuff, like cows and other things and your mind kinda drift away. Then you can think on different things or different sounds. But when I get in my pickup truck, maybe go to town, I got tape. I push it in and what you gonna hear? You gonna hear steel guitar playing (laughs). What you gonna hear when you get in my car? That sound.”

CC: “Do you ever feel like music is a place for you. More than playing in church, music is a place in the world for you?”

RB: “Sure. Once you get into it and get the feeling, there’s something on the inside you just don’t ever want to let it go. I feel like I found my place… What god gave me to offer wasn’t something I just picked up to benefit myself. I think what he gave me through the spirit was something offered to help spiritual growth. As long as I can do that I feel like I have come for what I need to do.”
CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSION: SPOONER’S ABSTRACTION

There were more than a few moments of doubt during this project, but none greater than after my interview with Fats Kaplin. The roads were locked up for the third straight day from the worst snowstorm to hit Nashville in what Fats said “was at least twenty years.” Snow had seemed to plague the project from the beginning, having nearly taken me off the road after my interview with Bill Frisell. Here I was safe, but stuck in a shady hotel by the airport with the stark realization that I might not have a project. I had just spent the afternoon talking with one of Music City’s finest instrumentalists and while Kaplin’s story was genuinely fascinating, it did not bring me any closer to discovering an essence of southern sound nor how “place might manifest in music.” I contemplated cutting my losses, scrapping the project and moving on to a “Plan B” thesis. I had known from its inception, the ideas at the heart of my inquiry were a bit odd, likely suffering from a tinge of romanticism, and at the very least, were difficult to articulate. Now, three musicians into the interview component of the work, I was discovering just how difficult to articulate these ideas really were.

Two important factors helped ease a mounting crisis of confidence. First, though perhaps of little academic consequence, was the fact that I was having a blast and enjoying the process. It was never lost on me what a unique opportunity it was to meet these folks and have them take the time to sit and talk about their work, their lives, and creative processes. Of more significance,
I developed a sense that documenting these musicians’ stories and their insights about southern places had real merit outside the scope of my own study. I did not think of myself in terms of being a new generation Lomax, but I did imagine this collection of filmed interviews and transcripts finding their way into an archive and in fifty-year’s time, used by some music scholar or fan interested in Stax, Royal, Sun, hill country blues, sacred steel, or even “Ameripolitan” music. With this in mind, I began to think of the work as an exploration rather than an uncompromising search for definitive answers to a set of ambitious thesis questions. While not abandoning the themes of place and sound, my focus became documentarian in nature rather than seeker of sonic enlightenment.

This small shift in approach also opened my ears to a repeated chorus from the interviews telling me “place” does matter, but “place” is defined by human connections. Through these conversations I learned the enormous talents of Memphis and Muscle Shoals did not emerge from magical rivers, but from relationships built in a culture of high school bands, talent shows and an ever-present desire to dance. Studios and the sounds they capture are similarly more the result of ambition and human interaction than baffles, tape machines or other more abstract ideas of “place” gleaned from libraries and legend. In all eleven interviews, the artists spoke of an important person as having a profound effect on their artistic development. For Frisell and Jackson, it was music teachers. For Powell and Ross-Spang, a series of mentors provided inspiration and passed down the craft of making records. For Robert Boles, it was the promise of a steel guitar and seeing Lorenzo Harrison at a church assembly. For others, their musicianship was directly shaped by the hand of family. Dale Watson, Spooner Oldham, Luther Dickinson, and Charles Hodges, had musician fathers, each with varying levels of success, but all of whom provided a model for a life in music and undoubtedly tuned their son’s young ears to the sounds
of their music’s roots. For Kaplin and Paxton, the causal arrows moved in another direction. Their love of string band music and prewar blues sparked desires to explore and reconnect with their own perhaps forgotten family histories in the South.

While having lunch with Spooner Oldham and looking out over the waters of the Tennessee River, I thought of his work on those early Arthur Alexander records, the same ones likely referenced by Dylan. I asked about the magic of his playing on the first FAME recordings. He laugh and said, “The best thing about me was what I didn’t know. I was just a kid.” Oldham goes on to describe the pioneering spirit of those early records and makes clear they were interested in creating hits and not an iconic sound that would be emulated thirty years later by Dylan. Although not a subscriber to the mythology of Muscle Shoals, Oldham does believe there is magic in music. For Oldham, inspiration may come from a place, but the magic comes when his heart, soul, and brain guide his fingers to just the right sound to match a song “riding it for three, or four, or five minutes. That’s the magic for me” (Oldham). When asked to describe what makes a song work, Oldham says, “It’s an abstract thing to me to this day, what makes it all meld together. It’s fascinating to me.” While these interviews brought me joy and insight into the curious amalgam of imagination, inspiration, human interaction, place and sound, I did not get any closer to cracking Lanois and Dylan’s code. Spooner may be as close to the source as I can get. If it is “abstract” to him, I will have to simply accept his word.
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