THE EVOLUTION OF HILL COUNTRY MUSIC: AN EXAMINATION OF MEDIA COVERAGE AND MARKETING OF R.L. BURNSIDE AND JUNIOR KIMBROUGH

By

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To my loving and encouraging parents, Ann and G.B., and to the Hill Country bluesmen, R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough
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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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This study uses the careers of R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough, two Hill Country
bluesmen, to track the evolution of Hill Country blues. Media coverage specific to these two
artists, along with how they were marketed by their record label, Fat Possum, are observed in
order to understand how this genre of the blues became popular and entered mainstream music.
Observations are organized in chronological fashion so that the evolution of the genre can be
seen as linear. A portion of this study also includes a compilation of oral histories.

The foundation of the research consists of qualitative research techniques, such as
qualitative interviewing, oral histories, and textual analysis. Primary source documents such as
newspaper and magazine clippings were analyzed in order to track trends and developments
relating to coverage of the Hill Country genre. Qualitative interviews conducted with
professional journalists, Hill Country artists, and blues scholars, provided context for
understanding these trends. These interviews, along with a selection of primary documents such
as CD album covers, and promotional rundown sheets, were used to identify and understand
marketing techniques used by the record label. Oral histories were compiled to generate a
biographical source of information for each artist.
The purpose of this study is to examine the media coverage Burnside and Kimbrough received throughout their musical careers in order to map the evolution of Hill County music, as well as gauge the amount exposure the genre received. In order to gain an understanding of the audience’s perception of these artists, the study also observes marketing techniques used by the artists’ record label, Fat Possum. Lastly, this study aims to humanize Burnside and Kimbrough by compiling a series of oral histories from individual’s close to both artists.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Music is an integral part of culture and society. It is introduced at infancy, being used as a form of communication between adult and child.\(^1\) As maturation occurs, listeners are constantly exposed to music. It is almost inescapable. It is present in television and radio advertisements, played in the background of department stores and restaurants, blasted at sporting events, and is easily accessible via smartphones, computers, and iPods thanks to technological advances. Psychologists and sociologists have long studied the relationship between performer and listener, trying to understand why people listen to music. Research has shown individuals use it as a vehicle to help (1) form independence (2) connect with others and create a sense of belonging, (3) and regulate moods,\(^2\) and simply to reflect on life or use as a distraction.\(^3\) Simply put, it is a form of communication. When studying the science of listening to music, Henkjan Honing writes, “It provides a means by which people can share emotions, intentions and meanings even though their spoken languages may be mutually incomprehensible.”\(^4\)

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\(^1\) Henkjan Honing, *Musical cognition: A science of listening* (New Brunswick, N.J: Transaction Publishers, 2013), 3; Henkjan explains the concept of infant-directed speech (which he also refers to as “babble music”), “a form of speech that distinguishes itself from normal adult speech through its higher overall pitch, exaggerated melodic contours, slower temps, and greater rhythmic variation,” used by adults when communicating with an infant.

\(^2\) David Huron, Thomas Schäfer, Peter Sedlmeier, and Christine Städtler, “The Psychological Functions Of Music Listening,” *Frontiers In Psychology* 4, (2013) : 511, accessed February 5, 2015, [http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3741536/pdf/fpsyg-04-00511.pdf](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3741536/pdf/fpsyg-04-00511.pdf); this study used a survey asking participants to rate statements beginning with “I listen to music because…” on a scale from 0-6. Results were narrowed down to three dimensions for listeners: self-awareness, social relatedness, arousal and mood regulation. Out of the three, arousal and mood regulation ranked highest, followed by self-awareness and social relatedness. Also see


a much larger audience. It is used as a platform to raise awareness, express personal concerns and experiences, or address political and social issues impacting society.

In the United States, music has historically been used as an active voice during major cultural movements, such as the Counterculture in the 1960s and during the period of poverty and extreme police brutality on African-Americans in the late 1980s and through the 1990s. Folk singer Bob Dylan released his second album *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* in 1963 during the Vietnam War era, which featured songs like “Blowin’ in the Wind” and “Masters of War.” The lyrics crafted in these songs were tailored to the events occurring during the time period, providing listeners with a message to relate to. In 1988 the west coast rap group N.W.A. released their debut album *Straight Outta Compton*, which featured the songs “Fuck the Police” and “Express Yourself.” This was “among the first [albums] to offer an insider's perspective of the violence and brutality of gang-ridden South Central L.A.” In regard to rap music being used as a vessel during the late 1980s and early 1990s, Houston A. Baker writes, “It was an articulate

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8 Dylan, *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*; the lyrics of “Masters of War” called out manufacturers of weapons, along with the government’s decision to keep troops in Vietnam. “Blowin’ in the Wind” acknowledges the injustice blacks are facing during the time of the civil rights movement (and before), and also the number of deaths occurring in Vietnam; suggesting the two are both inhumane, after which he says the answer to ending both is apparent, yet is being ignored, or ‘blowin’ in the wind,’ ibid.


10 “Biography,” *RollingStone.com*, accessed January 7, 2015, http://www.rollingstone.com/music/artists/n-w-a/biography; the song “Fuck the Police” contained lyrics showing group member’s observations and experiences with law enforcement in their communities, highlighting profiling and police brutality against blacks. “Express Yourself” focused more on encouraging blacks to use music as a form of expressing themselves, much like the group was doing to voice their opinions and frustrations.
cry to the world about the insufferable poverty, relentless police brutality, and frustrated hopes of the black urban scene. It chronicled and catalogued drug wars and the fierce interracial fury of black-youth homicide. It presented its own clear black understanding of the inner city’s economic and political abandonment.”¹¹ In his book *The Devil’s Music: A History of the Blues*, Giles Oakley writes, “The serious L.A. rioting and looting of 1992 showed just how accurately the slamming menace of West Coast rap mirrored the anti-cop cop attitudes of inner-city youth. This was urban crisis with a soundtrack.”¹²

These artists’ (N.W.A. and Bob Dylan) music was a reflection of the social and political events occurring during their (album and songs) time of creation. Johnny Black writes that, “to a large extent, a reflection of an evolving culture – social and political – which gives birth to the music, nurtures it, and ultimately dictates whether it will live or die.”¹³ Furthermore, the music allowed people sharing the same musical taste(s), and more importantly similar ideals, to come together during critical points in our nation’s history. William F. Danaher elaborated on the powerful effect music can have when forming a collective identity, writing it is “most useful as a tool for establishing collective identity when people can relate to it. Social movements that marshal preexisting culture via its music to elicit emotion and form and maintain collective identity have often been successful in achieving their goals.”¹⁴

Most recently, artists have used their music to bring attention to the increasing number of police shootings involving unarmed, young blacks. After Trayvon Martin was shot and killed in

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2012, rappers like Plies and Wyclef Jean released songs about the tragedy, calling attention to the social injustice. *Vibe* magazine editor Jermaine Hall said, “It was [is] a conscious effort by these artists to document and raise awareness.” Similarly, when Michael Brown was shot and killed in 2014, the rapper The Game released a song calling for blacks to take a stand against the white-on-black crimes. These examples are evidence that music still is an invaluable platform to address societal issues. Although, music has not been used exclusively by musicians for societal and cultural issues; it is also used strategically by politicians.

Politicians understand the power of music in regard to generating support behind their agenda(s), presidential candidates in particular. John F. Kennedy used Frank Sinatra’s “High Hopes,” George Bush Sr. selected Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the USA,” and most recently Barack Obama campaigned to Ben Harper’s “Better Way.” Kathryn Browell noted that Sinatra made a personalized version of his song “High Hopes.” Browell said the song helped the

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15 This shooting involved George Zimmerman (neighborhood watch captain) and Trayvon Martin (17-year-old black youth) and took place in Sanford, Florida. Zimmerman shot and killed an unarmed Martin, claiming it was self-defense, on February 26, 2012. Zimmerman was found not guilty on July 13, 2013.


19 This shooting involved Darren Wilson (white police officer) and Michael Brown (18-year-old black youth) and took place in Ferguson, Missouri. Wilson shot and killed an unarmed Brown, claiming he was physically assaulted and Brown reached for the officer’s gun, on August 9, 2014. Wilson was not indicted.


president “infuse his campaign with vigor and energy, but it also created a common language for voters across the country to express support for his candidacy,” and continued on, “Sinatra’s lyrics created an emotional connection between Kennedy, the popular personality and voters – who may have been Democrats, Republicans or independents.”

Once again, music is referred to as a language that uses emotions to make connections, and in President Kennedy’s case it connected him and the voters (supporters). When President Obama spoke at a rally in Madison, Wisconsin, in 2010, Ben Harper opened the event with the song “Better Way,” which one local news outlet said “the stirring performance by Ben Harper set the stage for his [President Obama] major political event,” and that the president used Harper’s song as a way to “kindle excitement over his presidential campaign.”

From President Kennedy to President Obama, music has continued to play an important role in the political realm. This only goes to show how embedded music is within the fabric of society.

It is important to identify the different roles music plays – whether it be as a form of communication, used for personal benefits, a vehicle for expression or to raise awareness, or to gain support – in order to illustrate its importance to culture and society. Music has been studied by psychologist, critical cultural theorists, historians, and sociologists. Understanding this helps to see music as an area rich with research possibilities. The number of genres in the United States alone is massive, with iTunes currently housing 34 genres, and over 200 subgenres, providing

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researchers with several avenues of opportunity. Recognizing the possibilities, music was selected as a launching point for this study, choosing the Blues genre as the topic of research.

The Blues is an important genre in American history. Its origins began when Africans were forced from their native lands, brought to the States and sold into slavery. It is a genre rooted in emotion and storytelling, having all of the elements discussed earlier that resonate with listeners and help create identities (i.e. emotions, personal observations and statements of fact). Famous bluesman Willie Dixon wrote, “The whole of life itself expresses the blues. That’s why I always say the blues are the true facts of life expressed in words and song, inspiration, feeling and understanding.”26 It was a major influence on the Rock and Roll genre,27 where pioneers like Bob Dylan, Led Zeppelin, Jimi Hendrix, the Rolling Stones, and emerged, infiltrating the nation in the early 1960s and through the 1970s. Dylan’s music, as discussed earlier, played a vital role in helping like-minded people have a voice to stand behind during the Vietnam War.

Bluesman Muddy Waters, who inspired the Rolling Stones’ sound and band name,28 sang about the major influence on his song “The Blues Had a Baby (And They Named It Rock and Roll),” singing, “All you people, you know the blues got a soul/Well this is a story, a story never been told/Well you know the blues got pregnant. And they named the baby Rock & Roll.”29 Another rock star, Jimi Hendrix, said, “Blues is part of America. Blues will never die.”30 Its longtime presence in American music, and influence on a genre that has since expanded into


30 Jimi Hendrix, Starting At Zero: His Own Story, (New York; London; New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2013), 205.
several subgenres – Punk Rock, Metal, Grunge, Alternative, etc. – along with its deep, emotional themes, is one reason it is an ideal genre to be researched.

However, there is also a timely element connected to research conducted on the Blues. In a recent interview with NPR, legendary bluesman Buddy Guy said he is worried about the genre’s future due to lack of exposure in the media, specifically on public airwaves. Guy said he and the late B.B. King would often talk about the issue. “If they (younger generation) don't hear it like I did…if you never tasted it, you wouldn't love it. That's what's happening with the blues,” Guy said. He concluded by saying he’d like to hear Muddy Waters “one or twice a week” in order to “let the young people know where it all started.” At this juncture in time, any research conducted on the blues could assist in generating exposure for the genre. Mississippi is referred to by many folklorists and blues scholars as the land where the blues began, and the Hill Country is an area of the state worthy of exploration.

**Purpose of Study**

This study originated as a discourse analysis of lyrics found in blues music. Its original design was to identify themes and meanings occurring within songs. However, after finding this research design to be used quite frequently in the school of music, by both ethnomusicologists and blues historians, the researcher shifted the design to a historical overview of the blues, more specifically the blues in the northern region of Mississippi, which is referred to as the Hills, or Hill Country. There has been a healthy amount of research conducted on this region of Mississippi overtime – including field recordings, in-depth ethnographies, books and journal

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31 Apple, 2015, 25.


33 Greene, “Buddy Guy,” *NPR.com*. 
articles, documentaries, etc. – with a heavy emphasis on musical traditions unique to the Hill Country. Scholarly literature devoted solely to specific artists from the region, however, is lacking in comparison to cultural studies on traditions. This study aims to fill this existing void. Scholars have suggested there are five artists, referred to as “The Big Five,” from this region who are most identifiable: Fred McDowell, Junior Kimbrough, R.L. Burnside, Jessie Mae Hemphill, and Robert Belfour. This research will look into the lives and careers of two of those artists: R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough. These artists were selected based on several contributing factors, including: their prominence in the Hill Country genre, as indicated in scholarly literature; the high number of occurrences either artist appeared in articles published in popular press in relation to the Hill Country genre; their popularity among vast audiences; and the high number of living descendants connected to each artist.

The goal(s) of this research is two-fold (1) observe how these artists were covered by the media, and how they were marketed by the record industry, (2) gain an understanding of who these men were, not only as performers, but as individuals. In order to accomplish this, research conducted will consist of collecting a series of oral histories meeting one or more of the specified criteria: artists (having had personal experiences with, or are familiar with Burnside and Kimbrough), industry professionals (tour managers, record executives, etc.) members of the popular press (journalists, writers, directors, etc.) and academics (ethnomusicologist, historians, scholars, etc). All interviews will be conducted by the primary researcher. Other research involves textual analysis of primary documents (newspaper and magazine articles, show bills, documentaries, video documentaries, etc.) and literature involving either artist, and information related to the Hill Country and its culture.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to ultimately fill a gap in literature pertaining to detailed documentation of each artist. In addition, this research aims to show how the Hill Country genre evolved using these artists as focal point, and observing how they were covered by the media, and marketed by the record industry. This study is also designed to paint a portrait of who these men were, both as performers and individuals, in order to be used for biographical references, and more so intended for use during discourse analysis of either artists’ body of work. Understanding aspects of a person’s life, along with their career timeline and impact(s) on a music genre, can aid in uncovering more intimate themes and meanings embedded within music. Lastly, this study hopes to serve as a living legacy for both artists who have since passed away.

**Review of Literature**

Over time, studies on the blues genre have varied widely, from historical research to lyrical analysis, and field-recordings to ethnographies. This section examines preexisting literature on several aspects of the blues, and is structured in the following order: history of the blues genre; biographical sketch of R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough; the Delta region; the Hill Country region; African origin and the fiddle and banjo; African origin and the fife and drum band. It should be noted that one text in particular, Dr. Sylvester Oliver’s dissertation, “African-American Music Traditions In Northeast Mississippi,” published in 1996, is cited heavily throughout the review, especially when discussing elements of Hill Country traditions. This is largely in part because of its thorough text, but can also be attributed to the dearth of literature on the Hill Country previously mentioned. The absence of literature germane to this topic will be evident in the review, as some sections will appear sparse, and not as detailed as others, for example the comparison of literature on the Delta and Hill Country regions. A majority of the literature selected for review is historical, appropriately selected because this
genre is rich in history and cannot be fully understood without some context. Historical literature was primarily selected because the Hill Country prides itself in tradition, many of which have strong roots in African tribes.

A Brief History of the Blues

Slavery and music survival

It was with the first African slaves brought to America from which the blues ultimately derived.35 The conditions slaves faced can never truly be captured in the vernaculars of history. Forcefully taken from their native lands, Africans were forced to endure grueling conditions on slave ships while voyaging across oceans toward the New World, upon which the individuals who survived were sold into slavery. Without regard for their tribal origins, slave traders and planters threw Africans together, which Giles Oakley writes was done deliberately.36 African culture was “rapidly suppressed,” religious traditions banned and replaced by Christianity, and in some cases their music was stopped.37 Music was one cultural aspect that survived while crossing the oceans, and one element of African life allowed by white masters, on the account that it suited their personal interests.38 Slaves with musical abilities often times held more value. The type(s) of music most typically allowed were rhythmic work chants, out of which “hollers” derived.39 In his book Authentic Blues: It’s History and Its Themes, Robert Springer writes that while slaves had their social activities and culture almost completely extinguished from intense

36 Oakley, The Devil’s Music, 12, p. 15.
37 Oakley; the banning of music and instruments was almost always the result of slave owners’ fears that slaves were communicating, or signaling warnings to one another.
38 Oakley, The Devil’s Music, 12.
39 Oakley, 12, p. 37; Oakley, among other scholars and researchers, credit work songs and hollers to be primitive forms of the blues, and sources from which artists could draw inspiration.
work demands from masters, music kept its “functional character,” because it was “non-material culture.” Springer argues that because music was a constant in the daily routine – farming, manual labor – it was kept alive “in the smallest nooks and crannies of the slaves’ lives, it was almost impossible to destroy.” From the first slaves, to the Emancipation Proclamation (1863) and the Reconstruction Period (1863-1877) and into the days of segregation, music survived in the black community, whether through religious tradition or secular traditions, and sometime during this period, the genre known as the “blues” evolved.

**When, where, who and why**

Research has struggled to pinpoint an exact time period, or location, for when and where the blues came into being. Previous literature suggests somewhere between the late 1800s and very early 1900s is the approximate timeframe for the emergence of the music that became known as the “blues.” In his book *Big Road Blues: Tradition & Creativity in the Folk Blues* Dr. David Evans, an ethnomusicologist and one of the leading blues’ scholars, says there were no reports of the singing of blues before 1890, however that year marked the first time folk blues emerged from the underground status they were previously associated with. Evans writes that emergence during this time period was most likely a result of social factors affecting blacks at that time, pointing out the “first generation of blacks born out of slavery” were coming into maturity in the 1890s. Evans offers more specificity about this generation’s reasoning behind

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42 Oakley, *The Devil’s Music*, 12.


44 Evans, *Big Road Blues*, p. 32.
creating the blues, writing, “This was certainly an appropriate time for young blacks to create the blues, songs of uncertainty and tension, for they had been brought up in a world of problems and enormous difficulties without the experience of an older generation to fall back on.”  

However, Evans writes that the older generations’ songs were in response to slavery, and their songs reflected that. Oakley writes that approximately 1910 is when the form (blues) had achieved enough separation to become known as the blues. In regard to location, Oakley writes, “The blues were emerging all over the Southern States of America simultaneously, in Mississippi, in Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and in Texas and elsewhere.” However, a majority of researchers believe the blues started in the state of Mississippi, and often times folksy studies focus on the Delta region. The playing of blues cannot be defined in a specific way, according to Robert Palmer, but the tendency toward the the AAA or AAB verse forms, the twelve-bar form, or pentatonic melodies with a flattened third is most common. However, depending on the geographic location(s) – ranging from Mississippi and Arkansas, Texas and Louisiana, the East Coast, Memphis, St. Louis and Chicago – the style of blues, along with its themes, vary. Ethnomusicologists offer musical form and structure in a much more detailed and technical

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45 Evans, *Big Road Blues*, p. 40.
46 Evans, *Big Road Blues*, 43.
48 Oakely, 12, p. 9.
aspect. Aside from technical styles, location, and time of origin, when identifying artists who first labeled their music as the blues, two names are commonly mentioned: W.C. Handy – often referred to as “The Father of the Blues” – and Gertrude “Ma” Rainey – often referred to as the “Mother of the Blues.”

William Christopher Handy was a musician and composer. He accepted an offer to become the band leader for the Knights of Pythias – a group based out of Clarksdale, Mississippi, that traveled around the area playing for social events, dances, and in stately plantation mansions – in 1903. The band performed different types of music, ranging from cakewalks to ragtime, and other forms of music existing as written scores. In his autobiography, Handy wrote that he had come to know the area he traveled – Delta, Clarksdale, Lambert, Yazoo City – and described it as “a familiar, monotonous round.” However, one night in a railroad station in Tutwiler, Mississippi, in 1903, Handy encountered “the weirdest music he had ever heard” being played by “a lean, loose-jointed Negro… clothes were rags, his feet peeped out of his shoes. His face had on it some of the sadness of the ages,” beside him as he slept. Handy said the man “pressed a knife on the strings of the guitar” as he played, creating an effect he described as “unforgettable,” noting the lyrics of the song the man sang while he played: Goin’ where the Southern Cross’ the Dog (repeated three times). Shortly after this

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53 Oakley, The Devil’s Music, 12, p. 41.

54 Palmer, Deep Blues, 35


56 W.C. Handy, p. 74

57 W.C. Handy, p. 74
encounter, Handy was in Cleveland, Mississippi, leading his orchestra in its usual material when a note was slipped to him, which requested songs native to the area be played – his orchestra’s attempts to do so were met with another note requesting a local trio (consisting of a mandolin, guitar, and string bass) be allowed to perform on stage. Handy described the material played as “one of those over-and-over strains that seems to have not very clear beginning and certainly no ending at all,” adding descriptors like the “kind of stuff that has long been associated with cane rows and levee camps,” “haunting,” and “disturbing monotony.” The audience’s response to this performance, tipping the performers with dollars, quarters, and halves, is when Handy decided to become a composer a arranger of the blues and other folksongs. He realized at that moment there was commercial promise in this type of music. Rather than being recognized as a performer, Handy is labeled as a “popularizer and publisher,” and known for “formalizing the music which was springing up all over the South in a disparate and incoherent way, he helped give it an identity,” whereas before the term blues had been applied to songs such as work songs, over-and-over songs, and devil songs among others. In 1912, he published “Memphis Blues,” being the third person to publish a song containing the word “blues” in a piece of music. Other authors say Handy was the first to write down the music for a blues song. While Handy had experienced what might have been a form of the blues in 1903 at the train station in Tutwiler, Gertrude Rainey heard this form of music a year earlier in 1902.

59 Handy, *Father Of The Blues*, 55, p. 76-78
60 Evans, *Big Road Blues*, 36.
Gertrude “Ma” Rainey was from Columbus, Georgia. She worked in some of the more famous minstrel and tent shows, including Al Baines’, Sila Green’s, Tolliver’s, and the Rabbit Foot Minstrels. Oakley writes that she had a “deep and rich contralto voice,” and would sometimes moan “hmmmmmmmm” and the audience would moan back, and sometimes she would shout and roar. While her story of encountering the blues is not as detailed and well-known as Handy’s, Rainey too described her first encounter with the blues as “strange.” It was in 1902 when the traveling show Rainey was performing in stopped in a small town in Missouri, upon which a woman came into her tent and sang the “strange but poignant song” that she later incorporated into her act as an encore, calling it the blues. Being from the south, Rainey was aware of, and familiar with, the lives her audience members lived and their experiences, which resulted in her blues being “deeply rooted in the experiences of the poor in the Deep South.”

Rainey was born in 1886, which would put her in the appropriate age-range in which Evans said was the first generation to create the blues.

The Artists: R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough

R.L. Burnside

Robert Lee Burnside (1926-2005) was born in November 23, 1926, in Oxford, Mississippi, and is known as a bluesman singer, songwriter and guitarist. More commonly

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63 Oakley, The Devil’s Music, 12.
64 Oakley, The Devil’s Music, 12, p. 91-92.
65 Evans, Big Road Blues, 43, p. 34.
66 Oakley, The Devil’s Music, 12, p. 92.

* Burnside’s birth location has also been identified as Lafayette County, Mississippi, which is close to Oxford.
known as R.L., he is the most internationally recognized blues artist from Northeast Mississippi, according to Dr. Sylvester Oliver.\(^{68}\) Burnside lived in the North Mississippi Hill Country for most of his life, except for a brief period when he moved to Chicago; his father and brother were killed in Chicago while he was there, after which he relocated back down South in 1959, settling in Holly Springs, Mississippi – where he resided for the duration of his life – where he decided to “take up the guitar seriously and play the blues” in the 1950s.\(^{69}\) Burnside learned to play the guitar from his neighbor, Fred McDowell, according to Miller Freeman’s *All Music Guide to The Blues.*\(^ {70}\) He spent most of his early life as a farmer and fisherman,\(^ {71}\) but gained national attention in 1967 when he was recorded by George Mitchell, a blues researcher, for the Arhoolie label, and had six of his tracks featured on the album “Mississippi Delta Blues, Vol. 2.”\(^ {72}\) During the late 1960s, he was also recorded by Dr. David Evans, a folklorist and ethnomusicologist, on the Highwater record label, and on other labels such as Vogue and Dutch based Swingmaster.\(^ {73}\) In 1983, Burnside met Jon Morris Nerenberg, a harmonica player who lived and performed with Burnside’s band on a regular basis.\(^ {74}\) From then until 1985, Nerenberg booked tours for himself and Burnside, after which Nerenberg moved to Holland, which led to Burnside joining him for tours across Europe and the Caribbean for five years.\(^ {75}\) Burnside toured Europe “at least twenty

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\(^{70}\) Skelly, *All Music Guide,* 67; other influences cited by Miller Freeman include Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, and Lightnin’ Hopkins.


\(^{72}\) Oliver, “African-American Music Traditions,” 68.

\(^{73}\) Oliver, “African-American Music,” 68.


times as a solo act,” playing Holland, England, France, Germany, Italy, and Sweden in the 1970s.\textsuperscript{76} Aside from his solo career, Burnside performed with his band, the Sound Machine, outfitted exclusively by family members: Duwayne (son, lead guitar), Danny (son, rhythm guitar), Joe (son, bass), and Calvin Jackson (son-in-law, drums).\textsuperscript{77} The Sound Machine typically preformed standard blues songs, along with Burnside’s original material.\textsuperscript{78} Some of his band members played with his close friend and neighbor, Junior Kimbrough.\textsuperscript{79} In regard to Burnside’s playing style, Oliver writes that it showed “a remarkable sense of Mississippi blues tradition,” and, “the raw passionate power of his voice is naturally compelling and distinct,” which distinguished him as a northeast Hill County blues singer.\textsuperscript{80} In 1991, Burnside was one of the Hill Country artists featured on the documentary \textit{Deep Blues}.\textsuperscript{81} He was signed by the Oxford-based label, Fat Possum, in 1991 and released his debut recording “Bad Luck City” that same year, followed up by his sophomore album “Too Bad Jim” in 1994, both marketed and distributed through Capricorn Records, and described as “showcasing the raw, barebones, electric styling of Burnside.”\textsuperscript{82}

\textsuperscript{76} Oliver, “African-American Music,” 68, p. 487.

\textsuperscript{77} Oliver, “African-American Music,” 68; Burnside only played with his band for local and regional performances, only bringing them overseas once as a whole group, according to Oliver.

\textsuperscript{78} Oliver, “African-American Music,” 68.

\textsuperscript{79} Oliver, “African-American Music,” 68.

\textsuperscript{80} Oliver, “African-American Music,” 68, p. 489; Oliver expands on the more technical aspect of Burnside’s style, writing that he plays in the standard tuning (key of E), but his other favorite key is G (open tuning). He also comments on vocals and signing style, writing that it was made up of “bursts of melodic energy that is forceful and intense,” constantly breaking out of “metric bounds, signing between the rhythmic cracks,” which was his most employed and unique feature, using it about 70 percent of the time in his recordings.

\textsuperscript{81} Skelly, \textit{All Music Guide}, 67.

\textsuperscript{82} Skelly, \textit{All Music Guide}, 67, p. 39.
Junior Kimbrough

David Kimbrough (1930-1998) was born July 28, 1930, in Hudsonville, Mississippi. Better known as Junior, he was primarily a regional sensation until later in his career. Oliver described Junior as quite, a lover (noting his ability to charm women), and particularly close to “his social circle.” Coming from a family of five, of what Oliver described as “musical amateurs,” Kimbrough first learned guitar licks from his father, David Kimbrough, Sr., and other Hill Country artists such as “Peg Leg” Roosevelt and Mississippi Fred McDowell. Before receiving a guitar – passed down from his three older brothers – Kimbrough played a makeshift string instrument common in the Hill Country, consisting of strings of wire fashioned on the side of a wooden structure, in this case the side of his house. After listening to his father and brothers, Kimbrough became skilled enough on the guitar that his father would take him around to sing and perform for neighbors, even though he was only eight years old; this helped him develop a reputation, and in late 1950 he formed a his own blues band, which was later named the Soul Blues Boys. The original band was made up of Lindsey Boga on rhythm guitar – replaced by Earl "Little Joe" Ayers when Boga moved away – long time friend George Scales on bass, Johnny Lee Smith on drums – although Calvin Jackson (R.L. Burnside’s son-in-law, and

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87 Oliver, “African-American Music Traditions,” 68; the instrument consisting of wire mounted on wood is often referred to as a diddley-bow. See Alan Lomax, “The Land Where the Blues Began,” ¾ inch video tape, The Mississippi Authority for Educational Television & Alan Lomax, (1979; West Hills: Media Generation, 1979.), 5:10-7:05, to see the construction of this instrument and it being played by a Mississippi blues artist.

drummer for his band the Sound Machine) would sometimes sit in – and Kimbrough on lead guitar. Junior’s band, along with Burnside’s, were often hired to perform at house parties (a Hill Country staple) such as Bill Tuggle’s. Later on, Kimbrough became known for his own house parties, where Burnside and other local acts would perform; Kimbrough’s venue is credited as being a place where musicians could learn, and in turn made him a role model figure in the community. Oliver described Kimbrough’s style as “a modern strain of rural Mississippi blues – that is, one man singing to the accompaniment of a band instead of a single guitar,” and labeled his guitar style as “strong.” The unique style of music Kimbrough played was labeled “Cottonpatch” blues in the early 1980s – the definition of the term can be musically defined as “a bucolic blend of string band music (similar to early bluegrass) and country blues that has been inoculated and charged with a heavy two-beat dance rhythm that is brisk and played with a dominant electric sound.” He was a highly original artist, and prided himself on playing original material and songs.

Before seriously pursuing music in the late 1960s, he worked in northern Marshall County as foreman for a local white planter managing the livestock, cotton and hay fields, assigning day-to-day jobs to workers, and maintenance on farm equipment. Junior gained recognition in 1966 after recording the tracks “Tramp” and “You Can’t Leave Me” for the

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90 Oliver, “African-American Music Traditions,” 68
93 Oliver, “African-American Music Traditions,” 68; a major theme Oliver identified in Kimbrough’s song lyrics was women.
Philwood label, based out of Memphis, Tennessee.\textsuperscript{95} It was not until almost 10 years (1975) later that Kimbrough recorded two solo tracks for a British anthology, after which he was not recorded again until 1982 when the Memphis-based label, High Water records, recorded two tracks of his tracks, “Keep Your Hands Off Her” and “I Feel Good, Little Girl.”\textsuperscript{96} For a majority of the time during the 1970s and into the late 1980s, Kimbrough mainly performed in juke joints around Mississippi, which is where Robert Palmer discovered him.\textsuperscript{97} Like Burnside, Kimbrough was featured in the 1992 documentary \textit{Deep Blues}, which generated a great deal of exposure for him, and helped play a role in his signing to Fat Possum records.\textsuperscript{98} In 1992, Kimbrough released “All Night Long,” his first full-length album, and his sophomore album “Sad Days, Lonely Nights” the following year in 1993.\textsuperscript{99} Despite his massive appeal and popularity outside of Mississippi substantiate this, Kimbrough seemed to prefer playing in Mississippi, where he remained a local celebrity and community figurehead until his death in 1998.\textsuperscript{100}

\textsuperscript{95} Oliver, “African-American Music Traditions,” 68.

\textsuperscript{96} Oliver, “African-American Music Traditions,” 68; Oliver notes that Kimbrough and his band have “several unreleased recordings,” and cites some made between 1981-1984. However, he does not clarify if these recordings were the “unreleased” mentioned earlier, therefore the author did not cite these as established recordings.


\textsuperscript{98} Bill Dahl and Stephen Thomas Erlewine, “Junior Kimbrough,” 83.


\textsuperscript{100} Oliver, “African-American Music Traditions,” 68.
Figure 1-1. Illustration of the upper portion of the state of Mississippi represents the Hill Country (yellow), including popular artist’s names next to the region they’re from. The Delta left portion of the state represents the Delta (green), including popular artist’s names next to the region they’re from. These Courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries.

The Delta: Geography, History and Musical Style

The Mississippi Delta is often referred to as the land where the blues originated. It is located in the Northwestern part of the state of Mississippi, spanning two hundred triangular miles, with its three points located at Marked Tree, Arkansas, Vicksburg, Mississippi, and Durant, Mississippi, and is situated between the Tallahatchie and Yazoo rivers located to the east, and the Mississippi River to the west (See Figure 1-1). It is typically described as flat, lowland region with rich soil, which researchers say is a result of the Mississippi River flooding

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the area every spring for centuries. William Ferris described the region as an “undeveloped ‘island,’” whose rich soil was covered with lush hardwood forest, bayous, and great cane breaks until settlers began to inhabit and develop the land in 1820, as part of the expanding cotton industry. Today, it is covered by cotton fields and soybeans, and a handful of small towns scattered throughout.

Much like other regions of Mississippi, the foundation of the Delta’s economy was created by black laborers, who [in the Delta] cleared fields, built levees to protect freshly planted fields from floods and the river. Debra Devi writes that alongside the black workers were “thousands” of Irish immigrants, who were “forcibly conscripted” to work clearing the land and assigned to working on levees, a job that was especially dangerous because of the steep and muddy slopes. Robert Springer writes that the attraction to the area grew after World War I, as it was a promising destination for employment for settlers, a majority being freed blacks; and that the large influx of people allowed drainage networks to be built, resulting in the growth of large cotton plantations between Reconstruction and the First World War. Devi estimates that “about a million African Americans were living in Mississippi” and that “four to five hundred thousand were in the Delta.” Springer writes that ninety percent of the Delta farmers were sharecroppers in 1925, a profession chosen by a majority of blacks because planters would offer

105 Ferris, *Blues From*, 103.
108 Devi, *The Language*, 101, p. 93
provision and housing in exchange for work. However, black sharecroppers noted they were always in debt at the end of a farm year, citing the inability for their crop to cover the cost of land rental, mules, supplies, and the final settlement with the white landowner. Springer writes that in 1934, the sharecroppers in the lower Delta were the poorest out of all cotton-producing regions in the South, netting an average income of $38.28, although Devi cites (through interviews) residents of the Delta claiming those in the Hill Country “could earn about a quarter a day, whereas [those] in the Delta could make a dollar or more a day.” Despite inhabitants of the Hill Country supposedly receiving less pay than those in the Delta, the harsh economic conditions and poor treatment of blacks in the region prompted migration to northern cities, with more than half of the black population moving to places like Chicago and St. Louis between 1955 and 1960. In 1979, Ferris reported that in the Delta, blacks still outnumbered whites two to one, with most of the population spread throughout the region, residing in small towns. However, the poor blacks of this region, those who experienced poverty and lived during the harsh conditions, were the creators of the Delta blues music, and intended for its listeners to be an audience reflected their culture – a music they could relate to and was deeply personal.

Robert Palmer refers to the Delta blues as the “purest and most deeply rooted of all blues strains,” while Springer writes it is, “undoubtedly the most authentically black form of the

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109 Springer, Authentic Blues, 40.
110 Ferris, Blues from, 103.
111 Springer, Authentic Blues, 40.
113 Ferris, Blues From, 103.
114 Ferris, Blues From, 103.
115 Palmer, Deep Blues, 35.
blues one may come to hear.” The music, according to Springer, is not very sophisticated, and typically features a guitar and/or harmonica, with the occasional use of percussion; he also describes the vocals as lacking sophistication, and notes their edgy and rough style. While Palmer’s description of the style’s musical structure is similar, calling it “simple enough,” he writes that it is a “refined, extremely subtle, and ingeniously systematic musical language,” and highlights outsiders, such as white musicians and blacks from other regions, attempts to master the style have most often been met with failure. Dr. David Evans writes that blues in the Deep South, which included the Delta region, were almost minimalistic in structure, and designed so that every note was “felt.” Evans describes the singing as “impassioned,” and having “harsh, raspy qualities[ey],” as a result of the voice originating in the back of the singer’s throat, sometimes showing field holler qualities. Palmer writes, “The Mississippi Delta’s blues musicians sang with an unmatched intensity, in a gritty, melodically circumscribed, highly ornamented style.” Several of the verses are borrowed from a larger body of traditional blue lyrics, dealing with death, spirituality, or the singer’s struggle between “heavenly and diabolical forces,” and usually sung in a serious tone.

117 Springer, Authentic Blues, 40, p. 69
118 Springer, Authentic Blues, 40.
119 Palmer, Authentic Blues, 40, p. 18.
121 David Evans, “Goin’ Up the Country,” 120.
122 Palmer, Deep Blues, 35, p. 44.
123 Palmer, Deep Blues, 35, p. 44.
With a large body of work for musicians to choose from, singers would also sing “make ups,” a process that involved creating verses on-the-spot in free verse form. In regard to the instrumental accompaniments in this style, Evans’ writes they “generally have powerful, driving rhythms, often accelerating in tempo over the course of a song,” and that the guitar or piano is usually played percussively, during which the technique of sliding a glass or metal tube, or ring, along the guitar’s strings to create a “whining” tone is often times used. This sliding originated when a player would run a bottle, or piece of glass, along a one-stringed instrument, a homemade instrument called “one-strand on the wall.” One-string evolved into guitars, and guitars were later made electric and amplified, and this style could typically be heard in “urban blues,” blues coming from areas where blacks from the Delta had migrated to such as Chicago and St. Louis. While stringed instruments such as the one-string and guitar were prominent in the Delta, others such as the fiddle were not preferred by its residents, according to Tom Dumas, who grew up in the hills north of the Delta. In regard to an artist from the Delta who embodies its style, bluesman Charley Patton is often cited as one of the pioneers. Evans describes Patton’s voice as “tough and raw, suggesting a rough-and-tumble life and a barely suppressed rage,” and despite being drawn from traditional blues verses, several of his lyrics contained “startling originality and contained highly personal references;” and said his playing style included a “superb touch on the guitar and mastery of the subtleties of tone and timing,” noting his

124 Ferris, Blues From, 103.

125 Ferris, Blues From, 103.; the term “bottlenecking” is often used when describing the use of sliding metallic/glass objects along guitar strings in order to produce a whining sound.


128 Ferris, Blues From, 103, p. 96-97.
preference to “snap and bend the strings and slide a knife over them to produce percussive and whining effects.”

Patton served as a “mentor, role model, and waymaker for many other Delta bluesman.”

Some well-known artists who emerged from the region include Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, B.B. King, and Robert Johnson. Race records, records of African Americans playing music, began being created in the 1920s, and Delta blues singers (such as those mentioned previously) were “widely recorded.” Dr. Sylvester Oliver writes that the music from the Delta spread rapidly since the 1920s, showing that “the Delta blues style was the most predominant style of Mississippi blues to emerge,” and was “the most preferred by Mississippi musicians who played popular blues songs.” The Delta blues evolved from what Robert Palmer refers to as the “loosely structured, rough textured cotton field blues of the early 1900s,” and into the “precise virtuosic music of men such as Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters in the 1930s and 1940s.” Palmer describes the current delta blues as “modern and electric,” but still having a rural point of view in sound and acknowledgement of traditions, that “differentiate today’s Delta blues from the blues of the big cities.”

**The Hill Country: Geography, History and Musical Style**

The northeast Mississippi Hill Country is located in the northeast corner of the state. It is situated between the lowlands of the Delta and the foothills of the Southern Appalachian

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129 Evans, “Goin’ Up,” 120, p. 43; see p. 41-47 for a more complete biographical outline of Patton’s life and career.

130 Evans, “Goin’ Up,” 120, p. 41.


134 *Deep Blues*, Directed by Robert Mugge, 133.
Mountain range, with the region extending approximately 45 miles from north to south. Six counties create the region, all bordering the Mississippi-Tennessee boarder, with the exception of one (See Figure 1-1). The eastern portion of the region consists of small mountains and hills, littered with woods, and the western portion is full of thick pine forests, hills, dense kudzu vines. Other regions east of the Delta, such as Tate and Panola counties are considered the Hill Country, according to Dr. David Evans. Several natural water springs exist throughout the northeast Hill Country, and its natural resources are wood, gravel and limestone, and the soil in a majority of the region is appropriate for vegetables and “other cash crops” requiring lower mineral factors. The western counties are more suitable for farming, and are covered with fields of cotton, soybeans and wheat today, while the eastern counties have wood and textile manufacturing plants.

Much like the Delta, the northeast Hill Country remained uninhabited except by native Americans until the early 1820s when white settlers came to the region, using their enslaved African-Americans to clear wooded lands to plant cotton. This land was owned by the Chickasaw Indians, who sold/rented the land to planters and allowed them to use blacks as labor, however, after the financial success the crops yielded in the 1830s, the Mississippi Legislature

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135 Oliver, “African-American,” 68, p. 7; Oliver offers more detail on the geographic layout of the region, writing that it starts about 17 miles southeast of Memphis, Tennessee, at the Marshall County, Mississippi, line, and it is 87 miles to the Mississippi-Alabama state line on the eastern side of the region.

136 Oliver, “African-American,” 68; the six counties are: Marshall, Benton, Tippah, Alcorn, Prentiss, and Tishomingo.

137 Oliver, “African-American,” 68.


139 Oliver, “African-American,” 68.

140 Oliver, “African-American,” 68.

141 Oliver, “African-American,” 68.
passed a law that extended the state’s rule over any and all land still owned by Choctaw and Chickasaw Indians in Mississippi.\textsuperscript{142} This act made the northeast Hill Country even more appealing for white planters and their enslaved African Americans, so much so that by the brink of the Civil War the region’s population was approximately 100,000.\textsuperscript{143} The land was cheap, and those with “capital or credit could secure vast tracts of land by making a small down payment.”\textsuperscript{144} Oliver writes that almost immediately, cotton became the number one crop to grow in the northeast Hill Country terrain, and by 1850 the region had the greatest number of farms and plantations in Mississippi.\textsuperscript{145} Palmer, however, claims that there were “never any big plantations here [Hill Country] at any time,” and that, “It’s always been small farms, a lot of them black owned.”\textsuperscript{146} In the early 1870s though, planters in the western portion of the northeast Hill Country allowed African-Americans to purchase their land with the income earned from harvesting their crops, a system known as sharecropping, which was discussed earlier in this section.\textsuperscript{147} However, the decline in sharecropping in Tate and Panola counties since World War II sparked a migration of blacks from the area to places cities like Memphis or towns farther north to find better jobs, although, a “considerable amount” of blacks who stayed continued to rent farmland since the region’s economy is still rooted in agriculture, according to Dr. David Evans.\textsuperscript{148} In 1991, Palmer observed that, “The pattern and pace of life in north Mississippi didn’t

\textsuperscript{142} Oliver, “African-American,” 68.

\textsuperscript{143} Oliver, “African-American,” 68.


\textsuperscript{145} Oliver, “African-American,” 68; other crops existed in the region as well such as corn, oats and wheat.

\textsuperscript{146} Deep Blues, Directed by Robert Mugge, 133

\textsuperscript{147} Oliver, “African-American,” 68.

\textsuperscript{148} David Evans, “Black Fife And,” 138.
[doesn’t] seemed to have changed very much in the last 100 years," which includes the musical style and traditions.

Providing descriptors of early blues music from the region is difficult. Several musicians from the Hill Country were never recorded, or weren’t interested in the idea of recording, while others may have been weary of record companies, or simply had no desire to become famous for their music. Like other regions of the state, however, the northeastern corner had developed its own unique blend of the blues, one which Oliver writes was “quite similar” to the Delta’s in some ways, but acknowledges the lack of early Hill Country recordings makes it difficult to compare. It is important to note that artists from the region, such as R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough, were often “casually” labeled as Delta blues singers by blues historians. Marshall County was the regional hub for blues during the early decades of the century – specifically three towns: Holly Springs, Chulahoma, and Hudsonville – and was where rural African-Americans created their music. The sound of the early blues style were influenced by several Hill Country music traditions, primarily the string band, which Oliver writes was “in many ways a carryover of the banjo and pre-blues traditions in respect to lyrics, playing and soloing techniques.” Guitar is the primary instrument used by bluesman of this region, like the Delta and other places, and a majority of those are amplified in some format. Musicians from the region such as R.L.

149 Deep Blues, Directed by Robert Mugge, 133.
150 Oliver, “African-American,” 68.
151 Oliver, “African-American,” 68, p. 393; similar musical elements include: lyrical content, slide technique (bottlenecking), constant repetition of guitar playing, vocal style, and is performed mostly by males.
152 Oliver, “African-American,” 68.
Burnside, Junior Kimbrough, and Johnny Woods have led the way for the Hill Country genre toward the end of the twentieth century, with R.L. being the most internationally recognized, and Junior primarily being a regional sensation until later in his life.\textsuperscript{156} Until this juncture in time, the Hill Country had been underrepresented in popular culture, despite the region’s close proximity to the Delta, which was a popular location for recording artists during the race records craze of the 1920s.\textsuperscript{157} Still, the blues from the northeast hill country is “dubiously defined” in the popular mind as being an extension of the Delta blues tradition, and artists like R.L. Burnside, Junior Kimbrough, Mississippi Fred McDowell, and Johnny Woods became “part of the record company initiatives to label all Mississippi bluesmen basically as ‘Delta’ blues musicians.”\textsuperscript{158}

\textbf{African Origins and Their Influence on Hill Country Tradition: The Banjo and Fiddle}

\textbf{African origins: Senegambia region and the Wolof Tribe}

Robert Palmer, musicologist and music critic for the New York Times, authored the book \textit{Deep Blues}, which contains great insight and research on the blues. The information related to African origins is especially important to review, as elements will be seen embedded within Hill County music and tradition. Palmer establishes the geographic location(s) where Africans were taken from, focusing heavily on Senegambia, but making reference to the slave coast, and what is now Angola.\textsuperscript{159} Tribes from the Senegambia region (known today as Senegal and Gambia) were popular during the formative years. In Michael Coolen’s article “The Fodet: A

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\textsuperscript{156} Oliver, “African-American,” 68.

\textsuperscript{157} David Evans, “Black Fife And,” 138


\textsuperscript{159} Palmer, \textit{Deep Blues}, 35, p. 26; (1) Senegambia: A stretch of the West African coast [labeled by slave traders]. It extended from present-day Senegal and the Gambia down to the northern coastline of Guinea, an area which was forested toward the south but whose northern extremities edged into the Sahara. (2) Slave Coast: The immense stretch of coastline [Europeans referred to as the slave coast] – present day Sierra Leone, Liberia, the Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo, Dahomey, Nigeria, and Cameroon. (3) Angola: Along the coast, south of the Congo River’s mouth.
Senegambian Origin For The Blues,” he cites tribes from Senegambia as being a “source of a large number of slaves who reached the United States.” Samuel Charters, one of the earliest scholars to research the blues, noted that among these tribes were the Wolof, Fula, and Mandingo. Researchers like Coolen and Palmer point out that a “high percentage” of slaves from the Senegambia slave trade were members of the Wolof tribe. Palmer attributes this to the Wolof empire spitting into “warring states” during the sixteenth century, after which periods of turmoil ensued, resulting in prisoners being captured and sold into slavery. He also writes that the presence of Islam moving into the region created unrest, making it “attractive to European slave traders.” It is important to recognize the Wolof’s prominence because elements from their musical tradition had a significant impact on shaping the blues, and can be seen in the earliest Hill County music traditions, as later literature will reveal. However, as noted earlier, Africans from different tribes were integrated, and music traditions were blended. Therefore, the vast amount of cultural traditions make it “impossible to draw definitive conclusions about the transmission of musical practices,” according to Kathleen Danser.


African links: fiddle and banjo

Coolen, who’s article focuses on the drawing similarities between the Wolof’s musical instruments/singing(ers) and those of early Afro-American blues – posits the influential role the tribe played on shaping the early blues, writing, “Since the Wolof were strongly represented among these slaves, it is appropriate to identify them as one possible source of musical influence.”166 Charters, although he does not specify the Wolof tribe, agrees that slaves from the Senegambia region had a strong connection to the origins of American blues.167 He also makes reference to the time period during which the Wolof were transported, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, noting it was when new Afro-American traditions were being birthed.168 Others like Gerhard Kubik believe the central Sudanic regions hold stronger weight with “provenance of some of the rural blues’ characteristic traits.”169 However, like Charters and Coolen, Palmer feels slaves’ from this area of West Africa had a strong musical connection to the blues. When observing instruments found in the southern region of Senegambia, Palmer writes, that “one encounters a wealth of stringed instruments, from the humblest one-stringed gourd fiddles to guitarlike lutes with two, three or four strings to elaborate harp-lutes with more than twenty strings.”170 Instruments observed, Palmer then writes, “The Wolof are also a likely source of the most popular American musical instrument to have originated among the slaves – the banjo,”

169 Gerhard Kubik, Africa And The Blues (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 69; Kubik is referring not necessarily to the westernmost geographical Sudan, but the region from Mali across northern Ghana and northern Nigeria into northern and central Cameroon.
170 Palmer, Deep Blues, 35, p. 27.
after which he compares the similarities between the Wolof’s music played on the *halam* and that which is played on the black American banjo.\(^{171}\)

Palmer provides detail of the construction of the five-stringed African instrument, showing the build of the banjo to be similar, after which he makes reference to how the halam is played, writing, “one of which (strings) vibrates openly as a drone string, and it is played in what American hammer folk musicians call frailing or claw hammer.”\(^{172}\) When writing about the roots and influences on blues, Charters’ points out the similarity between the halam and banjo as well.\(^{173}\) His description is more in-depth, and written from the perspective of the instrument while in Africa; he writes, “It was made from an elongated gourd that had dried to the hardness of thick plastic. It had five strings cut from a length of plastic fishing line tied to the rubbed wooden stick that worked as the instrument’s neck.”\(^{174}\) Charters’ furthers his description, writing, “Four of the strings went to the end of the stick, and the fifth was tied close to the body of the instrument, shortening its length and raising its pitch.”\(^{175}\) The fifth string can be seen as the string Palmer referred to as the “drone string.” Coolen’s research also makes reference to parallels that can be drawn between several Wolof instruments and those played in the formative


\(^{172}\) Palmer, *Deep Blues*, 35, p. 31-32; see David Ruben, “Blues On The Edge Kenny Brown,” *Guitar Player* (2006) interview in which Hill Country bluesman, Kenny Brown, acknowledges the term “frailing.” Brown, who played alongside Burnside and Kimbrough, says the secret to playing Hill County blues is “mostly in the right hand, with the index finger and thumb moving fast. I think Fred McDowell called it ‘frailin.’” McDowell is also one of the Big Five from the region, and an influential musician on Burnside’s career.

\(^{173}\) Charters, “Workin’ On The Building,” 161, p.14; Charters did not study this instrument cited in person, instead he bases his statements on an observation made by an English voyager named Jobson, who’s accounts were published in a compendium of travel writings published in London, Green’s *Collection of Voyages*. Jobson noted his observation in 1745 while traveling along the west coast of Africa and coming into contact with an African tribe, describing their singers and instruments.


\(^{175}\) Charters, “Workin’ On The Building,” 161, p. 14
blues, but finds a link between the Wolof’s xalam (plucked-lute) and the banjo. Similarly to Charters and Palmer, Coolen notes the xalam also consists of five strings, adding how the musician plays the instrument, in which he writes, “using the thumb (the musician), index finger, and middle finger of the right hand, strikes down on the strings rather than plucking up on them.” He does, however, acknowledge the idea. This style of play is similar to the “frailing” Palmer mentioned earlier, except Coolen’s description provides more detail. Building on Palmer’s description of other stringed instruments one might encounter in the southern region of Senegambia, Coolen’s research also draws parallels between a bowed-lute (referred to as riti by the Wolof) and the fiddle. Coolen doesn’t offer any specifics regarding possible parallels between the instruments, but does suggest the importance of the riti in Senegambia culture(s), “would have permitted Africans to perceive similarities between that instrument and the European fiddle, thus encouraging a syncretic exchange wherein the slaves readily accepted the fiddle as a substitute for the African bowed-lute.” Charters raises a point that the banjo is often thought of as an instrument associated with southern whites, but is in fact “one of the most vigorous survivals of the African cultural influence on American music.” The literature reviewed thus far clearly shows the African origin of both Wolof instruments – banjo and fiddle – and also illustrates how a large influx in Wolof slaves could have aided in the instrument’s migration to the states. It should be noted, however, that overtime, with the appropriation of African music by whites, the instrument changed form. However, research on Hill Country

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176 Coolen, “The Fodet,” 160; it should be noted that Coolen acknowledges the idea of the banjo being a xalam is speculative, but similarities and facts suggest a link.


music traditions has identified these two Wolof instruments as one of the first traditions to have originated in the region.

**The fiddle and banjo in the hill country**

In his dissertation *African-American Music Traditions In Northeast Mississippi*, Dr. Sylvester Oliver writes that fiddle and banjo players were the first known group of musicians in the Hill Country, adding that, “the tradition of fiddle music was quite strong in the northeast hill region at the turn of the century,”\(^{181}\) and later adds, “The fiddlers were among the most respected musicians before 1930 in most communities.”\(^{182}\) He elaborates on the string band tradition, writing that it was the “expanded ensemble sound of the fiddle and banjo tradition,” which also could include additional fiddle players, banjo, mandolin, guitar and a string bass.\(^{183}\) Although Oliver never mentions either the Wolof tribe or Senegambia in his research on the Hill Country, Coolen’s research finds “remarkable similarities” between the ensemble Oliver describes and a common Senegambian ensemble, consisting of a plucked-lute (the xalam), a bowed-lute (called riti by the Wolof and nyanyaur by the Fula), and a tapped calabash.\(^{184}\) Coolen writes that the ensembles popular in the United States from the late seventeenth through nineteenth centuries included the fiddle, banjo, and tambourine.\(^{185}\) Both the Wolof and Hill Country ensembles were both mostly made up of males. The presence of the instruments and ensembles in the Hill Country region noted by Oliver, and the parallels suggested in Coolen’s research, alludes to the idea that Wolof slaves were among those slaves who first settled, or were highly influential on

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\(^{185}\) Coolen, “The Fodet,” 160.
those who settled, in this area of Mississippi. Aside from their popularity and presence, Oliver’s research establishes their (instruments and musicians) primary role in the Hill Country.

Fiddle and banjo players often played at African-American social functions like house parties, fish fries, country dances, and other events acting as a venue to release stress, have fun and forget about the worries associated with farm life.\textsuperscript{186} Because they were expected to facilitate as the primary form of entertainment, the groups had a robust repertoire, including songs familiar for blacks and whites.\textsuperscript{187} It should be noted that Coolen writes ensembles from both continents (not specifically the Hill Country) prided themselves as entertainers, and listed events that mirror those Oliver mentions.\textsuperscript{188} Folklorist Alan Lomax conducted field recordings of blacks in the south for the Library of Congress, beginning in the 1920s with his father, John Lomax.\textsuperscript{189} Lomax continued to record over the years, and ultimately authored the book \textit{The Land Where the Blues Began}, in which he includes a chapter on “The Hills,” referring to the Mississippi Hill Country.\textsuperscript{190} In this chapter, Lomax recalls a visit he had with Sid Hemphill and Lucius Smith, both Hill Country artists, who played the banjo and “fiddle bow.”\textsuperscript{191} During his visit with Hemphill and Smith, Lucius calls the fiddle “the leading music of the whole world, outa all the

\textsuperscript{186} Oliver, “African-American Music Traditions,” 68.
\textsuperscript{187} Oliver, “African-American Music Traditions,” 68.
\textsuperscript{188} Coolen, “The Fodet,” 160.; the functions/events Coolen lists include: a christening, a private party, a wedding, a promotion, a political rally, a funeral, or any function they attend (whether invited or not).
\textsuperscript{189} Alan Lomax, \textit{The Land Where the Blues Began} (New York; The News Press, 1993); this work is an ethnographic compilation of various field-recording sessions Lomax conducted with artists, his personal experiences while immersed (documenting) cultural events, and in-depth interviews with a variety of those involved with blues throughout the South in some capacity.
\textsuperscript{190} Alan Lomax, \textit{The Land}, 189, p. 314-358.
\textsuperscript{191} Alan Lomax, \textit{The Land}, 189, p. 333-340.
music,” and that, “The fiddles leads all the music and the banjo’s next.” Junior Kimbrough, born in Marshall County, grew up watching his father’s friends play the banjo and fiddle, exposing him to certain songs he would play later in his career, however, this will be discussed later. Oliver noted in his research that both instruments “were closely tied to an old southern agricultural lifestyle that was enjoyed primarily by an older generation of African-Americans and whites” who had grown up on the music. When Oliver refers to an older generation having a preference for the music, it supports why Smith spoke so highly of each instrument to Lomax, as he was in his later years when the folklorist spoke with him. Also, Kimbrough was born in 1930, which suggests his father’s friends would have also been of that older generation.

In his research, however, Oliver notes that while these instruments (string bands) were the first tradition in the region, they were largely neglected in the late 1920s when record companies started recording African-American musical talent in the south, reporting that his “informants” said, “there were enough African-American fiddlers to go around and play for the socials of the affluent and the not so affluent audiences in the early decades of the twentieth century,” yet a large number remained “obscure figures outside of their immediate communities.” Bill Malone attributes the decline to the shift from slavery to freedom, and also the emergence of the blues, which attracted musicians to a more sophisticated style of music,

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193 Oliver, “Africa-American,” 68.


195 Lomax did not specify the time period in which he interviewed the artist, but says Hemphill was 91.

196 Oliver, “Africa-American,” 68, p. 356
accompanied by the desire to stay current with trends. However, by the 1940s and 1950s the fiddle music had become a “player’s art” and fiddle players in Marshall and Benton County would have “showdowns” in front of audiences, none of which residents felt was organized, but still referred to it as a tradition. Junior Kimbrough, born in Marshall County, grew up watching his father’s friends play the banjo and fiddle, along with his (Junior’s) bass player, George Scales, and would watch these showdowns:

Man, those old fiddle players sho’ could play too; I remember that! If one could not play the song they called off, another one came right in there, picked it up and played it like a champ. I can't remember all the songs they used to play now, but they played that old-time music on those fiddles, including a lot of blues songs, too.

Oliver notes that Kimbrough recognized the fiddle player’s repertoires included popular blues songs being played at that time, along with everything bluesmen on the guitar were playing.

Two songs mentioned are important to note: “Coal Black Mattie” and “Shake ‘Em On Down.” Oliver observed these two songs as being included regularly in the later regional blues players repertoire, labeling “Coal Black Mattie” as one of the most popular and widely known blues songs in the region. This song was recorded by four of the five “Big Five” of the region, with the exception of Jessie Mae Hemphill, however, the focus should be put on

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200 Oliver, “Africa-American,” 68.


202 Oliver, “Africa-American,” 68, p. 404-405; in an interview between Monroe Jackson and Oliver, Monroe claims he wrote the song about his relationship with a women named Black Mattie, one that was true story, but a tragedy. A more detailed description by Jackson can be found page 405. Mary Dell Coleman, however, told Oliver it was she had heard the song her whole life, and that it was “everybody’s song” and not just Jackson’s.
Kimbrough and Burnside. While the literature has slightly drifted from the historical Wolof lineage of the fiddle and banjo and its introduction to the Hill Country, the link between the role they played in keeping traditional songs like “Coal Black Mattie” and “Shake ‘Em On Down” alive, as well as exposing them to different generations of artists like Kimbrough and Burnside, is critical to understanding why these instruments (in this case the fiddle more so than the banjo) are worthy of in-depth review and discussion. While important in the Hill Country tradition, the banjo, was not “the instrument that would shape the blues, but it was the instrument that helped develop the techniques that became part of the background of the blues.”

African Origins and Their Influence on Hill Country Tradition: Fife and Drum Tradition

Military influence

Perhaps one of the more well-known traditions of the Hill Country music is the fife and drum band(s). The Hill Country region had one of the most active African-American fife and drum bands traditions in the United States between 1860 and 1960. Alan Lomax recorded the first fife and drum band in 1942 in the Hill Country, although the instruments found their way to the region will before that. Scholars agree that this particular style of band came to the region by way of military marching units in the nineteenth century, however, African-American participation in fife and drum bands can be seen as early as the French and Indian War (1754-1763), and traced through the Revolutionary War (1775-1783) and the American Civil War.


Oliver writes that slaves in southern states were allowed to play in military fife and drum bands during the Civil War, but drums had been banned by the Black Codes of Mississippi. This could explain blacks' draw to the fife and drum, as it was one of the few instruments they were permitted to play. During wartime, these types of bands were staples of militia units, playing during military drills, festivities, and parades. The traditional make up of a fife and drum band includes a homemade fife, snare or kettle drum, tenor drum, and bass drum, according to Oliver. Shortly after the Civil War ended, and during the later years of the Reconstruction period, the purpose of the fife and drum bands shifted from military purposes to a pure form of entertainment at events such as country picnics and ball games, however, Evans writes that there are a "number of respects in which the original military tradition is maintained." Among these military traditions, African roots also exist, and can be observed upon further review.

African Origins: Senegambia, Bantu, Sudan – instruments and talking.

The first recording of a fife and drum band – Sid Hemphill, Lucius Smith, Alec Askew, Will Head – was recorded in Panola County by Alan Lomax in 1942. In Lomax’s description of the performance, he references African tribes and traditions. In previous literature, several

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207 Danser, “Representation of African American,” 165, p. 28; see Oliver “African-American Music Tradition,” 57, p. 368, where writes that African-American fife and drum bands were also used in the nineteenth century by both the Confederate and Union troops.


211 Evans, “Black Fife And,” 138; see p. 165 for Evans’ observations of military traditions still alive in southern fife and drum traditions.


213 Lomax, The Land Where, 189, p. 325-326; Lomax frequently mentions Pygmy roots in his observation of the performance, mentions the Sudan region, and focuses on the instruments panpipes, fifes, and drums.
links to African traditions were noted, and now will be expanded upon. In his article “Black Fife and Drum Music In Mississippi” Dr. David Evans, a folklorist and ethnomusicologist at the University of Memphis, writes that “fife and drum ensembles are known in Africa, especially in the Sudan region, although a more common sight is the reed oboe with two or three drums of different sizes.” Palmer eludes to percussion instruments being prominent in villages located in the Senegambia region, writing that they often had “mount orchestras of drums, rattles, bells, and other percussion instruments.” In her master’s thesis Representations of African American Fife and Drum Music in North Mississippi, Kathleen Danser writes that among West African instruments were “carved drums covered with various animal skins.” When drumming in Africa, Evans points out the concept of “talking drums,” in which those in attendance encourage the drummer to make the drum “talk it.” Palmer explains what Evans means by “talk it,” writing, “playing rhythm patterns that conform to proverbial phrases of the words of popular fife and drum tunes – ‘is considered the sign of a good drummer.’” In Southern folk tradition, players who can make their instrument speak are admired, and that tendency is derived from African tradition. Talking drums also have the ability to transmit complex messages.

214 Evans, “Black Fife And,” 138, p. 167; it should be noted that Gerhard Kubik referenced the Sudan region earlier in the literature review, and tied the instruments from this region to more rural blues, which the Hill Country exemplifies based on its geographical location.

215 Palmer, Deep Blues, 35, p. 27.

216 Danser, “Representation of African American,” 165, p. 24; see Oliver “African-American Music Tradition,” p. 380, where he points out that once in America, drums used by bands in the Hill Country were typically store bought or manufactured.


218 Palmer, Deep Blues, 35, p. 39; Palmer’s explanation is based off of Dr. Evans’ research and field-recordings, in which Palmer cites regularly in Deep Blues, see also Lomax The Land Where The Blues Began

according to Lomax, and drums were “paramount” in bands like Sid Hemphill’s. Drums played in bands were typically outsourced from manufactures or purchased in-store. Other instruments like flutes, quills, and horns can “talk it” too by corresponding between pitch configuration in speech and in music; drummers imitate onomatopoeic nonsense syllables and/or verbal phrases that contain meaning to learn rhythms. This combination gives music the power to convey speech through sounds and rhythm. Palmer writes, “speech has its melodic properties, and the melodies found in music suggest words and sentences.” Lomax’s research in the Hill Country shows artists make reference to instruments like the flute “singing” or the harmonica “sing the melody with almost human nuance…make it ‘talk’ the words or moan them,” while also noting that the talking of instruments “unleashes strong and subtle feelings.” The fife was used as an extension of the human voice. It was [is] common for instruments like fifes, flutes, and quills to be fashioned by performers out of broken cane, which is also a West African tradition, but like drums, these instruments could also be purchased. While a link exists between the Hill Country fife and drum and Africa, the response individuals from both regions had to the instruments were are also similar – singing and dancing. Before examining literature

220 Lomax, The Land Where, 189.
222 Palmer, Deep Blues, 35, p. 29.
223 Palmer, Deep Blues, 35, p. 29; see Oakley The Devil’s Music p. 15 where he writes that slave owners became conscious of the fact that instruments like drums were used as a form of communication, or as a warning system, which the Black Codes of Mississippi later included a stipulation banning the use of drums.
225 Lomax, The Land Where, 189, p. 346-347
on these similarities, it should be emphasized again that once sold into slavery, African tribes were blended together, making it impossible to link the fife and drum tradition to one area or tribe.

**Senegambia, Bantu, Pygmies: vocals, dance and griots**

Village music making in the Senegambia region involves a mixture of group singing in call-and-response form, accompanied by hand clapping and drumming, according to Palmer.\(^{228}\) He elaborates on the Senegambia group singing, writing that “the parts of the lead vocalist and chorus often overlap, or even blend in a kind of polyphony – music that consists of several different but simultaneous melodies.”\(^{229}\) Similarly, the Bantu and Pygmies structure their signing using a technique called “hocketing,” in which a dense polyphony is created by building on several one-or-two-note parts.\(^{230}\) These two structures both encourage participation.\(^{231}\) Among the specific vocal techniques, was the Bantu “whooping,” which is best described as a “sudden jumping into the falsetto range.”\(^{232}\) As has been mentioned throughout this review, the blending of tribes created new traditions, and the Senegambia vocals and Bantu technique merged when the tribes were thrown together in the New World, forming what Giles Oakley, among other scholars, refer to as ‘corn field hollers,’ ‘cotton field hollers,’ ‘whooping,’ or just ‘loud

\(^{228}\) Palmer, *Deep Blues*, 35.

\(^{229}\) Palmer, *Deep Blues*, 35, p. 27-28; The term polyphony, or polyrhythm, is mentioned frequently by researchers such as Alan Lomax and David Evans, who have each documented the fife and drum tradition in the Hill Country and other regions of the South, when describing instrumentation and singing. For references of polyrhythm in the Hill County see Lomax, *The Land Where*, 65, p. 332, 335, and 350; see also Evans, “Black Fife and Drum,” 83, p. 167.


\(^{231}\) Palmer, *Deep Blues*, 35, p. 28

\(^{232}\) Palmer, *Deep Blues*, 35, p. 28; Palmer says this vocal technique seems to have derived from the Pygmies who were the areas (Congo-Angola region) first inhabitants.
mouthing.” Frederic Olmsted witnessed this hybrid music, or work song, in South Carolina in 1853 (while he might not have been aware at the time) while observing a gang of negroes loading cotton onto a train late at night:

Suddenly, one raised such a sound as I never heard before; a long, loud, musical shout, rising, and falling, and breaking into falsetto, his voice ringing through the woods in the clear, frosty night air, like a bugle-call. As he finished, the melody was caught up by another, and then, another, and then, by several in chorus.

This first hand account is important because it shows the blending of the two tribal vocal traditions (call-and-response, building on voices, falsetto range). Palmer writes that octave jumping, whooping and vocal techniques survived more strongly in the “hollers and blues of Mississippi,” while Oakley echoes this, writing, “such calls were common all over the South well into this century.” In his book *America’s Black Musical Heritage*, Tilford Brooks also offers the call-and-response song’s presence in the New World as evidence of the survival of West African musical practices. It should be noted that call-and-response format were also used by Delta bluesman, such as B.B. King. In Africa, Palmer writes, these types of singing were regularly practiced, as there were “plenty of opportunities…for almost every group activity,” listing activities such as constructing dwellings, religious events, and partying among

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233 Oakley, *The Devil’s Music*, 12, p. 35; see also David Evans, *Big Road Blues: Tradition and Creativity in the Folk Blues*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1982), p. 27 for a more detailed description of these types of songs’ rhythmic and vocal breakdown, see also Samuel Charters “Workin’ On The Buidling,” 38, p. 22, where he also explains the songs in a more technical fashion, but differ in making reference to a “five-tone scale that probably reflects African scales.”


236 Oakley, *The Devil’s Music*, 12, p. 35


238 Ferris, *From The*, 103.
others; and also adding that each activity had its own body of music.\textsuperscript{239} Lomax’s research points to several instances where both the technique of whooping and hollers are used by Hill Country artists. In regard to hollers, Lomax cites an observation of Napoleon Strickland’s “slow, wordless phrases” while singing, writing that “this is really a holler…and cornfield hollers – a slow, rhythmically free, lonesome tune.”\textsuperscript{240} Research conducted by Lomax also shows evidence of whooping, citing Sid Hemphill’s panpipe playing pointing to Pygmy roots with their “whooped and implosive notes,” while also linking Alec Askew’s playing of the panpipes to the Pygmies as well, describing the “strange, choked sound with a violent intake of breath on the offbeats…whooping on each intake of breath.”\textsuperscript{241} While literature shows African roots in vocal techniques can be identified in the Hill Country, the response between musicians and participants can be as well, although, literature, aside from is not as detailed as it was for instruments and vocals.

The research conducted by Alan Lomax is one of the more detailed pieces of literature that focuses on the similarities of the relationship Hill Country participants and musicians had, to those of African tribes. In Africa, it is difficult to distinguish between performer and audience members while music making is occurring because entire villages are involved – performers, sometimes known as griots, assume a more responsibility, but audience members still participate, whether it is clapping, or joining the performer in singing.\textsuperscript{242} Lomax writes that Sid Hemphill was the leader of a drum orchestra that, “called the people of the backwoods of

\textsuperscript{239} Palmer, \textit{Deep Blues}, 36.

\textsuperscript{240} Lomax, \textit{The Land Where}, 189, p. 350.

\textsuperscript{241} Lomax, \textit{The Land Where}, 189, p. 325-326.

\textsuperscript{242} Palmer, \textit{Deep Blues}, 35, p. 28.
Mississippi to march and to celebrate, as such orchestras had done in Africa.”\textsuperscript{243} As earlier literature mentioned, tribes from the Senegambia region had mount orchestra made of drums as well. The similarity between the formation of drums orchestras in Africa and the Hill County, along with the call for people to join in the celebration, or actively participate, is important to note, as it shows audience engagement. Oliver writes that fife and drum bands would typically parade as a group, and interact with the audience in a playful manner, “enticing them to join them as they move forward at an extremely slow pace.”\textsuperscript{244} Evans writes that the formation in which the groups paraded were a “far cry” from the rows seen in military formation.\textsuperscript{245} While documenting another fife and drum band, the Young Brothers, Lomax writes that an important African trait was becoming evident, “the trait that gives black dance music its flexibility and dance.”\textsuperscript{246} The literature shows the band was dancing with the audience surrounding them, creating an “electrifying rhythmic exchange” between performers and those in attendance, with dancers “breaking out and a musician responding, and the the reverse.”\textsuperscript{247} Hill Country residents facilitating the audience role have their actions influenced by the rhythmic beats of performers and a multirhythmic situation is created, one where members of both roles are playing around the beat, and have the freedom to improvise from others – “and it is the rich resource that the orchestra draws upon and nourishes with its hot licks and polyrhythms,” according to Lomax.\textsuperscript{248} Evans writes that when attending social events, such as picnics, where fife and drum bands

\textsuperscript{243} Lomax, \textit{The Land Where}, 189, p. 326.

\textsuperscript{244} Oliver, “African-American,” 68, p. 377.

\textsuperscript{245} Evans, “Black Fife and Drum,” 138, p. 166.

\textsuperscript{246} Lomax, \textit{The Land Where}, 189, p. 331.

\textsuperscript{247} Lomax, \textit{The Land Where}, 189, p. 331.

\textsuperscript{248} Lomax, \textit{The Land Where}, 189, p. 332.
perform, audience members will dance at any time, usually solo, while onlookers encourage both the dancers and the performers.\textsuperscript{249} Aside from dancing, techniques like hand clapping used by audiences in West Africa were used in the Hill Country, and other southern regions, to keep beat and actively participate in the drum and fife performance. “Hambone” was one technique in which a audience member employs a body slapping routine, that “utilizes the same one-measure repeated patterns as much of the fife and drum music.”\textsuperscript{250} Others like Tilford write that among the elements of African dance to have survived in America are its “improvisatory quality” and the strong rhythmic qualities that exist in in the combination of dancing, clapping, and singing simultaneous.\textsuperscript{251} Thus far, we can see one of the main elements of participation in the Hill Country is dancing, which Lomax constantly links back to Africa dancing. When quoting an ex-slave (a recount from 1853), Palmer writes about “patting,” in which the slaves would “strike the right shoulder with one hand, the left with the other – all the while keeping time with the feet, and singing.”\textsuperscript{252} The simultaneous action(s) Tilford mentions, along with the “patting” technique can be seen as multirhythmic, which supports the concept Lomax points to in his research, while also showing an African lineage from Africa to slavery to the Hill Country. The literature regarding connections between dance being a common practice in engagement with fife and drum in the Hill Country and its connection to African traditions does not seem to be of high priority of researchers, aside from Lomax and Evans’ work. However, noting the participation factor is well supported by Lomax, Oliver, Evans, and Palmer. The role of the performer in

\textsuperscript{249} Evans, “Black Fife And,” 138, p. 166


\textsuperscript{251} Tilford, \textit{America’s Black Musical}, 238, p. 29.

\textsuperscript{252} Palmer, \textit{Deep Blues}, 35, p. 27.
Africa, however, is well documented by scholars, and Lomax’s research frequently makes reference to performers, which is why the literature will now focus on that topic.

As stated earlier, performers were often referred to as griot(s). There are several interpretations for the word, which roughly translated means singer and musician. Samuel Charters writes that each tribe (West African language) uses a different description for a singer, but griot is used most frequently. In her book *The Language of the Blues*, Debra Devi writes that word derives from the French word *guiriot*, after which she writes guiriot most likely has a connection to the Portuguese word *criado*, which has its roots in the Latin word *creates*, meaning “one brought up or trained.” The Latin origin Devi highlights is helpful, as literature will show griots have often been described as skilled, trained musicians and performers, also taught to carry oral traditions and songs. In many Senegambian societies, griots often memorized and kept long epic genealogies that acted as an oral history of their people. An African griot must have an exceptional memory, as the material memorized goes past simple oral traditions, but also tribal religious rites and mythology. Among the Hill Country performers Lomax’s research explores, Sid Hemphill is whom he credits with keeping the griot tradition alive, writing that “the griot tradition has survived full-blown in America with hardly interruption.” As pointed out earlier by Palmer in the “Deep Blues” documentary, music in the Hill Country remained the same throughout generations, noting that music was often passed down from generation to generation.

253 Charters, “Workin’ On The Building,” 161, p. 13; Charters states that Mandigo refer to their singers as *Jali*, the Fula refer to their singers as *Jelefo*, and the Wolof have over thirty spellings of the name they refer to as singer.


257 Lomax, *The Land Where*, 189, p. 357; Lomax also names other artist when referring to keeping the tradition alive: Blind Lemon Jefferson, and Charley Patton.
in certain families, too. Hemphill’s family is a prime example of music being passed on throughout generations. After Hemphill passed away, Lomax revisited the area, upon which he discovered Hemphill’s granddaughter, Jessie Mae Hemphill. Lomax learned Sid started teaching Jessie Mae how to play the drum at the age of nine, after which she would play with her grandfather, father, aunts, and other family members. Devi’s research on the origin of the word griot, specifically its Latin roots meaning “one brought up or trained,” suggests this is why Lomax labeled Sid Hemphill a griot; because he trained members of his family to continue on a musical tradition indicative to Hill Country culture. Devi, however, writes that griots in American blues usually perform solo and sing alone, unlike in West Africa. This is important to note because Hemphill typically performed with others, which further suggests the Hill Country as a unique area, setting it apart from other regions where the American version of griots perform solo. Aside from being responsible for the mental retention of oral histories, learning instruments and song traditions, among other things, griots were also a source of entertainment, which fife and drum leaders were in the Hill Country also provided.

Significance of Study

Research on the Hill Country region’s musical and cultural traditions is rich. Sid Hemphill and his involvement with the fife and drum tradition in the region has been well documented by researchers and folklorists such as Alan Lomax and Dr. David Evans. Otha Turner and his involvement with the Hill Country picnic tradition has also been well documented. However, there is a dearth of literature focusing solely on individual artists from

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258 Deep Blues, Directed by Robert, 133.
259 Lomax, The Land Where, 189, p. 337
the region. This study attempts to remedy this by focusing on the lives and careers of two Hill Country bluesmen, R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough.

Burnside and Kimbrough were selected because of the amount of exposure they received during their careers, and after their deaths. For example, Burnside collaborated with the punk-rock group the John Spencer Blues Explosion in the 1990s, and his music has been featured on popular HBO television shows such as “The Sopranos” and “East Bound and Down”; Punk-rock artists such as Iggy Pop, along with indie-rock artists such as the Black Keys, have covered some of Kimbrough’s original music. Examples such as these help illustrate the reach Burnside and Kimbrough had past regional success, making them two of the more identifiable faces of Hill Country music.

The research conducted in this study tracks the evolution of Hill Country music through the careers of these two men, using the media and their record label, Fat Possum, as reference points. Documentation of this evolution can prove useful to future researchers trying to understand how this subgenre came into fruition, and from the culture in which it emerged. It also provides an in-depth look at the artist’s personal lives through stories told by people close to them, such as direct relatives and dear friends. These intimate stories humanize Burnside and Kimbrough, which in turn creates valuable literature that can be used when trying to understand the bodies of work created by these men, or simply who they were as individuals outside of music. As previously stated, with a healthy amount of preexisting literature focusing on musical and cultural traditions of the region, this research will be a valuable addition because of its intimate look at these cultural icons, as well as their role in advancing the Hill Country genre.

**Methodology**

This historical study utilizes methods rooted in anthropological and social science research methodology, including oral history and textual analysis. Patricia Leavy identifies oral
history as method of in-depth, qualitative interviewing, and notes its long-term use by anthropologists while trying to gain the knowledge of people’s perspectives and experiences in the field.\footnote{Patricia Leavy, \textit{Oral History: Understanding Qualitative Research} (Oxford University Press, 2011).} Overtime, though, oral history has evolved into a multidisciplinary method used by other academic schools such as social sciences.\footnote{Patricia Leavy, \textit{Oral History}, 262.} In regard to collecting in-depth knowledge from a participants perspective, oral history is a most effective method, according to Leavy,\footnote{Patricia Leavy, \textit{Oral History}, 262} which is the reasoning behind the researcher’s selection for using this method when conducting interviews with individuals who had personal relationships, or professional encounters, with R.L. Burnside, Junior Kimbrough, or both artists. Among qualitative approaches to inquiry, John W. Creswell identifies five, one being narrative research, which Creswell says includes oral history.\footnote{John Creswell, \textit{Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches} (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi Singapore, Washington D.C.: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2013); \textit{in-depth interviewing is also a technique used in other qualitative approaches Creswell mentions, including phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study.}} Therefore, this study may mirror narrative research methods at times. However, this is normal, as many qualitative approaches employ similar methods. However, oral history remains the primary method.

Textual analysis, more commonly referred to as analysis of content, is defined as a subjective method of interpretation of the content of text data “through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes and patterns,” according to Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah Shannon.\footnote{Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah E. Shannon, “Three Approaches To Qualitative Content Analysis,” \textit{Qualitative Health Research} 15, no. 9 (2005): 1277-88, accessed on September 10, 2015, doi:10.1177/1049732305276687.} When used in qualitative terms, “text” is not limited to the normal definition of the word (printed word), but can also be applied to other mediums such as audio

\[\text{\footnotesize \text{\textsuperscript{262}} Patricia Leavy, \textit{Oral History: Understanding Qualitative Research} (Oxford University Press, 2011).}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize \text{\textsuperscript{263}} Patricia Leavy, \textit{Oral History}, 262.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize \text{\textsuperscript{264}} Patricia Leavy, \textit{Oral History}, 262}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize \text{\textsuperscript{265}} John Creswell, \textit{Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches} (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi Singapore, Washington D.C.: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2013); \textit{in-depth interviewing is also a technique used in other qualitative approaches Creswell mentions, including phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study.}}\]
and visual elements. Hsieh and Shannon argue there are three different approaches to content analysis (1) conventional, (2) directed, and (3) summative. The researched employed two of the three approaches: conventional and summative. Conventional starts with observation of a text, during which codes are defined organically and then derived from the data; summative first identifies keywords in text before and during data analysis, and then are derived from researchers’ interest; and directed begins with a theoretical framework in mind and codes are created prior and during data analysis, after which they are derived from theory or relevant findings. Because this study does not operate under a theoretical framework, and the researcher’s selected primary text(s) ranged from print publications and personal interviews, to audio recordings and video documentaries, it was logical to select two approaches most appropriate for analyzing text(s): conventional and summative. Among qualitative approaches to inquiry, John W. Creswell identifies five, one being case studies, which uses similar data collection methods as this study, including interviews, documents and audiovisual materials. Therefore, this study may mirror case study methods at times, however, this is normal, as many qualitative approaches employ similar methods. It is with these selected methods – oral history and textual analysis – that the researcher was able to achieve an understanding of how Burnside and Kimbrough were covered by the media and marketed by the music industry, while also gaining an understanding of who each man was outside of the music industry-self.

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267 Hsiu-Fang, 266.

268 Hsieh and Shannon, “Three Approaches,” 266.

269 Hsieh and Shannon, “Three Approaches,” 266.

270 Creswell, Qualitative Inquiry, 265.
Data Collection

Oral history interviews

Nine individuals meeting one or more of the following criteria were interviewed for this study: (a) personal experiences and relationships with R.L. Burnside, Junior Kimbrough, or both artists, (b) history of employment with a media entity providing coverage of either artist, or the Hill Country region, (c) history of employment in the music industry (i.e. promoter, producer, tour manager, etc.) with a connection to either artist, (d) musician having played with either artist, and (e) scholar, researcher, or expert on the Hill Country blues, the region and culture. Of those nine, five individuals met criteria A, D, and E; one individual met criteria A, C, and E; one individual met criteria A, C, and E; one individual met criteria A, B, and C; one individual met only criteria B; and one individual met only criteria E. A total of 10 interviews were conducted overall, however, one did not meet any of the following criteria, and was not included in the study. Initially, a list of twenty prospective individuals was created prior to the study in order to generate the selected criteria, which then aided in helping develop interview questions. However, only three of the original twenty prospects were actually interviewed. The other seven were suggested by either the three individuals interviewed, outside sources, further research on the artists, or personal interaction with the researcher.

All the interviews, with the exception of two, were conducted by the researcher via phone, and recorded using either the smartphone application, Call Recorded, on the researcher’s personal cellphone, or recorded in a studio booth located in the University of Florida’s Innovation News Center using the recording software program KLZ. Before commencing each interview, individuals were read a copy of the IRB consent form, asked to consent to the terms verbally while on record, given the option for their identity to remain confidential, and informed they could withdraw from participation at anytime without consequence. Out of the ten
individuals, none elected to have their identity remain confidential, or withdrew from participation.

Each interview conducted consisted of open-ended questions. These questions were not designed to be strictly adhered to, but were meant to function more as a primer to stimulate conversation between the researcher and individual, creating opportunities for more personal storytelling to evolve. This proved to a most useful strategy, as each individual elaborated on topics the researcher had not included in their interview guide, providing rich, descriptive detail of their personal experiences with R.L. Burnside, Junior Kimbrough, and the Hill Country, or experiences observing these artists and the Hill Country genre from a professional standpoint.

Interview guides were adjusted appropriately depending on the individual being interviewed, as their age(s) and experience(s) sometimes varied. Interviews continued to be collected until saturation began to occur. The concept of saturation can be understood as a point in which no new or relevant data is emerging from the data, categories are well developed, and an established relationship among categories is strong and validated, according to Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin.\textsuperscript{271} The number of interviews collected can vary until saturation is achieved.\textsuperscript{272}

**Transcription and coding**

Upon completion, each interview was transcribed using either a professional service or research assistant. Six interviews were transcribed by a female, undergraduate student enrolled at the University of Florida’s College of Journalism and Communication, assisting the researcher, while the other four were transcribed professionally by Landmark transcription services. All copies of transcriptions were submitted to the researcher as either PDF or Word.doc formats. The


\textsuperscript{272} Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 265.
researcher first listened to the original audio recording of the interview while reading the printed copy of the transcription to double-check for accuracy and possible exclusion(s) of important character cues (laughs, dramatic pauses, emotional vocal tone, etc.). After proofing the submitted transcription it was reviewed again, this time the focus centered on the details of individual’s narrative, which Michael Agar, among other researchers, describes as the first step in the data analysis process.\footnote{Michael Agar, \textit{The Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction To Ethnography} ( New York: Academic Press, 1980); Joseph Maxwell, \textit{Qualitative research design: An interactive approach}, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2013); John Creswell, \textit{Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches} (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi Singapore, Washington D.C.: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2013)} While reading, themes began to emerge and the researcher made handwritten margin notes, marked asterisks at the beginning and end of seminal quotes germane to the study, and created categories. This process of sifting through data, dividing it into concepts and groups in order to cultivate a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, is known as open coding.\footnote{Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, “Grounded Theory Research: Procedures, Canons and Evaluative Criteria,” \textit{Qualitative Sociology} 13, no. 1 (1990), accessed on September 10, 2015, doi:10.1177/1049732305276687.} The researcher also implemented the conventional content analysis approach when reading the transcriptions, creating codes during the analysis. Overtime, as interviews were completed, transcribed, double-checked for accuracy and possible exclusion of character cues, reread with focus centered on the individual’s narrative, codes and themes were noted by hand in the researcher’s Moleskin notebook. After the completion of notation, the researcher identified reoccurring themes and subthemes in selected passages. On more than one occasion, a selected passage was linked to several themes and subthemes. Once all interviews had been completed, transcribed, read and double-checked for accuracy and possible exclusion of character cues, and hand-coded, digital copies of the transcripts were uploaded into the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software program, (CAQDAS), NVivo 10.
Primary resources

In April of 2015, the researcher visited to the University of Mississippi’s Blues Archive in the Department of Archives and Special Collections located in Oxford, Mississippi, for the annual three-day Blues Symposium hosted by the university. It was during this time when the researcher learned about the Blues Archive collection, which houses manuscripts, visual and audio materials, original newspaper and magazine articles, rare books, maps, and ephemera related to the University of Mississippi, the state of Mississippi, and the Blues. Strauss and Corbin consider all of these items, with the possible exception of rare books, to be forms of “nontechnical literature.” Nontechnical literature is often used in historical or biographical studies, and serves as a primary form of data to “supplement interviews and field observations,” and, “stimulate thinking about properties and dimensions of concepts emerging from data.” The selection of nontechnical literature as a form of data for this study was appropriate since it is closely associated with historical research, and because of its ability to supplement interviews, which could benefit the oral histories collected for this study as well. Glenn A. Bowen adds that documents are conceptualized without a researcher’s “intervention,” therefore primary sources provide a contrast between the two forms of data analyzed.

Prior to the initial visit to the Blues Archives, preliminary research was conducted using the University of Florida’s virtual, web-based One Search program, which provides students

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275 Strauss and Corbin, Basics of qualitative research, 271, p. 35; the authors list biographies, diaries, documents, manuscripts, records, reports, catalogs, videotapes, and a variety of other materials as nontechnical literature.

276 Strauss and Corbin, Basics of qualitative research, 271, p. 52.

277 From this point forward, the term nontechnical literature will be substituted with the terms primary resource(s) and primary documents.

enrolled at the university access to all holdings and electronic resources, including books, magazines, newspapers, scholarly journals, and dissertations available through all George A. Smathers Libraries. However, the resources available through One Search did not yield material worthy of collecting. Because both R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough were from Mississippi, and archives house several forms of primary documents, the Blues Archive’s collection offered the most opportunity for collecting exclusive rich, descriptive forms of primary resources. In July of 2015 the researcher returned to the University of Mississippi for four-days, with the purpose of collecting data from the Blues Archive for later analysis. The researcher’s average attendance duration on a daily basis at the archive was four hours.

The primary resources collected were from each artists’ file, which consisted of paper documents ranging from newspaper and magazine clippings to promotional flyers advertising an artists’ album release, and personal documents such as birth certificates and passports, among other documents. The researcher scanned all documents contained in each artists file (excluding replicas and those printed in languages other the English) individually, using a scanner located in the archive. Documents are prohibited from leaving the archive, therefore all data collection occurred in the specified area within the establishment. A total of 112 documents were scanned, and stored on the researcher’s personal flash drive in PDF format. Out of the total number of documents, sixty-three documents were scanned from R.L. Burnside’s file, and forty-nine documents were scanned from Junior Kimbrough’s file. However, in some cases, documents had to be combined to form one complete article, as was the case with some newspaper and magazine articles.

Outside of the archive, the researcher gathered other forms of primary documents. A selection of four vinyl record copies of the artists’ music were purchased by the researcher, under
the stipulation that the copy included liner notes. Three albums were of R.L. Burnside, while the other one was of Junior Kimbrough. The researcher selected four R.L. Burnside tracks from two different albums, and two Junior Kimbrough tracks from one album, totaling six tracks combined, to be used as primary resources as well. Prior to this selection, the researcher listened to eleven Burnside albums, and one compilation album featuring six of Burnside’s songs, and six Kimbrough albums. These selections were made after oral history interviews had been conducted, transcribed, coded, and themes identified. Each of the song’s lyrics were transcribed by the researcher. Two of R.L. Burnside’s albums were selected, but for musical observation purposes only. Two video documentaries containing interviews with R.L. Burnside or Junior Kimbrough, live performances by either artist, or historical information on the Hill Country region were also purchased by the researcher in DVD format. Specific times from each documentary were noted, and any dialogue occurring within those time frames, with the exclusion of song lyrics, were transcribed professionally by Landmark transcription services. Primary resources were collected until saturation began to occur.

The concept of saturation, explained earlier when reviewing the collection of oral histories, applies to the collection of primary resources as well. Strauss and Corbin note the difficulty that comes with trying to authenticate and gauge the credibility of primary documents, and suggest researchers “cross-check” data by collecting an assortment of documents, and if possible, supplementing the selection with observations and interviews. While Bowen agrees that having a wide variety of documents is beneficial, he argues that the researcher’s focus

279 Liner notes can be found in booklets inserted in a Compact Discs’ jewel case, digital booklets included with an album download, and on the sleeves of vinyl records. The notes are written for individual albums made by artists (although some artists do not include liner notes), and are usually structured as essays or biographical information.

280 Strauss and Corbin, Basics of qualitative research, 271, p. 52.
should not solely be on the number of sources gathered, but rather on the quality of the documents.  

While reading documents, and observing audio and visual components, several themes began to emerge, forming a pattern of repetition. Several of these themes had been previously identified during the coding of oral histories. As the analysis process of primary resources continued, elements of each artist’s life, personality, music, and the Hill Country genre and culture came into view, allowing themes to become more lucid and concrete. As stated previously in this section, saturation can never truly be completed, and the constant repetition found in the data eventually offered no new insights into the study.

Analysis and coding

Printed text documents, including scanned copies from the Blues Archive, liner notes from vinyl records and Compact Discs, six transcripts of song lyrics, and two transcripts of documentaries, were the first primary resources analyzed by the researcher. Bowen says document analysis, related only to printed texts, is a combination of content and thematic analysis, and involves “skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination), and interpretation.” While using document analysis, the researcher also applied elements of the summative content analysis approach. Documents were first separated into different categories based on their origin such as newspaper, magazine, promotional flyer, liner notes, song transcriptions, etc. The researcher then skimmed each document in search of key words, which Bowen identifies as the first step in conducting summative content analysis. A total of fifteen, predetermined key words were used during the search, a majority derived from the themes and

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codes that emerged during the analysis of oral histories, although one key word was derived from the section reviewing previously published literature. It is appropriate to create key words based on the researcher’s interest and review of literature before analyzing documents, as is specified in the summative content analysis approach.284 Key words were highlighted by hand, and labeled with a number – one through fifteen – correlating with an individual key word, and recorded in the researcher’s Moleskin notebook. This was done so the number of occurrences could be easily managed while sifting through documents. Throughout this process, a strong repeating pattern emerged for certain words.

Once key words had been accounted for, the researcher then read each article, which Bowen notes is the second step in the document analysis process.285 When examining an article, the focus shifted from key words to identifying seminal sentences and quotes, which were highlighted with the objective of strengthening findings. This process was very similar to the open coding process used when analyzing oral histories, in that themes began to emerge while reading, and categories were created. However, document analysis is a hybrid method, containing elements from both content analysis and thematic analysis, according to Bowen.286 Jennifer Fereday and Eimear Muir-Cochrane describe thematic analysis as a “form of pattern recognition within the data, where emerging themes become the categories for analysis.”287 The researcher wrote margin notes and memos alongside highlighted portions of text on each article. These served as the researcher’s interpretation, or personal understanding, of what message the

284 Hsieh and Shannon, “Three Approaches,” 266.
286 Ibid.
highlighted portion(s) conveyed. Interpretation is the third step in document analysis, according
to Bowen, however, it was performed simultaneously during the reading process when the
researcher made notations and memos.288

After documents were finished being skimmed for key words, articles examined
thoroughly and select passages highlighted by hand, and interpretations of those passages had
been made, the researcher inputted all findings into an Excel Spreadsheet. After entry into a
spreadsheet, the researcher uploaded original copies of each document into NVivo 10.

The remaining primary resources – two documentaries selected – were analyzed and
coded once document analysis of printed works had been completed. All of these resources were
analyzed using solely observation techniques. Careful listening and intense observation of
respondents’ speech and actions were employed by the researcher, which Strauss and Corbin
attest can lead researchers to “discover issues that are important or problematic in the
respondents’ lives.”289 While listening to the music of Burnside, Kimbrough, and their decedents,
the researcher recorded descriptors of the sound in the Moleskin notebook, which were based on
personal interpretation. However, interpretation was heavily influenced by themes and
subthemes revealed in text documents and oral histories. The researcher set aside the
transcriptions of the two documentaries and focused on the footage, writing vivid descriptors
about performer’s mannerisms while being interviewed and during performances, and also
environmental settings. These were also written in the researcher’s notebook. Similarly, the
footage from the selected YouTube videos was observed in the same fashion as the


289 Strauss and Corbin, Basics of qualitative research, 271, p. 38.
documentaries. This process did not aim to achieve saturation, but instead gain a different perspective from data, free of any parameters associated with approaches or collection methods.

After observations had been made and recorded by hand, the researcher created a digital document using Microsoft Word and transcribed the written observations from the notebook verbatim to the document. Each resource observed was provided an individual subhead, under which bullet points were created to distinguish between varied list of observations. The document was then printed out and coded by hand, during which themes and subthemes were identified, however, no new themes or subthemes emerged. Once the document had been completed, the original digital copy was uploaded into NVivo 10.

**Significance of Study**

Research on the Hill Country region’s musical and cultural traditions is rich. Sid Hemphill and his involvement with the fife and drum tradition in the region have been well documented by researchers and folklorists such as Alan Lomax and Dr. David Evans. Otha Turner and his involvement with the Hill Country picnic tradition have also been well documented. However, there is a dearth of literature on the Hill Country blues existing as its own genre, as well as studies focusing solely on individual artists from the region. This study attempts to remedy this by focusing on the lives and careers of two Hill Country bluesmen, R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough.

The research conducted in this study tracks the evolution of Hill Country music through the careers of these two men, using the media and their record label, Fat Possum, as reference points. Burnside and Kimbrough were selected because of the amount of exposure they received during their careers, and after their deaths. For example, Burnside collaborated with the punk-rock group the John Spencer Blues Explosion in the 1990s, and his music has been featured on popular HBO television shows such as “The Sopranos” and “East Bound and Down”; Punk-rock
artists such as Iggy Pop, along with indie-rock artists such as the Black Keys, have redone some of Kimbrough’s original music. Examples such as these help illustrate the reach Burnside and Kimbrough had regional successes, making them two of the more identifiable faces of Hill Country music.

Documentation of this evolution can prove useful to future researchers trying to understand how this subgenre came into fruition, as well as the culture from which it emerged. It also provides an in-depth look at the artists’ personal lives through stories told by people close to them, such as immediate family and close friends. These intimate stories humanize the lives and contributions of Burnside and Kimbrough, which in turn creates valuable literature that can be used when trying to understand the bodies of work created by these men, or simply to reconstruct who they were as individuals outside of their music careers. By supplementing the pre-existing literature focusing on musical and cultural traditions of the region, this research will be a valuable addition because of its intimate look at these cultural icons, as well as their role in advancing the Hill Country genre.

**Structure of Thesis**

This study is organized into five chapters, followed by an appendices and list of references.

Chapter 1, “Introduction,” consists of several components, beginning with the introduction, which provides contextual background for the topic. The introduction explains the significant role in which music plays in society, and concludes with the blues’ genres deep roots in American culture, explaining why it makes for a worthy topic of research. Following this section is the purpose of study, which provides an overview of how this study evolved and the researcher’s main goals. The review of literature includes a summary of pre-existing literature written by other scholars on such several topics as histories of the blues, biographical sketches of
both artists, descriptions of the Delta and Hill Country regions and their musical styles, and African influences on the Hill Country traditions. The next section explains the methods used to conduct the study, which include contextual analysis of historical documents and the collection of oral histories. The concludes with an overview of the significance of this study and its contributions to existing research on the topic.

Chapter 2, “Not Your Same Old Blues Crap: Fat Possum, Marketing, Artist Portrayal,” is compose of three sections. The first section provides a brief history of Fat Possum, the record label that signed each artist. Following this section, “Not Your Same Old Blues Crap” highlights the largely popular “clean” and “polished” playing style of blues during the 1990s and explains how artists on Fat Possum’s roster created music that did fit this style, making it a challenge to market. The final section examines how R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough were depicted in marketing, using album artwork and news stories.


Chapter 4, “Oral Histories,” is a collection of interviews with individuals who had personal experiences and relationships with both artists. Narratives are arranged in the following order: Cedric Burnside, R.L. Burnside’s grandson; Garry Burnside, R.L. Burnside’s son; Kenny
Brown, Hill Country bluesman and close friend to R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough; Joe Ayers, Hill Country bluesman and close friend to Junior Kimbrough; Amos Harvey, tour manager for both R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough.

Chapter 5, “Thematic Analysis Of Oral Histories,” uses excerpts from the previous chapter to discern personal thematic patterns for each artist. For Burnside, themes include: Family Man, and Playing And Having Fun. Themes for Kimbrough include: Serious About His Music, and Ladies Man.

Chapter 6, “Discussion and Conclusion,” provides a summary of the study’s findings, along with its limitations and future research opportunities.

The Appendices chapter includes: informed consent forms, a sample of media articles analyzed in Chapter 3, complete transcripts of the five oral histories, a list of references, and a biographical sketch of the researcher.
It was only a matter of Matthew Johnson cashing in his student loan to acquire the capital he and Peter Lee needed to start the Oxford, Mississippi, based record label Fat Possum in 1991. Johnson and Lee, both students at the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss) at the time, had done some writing for *Living Blues* magazine, the oldest blues publication in the country, which accelerated their keen interest in the blues. One of Johnson’s professors at Ole Miss, Robert Palmer – a music critic for the *New York Times* and *Rolling Stone*, and advocate for the Hill Country sound – had encouraged him to create a label.1

Fat Possum’s inception occurred during the middle of the second major period when “whites ‘discovered’ the blues,” the other era being the 1960s.2 This was a perplexing decision, as “blues records only account[ed] for a tiny friction of the nation’s record,” and, “only a handful of artists, like Buddy Guy and Robert Cray, ever crack[ed] the Billboard charts. And the nation’s premiere blues label, Alligator Records of Chicago, usually sold[sells] just 10,000 to 25,000 copies of each album.”3 Despite the financial statistics, Johnson and Lee moved forward. The two men went looking in the rural areas of Mississippi, away from the booming Midwest scene. Johnson found what he was looking for when he encountered artists like R.L. Burnside, Junior Kimbrough, T-Model Ford and Cedell Davis, who, among others, began to populate the label’s

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4 Ibid.
roster. In the documentary “You See Me Laughin’: The Last of the Hill Country Bluesmen,” released in 2002, Johnson said:

> I saw these old guys, 55, 60, that were just rocking. They weren’t there for any sort of career ambition or anything. They were just there because they wanted to be there. The energy and the rawness of it stopped me in my tracks. I was like, these are the kind of people I want to spend my time with.⁵

Fat Possum’s inaugural launch was R.L. Burnside’s “Bad Luck City,” which cost the company $3,500 to record – the album sold only 700 copies in its first year.⁶ This failure made the record owners question their decision and contemplate closing down shop, but fortunately, John Hermann (keyboardist for southern rocker group, Widespread Panic) believed in the label, and became a investor. Hermann’s partnership allowed Fat Possum to release four albums between 1991 and 1995, however each disc only sold between 3,000 and 8,000 copies.⁷ Recognizing the company’s limitations in areas such as distribution, marketing, and promoting, Johnson sought out Capricorn Records, who were also the record label Hermann’s band was signed with. A deal Johnson worked out with Capricorn in 1995 called for it to release albums by Junior Kimbrough, R.L. Burnside, Cedell Davis, Malone, Dave Thompson, and Paul “Wine” Jones.⁸ Much like the name of the label’s first release, this deal soon turned into bad luck city when lawsuits emerged and halted the release of any Fat Possum material in 1996.⁹ Despite all of the hardships, the label continued to more forward, appropriately making “We’re Trying Our Best” their motto. Once the lawsuits had settled, Fat Possum teamed up with a new distributor, a

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⁵ *You See Me Laughin’,* Directed by Mandy Stein, (2002; Oxford, MS: Fat Possum Records, 2005), DVD.

⁶ Zane, “From the Heart of,” 3.

⁷ Ibid.


⁹ Ibid.; a settlement between the Fat Possum and Capricorn was reached, and as part of that, Capricorn was able to release four Fat Possum albums in the spring of 1997.
punk label based out of California, Epitaph. The formalities involved in sealing this deal between Johnson and Epitaph president, Brett Gurewitz, were revealed in a feature story on Fat Possum that appeared in the *New Yorker* in 2002. The formality of the deal was humorous, and somewhat fitting to Fat Possum’s unconventional attitude:

When Johnson met Gurewitz, at his office in Los Angeles, the label president said, "Let me ask you an important question." Johnson braced himself. "If the Terminator and the Incredible Hulk got into a fight, who would win?" "The Terminator," Johnson answered. "You're right," Gurewitz said. "We got a deal."\(^{10}\)

In the spring of 1997, Epitaph released albums by Burnside, T-Model, the Neckbones, and 20 Miles.\(^ {11}\) When Junior Kimbrough passed away in 1998, Jay McInerney, a writer for the *New Yorker*, wrote in 2002 that Kimbrough’s death “underlines the central flaw in the Fat Possum business model: most of the Mississippi bluesmen whom Johnson has set out to record are ailing senior citizens. They are the last of the Mohicans.” To this Johnson responded, “There may be a few old guys out there I haven't found yet, but I'm beginning to doubt it. It used to be there were fifteen guys in every little town that played. Now you're lucky to find one.”\(^ {12}\)

**Not Your Same Old Blues Crap**

As noted earlier, the inception of Fat Possum occurred during the blues revival of the 1990s. Mark Camarigg, publications manager and assistant editor for *Living Blues* magazine, said this was the healthiest he had ever seen the genre, going back to the 1950s.\(^ {13}\) “It was popular, but in the 90s there was genuine money behind all of it,” Camarigg said. He offered an

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\(^ {10}\) McInerney, “White man,” 2.


\(^ {12}\) McInerney, “White man,” 2.

\(^ {13}\) Mark Camarigg (publications manager and assistant editor for *Living Blues* magazine) in discussion with the author, July 2015.
example of the constant exposure blues was receiving, specifically the artist Robert Cray, on a radio station in San Francisco:

There was a radio station in San Francisco, the Bay Area, KFOG, and all they would do, and all they would play, was Jimmy Buffett and the Grateful Dead. And they would play Robert Cray, to point to where it was just called Cray-Fog because they would play him all the time. And he had a massive white audience. I think this was like the late 80s early 90s, and the record labels could see that Blues would sell.\(^{14}\)

Some of the more popular bluesmen receiving airplay during this time were Stevie Ray Vaughan, Buddy Guy, Eric Clapton, and Robert Cray. Camarigg said the style of blues being heard on the radio was a “very polished sound” and was “still really bright, bubbly and boom.” Matthew Johnson, however, was not smitten with this blues revival, and its popular figures. In an interview with *Replay* magazine, Matthew Johnson said this revival was “killing the blues.” He continued:

This whole Joe Suit, ‘the blues are all right,’ ‘next Stevie Ray Vaughan,’ ‘next Buddy Guy,’ virtuoso thing. The guys I gravitate to are totally lacking in sophistication. It’s more of a f— you attitude, more of a rollicking, raw, hound-dog sound.\(^{15}\)

When Johnson refers to a more “rollicking, raw, hound-dog sound,” he is contrasting with the norm of that time period, which was the polished sound. The music Fat Possum’s artists were creating was rarely, if ever, described as polished. “It [Fat Possum’s music] wasn’t the stuff you were going to hear on the radio, and the stuff you were going to hear on the radio was going to be very polished,” Camarigg said.\(^{16}\) Newspapers and magazines frequently described the playing of R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough with words like “hypnotic,” “raw,” “trance,”


“authentic,” “real,” “not predictable,” and “obscure.” Up until this point, the media had used Delta as a catchall term when describing blues artists and their styles of music (these findings will be elaborated on in the following chapter), but descriptors like “hypnotic” and “trance” did not fit the Delta mold, insinuating that this was strain of blues was “different.” In 2002, Jay McInerney of the *New Yorker* wrote:

Mississippi blues – as opposed to Chicago blues – is supposed to be acoustic and folky, but the Fat Possum sound is grungy, repetitive, and amplified, more back alley than front porch. In many ways, it seems closer to punk rock than to, say, the jazzy virtuoso riffs of B. B. King, or the polite homages of Eric Clapton. Some have called it ‘dirty blues,’ although that phrase is almost laughably redundant.

Jim O’Neal, co-founder of *Living Blues* magazine, recalled hearing Hill Country bluesman, Mississippi Fred McDowell, and later R.L. Burnside.

It had such energy, and such a drive. It was different than the Delta blues. It wasn't the same structure. It didn't have all the chord changes. They [R.L. Burnside and Mississippi Fred McDowell] were so infectious, it was like you could really groove to the music, you know... it was almost like up tempo trance music, or something... it had a hypnotic beat to it.

Understanding they had found something different, Fat Possum seemed determined not to make blues records like those that had been done in the past, the ones created by folklorists, records Johnson said “no one will listen to.” It was most likely this train of thought that lead to the label creating one of its most popular, and well known slogans, “Not Your Same Old Blues Crap.” It was with this slogan that Fat Possum began to market its artists, and its artists’ music as something new, or as a never-before-heard-or-seen brand.

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17 See Appendix C (spreadsheet).


After Fat Possum’s first record bombed in 1993 (Burnside’s “Bad Luck City’), Johnson said the record wasn’t the problem:

It was a damn good record. But we ran into that old problem of undiscovered genius: they have no audience. Without an audience they can’t tour, so its rough to get the press coverage and radio play you need to build an audience. And without that it’s impossible to get Cindy Crawford to do your video.21

The audience Fat Possum found was a younger crowd, one into a more alternative/punk rock scene. O’Neal pointed out that Johnson and his eventual business partner Bruce Watson were younger when they founded the label, and had seen people’s response to this sort of music before. O’Neal noted:

They [Matthew Johnson and Bruce Watson] were younger, and they said they were in touch with the college crowd taste, and what was popular in the alternative indie rock circuit. And, I think they could see R.L., and Junior too I guess, were already coming to Oxford to play these college bars. And, they could see the reaction they were getting and the fact that they could probably tap into this wider circuit.

I think that they saw that his [R.L.] music would appeal to the other crowds and so that's the direction they went. And so it was the college clubs, and where the younger crowds were…and promote[ed] to the alternative circle of radio and media, you know?

They didn't go for the blues audience at all.22

With the endorsement of influential writer/produced Robert Palmer, and the unexpected collaboration between an indie-rock group and R.L. Burnside, Fat Possum slowly started to develop a niche audience of young, punk/indie rock fans. As music critic for *Rolling Stone* and the *New York Times*, Palmer primarily wrote about punk/rock music from the 1970s through the 1980s. He also authored several books, one being *Deep Blues*, which was released in the early 1980s. The book covered the blues from a cultural and musical standpoint. Later, he wrote and

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21 Zane, “From the Heart of,” 3.

narrated Robert Mugge’s 1991 documentary film “Deep Blues,” which explores the blues in the state of Mississippi and features a section on the Hill Country, including performances from both Burnside and Kimbrough.

Palmer is largely attributed for generating the first national exposure these artists received. Camarigg described Palmer as “a musicologist's musicologist.” As mentioned earlier, Palmer was a big advocate for the Hill Country sound, and a person who actively encouraged Matthew Johnson to start the label, so there was already an existing relationship established between the two men. By the time he started writing about the north Mississippi artists, he was already an established writer, and he had a healthy fan base of rockers/indie and punk-rockers.

Camarigg offered his insight on the impact Palmer’s position at the time:

Richard Hell & The Voidoids, Suicide, Blondie, all of that New York punk rock shit is Robert Palmer, okay? So if Palmer is now saying this North Mississippi blues [is cool], you trusted him because you're a hipster. And he if he told you Richard Hell was cool, and this punk rock stuff was cool, now he's telling you this blues stuff is cool, so you trust him.23

Palmer’s pre-existing reputation with punk fans helped aggregate interest within that fan base. Fat Possum had Palmer produce Junior Kimbrough’s debut album “All Night Long,” which received a four-star review in the February issue of Rolling Stone in 1993. Johnson admitted, “It wasn't that much interest in it [Fat Possum] until Robert Palmer produced ‘All Night Long.’”24

In 1996, Fat Possum released “A Ass Pocket of Whiskey,” a collaboration with indie-rock group Jon Spencer Blues Explosion and R.L. Burnside. Camarigg said by this point, Fat Possum recognized there was an audience for this sound, and knew who this audience was. “It [A Ass Pocket of Whiskey] was real kind of punky, loosey-goosey. It was bluesy, but it wasn't

23 Mark Camarigg, Living Blues, 13.

24 You See Me Laughin’, Directed by Mandy Stein, 5.
“Hill Country-ish,” Camarigg said. The response to this album received criticism from the blues community, with one critic dogging Fat Possum’s marketing strategy, as well as its artists, writing:

The idea behind Fat Possum records is basically to take a bunch of old blues guys who can't play very well, call that lack of skill 'soul,' and sell it to the indie-rock and punk-rock crowd instead of the usual blues audience. Why not? They embrace plenty of artists who lack skill and soul, so they should completely devour this 'dirty blues' stuff.²⁵

Despite the negative backlash from “A Ass Pocket of Whiskey,” Fat Possum pushed forward, creating another “controversial” album called “Come On In” that was released in 1998. This album was comprised of “remixed” versions of R.L.’s songs. In an interview with Blues Access in 1999, Bruce Watson, Johnson’s partner in Fat Possum, said the label received hate mail after the release, and even received death threats.²⁶ But Watson defended the album, noting its objective was to reach a broader audience than just the blues crowd:

To some people, [the blues] is an institution not to be fucked with. But we tried to make this record as accessible as possible to anyone who would listen — and maybe some of these purists would realize that if fans of other music liked this disc, they just might take an interest in the blues.²⁷

O’Neal recalled a time when he told someone from Fat Possum about a poor review an album of theirs was going to receive in Living Blues magazine:

I can remember one time, it was one Fat Possum album, or something, didn't get a good review at Living Blues — I wasn't the editor then but, I had seen the review in advance or something — and he [Matthews or Bruce] had said, ‘Oh great, that'll sell another six or seven copies.’ See? And for a lot of blues labels, Living Blues was the primary media outlet. But like I said, they weren't trying for that audience.


Generating an audience was an important part of the label’s process for exposure, but Johnson stressed the importance of moving the music along with the times in order to keep his artists relevant in the musical community:

I don’t want only records made; I want these guys going to Europe and partying in New York. The last thing I want to be is a folklorist and record records that no one will listen to. There’s a million blues records out there now. The world doesn’t need any more. You can’t just make a blues record today. It would be like writing a Victorian novel. You have to change or it’s dead.\(^{28}\)

Appealing to wider audience was smart marketing, according to O’Neal, saying it allowed Fat Possum to book its artists “on a wide circuit where a lot of other blues artists had never played.” At one point, Johnson put together a tour in 1996 that paired Junior Kimbrough with punk-rocker, Iggy Pop, and later had R.L. Burnside opening for the hip-hop group, the Beastie Boys. Exposure was the name of the game. When booking venues for one of R.L.’s tour, Watson explained why he and Johnson focused on getting their artist into rock clubs:

In blues clubs, you make a little more money, but you play to a limited crowd. By putting R.L. in rock clubs, there may be less people to start, but they’re more devoted and more likely to buy the album and pass the word around that he’s the real deal.\(^{29}\)

And when it came to teaming Fat Possum artists up with different acts, or remixing their music, Johnson didn’t think twice about it:

I don’t want my guys to die unknown. What good does it do them if their music is discovered 10 or 15 years after their death? That’s why I do all I can to get them on the road, to remix their music, do whatever it takes to get them into circulation today while it’s not too late.\(^{30}\)

It is clear that Fat Possum wasn’t releasing “the same old blues crap.” They had become innovators, taking an archaic, ancient sound and distributing it on a national level. While their

\(^{28}\) McInerney, “White man,” 2.

\(^{29}\) Friedman, “Mississippi Remix,” 26.

\(^{30}\) You See Me Laughin’, Directed by Mandy Stein, 5.
methods might have been frowned upon by members of the traditional blues community, artists like R.L. recognized the necessity of keeping the genre alive, even if it meant using unconventional presentations of the music. “It’s a natural thing for me, because all I’m trying to do is keep the blues alive, and if this is the way to do it, it’s fine with me,” R.L. said during an interview with *Blues Access* in 1999.³¹ There is no evidence to suggest that Fat Possum ever aimed to take away from the integrity of their artists’ music. However, during the process of creating an audience, and marketing this sound as something different, concern arose about how the label was portraying their artists.

**Rough, Tough and Gritty: Fact or Fiction?**

**Album Art**

Behind every raw, gritty, authentic sound, is a raw, gritty, authentic man. At least, that’s how some people saw Fat Possum portraying its artists. Dr. David Evans, an ethnomusicologist at the University of Memphis, said Fat Possum “tried to promote this image of music chaos, and also personal or lifestyle chaos of the artists.”³² One area where people might have gotten this impression is the artwork selected for album covers. When looking at R.L. and Junior’s album art, a majority of the covers are photos of the artists, depicted in a very serious manner, often times dressed in everyday street clothes, and placed in a rural or static setting.

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³² David Evans, (ethnomusicologist at the University of Memphis) in discussion with author, April, 2015.
The cover of R.L.’s 2004 release, along with its title, is perhaps the best example that illustrates this idea of a rough, and rigid perception. The album is a picture of R.L. wearing blue pants and red shirt, which fits tightly to his stomach, and is starting to come untucked. His stance is firm, with his arms bowed out to the side just a bit, and his face is expressionless. The photo appears to have been Photoshopped over a blurred background of a rural dirt road, and next to R.L. is the title of the album, “R.L. Burnside A Bothered Mind.” The combination of the title, along with R.L.’s demeanor, is suggestive of a man who is rough and serious. It appears to be very strategically laid out, based on the assumption that this was in fact photoshopped. On the
contrast, an album R.L. released on the Swing Master label pre-Fat Possum, shows him smiling and playing the guitar, while looking away from the camera, almost like a candid shot. This appears to be more natural.

Junior Kimbrough, on the other hand, has two album covers that stick out.

Figure 2-3. “God Knows I Tried.” © 1998 by Fat Possum Records.

Figure 2-4. “You Better Run: The Essential Junior Kimbrough.” © 2002 by Fat Possum Records.

Junior’s 1998 release, “God Knows I Tried,” shows the artist with a lit cigarette hanging between his lips and staring into the camera with a serious, almost disgusted look on his face. He is seated in his car with the window rolled down, and the picture is framed to only show his face and the interior of the car. The lighting of the photo creates shadows, and the highlights are
removed to better capture the cigarette smoke, as well as cast a shadow on Junior’s face, which shows the detail of his weathered skin. He is wearing a yellow t-shirt with text written on it that appears to say “Mississippi Blues Society.” Judging by Junior’s tight grasp on the cigarette between his lips, it suggests that he’s holding a pose, and combined with the ash being fairly short and the cigarette appearing to have a much more material to burn, it appears as though it was lit solely for the purpose of this photo, almost unnatural.

On the other hand, Junior’s 2002 release, “You Better Run: The Essential Junior Kimbrough,” appears to be a candid photo of the artist. However, he is pictured shirtless from the chest up, and he is in mid-reach to pull a cigarette from his mouth, one that is almost burned down to the filter. He is looking away from the camera, and his face is worn and weathered, even more so than “God Knows I Tried.” The backdrop for this album is old blue, paneling, which looks like it is on the side of the house. The title of the album “You Better Run,” is the name of one of Junior’s darker songs, one about that is about rape. The rough image, along with the eerie title, does portray Junior as a rough individual.

Evans said these images were “a deliberate effort to connect with the punk scene,” and commented that while both artists could be rough, it was not their defining character:

Punk records were selling, from a marketing standpoint it worked. It certainly sold records, but it created an image that I think was a bit false, or at least very one-sided. I'm sure you know, Junior and R.L. could be rough characters, if necessary. But that certainly would not define them I don't think, or be their outstanding characteristic.33

Camarigg said they [Fat Possum] were “creating stars, they were creating images for these guys,” and noted the grim look on some of the artist’s faces:

If you see those pictures you guys [artists] always looked pissed off. Nobody's smiling, I mean you can't find anybody smiling. They are in either very rural

33 Evans, ethnomusicologist, 32.
locations, you know, and nobody's really dressed up. Nobody looks polished, everybody looks pretty rough and I think that was very intentional.\textsuperscript{34}

On a visit to the home of Robert Belfour, another artist on the Fat Possum label, Camarigg discovered that some artists had been instructed not to smile, or to appear serious:

I thought, ‘this guy looks mean, man.’ And, I called him up and I went up to his house in Memphis, and we just sat at his dinner table and talked. And I said, ‘You know, I looked at those photographs [album covers] and I thought you were going to be a real hard ass.’ And he was just the sweetest man. And he said, ‘Oh yeah, they told me to do that. They told me to pose like that.’\textsuperscript{35}

Figure 2-5. “Come On In.” © 1998 by Fat Possum Records.

Figure 2-6. “Mr. Wizard.” © 1997 by Fat Possum Records.

\textsuperscript{34} Mark Camarigg, \textit{Living Blues}, 13

\textsuperscript{35} Mark Camarigg, \textit{Living Blues}, 13.
However, when looking at R.L.’s album covers, it wasn’t uncharacteristic for R.L. to have a serious look on his face during his daily life, according to Cedric:

Sometimes, my big daddy will have a straight face, and people would ask him, ‘You alright, R.L.?’ And, he’s like, ‘Yeah.’ You know, he just have that face, so I think that’s what some of those pictures are, is just him having a straight face and not because he’s not happy or enjoying life. It’s because they might have shot him with a straight face.\(^\text{36}\)

Cedric also pointed out that his grandfather was smiling on the cover of the 1998 release, “Come On In.” He also said if the record company asked him to make a face, it was usually for a reason, and made reference to the 1997 release, “Mr. Wizard.”

When he makin’ that face on there, with the weird lookin’ hat…he got a weird face you know? Like a mean face. But they want him to look like he got a weird, mean face because he’s a wizard.\(^\text{37}\)

With the insight provided by Cedric, it appeared as though Fat Possum’s selection of album art wasn’t entirely a “creation,” but in fact was based on some truths, although Belfour’s story contradicts this premise. However, when looking at the Hill Country culture, other aspects of the artwork can also be seen as truths, such as the attire selection.

Greg Johns on, curator for the Blues Archive at the University of Mississippi, said that a lot of musicians in the Hill Country had other trades, pointing out Mississippi Fred McDowell still kept his job pumping gas at Stuckey's.\(^\text{38}\) These men weren’t just musicians. Because of this, it wasn’t uncommon to see musicians playing in work clothes or see people in the juke joints wearing whatever they had on prior to showing up. Cedric remembers seeing people come in after working on their cars, covered in oil because they’d leave work and come straight to the

\(^{36}\) Cedric Burnside (drummer, and grandson of R.L. Burnside) in discussion with the author. August 2015.

\(^{37}\) Burnside, drummer, 35.

\(^{38}\) Greg Johnson, (Blues Curator, Associate Professor Archives & Special Collections at the University of Mississippi) in discussion with the author, April 2015.
juke joint. Also, if you observe footage from R.L.’s or Junior’s performances, such as in “Deep Blues” or “You See Me Laughin’,” they are wearing normal attire.

People’s suspicion of Fat Possum’s motives for selecting these raw, rough album art covers, could have also been influenced by comparing album covers of other bluesmen in circulation during this time period. Artists wearing suits on their album covers, or using a photo of themselves in deep concentration with their instrument, fell into the widely popular polished look of blues in the early 1990s, making Fat Possum’s artists once again the outliers. If Fat Possum recognized this polished look though, it would make sense that they elected to go with a rougher, and rawer look for their artists. O’Neal even suggested it “may have been a part of that conscious effort not to fall in with the same old blues, and everything else that was in the blues.”

Aside from album art, another area where artists appeared rough was in the media.

In the Media

There are different versions of why R.L. Burnside went to Parchman, a Mississippi prison, ranging from stolen goods to attempted murder. In this case, the researcher selected three separate stories based on the credibility of the source: Living Blues magazine, The New Yorker, and the video documentary, “You See Me Laughin’: The Last of the Hill Country Bluesmen.”

The first version to appear out of the three was in the 1994 October issue of Living Blues.

During an interview with Michael Pettengell of Living Blues magazine, R.L. said he spent six months in Parchman in 1955 for transporting stolen goods, although he had originally been sentenced to two years.39 “I had the car and some boys had stole some stuff and I didn’t know it was stole. And I was hauling it.” During his time in prison, R.L. said he “played a little bit of music,” sitting in with a band that would come to the prison, and on Saturday nights “the man”

would have R.L. play for about half-an-hour for the prisoners of the camp. He said that time in prison was “some kind of rough, man, although I didn’t have it as bad as some.” His time was cut short at Parchman though, because a man he was sharecropping for in Coldwater, Mississippi, was “a big man around Coldwater,” and needed R.L. back in time to drive the tractor for cotton season.

In this story, there is no mention of violence. It just appears as though R.L. ran into some bad luck during a time when race was still an issue in Mississippi. This article was published the same year Fat Possum released R.L.’s second album, “Too Bad Jim” (1994). His debut album, “Bad Luck City,” was released the previous year and only sold 700 copies. At this time, R.L. had not seen much exposure, and his days of working with Jon Spencer and opening for the Beastie Boys were yet to come. This story about R.L.’s time in prison didn’t appear in the interview until the sixth page, and even then, it was given only a subhead with minimal word count, approximately 300. The way it is presented, it doesn’t seem like that big of a deal, but more of a common occurrence that happened to black men in Mississippi.

In Jay McInerney’s piece “White Man at the Door,” published in the 2002 February edition of the New Yorker, he writes that “Burnside found that he was being harassed by a local bully who wanted to run him off his own place,” after which, Burnside told the bully, “‘Don’t come around no more,’ and then he was here, so I shot him.” R.L. specifies that he shot the man in the head. When the judge asked him what his intentions were, R.L. said, “It was between him and the Lord, him dyin’. Once convicted, he was sent to Parchman, which McInerney writes was “the notorious Mississippi prison that has featured in so many blues songs.”

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McInerney’s narrative does not mention R.L. playing the blues like the piece in *Living Blues*, but does cover the working conditions R.L. experienced while in Parchman. “In some ways, life at Parchman resembled life outside; inmates served on work gangs, chopping and picking cotton,” McInerney writes.41 “We had to pick two hundred pounds a day,’ Burnside recalls.”42 The narrative of this story is much different from the *Living Blues’* first-person piece. In the previous version told by R.L., there is no mention of violence as the contributing factor to his sentencing. In this version, however, violence is the cause, painting a picture of a man who did hard time, for a hard crime. R.L.’s quote about having to pick two hundred pounds of cotton a day is very different from his line in *Living Blues*, where he acknowledges it was rough in prison, but that he “didn’t have it as bad as some.” This article was published well into R.L.’s career with Fat Possum.

A majority of interviews in 2002 documentary “You See Me Laughin’: The Last of the Hill Country Bluesmen” were shot in the Hill Country, and inside or outside of artists’ homes. Shots of rural areas, littered with dilapidated cars, and poorer areas are seen throughout. At one point, a conversation is held between Fat Possum bigwigs Matthew Johnson and Bruce Watson while inside of R.L.’s home. An interviewer asks Alice Mae, R.L.’s wife, if she “used to go visit him after he was in prison and stuff, right?” After she answers yes, a woman seated next to her asks Alice Mae why R.L. went to prison, to which she responds by shaking her head, but doesn’t offer an explanation. Following this question, dialogue ensues between the three men:

**R.L. Burnside:** I didn't kill him. No. I just shot him. I told him that it was up to him and the Lord about dying.

*Matthew Johnson:* It did look bad. It was in the back of the head, wasn't it?

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41 McInerney, “White man,” 2.

42 McInerney, “White man,” 2.
R.L. Burnside: Yeah.

Matthew Johnson: Cuz most of the time, people, when they claim self-defense, it's usually when the guy's walking towards them, not when he's turned away.

R.L. Burnside: The judge asked me, "I really did shoot him in self-defense?" I said, "No, sir. I shot him in the leg, and he jumped the fence." [Laughter]

Matthew Johnson: You caught him in the head, didn't you?

R.L. Burnside: Yeah. Twice in the head and once right through there.

Interviewer: Why was he after you?

R.L. Burnside: I beat him out of some money at gambling. I had a gambling hall back then, and I beat him out of some money, and he was mad about that.

Interviewer: Dice?


Interviewer: Were the dice loaded, R.L.?

R.L. Burnside: No, no. They wasn't loaded.

Matthew Johnson: The gun was.43

What is unique about this version of the story is that it is a conversation between the owners of the label and their artist. There is no middleman, or medium, relaying the message. During the conversation, it almost seems as though they are having to pull teeth to get R.L. to elaborate on the details, which follow the timeline mentioned in McInerney’s article released this same year, except for the detail about gambling. In this version of the story, the contributing factor to R.L.’s sentencing involved a man attacking R.L. because he was angry about losing $400 in a dice game. This story evolved overtime, moving from stolen goods (94) to harassment from a bully (02) and gambling gone wrong (02).

43 You See Me Laughin’, Directed by Mandy Stein, 5.
Violence is a topic of discussion in the documentary. It is discussed in great detail with other Fat Possum artists featured on the film as well, such as T-Model Ford, who provides a vivid description about killing a man, while in the background his hard, raw, music plays:

I killed a man. He cut me, and I cut him back. I wasn’t nothing but a young man, 18 years old then. He come up there behind me and looking down on me, and next thing I know, he cut at me. It felt like a hot piece of iron when it went in my back. He just missed my spine uh just about that far. I leapt outta that chair, and carried that chair, and when I turned around he was headin…I throw that chair up on his head.

Back then, you could buy them old switchblade pocket knife for $0.25 then, and I had to get one. I run my hand in my pocket. I had good teeth then. I didn't fool around. I just hit, and I just kept cutting. He left that knife in my back. I just stood there and looked at him, blood was shootin’ up outta him. I was mad, didn't give a damn.  

The music, mixed with the vivid description, makes T-Model seem like a hard individual. In the documentary, T-Model also talks about being beaten so bad by his father that he lost one of his testicles. “My artists have all had hard lives, and that's reflected in the music,” Johnson said in his interview with The New Yorker.

Evans also mentioned that the label tried to portray “personal or lifestyle chaos.” People close to the artists, such as Johnson and Palmer, often times did present artists, most notably Burnside, as living a chaotic life, or being attracted to chaos. In his interview with The New Yorker, Johnson recalls the first time he met R.L., including a comment about how the artist “loved things to go wrong:”

I remember the day I met R.L. We were driving in his car. He was drunk. Every damn light on his dashboard was on, red lights flashing everywhere. There were cows on the road, and he was driving with one hand. He's definitely, like,

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44 You See Me Laughin’, Directed by Mandy Stein, 5.

45 McInerney, “White man,” 2.
nihilistic—in a friendly way. He loves when things go wrong. Tornadoes, hurricanes, floods—he just loves 'em.46


For years I believed the remarkable levels of chaos in everything remotely connected with those festivals [Memphis Blues Festival] resulted from a bunch of hippies trying to turn elderly blues singers into anarchist father-figures. Now I'm not so sure. In any case, that was some years before I met R.L. Burnside.

R.L. was an outstanding disciple of one of the greatest of all bluesmen, Mississippi Fred McDowell, who had been a Memphis Blues Festival regular. By the early 1970s, R.L. had really come into his own. The juke joints he ran, in Coldwater and elsewhere around the North Mississippi hill country, were as famous for their level of violence as for R.L.’s outstanding music, which rolled out of his jacked-up guitar amp in dark, turbulent waves—sometimes punctuated by gunshots, especially on Saturday nights. In fact, R.L. himself has been reported waving a (presumably loaded) pistol in at least one crowded joint. If that strikes you as akin to yelling "Fire!" in a crowded theater, well, that's R.L. The man is a connoisseur of chaos; he attracts it, admires it, and then absorbs it, like a black hole sucking reality itself into the chaos of Nothing.

Back in 1993, when I found myself producing a Burnside session for the album that became *Too Bad Jim*, a succession of chaotic eruptions seemed to threaten the entire project. A wooden string bass fell to pieces in the studio. Then the drum kit collapsed into kindling after being given a single light tap. Then a heavy glass door fell out of its mounting and gave me a skull-rattling knock upside the head. Out of the corner of my eye I glanced over at R.L.—he was enjoying himself like a kid at a Disney movie. The performances he recorded that day were highlights of the album.

Chaos theory is one way of explaining the mechanics involved. Another, more poetic, and perhaps wiser way of explaining it is called "the blues.” Rarely have chaos and uncertainty been so listenable; and I'll almost certainly be listening for the rest of my life.47

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This idea of R.L. being attracted to chaos seems to be evident in the descriptions provided by both Johnson and Palmer. Evans’ pointed out that Palmer’s writing prior to his involvement with Fat Possum had this idea of “sort of raw music, and rough characters, and all that,” which fit well with what Fat Possum was going for.

He just kind of gravitated towards that side of the music- you know the sort of sex, drugs and rock and roll…and violence. And, I mean, these are themes that just run through his writing and his outlook on music.48

However, those closest to R.L., such as Hill Country bluesman Kenny Brown – who R.L. often referred to as his “adopted son” – mentioned this association between R.L. and chaos, saying he used to call him “the master of chaos,” and explained, “If something big could go wrong before we hit the road, you could expect something to go wrong somewhere.”49 Brown told a story about R.L. thinking a building was burning down at a concern one night, and laughed about it.

Three different stories, from three different men, all having close relationships with R.L., provides evidence that the common reference of Burnside’s relationship with chaos did in fact exist, but it was not meant to be a malicious descriptor. In Brown’s version, he laughed. When Johnson made the statement of R.L.’s enjoyment of chaos, he made sure to mention the artists was “nihilistic—in a friendly way.” It is possible that people’s association with the word chaos is a negative one, as it is commonly used when describing tragic events, such as the headline used by The New York Times on April 25, 2015, “Scenes of Chaos in Baltimore as Thousands Protest Freddie Gray’s Death,” when noting observations of the events occurring in Baltimore,

48 Evans, ethnomusicologist, 32.
49 Kenny Brown, (Hill Country bluesman) in discussion with the author, September 2015.
Maryland, after the death of Freddie Gray. However, Evans also had a relationship with R.L., and when asked to describe him, he did not use the word chaos.

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CHAPTER 3
MEDIA COVERAGE: SHAKIN’ “DELTA” THROUGH THREE PHASES

Inside of the Blues Archive at the University of Mississippi, Greg Johnson held up three manila folders full of tangible documents. Two folders contained documents pertaining only to R.L. Burnside, a bluesman from the north Mississippi Hill Country. One is full, and the other serves to house the overflow. The third folder is slim and belongs to fellow Hill Country bluesman, Junior Kimbrough. Johnson explained the reason for the sizeable difference in the folders: one artist toured, Burnside, and the other, Kimbrough, not so much. Because Burnside toured more frequently than Kimbrough, he received more exposure, helping him accumulate the vast amount of content collected by the archives over time for his file. As a result of not touring as frequently, Kimbrough did not receive the same amount exposure, resulting in a low amount of content collected overtime for his file.

Inside each artist’s folder are clippings from: newspapers and magazine articles; newsletters from blues societies across the country; promotional flyers for concerts and album release dates; detailed marketing techniques and strategies used by Fat Possum (the artist’s record label) to generate exposure for albums or performances; letters of endorsement from blues scholars, concert promoters, and members of the media; and birth certificates and passports.

Having briefly described the differences in the musical style of Delta blues and Hill County blues in the review of literature, the researcher noticed a trend among documents in each artist’s files, which was the word “Delta” used as a descriptor for these Hill Country artists and their music. It should be noted that the researcher was alerted to this trend while reviewing literature prior to reading the described documents. However, the author, Dr. Sylvester Oliver, spoke of Delta “being used as part of the record company initiatives to label all Mississippi bluesmen
basically as ‘Delta’ blues,” whereas the researcher noticed the term being used by the journalists and members of the media. This “misclassification” was observed in documents dating back as early as 1985 and up until approximately 2002. In an attempt to understand this, the researcher analyzed primary documents, and used excerpts from select oral histories to provide context and reasoning behind the phenomenon. Before reviewing the results, however, it will be most useful to think of the media coverage as three separate phases: (1) pre-Fat Possum, a time period before either artist was signed by the record label, and (2) post-Fat Possum, a time period after both artists were signed and promoted by the record label. Sandwiched in between these phases was the release of the video documentary “Deep Blues,” and the writing of Robert Palmer, which helped generate a considerable amount of exposure to the region and its music.

### Pre-Fat Possum: Delta, A Convenient Catchall

All magazine and newspaper clippings from R.L. Burnside’s file were analyzed, which totaled thirty-three articles. The word Delta appeared fifty-one times throughout the analysis, with the most uses of the word appearing ten times in a newspaper article from 1985, and the lowest number of uses being zero, which was the case in twelve articles, all published after 1991. The term was used as a descriptor for R.L. ten times, labeling him a “Delta bluesman” or “Delta artist.” The term was used eight times when describing R.L.’s music, referring to it most commonly as “Delta blues.” Examples can be seen in excerpts from some selected articles:

> A capacity crowd crammed into the Colony University Inn Friday night to see the Delta blues in its natural state – the basic stuff, the real bare bones – as performed by R.L. Burnside…Fifty-nine-year-old Burnside is one of the few remaining authentic Delta bluesman still performing. – Concert Review, Newspaper, 1986.²


At 58, Burnside is one of the last authentic Delta bluesmen still alive...Although the blues had fallen into disfavor nationally, the Delta remained a hotspot, and Burnside stayed busy most weekends playing for friends at picnics, parties, and the occasional juke joint. – Wavelength August, 1985, issue, article, “A Bluesman Lives the Life.”

R.L. Burnside sings the blues, those old Mississippi Delta life, get-down-and-sing-it-simple blues...he picks up an old flat-top guitar, tunes it to open G, and starts to strum, tapping a bare toe. He sings “Goin’ Down South,” one of three original tunes on his “Mississippi Delta Blues” album – a mournful song that echoes a simple refrain. – The Times-Picayune’s October 6, 1985, issue, article, “Burnside’s brand of blues.”

If you enjoy the Delta blues, then R.L. Burnside is right up your alley...If you missed Mr. Burnside the last time he and Jon were in town (in May 1986), now is your chance to see one of the few remaining true Delta blues guitarist. – Newsletter, 1987.

There’s probably no place like a Mississippi Delta juke joint than the stone-and-glass atrium of the Philip Morris building in Midtown Manhattan...For one incandescent hour on Wednesday when R.L. Burnside held the stage, raw Delta blues sliced through the corporate sterility. – The New York Times’ October 19, 1991, issue, article “Review/Music: Delta Blues in an Unlikely Setting.”

Aside from appearing in bodies of text, the descriptor was often used in the article headlines for stories Burnside was featured in. Examples include “Mississippi Delta Blues in an Unlikely Setting,” “Delta Blues To Woo Beloit,” “A Rare U.S. Tour for a Delta Bluesman,” “If You Want a Degree in the Blues, Live Down on the Delta.” The frequency in which this word was used as a descriptor by the media, placed a label on R.L. as an artist, person, and his music. Overtime, the continual use of the term undoubtedly shaped the public’s perception of R.L., and

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4 Reni Haley, “Burnside’s brand of blues,” Times-Picayune, October 6, 1985; See also Appendix B, Burnside’s brand of blues, A4.

5 Baltimore Blues Society, “R.L. Burnside is coming back to town,” February, 1987; See also Appendix B, Burnside is coming back to town, A5.


his music, as embodiments of the Delta. Also, on more than one occasion, journalists compared
R.L. to Delta artists like Robert Johnson and Charlie Patton. Larger publisher’s (i.e. The New
York Times and The Times-Picayune) ability to distribute its material to a larger audience
allowed the information to be disseminated to more people in different locations, resulting in this
misconception being widespread. However, this misconception appeared in other mediums
outside of print journalism.

Figure 3-1. A promotional breakdown for R.L.’s release “Come On In.” Courtesy of Archives
and Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries.
The remaining material included in R.L.’s folder, outside of print journalism, were classified as promotional material(s) – letters authored by promoters, letters of endorsements, record label marketing strategies, and concert flyers – and were also analyzed, which totaled ten documents. The word “Delta” appeared nine times throughout the analysis, with the most uses of the word appearing four times in a promotional letter authored by Jon Nerenberg (no date), and the lowest number being zero, which was the case in three promotional items. The term was used as a descriptor for R.L. four times, labeling him a “Delta bluesman” or “Delta blues great.” The term was used three times when describing R.L.’s music, referring to it most commonly as “Delta blues.” There is not a substantial amount of evidence to support the perpetuation of the Delta classification in these documents as there were in the print articles. This is in part because several of these documents do not contain dates and offer only one or two words, and not detailed descriptions like those previously examined. Still, the limited evidence here is strong in
regards to their place, or person of origin. For example, one document is a letter signed by the producer/director of the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, a long-running, historic, annual musical festival hosted in New Orleans, Louisiana. In 1987, Quint Davis, producer/director, writes:

To Whom It May Concern: R.L. Burnside is one of the most important surviving Mississippi Delta Blues Musicians in the tradition of the immortal Mississippi Fred McDowell. R.L.’s famous album on Bluesway is one of the most important in that genre.^[8]

Above his signature, Davis writes, “Thank you very much for your considering this important and enjoyable American blues artist.”^[9]

In 1998, R.L.’s longtime record label, Fat Possum, released a marketing document (See Figure 3-1) with bullet points to be emphasized for the release of his album “Come On In.” One bullet point reads, “‘Come On In is R.L. like you’ve never heard him before. Drum loops and samples mesh with his hard delta sound.” A concert flyer (See Figure 3-2) advertising R.L.’s performance at Blind Willie’s, a venue in Atlanta, Georgia, has the words “Delta Blues Great” written along side other germane text related to publicizing the show. Located on the bottom right corner is the Fat Possum logo, suggesting this was when R.L. was signed to the label. The incorporation of the word “Delta” is used by high-profile producers/directors such as Quint Davis, along with R.L.’s record label Fat Possum. Much like the print articles, the usage of the term “Delta” by influential sources (i.e. the producer of Jazz Fest, and Fat Possum) also can be seen as a contributing factor to the perception of R.L. as a Delta bluesman, further solidifying his place in a genre of blues he did not belong. However, it should be noted that it is extremely plausible that the media’s coverage could have been influenced by high-profile figures such as

^[9] Ibid.
music festival producers and record labels, who used the terms themselves as a descriptor (this possibility will be discussed further along in this section). Fellow Hill Country artist, Junior Kimbrough, also endured the same fate as R.L in regard to the Delta classification.

All magazine and newspaper clippings from Junior Kimbrough’s file were analyzed, which totaled twenty-two articles. The term “Delta” appeared fifteen throughout the analysis, with the most uses of the word appearing two times in a four different articles published between 1989 and 1993, and the lowest number of uses being zero, which was the case in eleven articles, all of published between 1991 to 1998. Delta was used only once as a descriptor for Junior, labeling him a “Delta bluesman” or “Delta artist.” The term was used four times when describing Junior’s music, referring to it most commonly as “Delta blues.” Examples can be seen in excerpts from some selected articles:


Junior Kimbrough and R.L. Burnside are two of a dying breed: native Delta bluesmen who still ply their trades in north Mississippi juke joints on Friday and Saturday nights, making, living, breathing, evolving music…Kimbrough and Burnside were both featured in critic Robert Palmer’s tour through the Delta. – Album Review, The Philadelphia Inquirer, 1993.

He is one of the best living musicians who continues to work primarily in the Delta – the cradle of the blues. It is not often that we get to experience the deep emotional music presented by an artist playing with a fervor that will shiver your soul without going to the deep south. – Newsletter, Concert Preview, 1993.

While the selection of articles featuring Junior appearing feeble in comparison to R.L.’s, the limited amount of articles analyzed still yield a healthy amount of information to support the


idea that the media used the term Delta very loosely when applying it to blues artists, and their music. A majority of articles written on Junior appear post-Fat Possum, which is one reason why the use of Delta does not appear as frequently, and also because Junior was often referred to as highly original, which could have made classifying him a more difficult task. However, when looking at Junior’s debut album “All Night Long” released in 1993, some members of the media still struggled with differentiating between Delta and Hill Country blues. “All Night Long” received a four-out-of-five stars rating in an album review published in Rolling Stone’s February 4, 1993, issue, with no mentioning’s of the word Delta. However, a review on the same album was published in The Washington Post’s December 31, 1993, issue, and described it as, “The best Delta blues album in nearly 40 years.” This is evidence that Fat Possum’s efforts to rebrand Junior, and R.L., as Hill Country blues had yet to fully take effect. As a result, the media were still using Delta as a catchall descriptor for bluesman from Mississippi. Unlike R.L., the remaining documents in Junior’s file classified as promotional material(s) – letters authored by promoters, letters of endorsements, record label marketing strategies, and concert flyers – did not use the term Delta at all. However, a total of six documents were analyzed.

Identifying the frequent usage of the term Delta used by the media pre-Fat Possum illustrates how these artists, and their music, were subsequently placed into a category of the blues in which they did not belong. In an interview that appeared in the The Times-Picayune’s 1985, Burnside acknowledged the common assumption that all blues from Mississippi were often labeled Delta blues, including his. “Now where I live is in the hills, but they call it the Delta Blues. You don’t have to be from the delta to play the blues.”"13 He then acknowledges how is sound is different from Chicago and Delta blues:

I make a lot of unnecessary chords there. I make a lot of ‘em that you don’t read about in the book. Chicago blues, that’s fixed music, you can read about that. But I make a lot of ‘em that ain’t in the book to read about.

*The Baltimore Sun* published an article in 1986, in which they interviewed William Ferris, who at the time was the director of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi, during which he noted R.L.’s place of origin, and vouched for the uniqueness of the Hill Country. “He’s particularly important because he comes from the [northern] Mississippi hills, just outside of the Delta, representing an area not normally associated with the blues.”

Understanding why the media frequently assumed all blues from the Mississippi were Delta blues, and why the term was used as a general classification, was an important discovery, as it helped answer those questions.

Dr. David Evans, an ethnomusicologist at the University of Memphis, explained that the popularity of the Delta style during the 60s and 70s, and its longtime “stronghold” on the blues genre, allowed the term to become a “general term for country blues,” and became “interchangeable” [country blues, and Delta], which he said is “stupid” since the Delta is a specific geographic region. Evans said Delta became a “catch-all-term for country blues,” noting that artists from other areas in the south such as Texas and Georgia, were being labeled as Delta. “Mississippi artists in particular did [fall into the Delta category], and that was the fate that befell Burnside and Kimbrough for awhile,” Evans said.

Jim O’Neal, co-founder of the *Living Blues* magazine, the oldest blues publication in the United States, echoes Evan’s sentiments regarding Delta being used as a catch-all-term, and explained that record companies often times released Hill Country albums as Delta blues,

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15 David Evans, (ethnomusicologist at the University of Memphis) in discussion with the author, April 2015.
possibly as a result of the term Hill Country having yet to become an established genre at the time.

When Fred McDowell and R.L. Burnside's first records came out they were called Delta Blues. You know, record companies had them as Delta blues. I don't think at that time scholars, historians, journalists, or whatever, made the differentiation between Delta and Hill Country, and I don't even think Hill Country blues was even a common term. It was... if you were from Mississippi you were playing Delta blues, basically. It was kind of just lumped all together.16

O’Neal said he didn’t realize the Hill Country style should have its own name until he spent time in Mississippi, and listened to more records from that area. Up until that point, O’Neal said he was “going along with the nomenclature too…that it was Delta blues,” and said the two styles are “closely related, and some artists play some of both, but when you start pointing out the differences – it wasn't the same as what was coming from the Delta.” A lot of the credit for establishing the Hill Country blues should be attributed to Evans, according to O’Neal. Evans acknowledged himself as one of the first to recognize the Hill Country as a separate musical region, but cautioned about the difficulty of defining a certain style and region.

I think I might have been the first to sort of point out Hill Country as a kind of a musical region. But again, you have to be careful [as you know I pointed out in my talk]. You know, a lot of characteristics are found elsewhere in a much broader region. So, it's really rather hard to define Hill Country, even as a geographical region, much less a musical region.17

Evans said determining “whether there is a distinctive Delta blues style is another matter.” Information covered in the review of literature explains the “typical” blues structure most often associated with blues artists (12-bar blues) in more detailed and technical terms. Cedric Burnside, drummer and grandson of R.L. Burnside, describes Hill Country blues from a


17 Evans, ethnomusicologist, 16.
more personal perspective, and also offers insight into why some similarities of music from Delta regions might appear in this subgenre.

Hill Country is our style of music. It’s from, you know, North Mississippi – a little town called Holly Springs…Here in Holly Springs, our Hill Country blues is way different from blues you would hear, even in Memphis, you know? And Memphis is about 45 minutes away from us.

But the blues here in Holly Springs, Mississippi, is different than Memphis Blues. It’s a different style. It’s a different rhythm. Different beat, as well as Delta Blues. When you think of Delta, you think of Clarksdale Mississippi. You know, and Cleveland, Mississippi. You know, it’s a lot of Delta blues in that area ‘casue it’s the Delta.

Well, we’re bout’ two and a half hours from Clarksdale you know, and so the rhythm is just a little bit different. The beat is a little different. And, just like they created the Delta blues in the Delta, we created our sound in the Hill Country, you know, the Hill Country blues. And, so people might think, the Hill Country blues is Delta Blues, but when they hear it…I get asked this question sometimes: Why is the rhythm different? Because it’s different music.18

Hill Country bluesman, Kenny Brown, spoke about the emphasis on the rhythmic nature of the region’s sound.

It's more associated with the rhythms, and the drums are the rhythms to it more than the Delta stuff. Most of the fife and drum bands, at least when I came along, they were up in the hills. They weren’t, as far as I know, down in the Delta. The Hill Country stuff is more rhythmic, I think—a lot more rhythmic.19

Kenny and Cedric’s career as Hill Country bluesman make them experts on the matter of confirming a distinct difference between their style of blues and that played in the Delta. When describing the music, several of the people interviewed used descriptors such as “hypnotic,” “droning,” and “trance,” which will be identified by the media later in this chapter. However, this information came to light during interviews conducted post-Fat Possum, therefore should only serve as further conformation that the term was being used incorrectly by the media.

18 Cedric Burnside, (drummer, and grandson of R.L. Burnside) in discussion with the author, August 2015.

19 Kenny Brown, (Hill Country bluesman) in discussion with the author, September 2015.
Before post-Fat Possum, the absence of the existence of the term Hill County as a genre – explained earlier by Evans – is a possible explanation for why the media may have frequently, and unintentionally, classified Hill Country artists as Delta. Another contributing factor to this misclassification was that record companies were publishing R.L.’s and Junior’s material as Delta blues. If this was the case, all blame should not fall on the shoulder of journalists. Often times, journalists are sometimes accused of operating under the “assumption” that something is true based on its source of origin. For example, when reporting on a crime, a reporter most often times seeks out a law enforcement officer as a resource, as they are responsible for handling these matters. In the case of covering music, it is logical to assume that journalists would use record labels as a resource, as they are responsible for publishing and categorizing music.

O’Neal, who owned the record label Rooster Blues, based out of Clarksdale Mississippi, said he started the label after record labels began focusing heavily on the blues scene in Chicago, forgetting about, or ignoring what was happening other areas of Mississippi:

After so many of the great Mississippi blues artists moved to Chicago that became the center of that kind of recording, and there was this feeling that the only people left in Mississippi were the old guys that sit on their front porch with their guitar. But, that wasn't true you know? There was all this music going on in the juke joints… And that whole slice of the blues was then ignored as far as the recordings, and being documented even, and writing about it. Because most people when they thought about Mississippi, they were still more interested in Robert Johnson and [Charlie] Patton, or somehow not in... If something more modern was happening, they either weren't aware or didn't care, you know?20

Similarly, Mark Camarigg, the Publications Manager and Assistant Editor for Living Blues magazine, suggested that the media’s lack of exposure to the area could have played a factor in how Hill Country artists were covered also,

I think [one] is not being down here. If you if you hadn't visited, maybe, I just think maybe you don't make the distinction between Delta and the Hill Country.

20 O’Neal, Living Blues, 17.
The Hill Country I don't think has... people don't understand it, and aren't aware of it once you leave [Mississippi]. I think you get a hundred miles outside, probably a little farther than that... when you leave here it all kind of becomes Delta blues I think. So I think it's just laziness and ignorance to a great degree.²¹

Camarigg’s insight prompted the researcher to sort through all media documents from each artist’s file again, this time with the goal of documenting the place of origin for each article. Twenty-seven of the thirty-three articles from R.L.’s file originated in regions outside of Mississippi, and its immediate surroundings [Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Tennessee]. Articles appeared in publications across the nation, ranging from California to New York. Ten of the twenty-two articles from Junior’s file originated in regions outside of Mississippi as well. Similar to R.L., articles were published as far away as California and New York. The extreme distance(s) existing between the Hill County and the places of origin for some published articles, most definitely limited journalists in their ability to thoroughly cover these artists. Conversely, journalists specializing in music should have taken it upon themselves to note the differences between the music from the Delta and Hill Country – as was pointed out earlier, a stylistic difference exists – and explain this in their writing (which some did do). In articles published pre-Fat Possum, writers used broad terms as descriptors such as “basic,” “simple,” and, “powerful.” The result of including vague descriptors for a style of music with clear sounds of originality does cast a shadow of ignorance on the authors. In one New York Times article from 1991, the author writes, “His [R.L.] sons Calvin on the drums, knocked out a steady beat punctuated by rattlesnake accents on the hi-hat cymbals.”²² Calvin Jackson, is not R.L.’s son, but is in fact is son-in-law, and the father of R.L.’s grandson, Cedric Burnside. While this error doesn’t necessarily apply to classification, it does show a different form of ignorance. Journalists

²¹ Mark Camarigg, (publications manager and assistant editor for Living Blues magazine) in discussion with the author, July 2015.

working for publication’s such as *The New York Times* (a publication with a healthy assignment budget, presumptively) during this time (when newspapers were more successful) period could have taken the initiative to visit the Hill Country and experience it. As O’Neal admitted earlier, before visiting the area, he was “going along with the nomenclature too…that it was Delta blues.”

The failure to execute the effort required to make those stylistic distinctions in one’s writing, and lack of initiative taken to visit the area, appeared to be signs of lazy reporting.

**Priming the Possum: Deep Blues and Robert Palmer**

Little was known about the Hill Country until 1991, the same year the documentary “Deep Blues” was released. The documentary was written by longtime music critic Robert Palmer, and directed by Robert Mugge. The film “went deep into the heart of Mississippi to seek out the best blues acts in the country…They documented the performances of talented artists cut-off from the mainstream of the recording industry.” One section of the documentary is devoted solely to the Hill Country, and features performances by R.L. Bursnide, Jessie Mae Hemphill, and Junior Kimbrough. When introducing R.L., Palmer says he plays in a “real, real hard north Mississippi style, which is *quite* different from the Delta.”

R.L.’s performance was shot outside of his home, which has a yard full of broken down automobiles, unsalvageable children’s toys, and washing machines on the front porch. It gives the impression that this is a very rural, and poor area, which is accurate to some degree. When introducing Junior, Palmer says he is a “highly original singer, and guitarist himself,” followed by, “yet, he’s never made an album of his own,” and concludes by saying, “If you want to hear his music, have to go out juke-ing.”

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This intro paints Junior as an undiscovered talent, like a rare breed that can only be seen in their natural habitat. Junior’s performance was shot inside of his juke joint, a venue with a dirt floor and faded paintings on the wall. It too looked very rural, and it was. What’s most important about this documentary, however, is that it gave the Hill Country national exposure.

The mention of “Deep Blues” by journalists when writing about R.L. and/or Kimbrough was quite frequent, especially in the years closer to the documentary’s original launch date. For example, there were four articles from the year 1993 in R.L.’s file, and all of them mentioned “Deep Blues.” Similarly, Junior’s file had seven articles from the year 1993, and four of them mentioned “Deep Blues.” An article published in the Chicago Maroon’s March 5, 1993, issue, featured a review R.L.’s album “Bad Luck City” said the “new interest [in R.L.] is due in part to his current album, “Bad Luck City,” and an appearance on the ‘Deep Blues’ soundtrack.” In a newspaper article from 1993 previewing Junior’s upcoming concert at the Sonoma County Blues Festival said Kimbrough’s name “gained more prominence recently by virtue of a featured appearance in the excellent documentary, ‘Deep Blues,’” and called his performance in the film “one of the most riveting and intense performances in the 91 minutes feature.” An article published in the Philadelphia Inquirer’s June 20, 1993, issue, featured a review of Junior’s “All Night Long” and R.L.’s “Bad Luck City,” in which the author said, “The Robert Mugge film, ‘Deep Blues,’ and these Fat Possum albums afford these two underexposed masters the full-length forums they deserve.” From these examples, it is evident that the film helped generate exposure to both artists, and in doing so, brought attention to the Hill Country genre. Palmer’s involvement with the film also gave it a stamp of approval in a sense, because he was such a prominent music critic that those who consumed his work were naturally intrigued to watch the

27 Sonoma Country blues, 12.
documentary. However, his writing was also a powerful draw. Camarigg, thought of Palmer as a gifted writer who was very in tune with popular culture and its history.

This cat knew more than anybody. He knew better, you know? If Palmer said it was good, it was good. He had that quality sensibility, you know? And he also knew the history, and so he could tell you that. And he had so much knowledge that he brought to all of it, and that all came out in him writing about this stuff. So, if I'm a guy in California, and I'm at the newsstand reading Rolling Stone, I'm like, ‘Holy shit, I got to know this I don't know this? I know music, and I don't know this? 28

Camarigg, who was living in California when Fat Possum began to emerge, and Palmer was writing about the Hill Country. He remembers the first time he read about the genre:

I can absolutely remember being in Barnes and Noble and reading Rolling Stone, and there was an article about Fat Possum. It was about Robert Palmer, and they were talking about Junior Kimbrough and R.L. Burnside – it’s from like 1993 I think – and I remember reading about that…I was blown away, I guess. ‘I got to hear this stuff. I got to find it, you know? This sounds incredible.’ And then I got – I'm pretty sure I remember I got like RL Burnside…whatever was in high water, dam groove boys or something like that. And I was blown away. I was like, ‘This is awesome.’ And then I would get anything that was Fat possum. You know… I loved it all. I mean it was all great. I would read the liner notes, and it was all awesome.

“Deep Blues” and Palmer’s writing played a large roll in generating interest in the Hill Country region and its music. As a result, the media started to latch hold of the term Hill Country, or north Mississippi blues, and began identifying the style more and more in their writings, moving away from the catchall Delta classification. Around the same time, Fat Possum records were beginning to emerge on the scene, finding success with R.L. and Junior’s music.

Post-Fat Possum: Shakin’ The Delta

The stage had been set for the Hill Country genre, and it was now Fat Possum’s responsibility to capitalize on the curiosity of listeners, and deliver the music. The first record Fat Possum released was R.L. Burnside’s “Bad Luck City” in 1991, which sold roughly only 700

28 Camarigg, Living Blues, 17.
copies. Following this epic failure, Fat Possum brought in Robert Palmer to produce R.L.’s next album, “Too Bad Jim.” The first article review of “Too Bad Jim” – found in R.L.’s file – was featured in TIME on October, 17, 1994, and included references to the Hill Country region, points out the stylistic difference between Delta blues and Hill Country, acknowledges the fife and drum tradition, and calls R.L. “one of the region’s finest bluesman”:

And in the hill country of North Mississippi, the music is still written, sung and played with bad-luck-is-following-me laments, down-home wry humor and superb artistry…Up-country blues differs from the Delta sound. Short vocal and instrumental phrases are framed and repeated over a distinct one two march beat that lies its origins in the 19th century fife-and-drum bands and Afro-Cuban clave percussion.29

A review in *Rolling Stone* that same year makes very similar comments, and starts off by acknowledging that when thinking about Mississippi blues, the first thought that comes to mind is Delta. Later:

Mention Mississippi to blues fan, and chances are their head will start swimming with the raw sound of the Delta. But not all great Mississippi blues have a lowland address. In the Hill Country just north and east, there has always existed a bracing but unsung blues scene…But on “Too Bad Jim,” a far more expressive and supple work, Burnside delivers a searing set of songs anchored in tradition, demonstrating why the Mississippi hill country could well be the final blues frontier.30

These two examples illustrate “Too Bad Jim” as the first album to receive recognition as a product of the Hill Country, while simultaneously breaking the preconceived notion that all Mississippi blues is Delta. The liner notes for the album were written by Palmer, and include great detail on the geographic region, as well as the musical style. A short excerpt from the liner notes illustrates this:

Even more so than the Delta, North Mississippi blues is a churning, jamming one chord exercise in stamina and mass hypnosis, founded on fundamental speech-

29 See Appendix B, TIME magazine review, A11.
30 See Appendix B, Rolling stone review, A12.
rhythm formulas; often several instruments or voices are “talking” back and 
fourth to each other as part of the overall musical texture. This unique musical 
culture, centered in four adjacent counties of DeSoto, Marshall, Tate and Panola, 
makes particularly stringent demands on players from outside the area.  

Almost immediately, writers began to describe R.L.’s music using descriptors such as 
“hypnotic,” “trance,” and “raw,” among others. An article published in the the Toledo Blade’s 
May 21, 1995, issue, David Yonke writes regarding R.L.’s sound:

Burnside’s raw, earthy, northern Mississippi blues, sometimes called “trance 
blues,” is paced by a spare, hypnotic rhythm. Band members squeeze and ride the 
groove, awaiting the cue from Burnside, who when the moment’s right, unleashes 
one of his brutal, slash-and-burn solos.

An article published in the the Chicago Tribune’s February 24, 1998, issue, Rick Reger 
notes R.L.’s sound as Hill Country and using similar descriptions as the Toledo Blade article 
published three years earlier:

The 71-year-old Burnside plays North Mississippi country blues, a style based on 
rhythmic grooves rather than songs, which musicians whip into a headlong rush 
with wild call-and-response interplay.

The distance between these two articles is evidence that the genre and its style had become well-
established, and were being recognized by writers. What is more important, in terms of 
illustrating the evolution of the media’s coverage through the different eras is the elimination of 
the word Delta. However, “Too Bad Jim” was not the only Fat Possum record released during 
this period in time; fellow Hill Country bluesman Junior Kimbrough’s second album “All Night 
Long” was also in circulation.

Palmer also produced “All Night Long,” which helped generate a pre-buzz, similar to 
“Too Bad Jim.” The first album review of “All Night Long” – found in Junior’s file – was

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31 “Too Bad Jim” liner notes.
featured in *Billboard’s* December 19, 1992, issue. But unlike “Too Bad Jim,” the publication still classified Junior’s music as Delta, writing, “This strain of Delta blues is so pure, so close to the genres’ roots, that it’s rarely recorded.” Reviews that followed, for the most part, did not attempt to label Junior as either Delta or Hill Country. The reasoning for this can most likely be linked to the fact that he was “highly original,” making his music difficult to classify. In an album review of “All Night Long” featured in the September 1993 issue of *Request*, Geoffrey Him describes Kimbrough as “starkly original.” In a review of the album featured in *Rolling Stone’s* February 4, 1993, issue, Robert Santelli writes, “Few albums recorded during this current blues revival are as original or intense as *All Night Long*.” More important than originality, Junior himself classified his blues as “cottonpatch blues,” something besides Hill Country blues, creating more difficulty for writers to label his music. Oddly enough though, descriptors of the Hill Country sound still appeared in reviews of Junior’s albums, performances, and articles after he was deceased. In an album review on “All Night Long” that appeared in *Men’s Journal’s* March/April, 1993, issue, Anthony DeCurtis writes:

> Powered by relentless bass-and-drums accompaniment, Kimbrough’s songs are intensely physical…At the same time, his long, droning, metallic guitar solos are hypnotic, transporting journeys, music for the mind and spirit, as well as the body.  

An article published in remembrance of Junior in *Oxford Town’s* January 22-28, 1998, issue, shortly after his death, described his sound as, “tough, raw, and wildly hypnotic,” and was “equally boozy, bruised and sexy.” In an article published in *The New York Times* shortly after Kimbrough’s death in 1998, described him as having played, “raw-boned blues, with a voice that

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34 See Appendix B, Billboard review, 1882, B4.


harked back to field hollers, and stark repeating guitar lines that bordered on the hypnotic.”

Similar to “Too Bad Jim,” Palmer wrote the liner notes for “All Night Long,” except his writing for this album reflected a first-person account of his experience(s) in Junior’s juke-joint, although, he does provide descriptors from an article written by David Nelson, and published in the November/December 1991 issue of *Living Blues*:

> Kimbrough’s music carries the emotion and soul of the deepest blues, yet his music can match reggae in its hypnotic qualities, as well as stand up to any rock’n’roll for sheer intensity…Bass, drums and guitar…anticipate and feed off each other and know where the songs are going, becoming one big churning force.37

The excerpts selected for coverage on Junior post-Fat Possum largely illustrate the media’s recognition of Hill Country descriptors, and more importantly, the elimination of the word Delta. Providing excerpts as fruitful as those chosen for R.L. proved to be more difficult simply because Junior did not receiver as much press-coverage as his counterpart. However, those selected came from prominent publications such as *Rolling Stone, Living Blues* and, of course, the liner notes of Robert Palmer.

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This chapter consists of five oral histories, all of which came from people having personal relationships and experiences with both R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough. The histories are arranged based on how strong the researcher understood the relationship to be between the artist(s) and person interviewed. All narratives prefaced with a shorty biography have been written in first person.

**Narrative: Cedric Burnside**

**Biography**

Cedric Burnside is the son of Calvin Jackson, and the grandson of R.L. Burnside. He grew up around Holly Springs, Mississippi, and was around music starting at a very young age. His father played the drums for both R.L. and Junior, and his grandfather was constantly playing music. Around the time he was six or seven, he moved in with his grandfather, and while his granddad played the guitar, Cedric was always fascinated by the drums. He started playing the drums around age eight, and started touring with R.L. when he was about thirteen. Around this time, he was also playing drums with Junior Kimbrough at his juke joint. Overtime, Cedric honed his craft, and has carved a name for himself in music. For four consecutive years, he was awarded the Blues Music Award’s Drummer of the Year (2010-2014). In 2010, he created the Cedric Burnside Project, and in 2015, he and Trenton Ayers (the son of Hill Country bluesman, Joe Ayers) released the Cedric Burnside Project’s latest album, “Descendants of the Hill Country.” He is still play music, records, and tours on a regular basis.

**Growing Up In The Hill Country With Big Daddy**

I loved it. You know, we was a pretty poor family. You know, my big daddy was a sharecropper for a long time. As far as I could remember, by about 6-7 years old. You know, we
stayed in this little shack house with maybe about 4 rooms, total we stayed there for food and shelter. My big daddy sharecropped. He plowed gardens all day, and you know, when it was time to harvest the crop, we got half and the landlord got half. We just did that…all year round pretty much. And we stayed there because the landlord had a house and my grand daddy worked for him, so he let us stay there while my granddad worked and we split crops.

But, my granddad and them used to have house parties, just about every weekend, and people would come from miles around, you know? Thirty-forty miles, you know, right in our vicinity and just jam out, drank a little moonshine and have fun. Right there on the front porch.

But the memories, you know, I remember, was pretty awesome, and I wouldn’t trade them for the world. I’m glad to be a part of the Burnside family, and I’m glad to grow up and learn a lot from my big daddy as well, which is R.L. Burnside. He was like my father. I stayed with him from when I was 6-7 years old to when I was old enough to move out on my own. I really looked up to him, man.

You know, nothing that my big daddy wouldn’t do for his family. We all stayed with big daddy – I wrote a song about big daddy and my big momma – but we all stayed with them. And when I say all of us stayed with them, I mean the kids stayed with them, the grandkids was with them, and some of the great grandkids was in the same house. We all was in the same four room shack house in the middle of Mississippi, North Mississippi Hill Country, and just wooded area. You know, no running water and it was at least 15 people in that house. So he was the back bone of the whole family. Everybody knew it.

Everybody loved him you know, genuinely everybody loved everything about big daddy because he…he was worthy of all of that love, you know? Yeah man, he took care of his family to the fullest. He took care of me, I’m his grandson. I stayed with him until I was able to move
out of the house on my own, and get my own place. So, yeah. He was really the backbone. He was, you know, traveling just for…I wouldn’t say just for his family, but he was traveling to show his love and his talent to the people that loved his music, but he also would let em’ know he’s a family man. And he liked to show his love at home, with his family, as well as show his love to any person on the street, or any person at the club. He would give you the shirt off his back, but he definitely loved his family.

**Big Daddy Loved To Play And Share His Music**

Getting it out there [Hill Country blues], my big daddy toured before I was born and after, you know, solo…for a while. And he pretty much was overseas and in the states, and he didn’t do it much [toured], but he did do it sometimes…and he kinda got it [Hill Country blues] over there. He kinda got it known a little bit. And from that people will travel to Mississippi, you know, to the Hill Country, to get more. We’ll be outside playing and we’ll just see, maybe a camper pull up, or two or three cars pull up, and they wanna come here my granddad play.

And these people be from everywhere. You know, from San Francisco to Australia. They be from every where, you know? And my big daddy sometimes he be on the tractor in the field and we’ll have to run out there to the field and tell him, “Big daddy, big daddy. Somebody’s here from out of town and they wanna, wanna see you, wanna talk to you.” And he’ll go park the tractor, and go and get off the tractor, and come up to the house and sit on the front porch and play the guitar for a hour or so…and he leaves, and he’ll jump back on the tractor and go back to work.

He was willing to share anytime. It didn’t matter who came. You know, some people came, and even though we had a full four room house, with no running water, no toilet, you know, no kitchen sink, no nothing – you know, we hauled water for years. But people came all the time and some of them even camped there for the weekend. They camped out at our house,
and our house was so, so raggedy and poor looking, so we were like, “Woah. Why would anybody camp here?” But they didn’t really see that. All they saw was the Hill Country blues made them feel good. It made them feel awesome. And that’s what they wanted, and nothing else mattered. And that was a beautiful thing as well.

I have to say…money is good. We all know that’s what makes the world go round, but when it came to Big daddy, it was – he did it because he loved it, and he watched the look on people’s face. You know a lot of people come up to him and would cry. They would literally cry and tell him how much his music meant to them, and that it brought them through (over) hard times they might have had in the past. And, you know, he would just grab his guitar – whether he was onstage, in the dressing room, or whether he was at his house, he would just grab his guitar – and play his music. They wanted to hear it. He wanted to play it for them. It wasn’t…it really wasn’t about the money. Um of course the money helped when he started making it. But it wasn’t really about the money because people came from all over the world, all the time to his house. And he would play beautifully, and just as hard right there as he would on stage, and they didn’t offer him a dollar, and he didn’t ask them for anything. I know he did it all out of love.

The Sound Of Hill Country Blues

I would have to say, you know, my big daddy being from the Hill Country…you know some people get Hill Country and Delta mixed up, and I would say it’s kinda similar, but it’s different. You know, Hill Country got that, that just hypnotic beat that you just drawn to. It’s got that real foot stomping, you know, pumping music.

And you know um, it changes when it get ready. You know on Delta music, you know I love Delta music, but it’s got a different time, and the timing is almost…you know…the 12-bar, you know, the 8-bar; but Hill Country music don’t, it don’t have any bars (laughs) you know? You can’t really change on the 16-bar or nothing like that; or you know, the 12-bar… you can’t
do that. The people just change when they’re ready, and I like to call it “feel” music because you have to feel it, you know?

Hill Country is our style of music, it’s from North Mississippi – a little town called Holly Springs. But, you know like Hill Country music from holly springs…I’m pretty sure everyplace got a Hill Country…somewhere. But here in Holly Springs, our Hill Country Blues is way different from Blues you would hear, even in Memphis, you know? And Memphis is about 45 minutes away from us. But the Blues here in Holly Springs, Mississippi – it’s different than Memphis Blues. It’s a different style, it’s a different rhythm, different beat, as well as Delta Blues. When you think of Delta, you think of Clarksdale Mississippi, and Cleveland, Mississippi. You know, it’s a lot of Delta Blues in that area case it’s the Delta.

Well we’re bout’ two and a half hours from Clarksdale, and so the rhythm is just a little bit different. The beat is a little different. And just like they created the Delta Blues in the Delta, we created our sound in the Hill Country, you know, the Hill Country Blues. And so people might think, you know the Hill Country Blues is Delta Blues, but when they hear it…I get asked this question sometimes, why is the rhythm different? Because it’s different music.

**Learning The Drums**

It was something I always wanted to do, and every time I would look at them, every weekend they’d play, I was think to myself, “I gotta do that. I got to play the drums.” You know, I loved it. And, I liked the guitar too, but the drums just really fascinated me. And one day I just found the courage, I was about 7-8 years old, when I found the courage to just jump on the drums. You know? It didn’t really matter if I could play em’ good or not, it was just breaking the ice and the first thing is just getting’ on em’, and so I did.

And you know I played a little bit, and the people was just like, “Look at that little young boy playin’ the drums…he gon’ be good someday.” And that kind of motivated me and kept me
in it, you know? Around about ten years old, I was playing in the Juke Joints. I just stayed with it and…it just progressed more and more as I stayed with it.

That’s pretty much how he would do it [teach the drums by encouraging him to play]. You know, he’ll tell me, “You’ll never learn if you never get on them.” He always tell me that. Even when I didn’t have much confidence getting on them, you know, he was like, “You get better if you stay on them. You never learn or get better if you don’t stay on them.” And so that’s something I always did. I always – no matter what, if it was just one person listening to me, or if it was 200 people listening at me – just stayed on the drums, you know?

And, watching my big daddy, he did some of everything, even if he couldn’t play it that good, he still tried it. I saw him try to play bass, and he was okay on bass. And he used to play Fife and Drum with uh, Otha back in the day – before I was born, and a little bit after I was born, too. I wouldn’t be surprised if my granddad could play every instrument.

He always had an encouraging word for you. You know, you can’t be too brutal – sound to mean, especially to a kid. I was a kid. So he just wanted me to know, that I can really, if I put my mind to it, I can do what I wanna do, you know? That’s what he really wanted to instill in me, and he did. Cause you know right now…today I’m 36 years old and I’m still playing the music I love, you know? Not only playing the music I love, but he instilled in me to even write the music that I love. You know so, I write music as well and I’d just like to thank God and R.L. Burnside you know for uh, helping me along, along the years.

I can’t remember the name of the venue, but my first time – well, just playin’ in front of an audience with my big daddy, you know, I started playing in the juke joint – when I left Mississippi, and I did my first, you know, professional show with him, I went to Toronto, Canada. I never forget, because it was a different crowd. It wasn’t nothing like playing in the
juke joint; I was so use to playing in the juke joint, you know, it wasn’t nothing to me, cause I had got use to it.

But I left Mississippi for the first time, and drove to Canada with me, my big daddy and Kenny Brown. It was you know, butterflies in my stomach. I was like, “Are they gonna like this music? What are they gonna think about it?” And so I got nervous, and scared all over again. And, you know, once again, my big daddy said, “It’s going to be all right. Just do what you always do. Do what you do at the juke joint.” You know, I always listened to him. I know he wouldn’t tell me nothing wrong, so I just got up there and did it, and people was clapping their hands after the first song, and loving it; and that right there made me feel awesome. And butterflies went away, and I never had them again, from that day to this one.

**Defining A Juke Joint**

It’s wild as hell (Laughs). But wild in a good way. You know, a juke joint – I like to think of a juke joint as the front porch of our house was a juke joint for a long time, you know? People would come from miles around and just have fun. Drink a little moonshine, play a little music, and dance all night. And then you know, some juke joints when you find a nice building it’s probably old as hell, but still in pretty decent shape. Some people would find these juke joint buildings and have them a real juke joint, and that juke joint become popular…you know, like Junior Kimbrough. You know, growing up around Junior Kimbrough and his juke joint, there wasn’t a weekend where somebody didn’t come out and have fun. Some weekends it might be ten people. Some weekend it might be 300 people, so packed you can’t hardly walk in the juke joint.

But it was just a place where everybody you know, come after work, you know even if you didn’t have a job you’d come from home, you know after spending all day at home, maybe you cook, you’re a housewife or you’re a husband that work at home and you do all your work at
home and then you wanna come out and enjoy a little music…people would come to the Juke Joint. I saw people come in from…they work on cars and they have oil all over their face, all over their clothes, it didn’t even matter. They’d leave work and come straight to the juke joint. Drink a little moonshine and listen to a little music and it was just a beautiful thing to do. And that’s all a juke joint is really. Just a place, a gathering where people can have fun and just be themselves, you know?

Playing Junior’s Juke Joint Underage

It was a really good experience for me. I played with Mr. Junior Kimbrough…that was the first juke joint I ever started playing at – me and my uncle, Garry Burnside. I was about 10 years old, and I was playing drums good enough…when I turned about ten to play at the juke joint. Garry, which is two years older than me – I was about ten he was about twelve. A lot of times the bass player, or the drummer wouldn’t show up. You know, maybe they too full of moonshine and didn’t make it or whatever the case, you know? But me and Garry would be sort of like, the back up band. And we would play when they didn’t come, and they would hide us behind the beer cooler you know, when the police come ‘cause you know we was the band and if we get kicked out there wouldn’t be no music…it would just be solo. And not that they didn’t like it, but they enjoyed the band, you know? And so Mr. Kimbrough – they would hide us, and the people would come in and they’ll buy us cheeseburgers and drinks and try to stand in front of us ‘cause we’re up under the beer cooler (laughs) you know to hide us from the cops. So it was a beautiful experience, man. And you know, like I said, I wouldn’t trade it for nothing in the world.

Junior Kimbrough

Mr. Junior Kimbrough was a very serious guy when it came down to his music and his family. But he had a real comical attitude. He liked to crack jokes, he liked to hang out with his
friends and you know, drink a little moonshine like all old cats love to do, but when it came down to his music – like to run a juke joint, he was always there…every now and then he might have been, you know uh, a little ill and like had a cold or something and couldn’t make it on time, but he always came. Pretty much he was on time every weekend to open up the club and sometimes me, him, and Garry…early in the morning…when he come to open up the club and clean up to get ready for that evening, we’ll practice a little bit, you know, him and Garry practice most of the time. Me and him and Gary would practice a little bit, and he would just show us a few licks on the guitar, and then he’ll tell me how to play the beat on the drums and then we’ll just do it like that and get prepared for that evening.

So he was very serious about his music and very serious about his family. That’s something he didn’t play around with, and while he was playing his music, he didn’t like to be disturbed. He wanted to play his music and get everything down. He would lock the door – after we clean up in the morning he would lock the door – while he showed us the music he wanted to show us. You know, to make sure we got it and wasn’t disturbed.

But he was a good guy. Mr. Junior Kimbrough was a really good guy, and I loved him to death, and a lot of his music really helped us out to become the musicians that we are today, as well as my big daddy, you know?

You know Junior Kimbrough “All Night Long” was a favorite for a whole lot of people. That was just a beautiful, beautiful song – kinda a medium tempo song where you could just kinda shake your head to it all the time. “Meet Me In the City” was another one of my favorites of Junior Kimbrough. It was one of those slow, really sweet – it was a love song and people felt it. Everytime he played that song people would get on the floor and slow dance, and you know, get close (laughs).
Fat Possum

Fat Possum did a lot for Hill Country Blues, and for that I’ll always be grateful for them for carrying the Hill Country Blues as far as it could go. My big daddy and Junior Kimbrough, before they sort uh got with Fat Possum, and Fat Possum started pushing the music, the music didn’t get a lot of recognition it shoulda got a long time ago. But, just because they came up on Fat Possum, and they loved the music enough to do something with it…it got a following. I guess late 90’s, like about 90, you know 96-97, when it starts getting, well known. The Hill Country Blues, you know it was a long time waiting. And before you know it, in the early 2000’s, we was just shooting all over the place. People was listening at this music and was loving this music – and hey, the wanted more of it, and we was happy to give more, you know?

It was a beautiful thing for me, as well as my big daddy. But one thing that I didn’t…I couldn’t really get over, until very recently, maybe 3-4 years ago – my big daddy and Junior Kimbrough played this music for so long, but when it started reaching more people, that’s when they started getting more ill, and so they didn’t really reach the potential they could of reached when they was here. You know, of course they getting a whole lot of it while they’re deceased, which happens on a lot of occasions, but I…I just wish they could of got a little bit more out there before they passed. And so that’s one of the reasons why I love to just keep this music going and play it till I die, because I love that music so much, man. It’s part of me and I love those guys so much, you know, they’re a part of me and just, I just wanna keep this music alive, you know?

Narrative: Garry Burnside

Biography

Garry Burnside is the son of R.L. Burnside, one of his twelve children. Garry grew up near Holly Springs, Mississippi, and was around music starting at a very young age. He first
learned how to play the drums around age nine, later moving on to bass guitar, and the lead later in life. During his early years as a musician, Garry spent a large portion of time playing bass for Junior Kimbrough. Junior first heard Garry playing the bass when he was about ten, afterwards recruiting him to play bass with him at his juke joint. After Junior passed away in 1998, Garry began playing with other artists from around the region, including the North Mississippi Allstars, Hill Country Review, and his nephew, Cedric Burnside. Currently, Garry plays lead guitar with his band, the Garry Burnside Band.

**Learning Too Play**

We [brothers, cousins, nephews] were about eight, nine years old, coming up, that's how we learned [on buckets and other everyday items] 'cause we couldn't afford instruments. When my dad had something, we wouldn't just—we didn't know if we could play or not, and it was hard to get instruments. They ain't gonna tear the shit up. We had to show and prove that we could do a lot of shit. Yeah, man. We've [Cedric Burnside] been playing together, man, since he was about seven, I was about nine. Then I started playing with Junior at 11, and I think I started with my dad about 13, 14 years old when he started playing.

I was playing drums [at about nine]. I could play drums about nine, and I could play a little bass guitar. Junior heard me play. Junior Kimbrough heard me play. He used to come over. We stayed right next door to Junior, right beside his club, so he used to come over about two or three times a week and teach me stuff on bass guitar, on the bass. I've been doing that the longest. I ain't been playing lead guitar, you know what I'm saying, that long, not in no clubs. I'd been playing at the house mostly and was learning as I was going. Bass and drums. Drums were my first thing, then bass, then lead guitar.

Yeah. I loved playing music. Yeah. He [dad] wasn't that strict on you about how good your technique was at playing. He just liked to see us trying to go it, regardless how long it took
us to get great at it. We was young, but we could catch on ASAP, quick. It was just in us to do it. To me, it don't seem like it took that long. I just picked up the guitar and started playing it. I know it took a while doing it, but I was playing since I was young, little, so it really doesn't seem hard to me. I know it couldn't have been easy.

He was a good dad, man. He was there for us, and he always was telling constructive stuff and everything, made sure we was on the right page and shit. Yeah. It was really fun learning from him, my brother Duwayne, them, all of them, the Allstars. I learned from a lot of people, man, just being around them growing up. I had the best life to be around a lot of big-time musicians that's big-time, really big now, you know what I'm saying? They wasn't that big then, but I had—we're still like family. I had a lot of time to learn from them then, and as well I still can go see them and do that, you know what I'm saying, now.

I probably was 13 [first time I played with dad in front of people]. It was at Junior Kimbrough's juke joint 'cause my dad used to come in there and play the juke joint when he was in town. He didn't have no bass player. It was a few shows of me and him. Him and Junior had the same—they were with the same record company. We had the same venue in our city. Other than that, I really didn't play with him. We played mostly at home, like house parties at Junior's, somewhere like that, at house parties, like Junior's juke joint. I was about 13 years old.

Dad Loved To Play And Share His Music

Lots of people, man [came to our house]. I don't even remember their names or a lot of names, but man, we've been in magazines, man, and stuff ever since I was in diapers. I'm talking about all the people that come out on videos, that play on YouTube. I ain't big enough to play. Once I got big enough to play, you know what I'm saying, I remember a lot of—like I said, around about 12, 13 years old, you know what I'm saying, 11 to 13, I'm out with Junior playing. I
was out there too when they come around. They've been coming around since I was in diapers, man. They sit down, man. We had some people used to come stay with us to learn stuff from Dad, learn his style, his way. If you got the time to go play with somebody like that, man, who wouldn't take it? Yeah, I've seen a lot of that stuff, man.

A lot of musicians, man, that I know nowadays, it's hard getting them to sign autographs when they're backstage. At his [dad] first show, he was so cool. He didn't care who you was or what color you were. If you were interested in playing, you want to know his music, you know what I'm saying, he could show what you he know. You know what I'm talking about? That's all he could do. He was cool with that. I also teach music myself too now…Because that way, your music lives forever through other people.

**Relationship With Junior Kimbrough**

He and my dad was friends already. Then, man, we just—he just heard me play, came up to the house and heard me playing the bass and told me to come over there sometime, and I started going over there. He started teaching me. When I got good enough to him, when I turned 11, I played my first CD with him.

I'm gonna say at the club, man [first memory playing with Junior], because I was just fascinated by being out. You know what I'm saying? I was so young. He believed in me to know his music and really was serious about it. He gave me a chance with it. I was in the club when people my age couldn't get in. My friends would come in, and I was playing and jamming and shit. He showed me a life that I guess, I liked it [laughs]. You know what I'm saying? I stayed there with him. Playing at his club, having fun. It was something.

I was on all his CDs until he died. My name's on the cover as the bass player there. Me and his son, Kent Kimbrough, we was in Junior's band. All the way until I got legal to buy alcohol. Yeah. I played from 11 years old to about 22, 23, something like that. Until he died.
Junior was a great guy, man, and a wonderful teacher. You know what I'm saying? Teaching music and stuff. Junior had his ways of—my dad was more of like a family man. You know what I'm saying? At the house, you know what I'm saying? Junior was a family man, but he never liked to—even when he had two or three women at a time, Junior was kinda like pimpin’ [laughs]. You know what I'm saying? He had that kind of lifestyle going. He also had his own club, so he didn't have to travel as much as my dad cuz he mostly made people come to him cuz he knew he made his own money by having business.

All my dad did was travel. We went overseas two or three times, but not as much as my dad traveling. Junior wasn't big on the traveling, man. You know what I'm saying? He taught me street life. You know what I'm saying? Real life, to know about the streets and stuff. You know what I'm saying? A lot of stuff that I wouldn't have learned from my dad because he didn't hang out like that. You know what I'm saying? He was cool guy, man. He cared about his music, as long as you did his music right, you know what I'm saying, didn't interfere with his music, man, he didn’t mind you hanging around. He's the type that got time to hang out, kick it with the guys. People have said the thug guys. He was that type of guy.

**Junior’s Juke Joint**

I remember a lot of them [famous musicians] coming there, man. A lot of stars, man. Back—you know what I'm saying—from TV. Everybody come over there and just hung out, man. They did this movie out here. They come down here. Yes, a lot of big-time people come there, man. A lot of musicians too. I got to play with Big Jack Johnson, a lot of other musicians that are from the Delta and from everywhere else. They’d come down and just jam to be with Junior. They said Junior's band always start in with the guitar players come there. So some nights, I might be playing bass, man. We'd probably start at 5 that afternoon, and I'd probably get
off the bass at 1:00 that night, playing with everybody, especially my dad and my brother Duwayne. Then you know, the Allstars come down there, Jim Dickinson. Everybody use to come down there and just jam

You just come down there and just jam. I learned a lot of different kind of music playing that way, playing bass behind people, so when I got the guitar with that style I learned and then my own style, come up with the style that I got now, what I do. Yeah, man. A lot of stars came down there. I seen a lot of stuff. A lot of amazing shit happened at Junior's that a mother fucker wouldn’t believe, unless you was there because of the way the place looked. This was a juke joint. You know what I'm saying? Wasn't no B.B. King's club, nothing fascinating like that. It was just old pictures on the wall, shack right there, and some good music coming out of there. It brought motherfuckers from everywhere, TV, everywhere down there.

**Narrative: Kenny Brown**

**Biography**

Kenny Brown was born in 1953 in Selma, Alabama, and moved to the Hill Country area when he was fairly young. He began playing the guitar around the age of eight, although he was learning to read music and had become frustrated to the point where he considered quitting. However, bluesman Joe Callicot moved next door to Brown around the same time the young guitar player was about to throw in the towel. Under Callicot, Brown learned to play the Hill Country blues, and when he was 18, Brown met R.L. Burnside and began playing with him, and did so until he passed. R.L. referred to Brown as his “adopted son.” Brown is best known for his superb slide guitar playing. Today, he continues to play the Hill Country blues, and keep regional traditions alive, such as picnics.
Meeting R.L.

I went to a show [about 1972]. A friend of mine had put on a show and had a band from the junior college there playing. It was a rock band. It was out in the pasture. He lived near RL. He had RL come and open the show up. I met him then and told him that I played some guitar and I really liked what he was doing and I’d like to learn some from him. He told me where he lived and told me to come on down to his house. I went down in there. He was just a real friendly guy. I went down there, started going down there two or three nights a week. I’d get off—I was doing carpenter work. He’d get off the tractor—he was driving a tractor—or come out of the field, whatever he was doing. I’d go down there two, three nights a week, and we’d sit out and play ‘til midnight a lot of times. I did that for quite a while.

I mean, he loved to play, loved to have fun. He was just open and invited me right in to the house and they all became family to me. We were for years and years. They still are, all the family is still my family pretty much. He’s just a real friendly guy and just open. He’d show you anything. I miss him a lot.

Playing The First Show

I remember it well [the first show I played with R.L.]. We had to play to make a little money at a juke house out in the country. We drove, oh, it seemed like forever through little country roads that looked like tunnels from the trees growing over the top of them. We got to this big house out in the sticks out there. Went in there and there wasn’t nobody—I mean, there was people in there, but there wasn’t any white people but me.

We set up and started playing. Played for a little while with people jumping and having a good time. All of a sudden, RL said, “Well, Brown, you keep going, I’m going in the back to gamble some.” I said, “Oh, man, gosh. These people will kill me.” He says, “Oh, no, you’ll be all
right.” I said, “Well, man, I really gotta play.” I went playing the best stuff I could think of. People just hollering, “Play it, white boy,” and all that. [Chuckles]

A little while later, RL come out. I guess he lost his money or whatever. He come back in there and went to play with me. We played quite a while. We never really made any money, but we played. Later on, we laughed about it. He was just checking me out to see if I was gonna make it, I guess. [Chuckles]

That was about ’72, I guess, when I met him. It was probably a year later we went to that first juke joint. It might have been ’71 when I met him, ’71, ’72. It was about a year later, yeah.

Playing With R.L. Dates Back Pre-Fat Possum

Oh, yeah. Yeah, 20 years. I mean, not all the time. When I first met him, we played together a lot for a couple years. Then I moved down to Louisiana to stay for a little while. I’d come back and see him. I’d play with Johnny Woods. Me and Johnny, I’d go get Johnny a lot of times, we’d just go ramble for the whole weekend. We’d go see R.L. in different places, go play different house parties and stuff.

R.L. and I, we played off and on together for 20 years. The way I got with Fat Possum, I was playing with Mojo Buford, the harmonica player who was actually from the Hernando area, Eudora. He had moved to Chicago and was playing with Muddy Waters. He came back to Memphis and I met him in the 80s and started playing with him some. I think it was around ’90—’89 or ’90, playing. We did a tour. We went up to Canada and we come back down, our last show was in Clarksdale. It was on Muddy Waters’ birthday. We were doing a tribute to Muddy Waters. I thought, “Well, I’m gonna call R.L. and get him to come down.” He came down to the show, and some of the guys from Fat Possum, that was the first time I met them. They brought him down there.
Sometime during the night, me and R.L., just the two of us got up and played. I guess they liked it. A few months later, they called me and told me they were doing a record on R.L. and wanted to know if I would play on it. I said, “Yeah, I will.” I said, “But why?” They said, “What do you mean?” I said, “Well, R.L.’s best by himself.” They said, “Well, we want to add drums and we want it to be rocking a little more.” I said, “Okay, cool.” I said, “I’ll do it.” We cut a couple records in a couple of days down at Junior’s Juke Joint. That was about ’93, I think, when we cut that stuff, “Too Bad, Jim,” and, “Sad Days and Lonely Nights.”

Creating Our Sound

When I played with R.L., most times we never had a bass player, because—well, when I was learning from him we didn’t, because nobody could afford a bass or a bass amp, I guess. We never had one. Then when we started traveling and we recorded, most of that was without bass. Then we started traveling, it was two guitars and drums. All the time the sound guys were like, “Where’s the bass player gonna be?” “We don’t have one.” Then they’d ask me, “Where’s the bass player?” I said, “Oh, he’ll be here at the end of the show.” [Chuckles] Then it was, “Well, okay, all right.” Then every time at the end of the night, they’d come up like, “Man, you didn’t even miss the bass player.” I’d say, “Yeah, I know.” [Chuckles] That happened all the time. Yeah, I mean, you using your thumb and your fingers and trying to—well, I guess it came from when you were playing by yourself having to do it all.

That’s what Johnny Woods called it [playing technique referred to as frailing]. It was what Fred McDowell did. Johnny called it frailing. I never really understood exactly what it meant by frailing. I think it was like when you’re coming down with your thumb and up with your finger. You’re doing all that at the same time. That’s a lot of what me and R.L. did. You have to do that to get Fred’s sound. That’s a lot of how me and R.L. got the sound that we got, because we were both doing that at the same time. It creates a lot of harmonics and stuff. We
wouldn’t be playing exactly the same licks, but we’d be real similar—sometimes the exact same licks.

When you’re coming down with your thumb and up with your finger and just steadily—that steadily doing that, that’s the hardest thing for people to learn when I try to show somebody how to play the Hill Country stuff and RL’s stuff. It’s that.

A lot of times we’d get to just—I swore a harmonica player was on stage with us before. You turn around and look and couldn’t find a harmonica player or a piano. Sometimes you get to hearing a piano. You’d say, “Man, who’s playing piano.” Turn around and look and it was just all the harmonics from the guitars and the hands and the fingers and the thumbs going steadily and having it cranked up pretty loud, too.

Most of it [recordings on the album Burnside on Burnside], I think, came from a show on Burnside Street in Oregon—Portland. They recorded a bunch of shows over a week-long period or something or two weeks. I think most of it came from that one show. That record just pretty much sums up how we sounded live.

**Tour Stories Part 1: Gotta Go And A Hurt Back**

I remember I hurt my back one time really bad. I could barely walk. Every night, I’d get on stage and I’d have a hard time getting on the stage, but I’d get on stage. The first song would start off and it was like my back pain was gone. I never thought about it anymore. It was just healing me, I guess.

We played the same set probably for a couple of years. All the time, I would think, “Man, we’re playing the same set.” It seems like it would get old after a while, but it never did. It’s like every night it was fresh. We’d do it different. You never know really when R.L. was gonna change or something. He might. [Chuckles] Especially if you were playing and there was some
pretty girl in front of you dancing and stuff. You’re just looking at her. Sure as hell, RL played a

different—changed a different time or something.

Now that you called my attention to it, not long ago we were playing at Minneapolis at
the zoo one time. About middle way through the song, RL just got up, took off to go to the
bathroom. He come back. We did a song while we were waiting on him to come back, me and
Cedric. When he come back, he says, “When you gotta go, you gotta go.” [Chuckles].

Tour Stories Part 2: Master of Chaos

What we used to call him, the master of chaos. If something big could go wrong before
we hit the road, you could expect something to go wrong somewhere.

We were on stage in Canada one night, and the sound guys, before we played, he said, “I
got a smoke machine. You mind if I put a little smoke on the stage?” I said, “Yeah, go ahead.
Just a little bit, not a lot.” I forgot to tell RL about it. We were playing. We were about halfway
through a song, all of a sudden R.L. looked at me, and, man, his eyes were big. You could tell he
was excited. He was pointing, “Hey, hey, hey, hey man. Somethin’ on fire over there.”[chuckles]
I cracked up. I said, “Oh, I forgot to tell you, that’s the smoke machine.” He thought the building
was fixing to burn down or something.

Tour Stories Part 3: I Don’t Need A Guitar

When I started playing with him, I know we were doing a gig in Oxford one time, and I
looked up and the sound guy was standing on the stage. He was just looking around the stage. He
was like, “I don’t believe this.” Just kept saying, “I don’t believe this. I don’t believe this.” I said,
“What is it you don’t believe?” He said, “R.L,’s doing a gig here, and y’all actually have
everything you need.” I said, “What do you mean?” He said, “Well, usually he shows up without
even a guitar.” [Chuckles]
He maybe didn’t have one one time, showed up down there, and then the college kids run and get him a guitar or whatever he needs, just to get him to play. He thought, “Why do I gotta carry one? They’ll go get one for me.” [Chuckles] He just had a kind of a ‘don’t give a shit’ attitude, which is cool in a way. Just like if you can survive the world like that, I guess it’s all right. Duwayne [other members] are like that, about the same way now.

**Tour Stories Part 4: Makin’ People Smile**

**Santa Fe, New Mexico**

One night we were doing this show in Santa Fe, me and T-Model and R.L.. I was on stage with RL, and I looked out across the crowd, and it was standing room only. People were packed in like sardines. I started looking at faces. I couldn’t find a face without a smile on it. I thought, “Man, that’s cool. [Chuckles] We’re making people feel good.” Nowadays, I just try to make people feel better than they did when they got there. If they leave feeling better than they did when they came, I’ve accomplished my job.

**Chicago, Illinois**

We did a show in Chicago on time, it was me and Paul Jones and R.L. and T-Model and Cedric. We were running late, couldn’t find the place. It was a place called The Double Door. It was a big, big club. The Rolling Stones had played there. It was a pretty nice place. When we got there, we were fairly late. We got there, the place was packed. It was sold out. There wasn’t a drum stick on the stage. [Chuckles] These people are sitting waiting for a while.

We unloaded. I mean, it was 15-20 minutes from the time we pulled up at the back door, the show had started. All these people were thinking, “Man, we’re not gonna see nothing tonight.” [Chuckles] Then all of a sudden we bust in and just 15 minutes and music’s happening. Everybody was happy at the end of the night.
Tour Stories Part 5: Quirky Tendencies And Memorable Moments

Suitcase of snacks

He used to carry a separate suitcase, especially when he’d go overseas of just food, like sardines and crackers and stuff. [Chuckles] ‘Cause the time difference, you might wake up in the middle of the night and not be able to get anything to eat. He had his stuff with him, and he liked what he wanted to eat. Different parts of the country have different foods.

Where’s my baby and jokes

The head would screw off and that was—the top was in the head of the doll. There was a bottle down inside of it. R.L. would get him a drink on stage. He’d call out, “Where’s my baby? Where’s my baby?” Amos would bring him the doll. [Chuckles] People would crack up. He used to love to tell a joke. [He Ain’t Your Daddy Joke] The first time I heard that, man, I fell off a stool. I mean, we were at the El Mocambo in Toronto. I was sitting on a stool. I think that’s when my back was hurting. I was sitting on a little stool, and he starts telling that joke. I was changing the tune on the guitar or something. Then when he got to the punchline, man, I fell off the stool. [Chuckles] That was a good one. That’s probably the best one.

Fresh as a daisy

A lot of times, he’d go, “Man, we gotta play that long tonight?” I said, “Yeah.” We’d get done with the show and he’d act like he was wore out. We’d get everything packed up and get in the van. As soon as we’d get in the van and we’d start to go to the hotel or whatever, RL starts singing again or telling jokes [chuckles] like he was fresh as a daisy.

Inception of the adopted son

One day he started introducing Cedric as his grandson. Then one night he just introduced me as his adopted son or his white son or his adopted son. [Chuckles] Which, I guess, he treated
me about as bad as he did the rest of ‘em. [Chuckles] He didn’t never treat me bad. We never really had any bad arguments at all. Yeah, it was like we were all family.

**Tour Stories Part 6: No More Touring, No Matter The Amount**

Later on, he got to where he was really ready to go to the hotel [after a performance]. Later on, I think that’s why he quit touring, he was just scared he was gonna die away from home. He loved his family so much. He didn’t want that to happen.

He would play for almost nothing around here [Holly Springs]. I had a guy, after he quit touring—he pretty much quit, and a guy from Australia called me and wanted us to come over there. He wanted to know if I would talk to R.L. I said, “Yeah, I’ll talk to him.” He said, “What do you think?” I said, “I think he ain’t coming.” He said, “Man, I’ll pay him good.” I said, “Yeah, that’s good.” He said, “I’ll pay $25,000.00 a night.” I said, “That’s good.” I said, “I’ll come.” He said, “Will you talk to him?” I said, “Yeah, I’ll talk to him, but I know what he’s gonna say.” He said, “What’s that?” “He’s gonna say, ‘We ain’t gonna make that one, Duke.’” [Chuckles]

I told him about it, and that’s exactly what he said. He said, “Well, I don’t guess we’ll make that one, Duke.” [Chuckles] I mean, but you know he had the attitude. I guess RL had been broke so much in his early life that he knew he’d survive being broke. [Chuckles] He didn’t give a shit about nothing.

**Junior Kimbrough’s Sexy Sound**

R.L. never would really fool around. I’ve never known him to fool around with any other women or anything. Junior loved pussy. [Chuckles] That’s kind of a big difference. Junior, you listen to his music, and if you ever watch women listening to his music, it’s a lot more sexier music. One night we played a song that’s like, “Baby, I Love You.” The next song was, “I Love
You, Baby.” He would rehearse with his stuff, on his stuff more. He was a little—he liked to have his stuff the way he wanted it. His stuff was different.

**Playing With Junior Kimbrough**

I did a bunch of recording with him, played some live shows, too. More recording than live shows. Johnny Woods is the one that introduced me to Junior. He took me out when Junior was having house parties. He didn’t really have a juke joint, but he started rehearsing with his band on Sundays and got to where everybody is coming to his house. He was doing a little bootlegging and the house would be packed. Johnny took me down there the first time, that’s when I met Little Joe and Junior and all those guys.

When we first started getting around doing shows with RL and Junior. I recorded with him on two or three records. Some of that stuff, I never had rehearsed with him or anything. I just stumbled through it. [Chuckles] Mainly, with all those guys – Paul Jones and RL and Junior and CeDell Davis and all – I tried to complement them, but to stay out of their way, too, and not try to hog the show or show out myself. I just tried to support them and do what fit good with them.

One night we did a show with R.L. and Junior at Oxford. Junior asked me, he said, “Man, how long I gotta play?” I said, “An hour.” He said, “Oh, man. An hour?” I said, “Yeah.” We started the first song, and when we ended that first song, I looked at my watch, we’d been playing 30 minutes. We ended the second song, we’d been playing an hour. [Chuckles] We just got the groove going. People were getting into it. Nobody cared whether you’ve been playing 30 minutes or an hour and 30 minutes.

**Junior’s Juke Joint**

I mean, you never really knew whether Junior’s was gonna be open or not. We’d come in from shows on Saturday, I would drop him off on Sunday morning. I’d say, “Are you gonna be
open tonight?” He’d say, “Yeah, yeah, we’re gonna be open.” I’d drive down from Memphis, and, shit, wouldn’t nobody be there. Then maybe the next time, I’d say, “Junior, you gonna be open?” “Nah, I ain’t gonna open tonight.” Then on Monday I’d run into somebody saying, “Man, we had a hell of a time at Junior’s last night.” [Chuckles] You never knew. It was a crap shoot half the time whether he was gonna be open or not.

Some people claim The Rolling Stones came in. I don’t know if they did or not. No, I don’t think I ever met any famous people there, other than Junior and RL. [Chuckles] – and the crack dealers. [Chuckles] They were outside. They kept them outside. I mean, Charlie Musselwhite called me one time. He wanted to go down there, but it was Christmas time and I had to go to a family party, but I told him—he asked me if it was cool for him to go down there. I said, “Yeah.” I told him how to get there. Told him, “Go ahead.”

I don’t know who else famous has been in there. I mean, I can’t remember, it’s been so long ago really, who all I saw there. I took some people out there one time, and and told them it was a black joint. We got there and there was a darn tour bus from Ole Miss there. There was more white kids than there was—whoever was with me said, “Man, I thought you said this was a black joint.” [Chuckles]. No, no, I can’t remember any famous people. I can’t remember who it would’ve been.

**Narrative: Joe Ayers**

**Biography**

Joe Ayers was born in North Mississippi. Growing up in near Hudsonville, Mississippi, Ayers observed his second cousin, Lindsey Boga, and Junior Kimbrough play the guitar, and was intrigued by the instrument. In 1954, Ayers bought a guitar and started to play, joining his cousin and Junior whenever they would have jam sessions, which was almost always a weekly occurrence. Overtime, Ayers became familiar with Junior’s style of music, and in 1965 joined
Junior’s band, later called the Soul Blues Boys. Initially, Ayers started out playing rhythm guitar in the band, which he had played most of his life, but later mainly played the bass guitar in place of George Scales [original bass player]. In the 1991 video documentary “Deep Blues,” Ayers can be seen playing the bass with Junior during a performance of the song “All Night Long.” Ayers did not appear on any albums Junior cut with Fat Possum (aside from any re-releases), however he did record with Junior several times prior, with the last record being “Do The Rump,” which was released on the Highwater record label. The two remained close until Junior’s death in 1998. Today, Ayers plays the guitar off-and-on, and makes rare appearances.

Growing Up With Junior Kimbrough

He and my second cousin came up together as kids and babies. My second cousin [Lindsey Boga] is a year older than me, and he was an also a guitar player, and he’s still living. So he and Junior, they came up together from little tots. My aunt Phoebe was Lindsey’s mother. Just about raised Junior since they were little kids ‘cause they were both were playing guitars at 12 and 13 years old.

[I] used to be all around him. Junior’ been playing them things all his life, and so people’d get him, and they’d sit all around. It used to be where we were staying, or living, there was a big community. He’d be at somebody’s house that Saturday and Sunday. When I got in my teenage years, I started to run and find him. He’d, “Come on, help me out. And say, “We’re gonna be playing this little place.” I’d say, “All right.”

We played music together when we didn’t have but one guitar. He would play so long, and then when I learned to play one or two songs, well, then I would play them one or two songs to give him a break. I played with him all my life from when I was at least ten years old, up until he died, at some point in time.
On The Road And In The Juke Joint

Oh, drank all the way down, and all the way back with them boys. We’d laugh and talk about how some people cut up and this, that, and the other. We’d laugh and talk about how people are actin’ and how we act and whatever. Mm-hmm. Yeah. Just wind down and back. We used to be bad about drinkin’. We all did then, and who drunk the most. [Laughter]

That’s true. I have got so high, they had to prop me up. I never missed a lick on that bass, and, yep, just go on and played it. And Junior used to be playing – you’re so full of it. Now that was just only at his club. He’d get so full of it. He be singing, and I’d be singing, “Meet Me In The City,” drop his head down in his lap, be the same thing for about 20 minutes, then he might holler, [laughter] “All night long!” [Laughter] Another one. Think you could go to sleep on it. Back then, really, at that time, we talked to ’em. You would do that. Whatever you’d be playing…he might get so drunk, he’d go to sleep and wake up and then start singing, “You Better Run” or anything and still be playing. [Laughter.

Finding Out Junior Was Sick

Oh, yeah, we were real close. I mean, when he was in the hospital and everything, I would be there. We were right there for one another all our lives, right there for each other, like when he got sick. His old lady, Mildred, when he had a wreck, when Junior had a wreck. I ran a bulldozer all my life, and I was doing some work up there at Rust College for Rust College with the bulldozer. A good friend of mine had a wrecking service. Junior turned his car over, and then it rained me out from work. It was raining when Junior hit that little slick spot in that curve there and turned his car – his van over.

Then I come on in that evening. He said, “Junior, your buddy…He wrecked his van, and had crawled out that window.” And I said, “Huh?” He said, “Yeah, heard he had a wreck.” And he told me where it was, and I asked if I needed to get him. He said, “No, he crawled out the
window and then turned it over on its side.” I said, “Oh, no.” Then I broke out there. He hadn’t
told Beatrice, his girlfriend, the one that…they stayed together. They didn’t stay together, but
they had been for years on and off. He’d be there every day.

I broke out there. His car always be out to her house, and one of ‘em [girlfriends] be up at
his house. He had wrecked it, and they had done towed it off. Then he went out to his
girlfriend’s house, Mildred, so they was sittin’ out in that car. I broke out there. He hadn’t told
her nothin’ about he had had a wreck. [Laughter] I caught him red. I said, “You ain’t get hurt in
that wreck, did you?” and we busted out and went to laughing, he said, “nah.” She said, “What
wreck?” I said, “The wreck he just had.” She said, “You had a wreck?” Then he bust out, “Yeah,
I turned my van over,” ‘cause I messed up, [laughter] but she was gonna find out anyhow.

Then next morning, “You need to go to the doctor.” He said, “Oh, ain’t nothin’ to help.” I
said, “I don’t know, Hoss,” just like that. I said, “You need to go to a doctor.” Somewhere over
that nighttime, Junior was big anyway. She said his leg swolled up big as a gallon bucket that’s
shiny, like it was about to bust, like a watermelon. She made him go. They went to the doctor.
From that then they rushed him to the hospital, and they had to operate on him. God, all mighty,
they found out he had cancer, too, then, but he did not know it.

They won’t let nobody—he stayed in the ICU for I don’t know how long. I would go by
there and write a note, put it on the door, and the nurse said, “We’ll see to him gettin’ it.” Now
she didn’t never come out over there. Then he come on back to the house, and he got to doing
pretty good.

The Last Time We Played Together

The day before he died, I was over there. I used to go over there and cut his hair after he
got out the hospital. He got up, and he said, “Well, I did all my shopping and running around
yesterday.” He told me, said, “You can come and get your guitar.” Said, “I’m gonna go and get
mine now.” I said, “All right.” And so the day before he died, I goes over there, and we were
talking. The last thing he told me to do was to play “Do the Rump.” He just died laughin.” That’s
the last CD we did together, “Do the Rump” High Water.

I’d come and cut his hair. We’d laugh and talk, how he wasn’t big as a minute. I’d never
know. I’ve known him all his life, but, now, when he was comin’ up, real young, he wasn’t
nothin’ but just a little skinny somethin’. Mm-hmm, but he got fat in his older days. I was there
that day. When we left, he called me and told me I could come and get my guitar – I got a guitar
in the house, in the room. That’s the one we recorded “All Night Long” with it. It was in that
movie. If you all see him, if you all seen movie, “All Night Long,” Deep Blues movie? – that’s
what he recorded “All Night Long” on. And so that’s the one I picked up. Went over to his hou
the day before he died. He told me—I was sitting on the couch with him. He said, “Play “All
Night Long” never. Get that amplifier,” and I hooked it up. I played he died laughin’.

Playing Junior’s Funeral

They wanted us to play at the funeral. And so we all practiced up on what we were
singing at the funeral. Lindsey, George Scale, and myself, and David Kimbrough, little ole
nephew. He was something like seven or eight. He was on the draw back there playing on the
drums. They [newspaper] blowed it up [picture], and I cut that whole section out. That big ole
picture of Junior layin’ there in the casket, right below our feet. We was standing up over him
playin’.

[At the funeral we played] “Keep Your Hands Off Her.” During the time before they
brought us onstage, while the MC was talking about how long we had played together, then I
played then lead, real, real slow, and George, he was backin’ me up with no singing. “You Can’t
Leave Me, Baby,” that’s the name of the first recording we did in 1966, at least we did that, and
then went over there and so now we’re gonna bring it up to the band. Then when I started
hollering “Hands Off Her” [laughter] Just holding a long key, and let me tell you this, that’s the hardest thing I ever did ‘cause I never played – opened my mouth, all the years that we were playing, unless I was playing something of mine. But playing Junior’s music, I’d never open my mouth, all the years that we were playing together…until then. I used to do it, you know, in the field or in the truck or something to myself when he ain’t around. But it’s the first time that I sang that song. I had done…I feel like I hadn’t taken a nap, and I couldn’t get drunk [laughter] ‘cause I had to sing that song. [Laughter]. Sho couldn’t. I didn’t play it all the way through though. I played about half of it, and people starting crying so bad, then I broke it down. I broke it about half. People, a lot of ‘em were rejoicing. Some of ‘em were hollering, crying, and screaming, so I broke it down. Mm-hmm.

**Junior Was Serious About His Music And Only His Music**

At the old country houses, we’d play up there. When they’d get tired, they’d come and rest up, and I’d play other music. I never would play his music. Every time I did, he’d reach and grab the guitar and start playing it himself, wouldn’t let me sing it. [Laughter] Yeah, he was like that. Yeah, he was real serious about his music. Yeah. Yes, he really was. He didn’t want nobody to play his music too much, nobody else but me, and David’ll tell you right now, there’s a song about his father. He’s about the only one who’ll sing it. I used to do it when I still was playing guitar. I used to play, but after he died, I quit for three years.

He wouldn’t play nobody’s music, but you couldn’t make him play nobody else’s music but his. That’s right. You couldn’t make the song come out any cooler. Like we’re sitting around some days. He might have said, “Hit this.” Them down home blues, when it come out, oh, it was the going thing around here, and I used to have it bad. [Laughter] The when I’d get around him, started out playing rhythm guitar, and George Scales was playing bass. When I started playing down home blues, George would come on in there. Ah, he [Junior] would get
mad. He [Junior] had a good voice for singing. He wouldn’t do nothing but singing. He’d play a little bit, [laughter] then he’d sing a little bit, and then he’d quit. He didn’t want the people to dance too much off of nobody else’s music but his. Mm-hmm.

See, Junior’s music is hard to play. It was hard to play with Junior. You had to know Junior just to play with him. Couldn’t nobody play with him. There’s been more folks try to play with him and couldn’t. They didn’t know his timing, and they didn’t know what the scale was, didn’t know what the scale was. He didn’t have no scales. You had to watch Junior, know Junior, when he’s gonna make his change. Mm-hmm. Yep. At the song, when he’d put a frown on his face, then he’s gonna jump a little bit. He fittin’ to change then. Yeah, but other than that, you didn’t have nothin’ to go on. You gotta do one thing 20 times. Mm-hmm.

You look at every song, just 90 percent of the songs that R.L. sung, it was other people’s recording, but everything that Junior sung was always his own music, and so that made a big difference. That made a big difference. Everything, like I said, that R.L. sang someone else already done did it. Everything Junior played, he played something that he had did his self. They’re trying to get me back in the studio. I betcha I’ve got 15 songs that Junior—don’t nobody in the world know, ain’t never heard. We did that back in the first 60’s and latter 50’s, all that. We was on track cuz he sang one voice. I sit and sang another one. [Laughter] Yep.

Just thinking, just sit there and think about it [Writing a song]. Add something to it after you started. It started off, okay, like you would get one voice in it and you join that voice, but then you find something else to mesh that voice, find something else mesh with that with, find something else to mesh that with, and the next thing, you’ve got a song. You’ve got to have a vote on a three-minute record, three-minute phonograph’s record. Yep, old boys would make a record.
Junior just loved to play guitar. I mean, he just loved to play guitar. He’d get up in the night, middle of the night, and play guitar. He used to start crying when he’d start playing guitar. Yep, and I have seen him cry many, many days. Yep. Whenever he’d get the blues, he would start crying. He didn’t care who he was around or what.

**When The Ladies’ Man Settled Down**

They knew about it [Hill Country blues]. They been knowin’ for long before that [Hill Country had a title] ‘cause we used to have blues festivals in Holly Springs, and people always did come to find that music, find Junior, when he got established. Way back in his younger days, he had a different woman [laughter] just about every month. When he wasn’t established, he wouldn’t stay with them for no time, so whenever he started settling down, that’s when people started coming – ‘cause they used to hear about it then at different particular locations, and get there, he’s no longer there. And then them old women. I don’t know where he—that’s how he ended up with them 36 kids. Did you hear me? [Laughter]. Yeah, ladies fell for him. Yep. Mm-hmm.

There were differences [between R.L. and Junior]. Mm-hmm. R.L. would be waitin’ on people to call him to go somewhere, but Junior, all he’d do is sit back at his own place. They would come. Like I said, they would come to him. Yep. Well, one thing [why he didn’t travel], like I said, he liked the community. He liked the peoples. He always didn’t have nothin’ to leave himself ‘cause they’d come to him. Yep. He didn’t have to leave when they would come to him.

**The Term Hill Country And Its Characteristics**

I don’t know what year that was when I first heard the word “Hill Country,” but that was the first year we had a blues festival at Rust College. The first time I heard of Hill Country, and we just had so many blues players there. We had it 15 years, and that’s been 30 years ago, I imagine. I’ve been knowing about Hill Country about 30 years ago, but I just found out recently,
within the last three or four years, what the difference in Hill Country, how they class it as Hill Country.

It is, if you listen at it. Delta’s got a frail type to it, got a frail type of music ‘cause it is not together. I’m gonna let you listen to just a little wee bit of Hill Country in just a minute or so. [Playing guitar] Now you hear that. Could you hear that? Yeah, that was me playing. Uh huh, but, see, that’s different. Hear that boompty-boomp? It was still saying one thing, and our lead would go on doing something else. I talked to a whole lot of people who want to know how can we hold that bass, that beat, and then take our picking finger and do something different, make it say something different. See? You still didn’t get it, did ya?

They’ve [Delta] got a fret, or they play all their strings at one time, I think. Mm-hmm. Yeah, that’s different than— Hill Country, automatically, the baseline is automatically different from the rest of it. Yeah, that’s how I found how what they determine hill country from the other music, something they tell.

**Narrative: Amos Harvey**

**Biography**

Amos Harvey was born in Greenwood, Mississippi, and was raised in Columbus, Mississippi, which is located in northeast Mississippi. He began attending the University of Mississippi in 1989. Around 1990, Harvey learned about Junior Kimbrough’s juke joint off Highway 4 around Tullahoma, Mississippi. It was here where he came to known R.L. and Junior and build friendships with the two artists. He was asked by Fat Possum – around this same time frame – to take R.L. and Junior on tour, starting regional and moving into the national scene when Fat Possum began to promote the artists more. It was during this time that his relationship with several artists on the label developed into deep friendships. Harvey is still involved with tour managing today, but does so apart from Fat Possum.
First Time Hearing Junior Kimbrough

The first time I heard him play was when I went out there for that fundraiser for R.L’s house being burned [This is probably the beginning of ’92]. When I went in – it was actually a pretty, pretty fun drive. You’re driving somewhere in pitch black night, you know, drinking a few beers on the way, and you’ve been told the directions, but you don’t know what it is. So, you know, there’s a little bit of anticipation and excitement, and also being on your guard and everything. As we were topping a couple of these hills right before Junior’s place, it was getting kind of exciting because, you know, we knew were very close and when we got up on that third hill, there were cars lined on both sides of this little 2 lane road, Highway 4. So like, we kinda rose up on this hill to a very populated section of the highway, with just a little kinda wooden building over to the right, so we parked and went up to the door and we were actually warmly welcomed; which we didn’t know, you know, how we would be received, just because we were a few white dudes in a predominantly black you know club and everything, so we were there with good intentions and everybody there were there with the same intentions so that felt really good and welcoming. And, once we got in, we paid I think it was like 2 or 5 bucks back then, it couldn’t have been more than 5 dollars, but yeah all of this was going towards R.L.

We walked in saw the pool table, you know, lots of people were there, and so the music hadn’t quite clicked to me yet. We kinda heard it pulsing outside. We got in – we kinda had to move passed the pool table – and then really heard the music. Didn’t know who was playing it though, because the, we called it the pit, but the little place where the musicians played was – if you walked in the front door, it was to the back right in a little area that had a low ceiling, so you didn’t get to see where the music was coming from, but it was pumping and it sounded pretty much like nothing else I’ve ever heard. I mean, I recognized it as blues for sure, but it was definitely more hypnotic than any other 12-bar blues, or traditional blues really that I have grown
up hearing, and as we made our way closer to the pit, you know, lots of dancing, and dancing close; some great moves by men and women – walking passed to see who was playing, and it was Junior, Kenny Kimbrough and Garry Burnside, is who I ended up realizing who it was and I think even Joe Ayers was there, and they [he and Garry] traded out on bass. It was amazing.

I mean I knew right then I was hearing something I’ve never heard before and I wanted to keep hearing it forever. I mean, it was amazing. Like I said, it was hypnotic. It was more of a vibe than anything; really, is what it was feeling, it made a good feeling kinda wash over me and the people we were with, and we knew we were someplace special. I think the song was “All Night Long,” and throughout the years, I realized that song can be, you know, seven minutes, or it can be 47 minutes. When we walked in, it was about a 47 minute, or it just kept going on, it was pretty great. So that was the first time I heard Junior.

**First Time Hearing R.L. Burnside**

Later on in that night [first time hearing Junior], after Junior did a few more songs, he retired from the pit, went and got a beer, and we kinda introduced ourselves, and then it was R.L.’s turn to go up. Basically what happens is they switched off most nights, and R.L would never really get paid, it was more like beer and food. So sometimes he would just show up and sometimes he wouldn’t, either 1 a.m. or if he was on at 2 a.m., or if he just felt like it or not.

But when R.L got behind there, his grandson Cedric was there, and this was brand new so I didn’t really know that Cedric was his grandson until R.L announced it later while he was playing. But Cedric, I think was 13 back then, so basically it was this little kid getting behind drums on him, and it was R.L by himself, and then Kenny Brown came later, but the difference to me between R.L and Junior was R.L was fun, and Junior was dark. You know, Junior was dark, and like I said hypnotic and a little more introspective feeling. When R.L got there, it was like a comedian or a jokester up there. Not that Junior didn’t have a sense of humor, because he
did, big time, but R.L was more of a kinda an entertainer type vibe to him, and his songs were more upbeat, but they were also trancey and a little hypnotic as well. They didn’t change at the 12-bar process, you know it was similar but different to what Junior was doing, but a lot more like Muddy Waters style, John Lee Hooker style stuff going on. Kinda jump-boogie type blues. But again, the fact that he wouldn’t change on the normal 12-bar blues charges made it something different. You know its been described as dance music and stuff, and it really felt like it, you know? Everybody was dancing, and what happened was when he stayed on a rhythm longer than those 12-bars, it kinda created this anticipation for like, “when is the change gonna happen?”

But then you forget about it and you fall back into dancing and whatnot, then all of a sudden the change would happen, and then it’ll go back into it, and it was a really good way to build up the music and then fallback into the swing of it. But the biggest thing when I heard R.L. was that he was very entertaining and very engaging. His style, and that style you know, being pretty different from what Junior was doing. But, getting to see both of those guys that one night was pretty darn lucky, and again, knew that we were in some place special, and I knew that I would be coming out there a lot after that night.

**Hooking Up With Fat Possum And “Tour Managing”**

I had been going out to Junior’s a lot, so I had a relationship with him, that was a good relationship, just hanging out and listening to music. And they [Fat Possum] asked if I could take them on the road, and that was before I knew the term “tour manager” or “road manager,” and I just got asked to go on a tour with em.’ At first, things were pretty regional. You know, over to Tougaloo, or up to Memphis. The first show I took R.L. to in Memphis was with Calvin Jackson on drums – and Kenny Brown wasn’t playing with us. But it was R.L. and Calvin, and we played
at this little club near the river and I had no contract. It was a verbal contract that I was told about.

So, from that beginning, tour management was basically making sure they got paid, making sure the artists got there safely, finding a place for us to stay. You know, this was well before cell phones. Then, as I got to take more shows and stuff with them, I’d have a contract in hand, and I started making day sheets to where you got a address to the venue and an address of the hotel if you have one, and load in times and things like that. So, I basically learned the profession while I was doing it.

I think Fat Possum trusted me to go out there with them. I mean I don’t think, I know they did. But they trusted me to get the whole job done, and they didn’t have a template for me to go by. And, I don’t think I would have wanted one. The way it organically grew into a job, and figuring out what needed to happen was a good way to do it. But, they asked me to help, and as time went on you get better and better at something as you figure it out, and it was really fun. It was like having a couple of granddads sometimes on the road. You know, sometime those roles would reverse. Sometimes I would be the dad or granddad depending on how much somebody would drink, or you know, somebody when we needed to leave and what not. So it was actually kinda interesting to be a young dude directing the show.

It wasn’t ever like, “Don’t tell me what to do,” type thing. It was always, you know, the decisions that were made were in the best interest of everybody. Whether it was when to leave, or when to eat, or what made sense for our travels. So, there was never any weirdness. But, I did get accused by people, and on the road from fans and stuff like, that Fat Possum is controlling the artists and all this stuff. And, it’s just always ridiculous and pretty frustrating to hear, you know? ‘Cause I’d be sleeping in the same bed as R.L. on the tour. We’d all be in one room,
driving, doing the same thing, like, nobody’s controlling anybody, it’s trying to make the show happen and what not. So it was, it was interesting but it was always easy to assume you know, from a distance if you’re not actually doing it.

Stories From The Road: Touring With R.L.

The first show I took R.L. to in Memphis was with Calvin Jackson on drums and uh, and, and Kenny Brown wasn’t playing with us…but it was R.L. it was uh, you know, Calvin and we played at this little club near the river. And we got there, and one, it was fun, it was awesome. But, Calvin was kinda loaded and he had to go to the bathroom and asked me to sit on the drums, and I was like, “I don’t play drums, I’m not a drummer.” And so I basically ended up keeping a beat with the kick and the snare behind R.L, and R.L. turns around and he was like, “What are you doing here?” And I was like, “I’m sorry… (laughs) Calvins loaded and had to go do something.” And Calvin came back pretty quickly and was like, “You don’t play drums do you?”

It was always a pleasure [touring with R.L.]. And it was more of a pleasure if he decided to do the tour. You know, there’d be some tours where you get to a house to pick everybody up and he doesn’t wanna go for whatever reason: doesn’t feel good or maybe had a hangover, or decided it was too long to be on the road. But once we did get on the road, it was always fun. Like, he was always in a good mood. There would definitely be drinking and what not. But not all daylong, or anything. And he would have anecdotes to almost any situation, and I wish I had written all of them down. But, you know, just riding down the road and seeing some road kill, run over dog – he would always pipe up like, “Dog gone,” which is, the dog is gone (laughs). Like, simple little punny things, and, “Dead buzzard on the side of the road doesn’t make good dumplings” type thing. It’s just…he’s upbeat. And as went through different cities and stuff he would remember traveling or touring around from time to time. He’d say, “We went through this town back in the 60s.” And Junior did the same thing. I took him up to uh, Jackson, Tennessee
years and years ago to this, I think it was to Sharon Street Blues Festival, but he pointed out two places on the side of the road from Holly Springs to Jackson, going up 7 that used to be clubs that he used to play in. You know, one was non-existent, and one was fallen in. That was really interesting, and fun to hear about.

But touring was fun, and it was a long drive. It was usually just me, and sometimes Cedric, and sometimes Kenny driving. A lot of 12 and 13-hour drives around the United States. The most stories that I can remember, because they’re burned in my memory, are more T-Model stories than anything. T-Model was a little more wilder R.L. and Junior – it was more just playing the gig and drinking, and having a good time? I know that I do remember R.L., whenever we would travel, he would always pack Vienna sausages or sardines and crackers and stuff in his suitcase. So a lot of times when he would open that suitcase, it would be rank as can be, because either something had busted open, or just from putting the Vienna sausage back in there and travel. So that was always, it was always kind of a bag of tricks to see. What snack was gonna be in R.L.’s suitcase.

He would travel with a milk of magnesia bottle, too, And a lot of times that would have Jack Daniels in it. So he would keep that on the floorboard, or on the dashboard, in clear sight. If we ever got pulled over it would be a milk of magnesia bottle – disguising what he was drinking. But you know, his drink of choice, I’m sure you’ve heard, was the Bloody Motherfucker, which was Jack Daniels and tomato juice, or basically like a Bloody Mary with Jack Daniels. But, it’s an acquired taste, for sure. But hat was pretty unique, and his signature.

For a while we toured – I had some dream to make a moonshine baby, for some reason I had a literal dream. I went, found a baby doll and took the stuffing out of it and put a little 10-ounce bottle in it and filled it up with moonshine, and took the baby’s head off, cut the neck to
where it would fit on top of a bottle cap, and so we would drink out of that. And eventually, he ended up incorporating it into his show. When he would get to the middle of his set, when he would break down and do solo for a few songs, he would introduce Cedric as his grandson and then he would introduce Kenny Brown as his adopted grandson or his adopted son, and then he would go to the solo. Then he would ask for his favorite grandbaby, was actually on the side of the stage. And he would ask me to bring out his baby, and people didn’t really even know what he was talking about. And I would hand him the baby and he’d pop the head off and take a swig out of the body. And it was usually a pretty big applause, or people were like, “What the hell is going on?” But he was fun like that. That was a big thing, you know? And again, different with Junior – was a little more reserved, even though he was funny as can be, and told jokes a lot more too. But he was more reserved and dark.

So after R.L.’s show, I mean, it was absolute energy. You know, most of the time he’d end with “Snake Drive”or “Goin’ Down South” or something like that. And it just felt good. And the energy, you know? People were, it was a partying atmosphere, too. Lots of drinking going on. Lots of alcohol sales for the venues.

**Music Was Secondary, Family Was First For R.L.**

It was always either a hangover or, you know, they had a house party to do two days later…for 50 bucks [why either artist wouldn’t want to tour]? Instead of caring about hopping on a plane and going to Amsterdam and doing several shows and coming back with a couple grand. To do that much travel and “work” sometimes was a pain in the butt to em’. So it’s interesting. It’s like they’re for the most part, pretty happy not doing it. I mean R.L. had a huge family and Junior did too, but people didn’t live with him [Junior]. R.L. did. R.L. had 7-9 people living in his house. Junior had, you know, his wife Mildred, and that was it. So it was different. It was a lot easier for Junior to exist than R.L. financially.
So, yeah, R.L. made great money, and he knew that if – to keep supportin’ his family, he would do the tours, you know? It was a great way for him to get ahead. You know, he’d get back home and give his money out basically to almost everybody, and quickly share his spoils, and you know, have to go on tour, again. Not “have to,” luckily another tour would come up, and kinda start the processes again. It was more like extra curricular, or at times possibly therapeutic [playing music]. But it was definitely something that was secondary. Well, and that changed a little bit when R.L. started making better money when he was going on he road – he realized that he didn’t have to do farm work anymore.

But, at the same time he would wanna get home ‘cause he would get a call that so-and-so’s sick. Or somebody’s in the hospital. And it meant more to him to get home to be able to contribute, or to be around for that, then be like, “Alright, let me go 21 days and I’ll make this much more money.” You know, if somebody was sick in his family, he would be home.

I think he probably would have toured longer if we could have afforded to have Alice Mae [his wife] with us all the time, or had a tour bus type thing. ‘Casue a lot of this was in the van, you know? And he didn’t wanna make her sit in the van all the time, doing 13 hour runs. But, they loved each other. And when they were on tour together it was awesome. And not that it wasn’t awesome if she wasn’t with us, but he loved family. There’ve been numerous, numerous shows where if it’s in driving distance, there’s gonna be 7-15 people with him. You know, family, and cousins, and friends. And you know, sometimes clubs don’t take too kindly to that, ‘cause now there’s 15 people drinking the beer…and trying to be fed, as opposed to 3 musicians that were hired. So you know, every now and then that could get uh, a little hairy. But when you step back, it still goes back to that family thing, you know, of sharing.
Not So Many Stories From The Road: Touring With Junior

Junior was a little more reserved, even though he was funny as can be and told jokes a lot more too. But he was more reserved and dark. He wanted to do the gig and leave, you know? There was no hanging out. Usually he would be like, “How long do we have to play?” Not “till we have to play,” but, “how long do we have to play,” basically. Whether it was an hour, or an hour and 15 minutes, or what not – you know there’s been plenty of times when I’d say you know, it’s a 60-minute set and he’d play two 30 minute songs… which are awesome. They go through this evolution where you forget that it’s the same song for thirty minutes, and that was the beauty of what Junior could do with his kinda hypnotic, evolving, and flowing – the dynamics of his songs.

[After the show] He was ready to go. It was not because he didn’t like the people, he just – he’s a homebody, you know? He wanted to do the show, get the money, and go. And it wasn’t like, “I’m only doing this for the money.” It was, “I am doing this for the money” but, it’s like, “Let’s do this. Let’s get home, ‘cause I can play Saturday and Sunday night. (laughs) And, you know, go 20-minutes away, instead of 7 hours to do this.” So, he could just take-it-or-leave-it. It didn’t matter to him, really. So a lot of time it did felt like we were like pulling teeth to get him to tour. And there’d been plenty of times when I drove up to Holly Springs to pick him up to start a tour and he’s like, “No. I’m not gonna go.” And it drove booking agents crazy, clubs crazy, but they’d always try it again. If they could get it once, they wanted it bad. And you know, it got to where we had a couple of booking agents drop us because of it, and that’s understood. But after a while, then it’s not professional. Sometimes you knew there would be a 50/50 chance, and you’re just crossing your fingers that it would be the good 50.
He kept to himself. He was perfectly happy, you know, being where he was. And you have to respect that. He liked playing. He’d play enough to make a little money, you know, on the weekends. And that was plenty for him, you know?

Audiences and Crowd Response

The crowds at most of these shows were very receptive. Young for the most part. White for the most part. In the bigger cities, you got to be an older crowd. You know, definitely after the Johns Venture record came out, it was – “hipsters” wasn’t really used that much anymore. But yeah, it was young rock-and-rollers a lot at the shows. In some of the cities like Chicago, and places like that, it would be a great mixed crowd. You know, blacks, whites, young and old.

But people were always affected by this music. If they knew about it, they were there. If they had heard about it, and it was their first time, they were hooked, you know? And that was just – I don’t even know that I could ever say that somebody said, “I don’t like this music.” Or walked out for some reason or didn’t find some sort of connection to it.
CHAPTER 5
THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF ORAL HISTORIES

The five individuals interviewed each had deeply personal relationships with both artists, as well as their own unique interactions and experiences. These narratives were so specific that a high number of themes initially appeared within each person’s account, and when analyzed as a collective whole, the sheer number of themes was so abundant that it became increasingly difficult to process, which warranted further examination. Despite the vast diversity, a repetition among narratives occurred, allowing three overarching themes to be identified, two Burnside and one for Kimbrough. For R.L., the themes were “Family Man” and “Playing and Having Fun.” For Junior, the themes were “Serious, Original and Hypnotic.” These themes are largely supported by excerpts from individual’s oral histories, which was purposely done, as trying to synthesize information gained from in-depth interviews seems to defeat the purpose of capturing intimate, raw conversations. This chapter presents the following themes as information intended to help foster a better understanding of each artist individually, their similarities and differences. As opposed to previous, the findings in this section yielded a more equal balance between R.L. Burnside, who has largely dominated this study, and Junior Kimbrough.

R.L. Burnside

Family Man

Perhaps one of the stronger themes to emerge from these narratives was the idea of R.L. Burnside as a man devoted to his family. Every person interviewed made some reference to R.L. and his involvement with his family, whether it was related to music or general observations. He was often described as a man who loved his family, and supported them not only financially, but emotionally as well. A type of emotional support that became evident was his encouraging voice used to instill the love and desire to play music, which developed as a subtheme.
Portions of Cedric and Garry Burnside’s narratives best illustrate this when talking about the encouragement their granddad, and father, offered when it came to playing, or learning, music. As a young child, Cedric recalled his granddad’s method of encouragement to play the drums, telling him it wasn’t about being the best initially, but just taking the initiative to play:

That’s pretty much how he would do it [teach the drums by encouraging him to play]. You know, he’ll tell me, “You’ll never learn if you never get on them.” He always tell me that. Even when I didn’t have much confidence getting on them, you know, he was like, “You get better if you stay on them. You never learn or get better if you don’t stay on them.” And so that’s something I always did. I always – no matter what, if it was just one person listening to me, or if it was 200 people listening at me – just stayed on the drums, you know?¹

Cedric further praised his granddad, saying he never spoke down to him when he was a child. His ultimate goal was to teach his grandson to not only have confidence in playing the drums, but love playing music as well. This is something Cedric said has stuck with him throughout the years:

He always had an encouraging word for you. You know, you can’t be too brutal – sound to mean, especially to a kid. I was a kid. So he just wanted me to know, that I can really, if I put my mind to it, I can do what I wanna do, you know? That’s what he really wanted to instill in me, and he did. Cause you know right now…today I’m 36 years old and I’m still playing the music I love, you know? Not only playing the music I love, but he instilled in me to even write the music that I love. You know so, I write music as well and I’d just like to thank God and R.L. Burnside you know for uh, helping me along, along the years.²

Even when R.L. was in the spotlight, playing on stage in front of an international audience in Canada, he was more concerned with his grandson’s level of comfort and confidence. He ensured him he was ready to play, providing the comforting image of playing in a juke joint like he was use to.

It was you know, butterflies in my stomach. I was like, “Are they gonna like this music? What are they gonna think about it?” And so I got nervous, and scared all

¹ Cedric Burnside (drummer, and grandson of R.L. Burnside) in discussion with the author, August 2015.
² Ibid.
over again. And, you know, once again, my big daddy said, “It’s going to be all right. Just do what you always do. Do what you do at the juke joint.” You know, I always listened to him. I know he wouldn’t tell me nothing wrong, so I just got up there and did it, and people was clapping their hands after the first song, and loving it; and that right there made me feel awesome. And butterflies went away, and I never had them again, from that day to this one.3

The amount of support and encouragement Cedric received from his grandfather no only proved R.L. was constantly showing love for his family, but that it was engrained in his personality. All of the recollections Cedric described occur at different points in his life and musical career. As he grew, R.L. acted as a constant, never changing.

R.L.’s son, Garry, recalls similar memories as his nephew. He emphasized the fact that it was never a matter of being the best, but just making an attempt to try something you desired. As a result, Garry developed a love for music, and it was an activity he looked forward to.

Yeah. I loved playing music. Yeah. He [dad] wasn't that strict on you about how good your technique was at playing. He just liked to see us trying to go it, regardless how long it took us to get great at it. We was young, but we could catch on ASAP, quick. It was just in us to do it. To me, it don't seem like it took that long. I just picked up the guitar and started playing it. I know it took a while doing it, but I was playing since I was young, little, so it really doesn't seem hard to me. I know it couldn't have been easy.4

The learning process for Garry was fun. His father incorporated the whole family, his children and grandchildren. This inclusion of all ages allowed Garry’s older brother, Duwayne, to act as a teacher to his little brother, something Garry enjoyed.

He was a good dad, man. He was there for us, and he always was telling constructive stuff and everything, made sure we was on the right page and shit. Yeah. It was really fun learning from him, my brother Duwayne, them, all of them, the Allstars. I learned from a lot of people, man, just being around them growing up. I had the best life to be around a lot of big-time musicians that's big-time, really big now, you know what I'm saying?5

3 Burnside, 1.
4 Garry Burnside (bassist, and grandson of R.L. Burnside) in discussion with the author, August 2015.
5 Burnside, 4.
This theme of encouragement is particularly strong because the testimonies were given by two descendants of R.L., both of whom lived with him for a majority of their lives. Garry’s comment about the lack of concern his father had for technique, coupled with Cedric’s recollection of his grandfather’s comforting words before playing in front of an international audience, are evidence of positive reinforcement, a key component in emotional support. This is also one of the more important themes, as it provides context as to why both men were so successful at a young age, which in turn can be seen as a contributing factor to their continuation as musicians by trade. Tradition in the Hill Country is often passed down from generation to generation. This tradition currently lives in two generations of Burnsides: grandson and son. Aside from music, the relatives and non-relatives close to R.L. always mentioned his constant interaction with his family and deep love for them, which developed into another subtheme.

Amos Harvey’s comment on R.L.’s preference for having his wife, Alice Mae, with him on tour, speaks volumes for the bluesman’s love, and preference for being around his family as much, and whenever possible.

I think he probably would have toured longer if we could have afforded to have Alice Mae [his wife] with us all the time, or had a tour bus type thing. ‘Casue a lot of this was in the van, you know? And he didn’t wanna make her sit in the van all the time, doing 13 hour runs. But, they loved each other. And when they were on tour together it was awesome. And not that it wasn’t awesome if she wasn’t with us, but he loved family.6

Amos continued to say that if R.L. was playing a show within a reasonable vicinity from his home base, he would request that members of his family be transported to the concert. He also asked that they have the same access as him to concessions and spirits.

There’ve been numerous, numerous shows where if it’s in driving distance, there’s gonna be 7-15 people with him. You know, family, and cousins, and

6 Amos Harvey (tour manager for R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough, and former employee of Fat Possum) in discussion with author, July 2015.
friends. And you know, sometimes clubs don’t take too kindly to that, ‘cause now there’s 15 people drinking the beer…and trying to be fed, as opposed to 3 musicians that were hired. So you know, every now and then that could get uh, a little hairy. But when you step back, it still goes back to that family thing, you know, of sharing.⁷

In his early touring days, R.L. was known to cut loose after a performance, perhaps staying out a little later. However, as he progressed in age, he preferred going back to the hotel immediately following the show. Kenny Brown hypothesized one possible reason for this, and why R.L. might have elected to quit touring – his desire to be close to his family, along with his unrivaled love for them.

Later on, he got to where he was really ready to go to the hotel [after a performance]. Later on, I think that’s why he quit touring. He was just scared he was gonna die away from home. He loved his family so much. He didn’t want that to happen.⁸

Kenny’s statement, along with Harvey’s comment on the impact of Alice Mae’s presence while on the road, suggest that R.L. was willing to give up money – by cutting back on touring – in order to be with his family on a more frequent basis. The appeared to be a figurative sacrifice, although, some time later in his interview, Kenny said, “I guess RL had been broke so much in his early life that he knew he’d survive being broke. [Chuckles] He didn’t give a shit about nothing.” This provides another perspective of – being with his family was more important than living life away from them, on the road, and generating enough income to live comfortably. Even when growing up in a four-room shack in Holly Springs, Cedric said his grandfather kept everyone together, and served as the family’s backbone.

⁷ Harvey, 6.

⁸ Kenny Brown (Hill Country bluesman, and played with R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough) in discussion with the author, September 2015.
great grandkids was in the same house. We all was in the same four room shack house in the middle of Mississippi, North Mississippi Hill Country, and just wooded area. You know, no running water and it was at least 15 people in that house. So he was the back bone of the whole family. Everybody knew it.9

Joe Ayers made the comment that R.L. “had a band of their [Burnsides] own,” and would usually only play with R.L. “due to all the kids wasn’t there.” This suggests that R.L. not only used music to encourage his children, and grandchildren, but also as a way to keep his family close together. Once again, music acts as an adhesive for the Burnside family, and further helps build on the overarching theme.

Playing And Having Fun

Few excerpts found in the oral histories will speak as loudly as the story Cedric Burnside tells about people from all over the world driving into their yard in Holly Springs, Mississippi, to try and hear his big daddy play. Cedric remembers people from Australia and San Francisco pulling up in cars or campers, and asking him if his granddad was around, and if he would come play some guitar for them.

My big daddy sometimes he be on the tractor in the field, and we’ll have to run out there to the field and tell him, “big daddy, Big daddy, somebody’s here from out of town and they wanna, wanna see you, wanna talk to you.” And he’ll go park the tractor and go and get off the tractor and come up to the house and sit on the front porch and play the guitar for an hour or so, and he leaves. You know, he’ll jump back on the tractor and go back to work, you know?10

Cedric said his granddad never ask who it was, or why they were here, he just was happy to play. He was happy to share his music.

He was willing to share anytime. It didn’t matter who came. You know, some people came, and even though we had a full four room house, with no running water, no toilet, you know, no kitchen sink, no nothing – you know, we hauled water for years. But people came all the time and some of them even camped there for the weekend. They camped out at our house, and our house was so, so

9 Cedric, 1.

10 Ibid.
raggedy and poor looking, so we were like, “Woah. Why would anybody camp here”?  

Even on the front porch of his house, Cedric said his granddad didn’t hold back. He always played with the same intensity and veracity as he did in front of thousands of people. 

People came from all over the world, all the time to his house. And he would play beautifully, and just as hard right there as he would on stage, and they didn’t offer him a dollar, and he didn’t ask them for anything. I know he did it all out of love. 

From Cedric’s stories, it starts to becomes clear that R.L. was a genuine man, who genuinely loved to play the guitar, and play for people. His passion for playing music didn’t stop with entertaining; much like he taught his children, and grandchildren to play, he was also open to teaching anyone, or jamming with anyone, who asked. In 1971, Kenny Brown approached R.L. about learning some things from him on the guitar. Too no surprise, his answer was yes, and he gave Brown directions to his house and told him to come on over. 

He was just a real friendly guy. I started going down there two or three nights a week. I’d get off—I was doing carpenter work. He’d get off the tractor—he was driving a tractor—or come out of the field, whatever he was doing. I’d go down there two, three nights a week, and we’d sit out and play ‘til midnight a lot of times. I did that for quite a while. I mean, he loved to play, loved to have fun…He’d show you anything.  

Kenny ultimately became close with R.L. and his family, and accompanied him on records and tours regularly. R.L. referred to him as his adopted son. During live performances, R.L. was no shortage of fun and excitement. Amos mentioned an act R.L. had worked into his performance routine, one which involved a baby doll with a bottle of moonshine hidden inside and the head of the doll acted as a cap. This was a crowed favorite.  

When he would get to the middle of his set, when he would break down and do solo for a few songs, he would introduce Cedric as his grandson and then he would introduce Kenny Brown as his adopted grandson or his adopted son, and

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11 Cedric, 1.  
12 Brown, 8.
then he would go to the solo. Then he would ask for his favorite grandbaby — was actually you know, on the side of the stage. And he would ask me to bring out his baby, and people didn’t really even know what he was talking about. And I would hand him the baby and he’d pop the head off and take a swig out of the body. And it was usually a big applause, or you know, people were like “what the hell is going on?” But he was fun like that.13

R.L. use to love to tell jokes, one of which is titled “He Ain’t Your Daddy.” Kenny said the first time he heard it he nearly fell off of his seat while he was tuning his guitar. The joke was so popular R.L. worked it into their performance set list, and a live version of it appeared on the record Burnside on Burnside. The feel-good attitude, and raw sound R.L. produced trickled out into the audience and up into the atmosphere. Amos described it as a party.

So after R.L.’s show, I mean, it was absolute energy. You know, most of the time he’d end with “Snake Drive” or “Goin’ Down South” or something like that. And it just felt good. And the energy, you know? People were, it was a partying atmosphere, too. Lots of drinking going on. Lots of alcohol sales for the venues.14

It didn’t matter if R.L. was on the front porch, or in front of an audience, he played and enjoyed himself just the same. His love for playing and sense of humor was apparent in all facets of his life, as can be seen in the vivid stories of Cedric, Kenny, and Amos.

Junior Kimbrough

Serious, Original And Hypnotic.

Where R.L. is known more for his kind hearted and jovial stage presence, and a set list of Hill Country classics like “Shake ‘Em On Down” and “Goin’ Down South,” Junior Kimbrough has been called starkly original, and his process for creating music is deadly serious. Joe Ayers, who grew up with Junior and played with him off-and-on until his death in 1998, remembers how serious his friend was when it came to other people trying to play his music. When they were much younger, and Junior was just playing around the Hill Country region, Ayers would

13 Harvey, 6.

14 Ibid.
take over playing the guitar whenever Junior would get tired. When he did, he was cautious of what he’d play.

At the old country houses, we’d play up there. When they’d get tired, they’d come and rest up, and I’d play other music. I never would play his music. Every time I did, he’d reach and grab the guitar and start playing it himself. Wouldn’t let me sing it. [Laughter] Yeah, he was like that. Yeah, he was real serious about his music.15

The music Junior created was authentic. It was his original material, that he took time to create. Perhaps this was a contributing factor to why he didn’t allow anyone else to play his music – it felt almost like they were robbing him of his hard work. This was different from a majority of the material in R.L.’s repertoire, according to Ayers.

You look at every song, just 90 percent of the songs that R.L. sung, it was other people’s recording. But everything that Junior sung was always his own music, and so that made a big difference. That made a big difference. Everything, like I said, that R.L. sang someone else already done did it. Everything Junior played, he played something that he had did his self.16

Because of it’s originality, Junior was very serious about its presentation in front of an audience. When they were underage, around 11 and 13, Garry and Cedric Burnside use to play with Junior at his juke joint – Cedric on the drums, and Garry on the bass. Garry went on to play bass with Junior on a regular basis. Originally though, Cedric said they served as replacements.

A lot of times the bass player, or the drummer wouldn’t show up. You know, maybe they too full of moonshine and didn’t make it or whatever the case, you know? But me and Garry would be sort of like, the back up band. And we would play when they didn’t come, and they would hide us behind the beer cooler you know, when the police come ‘cause you know we was the band and if we get kicked out there wouldn’t be no music…it would just be solo. And not that they didn’t like it, but they enjoyed the band, you know?17

15 Joe Ayers (Hill Country bluesman, and played with Junior Kimbrough) in discussion with author, September, 2015.

16 Ibid.

17 C. Burnside, 1.
Cedric can remember meeting Junior at his juke joint early in the mornings to help clean up, and get everything ready to open the club that night. When they were finished, he, Garry and Junior would rehearse material for that night. It was a closed session.

While he was playing his music, he didn’t like to be disturbed. He wanted to play his music and get everything down. He would lock the door – after we clean up in the morning, he would lock the door – while he showed us the music he wanted to show us. You know, to make sure we got it and wasn’t disturbed.

Me and him and Gary would practice a little bit, and he would just show us a few licks on the guitar, and then he’ll tell me how to play the beat on the drums and then we’ll just do it like that and get prepared for that evening.  

Thorough rehearsals were not out of the norm for others who played with Junior, though. Kenny Brown recalls how Junior would rehearse until he got things sounding the way he wanted.

He rehearsed with those guys a lot – with Garry and Cedric, and Gary and Kent. He would rehearse with his stuff, on his stuff more. He was a little—he liked to have his stuff the way he wanted it. His stuff was different.

The practice was a necessary part or Junior’s ritual, but Ayers said practice could only take musician so far. Aside from the music being original, Junior was also original. In order to play with the bluesman, you had to be familiar with him and understand him.

Junior’s music is hard to play. It was hard to play with Junior. You had to know Junior just to play with him. Couldn’t nobody play with him. There’s been more folks try to play with him and couldn’t. They didn’t know his timing, and they didn’t know what the scale was, didn’t know what the scale was. He didn’t have no scales. You had to watch Junior, know Junior, when he’s gonna make his change. Mm-hmm. Yep. At the song, when he’d put a frown on his face, then he’s gonna jump a little bit. He fittin’ to change then. Yeah, but other than that, you didn’t have nothin’ to go on. You gotta do one thing 20 times.

The combination of Junior’s original material, along with his serious, almost anal rehearsal routine, and the fact that he himself was another original element to become familiar

\[^{18}\text{Ibid.}\]
\[^{19}\text{Brown, 8.}\]
\[^{20}\text{Ayers, 15.}\]
with in this puzzle that was *his* sound, made him somewhat of an enigma. However, the culmination of this resulted in his signature sound. Amos Harvey remembers the first time heard Junior’s sound when he walked into the bluesman’s juke joint one night.

It sounded pretty much like nothing else I’ve ever heard, I mean, you know, I recognized it as blues for sure, but it was definitely more hypnotic than any other 12-bar blues, or traditional blues really that I have grown up hearing…I mean it was amazing. Like I said, it was hypnotic. It was more of a vibe than anything; really is what it was feeling.\(^{21}\)

Later on, Amos tour managed Junior after he was signed by Fat Possum, and he experienced that sound from a different perspective. He said Junior would ask how long he *had* to play, as opposed to asking how long *till* we have to play.

Whether it was an hour or an hour and 15 minutes, or what not. You know, there’s been plenty of times when I’d say you know, “It’s a 60-minute set” and he’d play two 30-minute songs, which you know, are awesome. They go through this evolution where you forget that it’s the same song for thirty minutes, and that was the beauty of what Junior could do with his kinda hypnotic, evolving, and flowing – the dynamics of his songs.\(^{22}\)

Kenny sometimes played live with Junior, and recalls a similar experience from a musician’s standpoint; one where he was lost in the music.

One night we did a show with RL and Junior at Oxford. Junior asked me, he said, “Man, how long I gotta play?” I said, “An hour.” He said, “Oh, man. An hour?” I said, “Yeah.” We started the first song, and when we ended that first song, I looked at my watch, we’d been playing 30 minutes. We ended the second song, we’d been playing an hour. [Chuckles]. We just got the groove going. People were getting into it. Nobody cared whether you’ve been playing 30 minutes or an hour and 30 minutes.\(^{23}\)

\(^{21}\) Harvey, 6.

\(^{22}\) Ibid.

\(^{23}\) Brown, 8.
Garry Burnside, who started playing bass with Junior around age 11, spoke about the contrast between his father’s and Junior’s lifestyle, during which he mentioned both the primary source of income, as well as relationships:

Junior had his ways of — my dad was more of like a family man. You know what I'm saying? At the house, you know what I'm saying? Junior was a family man, but he never liked to — even when he had two or three women at a time, Junior was kinda like pimpin’ [laughs]. You know what I'm saying? He had that kind of lifestyle going. He also had his own club, so he didn't have to travel as much as my dad ‘cause he mostly made people come to him ‘cause he knew he made his own money by having business.

Joe Ayers, who grew up with Junior and played with him off-and-on until his death, said when his friend broke the contract they had with the Highwater record label to sign with Fat Possum, he was focused on the money, and not the contract he was bound too. “He went with Fat Possum. He broke his contract,” Ayers said before continuing, “Yep. They paid him a little money. Junior was crazy about money. He didn’t care nothin’ about no contract. [Laughter].”

During the interview, Ayers also made a comment about Junior’s relationship with women.

Way back in his younger days, he had a different woman [laughter] just about every month. When he wasn’t established, he wouldn’t stay with them for no time, so whenever he started settling down, that’s when people started coming – ‘cause they used to hear about it then at different particular locations, and get there, he’s no longer there. And then them old women. I don’t know where he—that’s how he ended up with them 36 kids. Did you hear me? [Laughter]. Yeah, ladies fell for him. Yep. Mm-hmm.

When describing the difference between Junior and R.L., Kenny Brown said, “Well, R.L. never would really fool around. I’ve never known him to fool around with any other women or anything. Junior loved pussy. [Chuckles] That’s kind of a big difference.” Other than this comment about Junior’s infatuation with women, Brown’s narrative never mentioned anything related to Junior’s source of income.

24 Ayers, 15.
25 Ayers, 15.
Evolution

The purpose of this study was to discover how the Hill Country artists R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough were covered by the media and depicted through marketing techniques employed by Fat Possum, using album artwork and news stories as resources. It began by focusing on media coverage, analyzing primary documents exclusively from the artist’s file at the Blues Archive at the University of Mississippi, which included a collection of various print mediums such as newspaper and magazine articles, newsletters, and promotional material.

Following this was an observation of the Blues Revival of the 1990s, which was the time when Fat Possum emerged and Burnside and Kimbrough’s music was distributed by the record label. Next was an examination of the artists’ album artwork used by Fat Possum when distributing Burnside and Kimbrough’s music, along with news stories tied exclusively to Burnside. Interviews were also conducted with individuals who had personal experiences and relationships with both artists. These interviews were used to compile a section of oral histories. The study concluded with a thematic analysis of the oral histories.

Media Coverage

Prior to being signed by Fat Possum in the early 1990s, both R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough were frequently misclassified as Delta bluesmen in the documents analyzed. Descriptors for the Hill Country sound were also frequently misclassified. Both of these errors can largely be attributed to the fact that the term “Hill Country” had not yet come into existence. Interviews with bluesmen from the region such as Kenny Brown and Joe Ayers, revealed that artist were unaware that the style of music they were playing was “Hill Country” until the term surfaced in the 1990s, although the artists knew before this that their style of music was
distinctly different. Jim O’Neal, co-founder of Living Blues magazine, and Mark Camarigg, the current publications manager and assistant editor for Living Blues, both agreed that Dr. David Evans deserves a lot of the credit for bringing attention to the fact that the Hill Country is its own musical region. O’Neal said another possible contributing factor to the “Delta” misclassification was the record companies use of the term when promoting blues’ albums, as well as reporters’ lack of interest in covering anything outside of the blues epicenter at that time – the Midwest. Camarigg suggested reporters’ lack of effort to visit the area could have also been a contributing factor. In the 1990s, however, media began to adopt the term “Hill Country,” using it as a descriptor for both sound, and artists. This can largely be attributed to the release of Robert Mugge’s documentary “Deep Blues” and coverage from well-know rock critic, Robert Palmer.

The documentary “Deep Blues” was written, and narrated, by Palmer and directed by Mugge. It explored the blues scene in Mississippi, and a section of the film was devoted to the Hill Country. The section featured performances by artists from the region, including Junior Kimbrough and R.L. Burnside. Palmer’s association with the film provided a mark of credibility, helping generate exposure on a national level. Camarigg described Palmer as a “musicologist's musicologist,” and noted his reputation as a prominent rock critic, writing for both Rolling Stone and The New York Times. In the film, Palmer identified R.L.’s style as raw, north Mississippi and included that it was very different from the Delta sound. When introducing Junior, he labeled him as an artist who is highly original and created intrigue by informing viewers Junior had never made an album of his own.

Aside from the film, Palmer began drawing attention to these Hill Country artists, among the first being Burnside and Kimbrough, with his writing in Rolling Stone and The New York Times, it only fueled interest. Around this same time, Palmer was mentoring Matthew Johnson, a
co-founder of Fat Possum, and in turn, was writing about the label’s artists and music. As an advocate for the Hill Country sound, Palmer was drawing attention to these artists and subgenre of the blues. Once Palmer had primed the audience, Fat Possum began to emerge as the face for the Hill Country, and their poster child was R.L. Burnside.

**Marketing and Portrayal of Artists**

Fat Possum was founded in 1991 by Peter Lee and Matthew Johnson. The label’s inception occurred during the 1990s blues revival. At this time, blues were a hot commodity. Artists like Robert Cray, Eric Clapton, and Buddy Guy, among others, were some of the more popular bluesmen at the time. The style of music during this time period was often described as “polished” and “clean” in media coverage, and also during personal interviews. Fat Possum’s artists’ sound existed on a completely different spectrum, having already been described as raw, north Mississippi by Palmer in “Deep Blues.” Johnson had a strong distain for the revival itself, telling *Replay* magazine in 1997 that it was “killing the blues.” He let it be known his artists were nothing like the more popular artists in circulation.

This whole Joe Suit, ‘the blues are all right,’ ‘next Stevie Ray Vaughan,’ ‘next Buddy Guy,’ virtuoso thing. The guys I gravitate to are totally lacking in sophistication. It’s more of a f— you attitude, more of a rollicking, raw, hound-dog sound.¹

Fat Possum was the label that strived to be different. When their inaugural 1993 record release “Bad Luck City” by R.L. Burnside bombed (selling only 700 copies), they went looking for a record label that could help them distribute on a wider scale and hooked up with Capricorn in 1995. However, the deal fell through in 1996 and it tied the label up in lawsuits. During this time the label made its company motto, “We’re trying our best,” to reflect its dedication to producing music despite the struggles endured. In 1996, the label teamed up with an unlikely

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¹ See Appendix B, Document C1.
distributor for blues music: punk-rock label, Epitaph. Shortly afterward, the slogan the company released one of its more well known slogans, “Not your same old blues crap.” This helped create the idea that the label was different from the norms of the blues revival. Notable differences appeared in the target audience, album art work, and in media coverage.

Jim O’Neal, who knew Johnson, said Fat Possum’s goal was never to market to a traditional blues audience, but a younger audience. He said the popular music at that time in the college scene was alternative indie rock, and Johnson [and now business partner Bruce Watson] had seen the response R.L. had gotten when he played college bars in Oxford, Mississippi – where the label was based – and felt R.L. could be marketed toward a wider audience. Having already teamed up with a punk-label, Fat Possum had access to a wider, more diverse audience. However, they needed more exposure. They needed an advocate, and found one in Robert Palmer. Palmer, Johnson’s professor at Ole Miss, was actually one of the people who encouraged him to start the label. The rock critic had accumulated a cult-following almost, of rockers/indie and punk rockers, who followed his work. When Palmer began writing about the Hill Country, his readers were introduced to the new rough and gritty sound of artists like Burnside and Kimbrough.

However, Palmer’s association with the blues subgenre was evident in more than just his writing. He also produced R.L. Burnside’s “Too Bad Jim” (1994) and Junior Kimbrough’s “All Night Long” (1993/1994). The liner notes for both albums were written by him as well. Palmer’s involvement with the music on several levels provided Fat Possum with the opportunity to continue targeting the indie-rock audience. The label capitalized on chances to collaborate with artists outside of the blues genre, which resulted in R.L. Burnside’s 1996 release “A Ass Pocket Of Whiskey,” which featured the indie-rock group the Jon Spencer Blues Explosion.
Outside of building a non-traditional blues audience and producing hybrid music, the label was using album artwork that strayed from the images appearing regularly on albums during the blues revival.

Two of R.L.’s albums – “A Bothered Mind” and “Mr. Wizard” – and two of Junior’s – “God Knows I Tried” and “You Better Run: The Essential Junior Kimbrough” – were examined during this study. While analyzing the album art, similarities between the two artist’s albums became evident. Both artists were not smiling on the cover of their albums. R.L.’s “A Bothered Mind” album cover appeared to be a product of Photoshop. A photo of the artist dressed in casual clothing and wearing a serious face appeared to be layered on top of a computer-generated rural backdrop of a dirt road. The album artwork for the other R.L. album “Mr. Wizard” was an image of the artist wearing a wizard’s hat and making a serious face.

Conversely, both of Junior’s albums were photographs of him, each capturing his facial expression as serious and tired, and always smoking a cigarette. In one photo he is shirtless, and in the other he is wearing a faded, yellow t-shirt. This idea of not smiling, and looking rough on album covers, could be seen with other artists on the label’s roster as well. Mark Camarigg confirmed this was done intentionally when he asked Robert Belfour why he looked so mean on his album covers. Belfour responded that the label told him to make that face. These serious and rough images were vastly different from the “suit and tie” look that was popular during the revival. Coverage of Fat Possum artists in the media was also analyzed.

Three different narratives exist, in three separate mediums, about why R.L. went to Parchman, a Mississippi prison. Overtime, the narrative changes and evolves. The first narrative appeared in an issue of *Living Blues* published in 1994. This version is told from R.L.’s point of view, appearing in the magazine as a collection of some of his stories in first-person format.
Here, R.L. explains he went to prison for being wrongly accused of transporting stolen goods. While in prison R.L. said he played music with a band that would come on Saturday nights. He complained about prison being rough, but noted that he didn’t have it as bad as some others. When this issue of the magazine was released, R.L. had just released “Too Bad Jim,” his sophomore. This was before Fat Possum had created the slogan “Not your same old blues crap,” or had any trouble with record labels. The two other versions both appeared in 2002. One appearing in an issue of The New Yorker and the other in the video documentary, “You See Me Laughin’: The Last of the Hill Country Bluesmen.” This was well after Fat Possum had begun using serious album art, and labeling their music as not the same old blues crap.

In The New Yorker’s version, it states that R.L. went to prison for shooting a man in the back of the head because he kept bullying him. The writing style is mixed with quotes from R.L. as well as the author’s descriptions. It also says that R.L. had to pick 200 pounds of cotton a day. The reasoning for R.L.’s sentencing is completely different from the Living Blues version, as is the description of his time in prison.

The story told in the video documentary is a conversation between R.L. and the business Fat Possum executives, Matthew Johnson and Bruce Watson. In this version, R.L. once again says he shot a man in the back of a head, but this time he was the artist did so because a man was after him because he took all of his money playing dice. This version is similar to The New Yorkers in that R.L. was sentenced to prison for shooting a man in the back of the head. However, it is differs when R.L. provides his reasoning for committing the crime, saying it was a result of a man pursuing him after the bluesman took all of his money playing dice.

Oral Histories

Oral histories were collected from nine people in total, but only five were used in this study: Cedric Burnside, Garry Burnside, Kenny Brown, Joe Ayers, and Amos Harvey. The four
interviews not included were used as supporting data in chapters two and three. The four used in chapters two and three were: Jim O’Neal, Mark Camarigg, Dr. David Evans, and Greg Johnson. When structuring each person’s oral history, the researcher used his discretion on what to include and what to exclude. Material included was primarily personal accounts that were spoken with candor and exclusive to this study. Most stories were rooted in memories and expressed vividly in the person’s natural speech. After the selections had been made and entered into a story format, the researcher attempted to develop themes for chapter five.

**Themes**

Three themes developed in total, two for R.L. Burnside and one for Junior Kimbrough. R.L.’s themes included “Family Man” and “Playing and Having Fun,” and Junior’s singular theme was “Serious, Original and Hypnotic.”

**Limitations and Future Research**

There were three limitations the researcher encountered when conducting this study. The first was the limited information on Junior Kimbrough. As Greg Johnson of the Blues Archives explained, the lack of information is a most likely a result of Junior having not toured as frequently as Burnside. As was discovered throughout this study though, Junior preferred to stay in north Mississippi, and he operated under the mindset that if people wanted to see him play, they could come to his juke joint. This helped explain why a majority of articles on Junior are features on his juke joint. Portions of this study are heavily weighted with information on Burnside, and sparse on information on Junior. This was mostly the case in chapter three when looking at the media coverage.

Another limitation is the absence of a voice from Fat Possum. An email conversation between the researcher and Bruce Watson was initiated, although, it did not move past a cordial response from Watson. The researcher’s experience working as a journalist drew attention to the
missing voice, which usually results in a one-sided story. However, the researcher compensated for this by finding articles containing excellent voice from owners of Fat Possum, a majority of which were germane to the chapter in which they were used as supporting evidence. The last limitation observed was phone interviews versus face-to-face.

It was the goal of this research to compile oral histories with individuals who had direct experiences with both R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough. In order to achieve this, qualitative-style interviews were conducted. The individuals interviewed ranged from direct relatives, music industry professionals, scholars and researchers, and journalists. All interviews (with the exception of Greg Johnson) were conducted by telephone because of time restrictions and geographic constraints. A majority of research cited in the review of literature involving qualitative-style interviews with Hill Country artists were conducted in person. Interviews such as Lomax’s with Sid Hemphill and Lucius Smith, and Palmer’s with R.L. Burnside, included a mixture of conversation and exclusive performances. Their presence allowed more participation in activities as opposed to telephone interviews. As Amos Harvey noted, in order to understand the Hill Country one must experience it. Therefore, telephone interviews eliminated the “experience,” as well as interaction with participants, which could have included opportunities for exclusive performances, guided tours of regions, and participant observation. Prior research regarding face-to-face qualitative interviews versus telephone interviews shows pros and cons for both techniques, according to Gina Novick. Part of the difficulty of the phone interviews was also the process of reading the IRB-02 form over the phone. The literature was often

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intimidating to certain individuals, and sometimes prompted the researcher to have to speak directly with an artist’s manager before proceeding with an interview.

These limitations however, did not have major affects on this study. The results from this study’s research created a valuable addition to the existing pool of knowledge on the Hill Country. Preexisting literature on the Hill Country largely focuses on traditions, while this body of work explores its role in popular culture. The research provides evidence of how the term “Hill Country” evolved overtime, using the media as the primary source for a timeline. Previously, there was a grey area surrounding the time period during which the term became a common descriptor for the subgenre, and who was credited for coining the term. The study also examined Fat Possum’s role in advancing the Hill Country genre in popular culture. Lastly, the oral histories included in the study humanize these artists, which is an important source of information for future researchers who want to better understand these men and their music.

Further research would be necessary to better understand Fat Possum’s reasoning for targeting a non-traditional blues audience, its selection of album art, and thoughts on the media coverage its artists received. This could be achieved by researchers collecting oral histories from Matthew Johnson and Bruce Watson, along with former and current employees of the label. A body of literature containing these oral histories could expand on the observations made by the researcher in chapter two of this study. Additional areas of research could include interviewing marketing experts about the album artwork cited in this study and how it portrays artists to audiences. This research could also consult researchers specializing in semiotics to dissect the deeper meanings embedded within the album art from this study and other Fat Possum artists as well. Research could also focus on the bodies of work created by Burnside and Kimbrough, using discourse analysis as a method for possibly understanding underlying messages in their
lyrics. Because the Hill Country genre has not been explored by many researchers outside the field of musicology, and other music related disciplines, the opportunities for studies go well beyond those suggested by the researcher.
APPENDIX A
INFORMED CONSENT

Artist

Greenberry Taylor
University of Florida, College of JM/COM
Division of Graduate Studies and Research
1885 Stadium Road, PO Box 118400
Gainesville, FL 32611-8400

Dear Artist:

I am a graduate student at the University of Florida. As part of my thesis I am conducting an interview, the purpose of which is to learn more about the artists R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough. I am asking you to participate in this interview because you have been identified as a highly successful Blues artist. Interviewees will be asked to participate in an interview, conducted by phone or in person, lasting no longer than 90 minutes. With your permission I would like to audiotape this interview, but only after you have verbally consented. If you choose, your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law and your identity will not be revealed in the final manuscript. Either a professional service, or myself, will transcribe the interview. The information gleaned from the transcriptions will then be used to help support the findings of either of the specified Blues musicians, after which the manuscript(s), recording(s) and data will be archived in my personal research archives.

There are no anticipated risks, compensation or other direct benefits to you as a participant in this interview. You are free to withdraw your consent to participate and may discontinue your participation in the interview at any time without consequence.

If you have any questions about this research protocol, please contact me or my faculty supervisor, Dr. Bernell Tripp. Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant rights may be directed to the IRB02 office, University of Florida, Box 112250, Gainesville, FL 32611; (352) 392-0433.

By signing this letter, or verbally consenting, you give me permission to report your responses. Your responses will be reported using either your name, if permission is granted, or anonymously, in the final manuscript to be submitted to my faculty supervisor as part of my course work.

Greenberry Taylor

I have read the procedure described above for the School Curriculum Interview assignment. I voluntarily agree to participate in the interview and I have received a copy of this description.

__________________________________________
Signature of participant

__________________________________________
Date

I would like to receive a copy of the final “interview” manuscript submitted to the instructor.

☐ YES ☐ NO
INFORMED CONSENT:

Professional

Greenberry Taylor  
University of Florida, College of JM/COM  
Division of Graduate Studies and Research  
1885 Stadium Road, PO Box 118400  
Gainesville, FL 32611-8400

Dear Participant:

I am a graduate student at the University of Florida. As part of my thesis I am conducting an interview, the purpose of which is to learn about people’s relationship, experiences, or involvement, with the Blues music genre, specifically the artists R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough. I am asking you to participate in this interview because you have been identified as a person who has interacted with the Blues in some capacity. Interviewees will be asked to participate in an interview, conducted by phone or in person, lasting no longer than 90 minutes. With your permission I would like to audiotape this interview, but only after you have verbally consented. If you choose, your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law and your identity will not be revealed in the final manuscript. Either a professional service, or myself, will transcribe the interview. The information gleaned from the transcriptions will then be used to help support the findings of either of the specified Blues musicians, after which the manuscript(s), recording(s) and data will be archived in my personal research archives.

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By signing this letter, or verbally consenting, you give me permission to report your responses. Your responses will be reported using either your name, if permission is granted, or anonymously, in the final manuscript to be submitted to my faculty supervisor as part of my course work.

Greenberry Taylor

I have read the procedure described above for the School Curriculum Interview assignment. I voluntarily agree to participate in the interview and I have received a copy of this description.

__________________________  ____________________
Signature of participant  Date

I would like to receive a copy of the final “interview” manuscript submitted to the instructor. [ ]

YES/ [ ] NO
APPENDIX B

BURNSIDE ARTICLES

The Real Thing,

A guitar, a chair, a mike, an amp—

and R. L. Burnside.

By Grant Britt

A capacity crowd crammed into the
Colony University Inn Friday night to see
the Delta blues in its natural state—the basic
stuff, the raw bone—as performed by
R. L. Burnside.

When Burnside performs, there are no
flashy solos, no dazzling runs and there isn’t
a fill within miles. There is a guitar, a
chair, a mike, an amp and the man himself.
And that’s all you need.

Fifty-nine year-old Burnside is one of the
few remaining authentic Delta bluesmen
still performing. But having that distinction is a mixed blessing. What it usually means is that the purveyor of the real thing can be
impossibly popular overseas and can even
be hailed as a legend at the folk/blues
festivals in this country, but still have trouble making a living. Burnside has toured
Europe seventeen times, appeared at every
major blues gathering in the States, and still
has to struggle along working pick-up jobs—picking cotton, painting houses or
doing commercial fishing. But Burnside
isn’t bitter. When you have a wife and
twelve kids to support, you don’t turn your
nose up at a dollar, and you’d better have
a good sense of humor to keep your mind
off your troubles.

Unlike some bluesmen who feel compelled to live the life they sing about, Burnside takes it all in stride and good humor.
As he told the crowd when they began to
sing “Amen” and “You tell ‘em” during a
song about a no-good, cheating woman:
“Hey now, it’s just a song, you know. They’re
only words!” He relaxes his audience, spicing
tales about his friends into his act,
creating a down-home ambiance that blends
well with his laid-back playing. Burnside’s
style is so basic that it takes a few songs
to appreciate the simplicity and purity of
what he is doing. There’s no flash, just
those big old workman’s hands wrapped all
the way around the neck of the guitar,
chewing on a steady rhythm. And Burnside
keeps his steady rolls’ shuffle going as he
lays down his heavy sounds about
everyday life and times. His vocals range
from a wailing moan to a steady blues

at the end of a stanza on the classic Delta
stuff “Dust My Broom,” “Rollin’ and Tumblin’,” to a clear harmonic “Boogie
Children,” “Just Like a Woman.” Although
his bottleneck solos got the biggest crowd
response, his acoustic work was a classic
element of less is more. The lack of fills
and fills enables the listener to hear the
framework and hang on their melody lines
on the bare bones.

Burnside was accompanied on harp by
Jon Nerenberg, who is also R. L.’s driver
(in a ’58 Cadillac) and manager. Nerenberg heard one of Burnside’s albums ten years ago and was so taken with
it that he tracked the man down and offered
his services. The two have been performing
since 1981. Nerenberg plays somewhat unsettling accompaniment, haunting fills and runs that seem out of
place at first, but as the echoes sink in, it all
falls into place. His playing at times seems
like an afterthought; but as he says, he feels
that his function is to complement
R. L., not detract from his performance.

The only sour note of the evening was a
blaring sound system that caused some of
Nerenberg’s solos to rattle the biceps of
the front-row customers. But that can hardly
be laid on the performer, as the sound man
had been in an automobile accident seconds
before the show was to start, and the sound
was run by last-minute volunteers. In addi-
tion, there were no stage monitors, so it is
a minor miracle that the show, which was
sponsored by the Piedmont Blues Preserv-
ation Society, came off as well as it did.
And on top of everything else, this was the
third show the duo had done that day, having
arrived at six in the morning to drive from
Black Mountain to Winston-Salem, do a
noon show, a five o’clock show and then
travel to Greensboro for the nine o’clock
performance.

But no one in the crowd seemed put off
by the difficulties. The sit-down crowd paid
close attention as Professor Burnside con-
ducted his blues seminar. There was no quit
afterwards, and no homework was assigned.
R. L. Burnside got the message across.

Clear morning.

Courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries.
There's probably no place like the Chicago blues scene. The Down South sound has a distinctive, unique character, and there are not many songs that can be called "classic blues." This record was recorded during the peak period of the Down South blues scene, before the blues scene really started to dwindle.

Mississippi Delta Blues:

A Delta blues might contain elements of gospel music, but it's not exactly the same thing. The Delta blues is a genre of music that has its roots in the Mississippi delta region of the United States. It is characterized by its use of the blues scale, a series of three or four distinct notes, usually played on a guitar or harmonica. The Delta blues is also known for its use of emotional and evocative lyrics, often dealing with themes of love, loss, and hardship.

Review/Music

Mississippi Delta Blues

R.L. Burks performing at the Philip Morris Building

The New York Times The Arts Saturday, October 21, 1971

Courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries.
A Bluesman Lives the Life, 1985, A3

R.L. Burnside plays the blues as they were meant to be played... and lived.

By Almost Slim

R.L. Burnside looks worried. The $300 he owed to his wife in Coldwater, Mississippi, can’t be closed, and she’s just called to say she’s broke and needs some money. R.L. can’t figure out what the problem can be because he sent the money in care of the High Sheriff back home “who can catch anything,” who was to pass the money on. After a couple of exchanges over the phone, R.L. promises he’ll pay $200 more that afternoon. The problem is R.L. doesn’t have enough money to fulfill his promise, so he’s considering parting a borrowed amplifier to raise the cash. R.L. lays down his cheap Airline guitar next to his half-consumed pint of Black Velvet, scratches his head, and contemplates his next move. It seems life is continuously presenting such situations for bluesman R.L. Burnside.

At 58, Burnside is one of the last authentic Delta bluesmen still active. While his playing is somewhat primitive, his lyrical themes not exceedingly original, Burnside still manages to engage his audience in his compelling performances. A quiet, simple man, who actually dons the life he portrays in many of his songs, Burnside has made a surprising number of recordings, and has been to Europe no less than 17 times. Of late, Burnside has been playing frequently in New Orleans along with white harmonica player John Nemarngard, who has been finding work for the duo — painting houses to playing them — and generally looking after R.L.

Born November 23, 1927, Burnside still lives close to his birthplace, Coldwater, Mississippi, which is situated 20 miles south of Memphis, where the tall country meets the Delta. Burnside grew up “always liking music,” and his first instrument was the powerful “guitar box,” a strain of blue ridge sailed to the side of the barn and played with a bottle.

“My parents split up when I was young,” he explains. “My daddy moved to Chicago but my mother stayed in Mississippi. There was plenty of music both places. I grew up with it. I used to listen to Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, Lightnin’ Hopkins — that’s who I like to play behind. Fact, I used to see Muddy Waters at the Club Zanzibar in Chicago. I never did play with him, but I could sit down and talk to him just like you and me. I saw him and me a lot of music.”

It was back in Mississippi, however, where Burnside eventually picked up a guitar during the early 1950s. At the time the Delta was a hotspot for blues activity. With Memphis just a few miles away, Burnside could tune in daily to WDIA in Memphis and hear the likes of B.B. King and Rufus Thomas. With the mere twist of the dial he could tune into KWEM in West Memphis and hear the Howlin’ Wolf, who advertised farm implements and played the latest blues releases, and if that wasn’t enough, each day at noon it was “King Biscuit Time” over KFRA in nearby Helena, Arkansas, where the legendary Sonny Boy Williamson played live daily along with the King Biscuit Boys.

“Oh I knew all those fellows,” he claims. “Sometimes I’d visit Memphis or Helena, but they played in the Delta a lot in Times or Clarksdale. I’d always try and see them play.”

Burnside had early aspirations to play harmonica, in the mold of Sonny Boy Williamson, but “I was like I couldn’t get the hang of it. I liked the harp because it sounds so good. Besides if you want to play somewhere, all you need is your harp. Be please! the guitar you got to carry your instrument and your amplifier. Always seemed a lot of work to me.”

August 1985/Wavelength 23

Courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries.
Burnside’s brand of blues

R.L. Burnside sings the blues, those old Mississippi Delta hand life, gets down and swings it with his gutta percha.

The 56-year-old father of 12, from Holly Springs, Mississippi, knows the blues to better than anyone and they are a part of his own experience.

"People say you play the things you feel or what you live. Burnside says, "I've been listening and fermenting across his face. They say you that I have must be in the first place and everybody must that on you, but if it's really have to be in the first place, he says, "I've been listening and fermenting across his face.

He sings of the things he has, but he has been married to his wife, Alice Burns, for 20 years. Oursage off, he sells his wares as a singer as no one else can.

He played blues with a guitar and some other things of his own invention. He sings "Ole Man Blues," one of his old favorites, and old Mississippi Delta albums are a successful song that echo a simple rhythm.

He's got a "gum road" mouth, I'm going to tell you, he says, "I'm going to tell you, I'm going to tell you, I'm going to tell you.

He also sings "Ole Man Blues," one of his old favorites, and old Mississippi Delta albums are a successful song that echo a simple rhythm.

He is a part of the blues, the music that has evolved through the years, the music that has grown, the music that has evolved through the years, the music that has grown.

Mississippi mountain Burnside at the 9th Ward home of his harmonica player, Jim Nelsen.

Burnside's brand of blues is not just a music, it's a way of life.

Oostage or off, R. L. Burnside tells tales as believable as they are foolish. He playfully mingles truth with fantasy and leaves his audience to separate the two.

Turner's music, get influenced by a lot of people in the city, he says, "You see, I can do that and you believe, and you keep trying and you stick with it, you stick with it, you stick with it."
President's Message:
A couple of questions have come to my attention lately that I would like to address.
First, the question of why we charge $25 for a membership and where the money goes. I think everyone is aware of what T-shirts cost, so there is no need for an explanation on this point. Our main expense will be for the newsletter, which has evolved from a hand-typed, mimeographed letter to the present format that is typeset and contains photographs. At present, the newsletters cost almost one dollar per subscription per month to send out. Another large expense is for the Society’s phone bill, since we are considered a business and must operate as one. Each phone call costs 10¢ to make, and this doesn’t include monthly charges and long distance calls. I would say the phone bill averages between $500 and $1200 per month. Postage is also a large expense since we send out SO purchase orders. Newsletter membership forms each month. We have also started mailing out T-shirts to new members, which run almost $1500 per person to package and mail. There are also a few small expenses such as office supplies, photo supplies, computer labels and paper, etc. So, it is plain to see that the $25 that you give as a membership fee helps us just cover expenses. We do appreciate your contributions!

The other question I would like to raise is that of renewals. We are going to try something just a little bit different this year. For any first-time member that joins, the membership fee will be $25, which will include the original red shirt with the B.B.S. logo and one years newsletters and benefits. The difference will be for charter members who renew their memberships. We plan to make a new T-shirt design which will be sold separately. Thus, the renewal fee for the newsletter, membership card and benefits will be just $15 for original members. See next months newsletter for complete details.

Again, we thank you for your patronage and hope you continue to support the blues.

Dale Patton

R.L. Burnside Is Coming Back To Town:
If you enjoy the Delta blues, then R.L. Burnside is the one you are looking for. Born the son of a sharecropper in 1927, R.L. still lives in Coldwater, Mississippi, where the hill country meets the Delta. Though he cites Lightnin’ Hopkins and John Lee Hooker as his major influences, he will certainly remember the past greats such as Robert Johnson and Charlie Patton.
R.L. Burnside will be accompanied by Tony Nurnberg, a talented, young harmonica player, now living in New Orleans, but originally hailing from nearby Alexandria, Virginia. In 1968, Mr. Burnside and Jon Nurnberg went out to play at the Cat’s Eye Pub in Fells Point. The show was underway by 9:30 p.m. and there will be NO COVER. You can’t ask for a better deal than this, so lets all be there to support these hard-working, authentic Delta bluesmen!

Dennis Spanier, MARCH 3

Bucks County Blues Society Show:
On Friday, February 27th, a group of B.B.S. members will be trucking to the Bucks County Blues Society. Headlining the show will be guitar greats like Alligator recordings artists Lonnie Mack and Jimmy Johnson. Also on the bill will be one of our favorites, Sugar Ray and the Bluesmen.
The tickets may be purchased through the B.B.S. and are $16. This price includes beer and munchies. If enough people are interested, we may provide transportation at an additional cost. (Call Dale at 444-1716).

Blues Hall Of Fame

Here are the 1986 Blues Hall Of Fame Inductees honored at the W.C. Handy Awards Show in Memphis this past November, along with a definitive list of those artists who have been so honored from 1980-1985.

Blues Hall Of Fame Inductees 1986
Albert Collins, LEADBELLY (Huddie Ledbetter), Sonny Terry, Johnny Winter
Hall of Fame Inductees (Classic Albums):
Robert Johnson, CROSS ROAD BLUES (ARC); Little Walter, JUKE (Checker); Muddy Waters, MANISH BOY (Chess)
Hall of Fame Inductees (Classic Literature):
Albert Collins, ICE PICKIN’ (Alligator); Willie Dixon, I AM THE BLUES, (Columbia); Albert King, LIVE WIRE BLUES POWER, (Sax)
Hall of Fame Inductees (Classic Literature):
Chicago Breakdown, (Chicago Blues) by Mike Rowe

February Meeting:
The monthly meeting of the B.B.S. will be held on Saturday, February 21st at Bird’s of a Feather (in Fells Point) at 9 p.m.

Courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries.
Delta Blues To Woo Beloit, 1986, A6

Courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries.
If You Want A Degree, 1985. A8

If You Want A Degree, 1985.

Geraldine Wyckoff PerCUSSIONS

September 9, 1985

A Rare U.S. Tour for a Delta Bluesman

What Mississippi bluesman is better known in Europe than in the United States? The answer could be — many, as Europeans have always had an affinity for American blues and jazz. Therefore the name R.L. Burnside, common in the musical communities of western Europe, is still unknown to many blues devotees in this country, despite a career which has spanned over 30 years.

Because of Burnside’s own interest in playing more, the personal management of John Neremberg (who also accompanies R.L. on harmonica) and the work of NOTE (New Orleans Talent Exchange) a tour beginning September 15 should change all that. The rare U.S. tour will include shows in St. Louis, Madison, Wisconsin, Chicago and New York. “It’s off to Europe — Holland, Belgium, Greece and Austria — places far from Mississippi, but where local fans are familiar with his talents through numerous tours and European-released albums.

Critics’ Choice

Music:

Parny Karp: “The second of a two-part concert: the first complete rendition (with full repeats) of Bach’s unaccompanied cello suites performed in Madison in over 30 years. Last week end, Karp (playing from memory) handled this tremendous music with considerable aplomb. Expect more of the same here. Pft., Sept. 13, UW Mills Hall, 8 p.m.”

Jane Silvern: “You hear everything on this Canadian singer/songwriter’s new record, No Borders Here: Alyce, Amy Mitchell-style impressions; Laura Anderson-like conceptual imagery; avant-garde sexuality; and rock ‘n roll flourishes. Her funny, quirky sensibilities are even more apparent live. Definitely the cult show of the week. Sat., Sept. 14, UW Union South, 8 p.m.”

Mark Williams Jr.-Larry J. Dalton: Two of the most successful contemporary country performers share the stage for a Nashville extravaganza. Sat., Sept. 14, Dane County Coliseum, 8 p.m.

Laugh Capades: A variety show that sounds like fun. Comic-magician Chris Cates has played cruise ships and has brought together teams of harry Youngman, who means he should be pretty prolific. Cherys & Mills are a comedy-juggling duo, and the Fabick brothers are a comedic street-music trio reminiscent of the Violent Femmes. Sat., Sept. 14, Bumby’s, 8 p.m.

Willy St. Fair: Where the way they’ve got this organized around three stages, it’s starting to look like the east side’s version of Summerfest. On the rock stage: Still Not Married, Jackie Allen Quartet, Clyde Stubblefield Band, Olmeca, House among Thieves and the

Hosters, Funk and new music have their own stage (don’t want to subject those Jackie Allen fans to the Tar Babies), where you can hear Jangamalee with Virginia Rose, Cyclops & the Big Little Cat Monsters, Tar Babies, Moehi Mench, Drake Scott, and Qwa Digs Under Paris’s Industrial Jam. Over on the performance stage are Susan Gilchrist, Andrea Musser, Charlie St. Cyl & Roger Brothers, Madison Street Theater, the Jim Viek Group, Sardis & Zedens, Jane with Lynette, Laura Ellen Neustadt & Stuart Stotts and Peppe y los Gitanos. Sun., Sept. 15, 300 and 300 blocks of Williamson Street, 11 a.m. to 6:30 p.m.

Fine Arts Quartet: Once world-renowned, the quartet is now a younger, more aggressive ensemble that has been together for about three years and is gradually rebuilding its reputation. Here it performs Shostakovich’s “String Quartet No. 7 in F Sharp Minor” and Franck’s “Piano Quintet in F Minor” (with guest pianist Anahy Robles). Sun., Sept. 15, Eberhar Museum, 1:30 p.m.

Ken Adams: Adams, a humorist and folklighter, is celebrating the release of Ken Adams Live—Dirt Road’s Real Good Love Budget LP with a day-long bash; at 7 p.m. there’s a “Weird Honor of 1985” contest. Ken is a modest enough guy to admit that he’s never before sounded this good on vinyl. It’s his first album. Sun., Sept. 15, Old Town School of Folk Music; 8177 E. Johnson, 4:31 p.m.

Tina Turner: What can we tell you that you don’t already know about the electric Ms. T? We bet she’ll get plenty of

respect from a full Coliseum. Sun., Sept. 15, Dane County Coliseum, 7:30 p.m.

R.L. Burnside: Burnside is a bigger star in Europe than in America, perhaps because he’s the real American thing: Mississippi Delta blues singer-guitarist in the Son House/Robert Johnson-Charlie Patton tradition. In his mid ’50s, he’s the son of a sharecropper and has done his share of farm work, which is reflected in his music. A rare opportunity to hear a true Southern voice. Mon., Sept. 16, O’Cayz Corral, 9 p.m.

Courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries.
January 24, 1987

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

R.L. Burnside is one of the most important surviving Mississippi Delta Blues musicians in the tradition of the immortal Mississippi Fred McDowell. R.L.'s famous album on Bluesway is one of the most important in that genre.

R.L. has appeared successfully on many major American festivals and on the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, the Memphis Music and Heritage Festival, the Memphis Blues Festival and others. He is very professional to work with and was always on time, and gave a satisfactory performance.

Thank you very much for considering this important and enjoyable American blues artist.

Yours truly,

Quint Davis
Producer/Director

QD/vb

PO. Box 2530/1205 North Rampart St./New Orleans, La. 70116/(504) 522-4786

Courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries.
BRINGING THE BLUES TO BALTIMORE

By Rafael Alvarez

If you missed the recent movie “Crossroads” — Billy Bob’s latest, a new movie-entrepreneurial spinoff from the Mississippi-born, blues-championing bluesman who left local doctor’s orders for only a short time, he’s been motivated and I don’t need to write — there are at the Cafe du Monde in Baltimore tonight for a screening.

The show is a showcase of the blues and the people who play them. The film is a portrait of the life of a blues legend, R. L. Burnside, who has been playing the blues for over 50 years. His music is a testament to the power of the blues in America and the world.

R. L. Burnside: "I think the blues are beginning to come back a little bit. I’m hoping they will," said Mr. Burnside, a former guitarist and former member of the band "The Blues Band," who now works as a commercial fisherman in the Gulf of Mexico.

See "Burnside," Col. 1

R. L. Burnside: "I think the blues are beginning to come back a little bit. I’m hoping they will.""
TIME Magazine review, 1994, A11

Born to Sing the Down-Home Blues
Trey Sprung, R.L. Burnside, Pat Porson Records

If at home, you go to the announcement that "the blues are back," don't believe it. The blues never went away. And in the hill country of North Mississippi, the music is still written, sung and played with bad-luck-in-a-following beating, down-home, wry humor and superb artistry. One of the region's finest musicians is R.L. Burnside, 67, a singer who makes frequent stays at international jazz festivals and tours Europe half a dozen times a year. When much of what is heard is based on big-band studio recordings today has a husky, smooth sound, Burnside's newest album has the raw, earthy power of authentic blues. The Chicago Tribune calls The Bad Man "the real deal," and it is. Tiny, three-year-old Pat Popum Records of Oxford, Mississippi, has built a reputation for being among the best blues labels in the U.S. The Bad Man was recorded on the spot at its facilities and in a local juke joint much favored by Burnside. Up-country blues differs from the better-known Delta sound. Short vocal and instrumental phrases are framed and repeated over a distinctive one-two-three beat that has its origins in 19th century fife and-drum bands and African claw percussion. The four players on the album—R.L. Burnside is the harpist—play melodies and rhythms back and forth with the casual familiarity of old, speaking a shared musical language that lies a vocabulary pure as the day and blue as the night. 

TIME, October 17, 1994

Courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries.
MENTION MISSISSIPPI to blues fans, and chances are their heads will start swimming with the raw sounds of the Delta. But not all great Mississippi blues have a lowland address. In the hill country just to the north and east, there has always existed a breathing but understated blues scene. Now, thanks to the efforts of the small, Oxford-based label Fat Possum, we’re finally getting to hear some of the region’s best blues talent.

A good place to start is with 68-year-old singers and guitarists R.L. Burnside, from Holly Springs. On Bad Luck City (1997), his first Fat Possum album and the label’s maiden release, Burnside seemed uncomfortable with the recording process. Too many of the tracks sound scratchy or taped up, which gives them an artificially modern feel. But on Too Bad Jim, a far more expressive and supple work, Burnside delivers a scaring set of songs anchored in tradition, demonstrating why the Mississippi hill country could well be the new blues frontier.

Cut from the same mold that produced such Mississippi slide masters as Robert Johnson, Bukka White and Fvie McDowell, Burnside has a bit of Delta blues running through his guitar style and vocals. But it’s the hill country’s down-home rhythms, based very much on the drum patterns of the region’s life-and-death bands, that separate Burnside’s blues from those of his Delta friends.

On fire, Burnside lays on top of each rhythm a series of tortured, scratchy slide licks that go with Calvin Jackson’s wonderfully frenetic bass-keeping and Son Dwayne Davis’s barn-swinging bass (second guitarist Keny Brown completes the band). Their delivery of standards like “Shake ‘Em On Down,” “Old Black Mattie” or “Goin’ Down South,” in effect, creates a juke-joint rave-up in your living room.

There are also a couple of choice Burnside solo pieces on the album. His particularly haunting rendition of “Death Bell Blues” and “Miss Glory B.,” in which his guitar becomes an extension of his voice, makes certain that personal pain overrides any sense of pleasure on Too Bad Jim.

Today, when many blues artists are slicking up their sound to the point that it slips right through our hands, the blues has rarely sounded so emotionally driven and honest as it does here. Too Bad Jim is just too good to fall by the wayside.

Too Bad Jim is available from Fat Possum, P.O. Box 929, Oxford, MS 38655; (601) 230-9794. — Robert Santelli

Courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries.
THE WASHINGTON POST
DECEMBER 31, 1993

GEOFFREY HIMES
Junior Kimbrough & the Soul
Blues Boys "All Night Long" (Fat
Possum). This unexpected marvel
is the best Delta blues album in
nearly 40 years. With his hypnotic
boogie grooves and his vocals full of
dread and desire, this Mississippi
cotton farmer gets closer to his
African roots than any politically
correct urban rapper.

Mavis Staples "The Voice"
(Paisley Park/ Warner Bros.). The
eight songs that Prince wrote for
this album contain the most explicit
and eloquent social commentary he
has ever penned, and Staples brings
them to life as much as Gladys Knight
and Aretha Franklin invigorated
Curtis Mayfield's best songs.

Dave Burwell & David Murray
"Brother to Brother" (Garell).
Despite all the attention showered
on Joe Henderson and Joshua
Redman (who both deserved it),
the year's best jazz album came from
these overlooked giants. This
unaccompanied piano/saxophone
dialogue, rooted in the
fundamentals of New Orleans jazz,
managed to say more with fewer
notes than any instrumental album
this year.

Alejandro Escovedo "Thirteen
Years" (Watermelon). Not since
Van Morrison's "Astral Weeks" has
anyone combined strings and rock
'n' roll with such stunning effect.
The Texan singer-songwriter
creates moody folk-rock numbers
for his rock quintet and then
incorporates a string quartet for
harmonic weight.

The Juliana Hatfield Three
"Become What You Are" (Atlantic/
Mammoth). The year's best
alternative-rock album comes from
the former Blake Baby, who even
more than PJ Harvey or Liz Phair
has fashioned refreshingly honest,
engaging and hook-laden rock 'n'
roll songs about a young woman's
place in a world that offers her
more choices than freedom.

Jimmie Dale Gilmore "Spinning
Around the Sun" (Elektra). The
year's best country album comes

Courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries.
New Recordings

Ali Farka Toure; Chris Smither

Pep

Reviewed by Tom Moon

ALI FARKA TOURE
The Source (Rykodisc *** *)

As Michael Jordan and Charles Barkley battled in the NBA championships last week, the message of Ali Farka Toure's enchanting "Inchanga Mbona" — which translates into "God creates exceptional beings who force the admiration of everyone, even their enemies" — took on the resonance of an unofficial theme song.

With a repetitive electric guitar figure framing his testimony, Toure is full of admiration, his voice meandering through call-and-response episodes that could be praising superstar athletes or stern gods. He is devoted to a lofty ideal not unlike the one Jordan and Barkley aspire to, intent on capturing a spirit not often summoned in song.

Toure, from Mali, is another exceptional being. While he considers himself a bluesman, he does not use the blues as a cheap crossover device. He refuses to recognize any borders between the Mississippi Delta and the African plain. He takes the feeling of the blues whole, then adds it to the grip's age-old tales of struggle and spirituality. The result is a meditative music that wraps cautionary shouts and wounded love cries into a transcendent experience conscious of its sources but never anything less than pure.

The Source, which finds Toure in the company of a small group of musicians and percussionists rather than his usual solo setting, ranks among the guitarist/vocalist's best work. Its critics praise Mali's persistent farmers, exalt the virtue of a woman who waits for her husband, and instruct that "devotion is the root of all good work." But

many young women accept as their fate: The bitter "Canary" inventor of what's expected from a wife or girlfriend, while "Inchanga Mbona" — with its refrain "And I kept standing 6-foot-1, instead of 5-foot-2, and I loved you — is an anthem of freedom and empowerment.

Phair's precision as a lyricist will make her a postmodern rock hero, a woman who, like Patsy Jean Harvey, can address the等等。
Junior Kimbrough — A Veteran Newcomer

Junior Kimbrough’s appearance at this year’s Festival is also his inaugural journey into northern California.

Kimbrough’s name, although by no stretch of the imagination a household name, gained more prominence recently by virtue of a featured appearance in the excellent documentary, “Deep Blues.” This Robert Mugge film, put together with financial assistance from the Eryxhonic’s Dave Stewart and commentary by music writer, producer and critic Robert Palmer (who authored a book by the same name), introduces us to blues musicians currently living and working in Mississippi. Junior’s segment in the film is one of the most riveting and intense performances in the 91 minute feature. Junior does have a way of making a handful of singing guitar notes and a lurching guitar-based riff sound simultaneously like some pre-Blues missing link as yet unheard of,” says Palmer.

Rockabilly legend Charlie Feathers calls Kimbrough, “the beginning and the end of music.” Riding Johns, giving his recent release, All Night Long, a four star review, said, “This album is gazed with rocking rhythms and long, trance-inducing electric guitar passages that are like nothing you’ve heard before. Backed by the Soul Blues Boys — bassist Gary Burnside and drummer Kenny Malone — he sketches landscapes of immaculate emotional magnitude. His message is clear: Make the blues mean something.”

Kimbrough, in early years in Marshall County, was a formatte influencer on several white rockabilly and country musicians who had close by. Junior learned his music mostly from his brothers and sisters. His father was carrying him to play at house parties before he was ten, and he is now running his own house parties with music played for dancing.

Junior now resides in Holy Springs, Mississippi and plays at his own Jake John, “Junior Kimbrough’s House,” in nearby Oxford. He is one of the best living musicians who continues to work primarily in the delta — the cradle of the blues. It is not often that we get to experience this deep emotional music presented by an artist playing with a fervor that will shiver your soul without going to the deep south. This is pure soul music that “resonates about the human spirit,” says riding Johns’ Robert Santelli.

The Sonoma County Blues Festival is very happy to be able to present Junior Kimbrough in his first northern California appearance.

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FRI, 23rd PETE ESCOBEDO
FRI, 30th LITTLE CHARLIE & the NIGHTCATS
SAT, 31st THE GREG KAIN BAND

Coming Friday, August 6th:
JOE LOUIS WALKER & the BOSS TALKERS

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Courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries.
JUNIOR KIMBROUGH & THE SOUL BLUES BOYS

All Night Long
PRODUCER: Robert Palmer
Eat Possum 1002

Mississippi electric blues picker, featured on the recent "Deep Blues" film and soundtrack, makes his first full-fledged recording partly thanks to journalist Palmer, who taped him and his band on location at the juke joint where they've held court for years. This strain of Delta blues is so pure, so close to the genre's roots, that it's rarely recorded. Fortunately, a slice of it is now available for everyone to hear. Contact: 601-236-3110.

Courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries.
In late December, the leaves are gone from the trees in northeastern Mississippi, and the kudzu has shriveled up to brown vines. Suddenly you can see through the vegetation to the fields and woods beyond the road, and you realize just how rural this pocket of the South is—too hilly for agribusiness and too backwater for high tech industry. As you drive west down Route 4, the wooden telephone poles flip by and stars shine bright in the sky, unchallenged by city lights.

On the north side of the highway, about 12 miles west of Holly Springs, and one mile east of Chulahoma, is Junior's Place, ground zero for some of the most thrilling music being made in America today. If you drove by it on a weekday, you would swear it was an abandoned building, for there are no visible signs on the squat, former gas station/former sanctified church—just peeling paint and half-burnt posters. If you drive by on a night that David "Junior" Kimbrough has opened up his legendary juke joint, however you will find the muddy parking lot full of pickup trucks and secondhand gas guzzlers.

Because the blues is still a Saturday-night, drinking-and-dancing, social music in this isolated corner of the Mississippi hill country, it has remained a vital, contemporary form rather than a tradition to be preserved. And because the region has been largely ignored by the modern world, this brand of blues has escaped homogenization and kept alive those idiosyncrasies that put the African into African-American music. It wasn't until 1991 that Kimbrough and his longtime pal and rival R.L. Burnside cut their first full-length albums for the Redeling FreightPossum label. They were brilliant recordings, but they never reached more than a few thousand music insiders.

In the ensuing months, however, the secret of the Mississippi hill may finally leak out to the wider world. This spring, Fat Possum will release four albums with Capricorn Records (home of alt-rockers 311 and Cake) and four more with Epiphany Records (home of punk/jam band Ramblin'). By the end of the year, Fat Possum will have issued a dozen new titles, more than the total it has released in its previous six years of existence. It's happening not a
APPENDIX C
COMPLETE ORAL HISTORIES

Cedric Burnside

Tripp: Alright, man. That was uh, that’s one of the longest things…it’s pretty ridiculous but they make me do it

Cedric: Haha, it’s all good. It helps you out in the long run.

Tripp: Yep. That’s what’s up man…But man I guess the first question is kinda…it’s kinda open ended man… I just wanna know what it was like growing up in the Hill Country and livin’ in the Hill Country first…

Cedric: Well, uh…I have to say, I …I loved it. You know um, we was a pretty poor family. You know my big daddy was a sharecropper for a long time. You know uh, as far as I could remember by about 6-7 years old, you know we stayed in this little shack house with maybe about 4 rooms, total, haha, uh and we stayed there for food and shelter. My big daddy sharecropped, he (blank 4:18 says something with an f) gardens all day and uh you know when it was time to harvest the crop, uh, we got half and the landlord got half and you know we just id that…you know, all year round pretty much…and um we stayed there because the landlord had a house and my grand daddy worked for him so he let us stay there while my grad dad worked and we split crops (4:45)

But um, my grand dad and him used to have house parties, just about every weekend and um people would come from miles around, you know? 30-40 miles you know right 5:00 inaudible and just jam out drank a little moonshine and have fun, right there on the front porch.

But the memories you know, I remember, was pretty awesome you know and I wouldn’t trade them for the world. You know I’m glad to be a part of the Burnside family and you know I’m glad to grow up and learn a lot from my big daddy as well…which is R.L. Burnside.

Tripp: Mhm…Uh, I watched some videos of you man, uh, from the archives and you were…man you could barely hear over the drum set but you were back there playing um, how’d you uh…what was the first…how’d you get involved with it man…was it your, was your grandfather just like “hey Cedric, sit down and play…” you know? Was he just…it seems like from when I’ve talked to people it seems like he was a real easy going guy so, he was just real…

Cedric: Yep…
Tripp: ….and he was just …how were you attracted to the drums?

Cedric: Well, like I said, um, I wanna clear something before I answer that…the guy you saw on the drums, the little guy, I think that was my uncle Dwayne….Um and I wanna say it because some people will get it mixed up. But um, I started playing drums just by watching my big daddy and my dad as well you know, play at the house parties.
Tripp: Mhm…

Cedric: …and it was something I always wanted to do. You know my dad was a drummer, Calvin Jackson…

Tripp: Right…

Cedric: …and um, it was something I always wanted to do and every time I would look at them, you know, every weekend play I was like to myself, I gotta do that. I got to play the drums, you know, I loved it. And you know, I liked the guitar too, but the drums just really fascinated me. And one day I just found the courage, I was about 7-8 years old, when I found the courage to just jump on the drums. You know? It didn’t really matter if I could play em’ good or not it was just breaking the ice and the first thing is just getting’ on em’ and so I did.

And you know I played a little bit, and the people was just like “look at that little young boy playin’ the drums…he gon’ be good someday” and that kind of motivated me and kept me in it, you know?

Around about ten years old, I was playing in the Juke Joints, you know? So uh, I just stayed with it and…it just progressed you know, more and more as I stayed with it, you know?

Tripp: Did uh, I know sometimes they say that uh, I got to talk to Amos Harvey a little bit um and he was…

Cedric: That’s my guy, man!

Tripp: Yeah, he was Amos was awesome, man. He said uh…

Cedric: Yeah, that’s my dude. He’s a really good guy.

Tripp: Yeah he was the one who gave me…man, his stories are just, you know, amazing. He was the one that started the trend in telling me, kinda you know everybody I’ve talked to was saying the same thing about your grandfather, that he was just the happiest dude, nicest guy to be around, you know and um, he said uh, Amos said that sometimes R.L. would sometimes jump behind the drums and play you know?

Cedric: Yeah!

Tripp: …and uh, watching him do that, what was it like to just kinda, I imagine you really looked up to your, to R.L. right?

Cedric: Oh, man, he was like my father, uh, I stayed with him from when I was 6-7 years old to when I was old enough to move out on my own. I really looked up to him, man.

Tripp: And uh, did he just be like hey man, jump on the drums and just jam sometimes?
Cedric: yeah well, that’s pretty much how he would do it. You know, he’ll tell me you know “you’ll never learn if you never get on them” You know he always tell me that. Uh, even when I didn’t have much confidence getting on them you know he was like you know you get better if you stay on them. You never learn or get better if you don’t stay on them. And so I that’s something I always did, I always no matter what, if it was just one person listening to me, or f it was 200 people listening at me I, I just stayed on the drums, you know?

And uh, watching my big daddy, he did some of, some of everything, you know even if he couldn’t play it that good, he still tried it, you know, I saw him try to play bass and he was okay on bass and you know, uh, he used to play Fife and Drum with uh, Okatana (9:52) uh, back in the day. Um, before I was born and a little bit after I was born too and so I wouldn’t be surprised, you know if my granddad could play every instrument…

Tripp: Yeah.

Cedric: You know? He would try everything.

Tripp: What…what was it like, I hear a lot of people talk about you know Hill Country music and uh, just how it’s so different, so unique uh, um , but what you know, when do you think people really start to say hey, this is Hill Country music, man…like it exists, you know, people outside of Holly springs. When do you think that kind of happened?

Cedric: Well…I would have to say you know, my big daddy, being from the hill country, um, you know some people get Hill Country and Delta mixed up and I would say it’s kinda similar, but it’s different. You know um, Hill Country got that, that just hypnotic beat that you just drawn to. It’s got that real foot stomping, you know, pumping music.

And you know um, it changes when it get ready…(11:08) You know on Delta music, you know uh, I love Delta music and but, it’s got a different time and the timing is almost…you know…the 12 bar, you know, the 8 bar, and but Hill Country music don’t, it don’t have any bars…(laughs) you know you can’t really change on the 16 bar or nothing like that, or you know, the 12 bar…you can’t do that. The people just change when they’re ready and I like to call it “feel” music because you have to feel it, you know?

You’re gonna have to feel it and um, as well as…getting it out there, my big daddy toured before I was born and after you know, solo…uh, for a while and he you know, pretty much overseas and in the states and he didn’t do it much, but he did do it you know sometimes, and you know he kinda got it over there, he kinda got it known a little bit…and from that people will travel to Mississippi you know, to the Hill Country, to get more, you know We’ll be outside playing and we’ll just see maybe a camper pull up or two or three cars, pull up and they wanna come here my granddad play.

And um, you know these people be from everywhere… you know from San Francisco to from Australia…you know, they be from every where, you know? And um, my big daddy sometimes he be on the tractor in the field and we’ll have to run out there to the field and tell him you know “big daddy, big daddy, somebody’s here you know, from out of town and they wanna, wanna see
you, wanna talk to you” and he’ll go get, park the tractor and go and get off the tractor and come up to the house and sit on the front porch and play the guitar for a hour or so and he leaves you know, he’ll jump back on the tractor and go back to work, you know?

Tripp: Wow, man…

Cedric: It, it was you know quite an experience, and a beautiful thing, as well.

Tripp: So he was just, he was just willing to share his music I mean like all the time…

Cedric: He was willing to share anytime. It didn’t matter who came. You know, some people came and…and even though we had a full four room house, with no running water, no toilet, you know no kitchen sink, no nothing you know we hauled water for years…uh, but people came all the time and some of them even camped there for the weekend. They camped out at our house, and our house was so, so raggedy and poor looking so we were like woah…why would anybody camp here? You know? But they didn’t really see that…all they saw was the Hill Country blues made them feel good, it made them feel awesome and that’t what they wanted and nothing else mattered. And that was a beautiful thing as well.

Tripp: What was it like watching you…I mean what was it like uh watching your grandfather interact with people, you know, kind of like that. Cause a lot of people, you know, a lot of musicians are you know, from what I’ve experienced, a lot of them are kinda like you know, hey this is my thing, like you can only watch me do it on stage…what was it like watching him being like so…engaged with anybody?

Cedric: Well, I have to say it was a beautiful thing, and it was real. You know casue sometimes he gets so to the point with so few words it just really blow people minds. They looking for him to say something else and (laughs) it’ll already be cleared up, you know? (laughs) You know they might ask them you know why he loved to play the guitar so much and he might tell them you know that’s what I always wanted to do uh, that’s what I love. And he’ll be done with it and really that’s the answer to the question, that’s what he loved.

Tripp: Mhm.

Cedric: and so people expected him to say a little bit more. But he just wasn’t that guy. He told you what, what it was and he didn’t mind saying that and he also didn’t mind playing for you you know, he was just a real and genuine and real guy. And I like to think of you know myself as, you know follow him in that characteristic because I love that about him. You know that’s one of my favorite things about my big daddy, is he was so real, you know?

Tripp: Mhm…Do you remember the first time you played the drums with him in front of an audience?

Cedric: I do! I cant remember the name of the venue but my first time uh, well, just playin’ in front of an audience with my big daddy, you know I started playing in the juke joint, but uh, when I left Mississippi and I did my first, you know, professional show with him, I went to
Toronto, Canada. I never forget, because you know, it was a different crowd um, it wasn’t nothing like playing in the juke joint, you know I was so use to playing in the juke joint, you know it wasn’t nothing to me, cause I had got use to it.

But I left Mississippi for the first time and um drove to Canada with me, my big daddy and Kenny Brown, it was you know, butterflies in my stomach, I was like are they gonna like this music? What are they gonna think about it, you know? And so I go nervous and scared all over again and um, you know, once again, my big daddy said “it’s going to be all right, just do what you always do. Do what you do at the juke joint” you know, and so I always listened to him. I know he wouldn’t tell me nothing wrong so I just got up there and did it and um, and people was clapping their hands after the first song and loving it and that right there made me feel awesome. And butterflies went away and uh, I never had them again, from that day to this one.

Tripp: yeah that’s crazy!

Cedric: Yeah I know, I never had them again…

Tripp: So it was probly, probly you know, having an advantage of being around somebody who’s just so encouraging you know, wasn’t like “hey man, better do this” you know “hey, it’ll work out, it’ll be alright” you know?

Cedric: Yeah, well he always had an encouraging word for you. You know um, you cant be too brutal or too, you know, uh sound to mean especially to a kid. I was a kid. So he just wanted me to know, to know that I can really, if I put my mind to it I can do what I wanna do, you know? That’s what he really wanted to uh, (cough) excuse me, instill in me uh, and he did. Cause you know right now…today. I’m 36 years old and I’m still playing the music I love you know, not only playing the music I love but he instilled in me to even write the music that I love. You know so, I write music as well and I’d just like to thank God and R.L. Burnside you know for uh, helping me along, along the years. You know?

Tripp: I know you said that you’re playing the music you love and I know your grandfather did too, a lot of people that I’ve talked to for R.L., he just wanted to play the music it wasn’t, ever really about the money for him… Um, you know, could you kind of maybe talk about that just um, watching him career, playing for people, um…

Cedric: Yeah uh, I have to say…money is uh, good. We all know that’s what makes the world go round, but when it came to Big daddy, it was you know, he did it because he loved it and you know and he watched the look on people’s face. You know a lot of people come up to him and would cry, you know they would literallry cry and tell him how much his music meant to them and what it brought them through over hard times they might have had in the past…and you know he would just grab his guitar, whether he was onstange, in the dress, in the dressing room or whether he was at his house, he would just grab his guitar and play his music you know… they wanted to hear it, he wanted to play it for them. It wasn’t…it really wasn’t about the money. Um of course the money helped when he started making it…

Tripp: Mhmm…
Cedric: But uh, it wasn’t really about the money because people came from all over the world, all the time to his house. And he would play beautifully and just as hard right there as he would on stage and they didn’t offer him a dollar and he didn’t ask them for anything and you know, I know he did it all out of love.

Tripp: Mhmm. I know that when he was on tour that um, I found some awesome articles um, when I was at the Ole Miss Archives, just newspaper articles and magazine articles and what he would…one thing he’d always say you know, he’d be on tour or whatever but it might be ten days and he’d say I gotta get back man, I gotta get back to my family you know I gotta get back to doing my other job…

Cedric: hahaha, yeah…

Tripp: It seemed like he was so like his family was the most important thing for him and providing for them was the most important thing for him. So what was it like, you know he’d be on tour, but you know then he’d come home to you guys you know, what was…did you know he wanted to come home when he was did he work just as hard at his other job, you know?

Cedric: Man, definitely, um… you know nothing that my big daddy wouldn’t do for his family. You know we all uh….we all stayed with big daddy. I wrote a song about uh, big daddy and my big momma…but we all stayed with them and when I say all of us stayed with them, I mean the kids stayed with them, the grandkids was with them and some of the great grandkids was in the same house, you know…we all was in the same four room shack house and you know in the middle of Mississippi (22:18) blank Mississippi, hill Country and you know just wooded area, you know no running water and it was at least 15 people in that house, you know so he was a, he was a, back bone of the whole family. Everybody knew it.

Everybody loved him you know, genuinely everybody loved everything about big daddy because he…he was worthy of all of that love, you know? Um but yeah man…he took care of his family to the fullest. Uh and he took care of me, I’m his grandson. I stayed with him until I was bale to move out of the house on my own, and get my own place. So, yeah. He was really the backbone. He was you know traveling just for you know, I wouldn’t say just for his family, but he was traveling to show his love and his talent to the people that loved his music but he also would let em’ know that you know, he’s a family man and uh, he liked to show his love at home, with his family, as well as show his love to any person on the street, or any person at the club…he would give you the shirt off his back, but he definitely loved his family. Definitely.

Tripp: What was he doing when he wasn’t touring or wasn’t playing music?

Cedric: Well he would spend a little time at home. He would cut the grass, you know, he would take the kids to the doctor’s appointment, you know he was just a regular, regular dad, you know, and um awesome. You know things like if the house need like fixing on, he would go get the parts to fix on the house whether it was wood or the outside of the house, whether it was electric part to put up a light, you know my big daddy was kind of a jack of all trades. Uh, you
know when it came down to doing a little house work or fixing on the car he was, just a regular
guy…you know?

Tripp: Yeah…what, what was it like or what is it like, what was it like if you could describe the
emotions or the energy of what’s it like playing in a juke joint in the Hill Country?

Cedric: (Laughs) well….It’s wild as hell. (Laughs) uh, but wild in a good way um, you know, a
juke joint, I like to think of a juke joint as you know the front porch of our house was a juke joint
for a long time, you know? People would come from miles around you know, and, and just have
fun. Drink a little moonshine, play a little music and dance all night. Uh and then you know,
some juke joints when you find a nice building uh you know, it’s probably old as hell, but still in
pretty decent shape. Come people would find these juke joint buildings and have them a real juke
joint and that juke joint become popular…you know like junior kimbrough. You know growing
up around Junior Kimbrough and his juke joint, you know, there it a weekend where somebody
didn’t come out and have fun. Some weekends it might be ten people. Uh, you know some
weekend it might be 300 people, so packed you cant hardly walk in the juke joint.

But uh, it was just a place where everybody you know, come after work, you know even if you
didn’t have a job you’d come from home, you know after spending all day at home, maybe you
cook, you’re a housewife or you’re a husband that work at home and you do all your work at
home and then you wanna come out you know and, and enjoy a little music, people would come
to the Juke Joint. You know, I saw people come in from you know they work on cars and they
have oil all over their face, all over their clothes, it didn’t even matter. They’d leave work and
come straight to the juke joint….

Tripp: Mhm.

Cedric: Drink a little moonshine and listen to a little music and it was just a beautiful thing to do.
And that’s all a juke joint is really. Just a place, a gathering where uh people can have fun and
just be themselves, you know…

Tripp: What um…what was it like playing with Junior Kimbrough? Cause I know you played
with him a little bit too, right?

Cedric: Aw, yeah. Um, it was, it was cool. It was a really good experience for me um I played
with Mr. Junior Kimbrough that was the first juke joint I ever started playing at. Me and my
uncle, Gary Burnside…Um, I was about 10 years old and I was playing drums, good
enough…when I turned about ten to play at the juke joint and uh, Gary which was two years
older than me, I was about ten he was about 12 you know, um a lot of times the bass player or
the drummer wouldn’t show up…you know maybe they’d too full of moonshine and didn’t make
it or whatever the case, you know? But me and Gary would be sort of like the back up band and
you know, we would play when they didn’t come and they would hide us behind the beer cooler
you know, when the police come cause you know we was the band and if we get kicked out there
wouldn’t be no music. It would just be solo, and not that they didn’t like it but they enjoyed the
band… you know and so Mr. Kimbrough was you know they would hide us, and the people
would come in, they’ll buy us cheeseburgers and drinks and try to (28:25) sit in front of us cause we’re up under the beer cooler (laughs) you know to hide us from the cops.

So uh, it was a beautiful experience, man. And you know, like I said I wouldn’t trade it for nothing in the world. Mr. Junior Kimbrough and my big daddy, you know, R.L. Burnside and along with Mr. Othar Turner…um I love those guys and I miss em’ so much. Um and I just like to give big shouts out to them for instilling the music in me and my uncles and other musicians that’s in the area you know that love the Hill Country blues…and, and play the hill country blues, you know uh, to keep it alive. Ugh I’m just so thankful and grateful for all those cats, man.

Tripp: What was…What was Junior like, I’ve heard a lot of people had experiences with your grandfather they say he was just real personable you know, he was always out there…but a lot of people, I wasn’t able to get a lot of stories about Junior, so what was Junior like?

Cedric: Well to me, uh, Mr. Junior Kimbrough was a uh, um, very serious guy, when it came down to his music and his family. But he had a real comical you know, attitude. You know, he liked to crack jokes, he liked to hang out with his friends and you know, drink a little moonshine like all old cats love to do and but when it came down to his music, like, uh to run a juke joint, he was always there…every now and then he might have been, you know uh, a little ill and like had a cold or something and couldn’t make it on time, but he always came.

But, um, pretty much he was just um you know, on time every weekend to open up the club and sometimes me him and Gary…early in the morning…when he come to open up the club and clean up to get ready for that evening, we’ll practice a little bit, you know, him and Gary practice most of the time. ME and him and uh, Gary would practice a little bit, and um…and um, he would just show us um, a few licks on the guitar and then he’ll tell me how to play the beat on the drums and then we’ll just do it like that, you know, and get prepared for that evening.

So he was very serious about his music and very serious about his family. Uh, that’s something he didn’t play around with and while he was playing his music, he didn’t like to be disturbed…you know he, wanted to play his music and get everything down, he would lock the door, you know uh after we clean up in the morning he would lock the door while he showed us the music he wanted to show us. You know, to make sure we got it and wasn’t disturbed.

But um he was, he was a good guy, Mr. Junior Kimbrough was a really good guy and uh. I loved him to death and you know um, a lot of his music, really you know, helped us out to become the musicians that we are today, as well as my big daddy, you know?

Tripp: Mhmm…

Cedric: So yeah, he was a really good guy man, too. In my perspective, you know?

Tripp: When, when your grandfather and Junior were signed by Fat Possum…it was almost like blew up, like the Hill Country was like man, the whole world knew about Hill Country then it was to this whole different audience, man…Um, can you kinda explain what that was like?
Cause I know…I know you did uh, you were on all of those records except one… I think, right? When he was with Fat Possum?

Cedric: Well yeah…it was a couple ones I want on but it was about three or four but yeah, just about all of them, all the rest of them…uh, after my dad played, I was on.

Tripp: What was uh, what was it like…can you kind of explain to me like, alright hey, we’re just playing and all of a sudden we’re signed by this record label and now we’re all over the place, what was that…what was that like…

Cedric: Well I, I have to say as bein a teenager at the time it was like…crazy good (laughs) uh, you know wild. But you know, Fat Possum did a lot for Hill Country Blues and for that I’ll always be grateful for them for carrying the Hill Country Blues as far as it could go.

My, my big daddy and Junior Kimbrough, before they started playing, before they sort uh you know, got with uh, Fat Possum and Fat Possum started pushing the music, you know the music didn’t get uh didn’t get a lot of recognition it shoulda got a long time ago…But just because, you know, they came up on Fat Possum, and they loved the music enough to do something with it, it…it…got a following, you know um…I guess late 90’s like about 90 you know 96-97 when it starts getting, you know, well known. Uh, the Hill Country Blues and you know it was a long time waiting. And befor you know it, you know, in the early 2000’s we was just touring? (34:15) all over the place…people was listening at ths music and was loving this music and hey wanted more of it and we was happy to give more, you know?

It was, it was a beautiful thing for me, as well as my big daddy, but one thing that I didn’t, you know I just, couldn’t really get over, until um, very recently uh, maybe you know, 3-4 years ago…my big daddy and Junior Kimbrough played this music for so long but when it staredd reaching, you know, more people that’s when they started getting more ill and so they didn’t really reach the potential they could of reached when they was here. You know of course they getting a whole lot of it while they’re you know, deceased…which happens on a lot of occasions, but I…I just wish they could of got a little bit more out there, you know, before they you know…passed. And so that’s one of the reasons why I love to just keep this music going and play it till I die…because I love that music so much, man. It’s part of me and uh, and I love those guys so much, you know, they’re a part of me and just, I just wanna keep this music alive…you know?

Tripp: What was you know…when I talk to people, they try to break down sound bars and riffs and I mean im not musically inclined, man …I’m just a guy in the audience that digs the music, you know?

Cedric: Yeah.

Tripp: But what’s uh, when you look at your grandfather’s music and you look at Juniors’….what are the simililarites and the differenes I guess in them….especially since you’ve played with both of them, you know? Um what was that like, you know playing with your grandfather and then playing with Junior…the music style and type of music?
Cedric: Well, you know I have to say with them being two different people...you know nobody have the same style, but you know you can grow up in the same area ... and the music is the same you know, Hill Country feeling you know, with Mr. Kimbrough, even though his style was um...you know, different from my grand dad, it was still Hill Country. And he still had his own timing.

(laughs) you know he still had his own timing and his own feel. He didn’t change when it came down to you know 8 bars, 12 bars, he still didn’t do that, um, even though it was his own style, own feeling...he still changed when he got ready. So that was a Hill Country style which was Mr. Junior Kimbrough’s Hill Country style, because he was from the Hill Country, you know?

And when it comes down to my big daddy music, his music was his own rhythm, his own style...and he again was a musician that changed when he got ready. You know he wrote different music, but it was Hill Country as well, but it was his hill country. So you know, I like to think of it as feel music and you know Junior Kimbrough feel music and R.L. Burnside feel music...you know, that’s the best I can explain it, you know?

Tripp: What was your, what was your favorite song of your grandfathers you know what was your favorite song you guys would ever play together?

Cedric: I would have to say, man...skinny woman was one of my favorite. But I got so many favorites of my big daddy, you know “Going Down South” was one of my favorites, you know um, Miss May Bell, was one of my favorites...

Tripp: Yeah..

Cedric: You know Junior Kimbrough, All Night Long, was a favorite for a whole lot of people...you know that was just a beautiful, beautiful song...kinda a medium tempo song where you could just kinda shake your head to it all the time. Uh, Meet Me In the City was another one of my favorites of Junior Kimbrough you know it was one of those slow, really sweet...uh, it was a love song and people felt it... you know everytime he played that song people would get on the floor and slow dance and you know get close...(laughs)

Tripp: I guess one of my last questions, man was kinda of you know both these guys were so successful I mean like their music is just you know, it’s everywhere now and you have a lot of people, a lot of Blues artists who you know were in the Delta, moved to Chicago and you know some other people that moved to uh, Memphis...what is it about the hill country that kept you know, your grandfather and Junior there?

Cedric: you know...I, I ...I don’t really know man uh, I do know that um Mississippi to me is a beautiful state, you know um, a lot of people might not see it like that. But I guess the same reason that I love Mississippi is the same reason they loved it so much and stayed here. R.L. went all over the world to so many beautiful places, man...and loved those places, but nothing made me wanna leave Mississippi.
And so if I have to answer that for them, I would have to say they kinda felt that same way. You know?

Tripp: I’ve heard, just heard from a lot of people, especially talking to Amos, he just talks about culture and the Hill Country and Family…and you know…

Cedric: Yeah…

Tripp: and that’s what people say keeps a lot of people there. Um, not just your physical family but like but just you know everybody…

Cedric: Yeah! The Hill Country Family

Tripp: Yeah. 40:20 (y’all talk over one nother so it’s hard to tell who is who and what the other says)

Cedric: I got you.

Tripp: Yeah and the Hill Country…so you’ve been in the Delta and you’ve been in the Hill Country you know people tell me differences like you know geographically but you know like you said earlier, a lot of newspaper articles I found…before Fat Possum would call your grand dad a bluesman or a delta bluesman and uh…

Cedric: Yeah…

Tripp: And uh, in one of the interviews he straight up said, naw man, it’s not Delta Blues but It doesn’t bother me…

Cedric: (Laugh) he’s a good guy…

Tripp: why do you think that newspapers and everybody was calling the music Delta Blues until then?

Cedric: Well uh, I would have to say because they didn’t really know…you know um, if they called it Delta, in the Hill Country then you know, maybe they didn’t really understand uh, what type of music my big daddy said it was or maybe they just didn’t get the real deal facts…but either way, now people know Hill Country Blues from Delta Blues…

Tripp: Mhmm.

Cedric: And um, I am just glad that Hill Country Blues is still around and Delta Blues is still around but uh my big daddy just got nominated…I mean just got inducted into the Blues Hall of Fam, not nominated, uh, this year actually and it made me feel so good and it was a long time waiting… so now Hill Country Blues is on the map and you know, it’s going strong and Imma’ try and make sure it reach the top. You know?
Tripp: You grew up…did you guys always grow up calling it Hill Country cause people I talked to you know and you know ive talked to a lot of people so far and some people are like no one really knew it was called Hill Country…and we didn’t…it wasn’t really identifiable…did you guys always call it Hill Country Blues like did y’all know like hey, this is our genre, man…This is our subset of Blues.

Cedric: Well yeah, it is. It def…Hill Country is our style of music, it’s from you know North Mississippi uh, a little town called Holly Springs…but you know like Hill Country music from holly springs, I’m pretty sure you know everyplace got a Hill Country…somewhere. Uh, but here in Holly Springs, our Hill Country Blues is way different from Blues you would hear, even in Memphis…You know and Memphis is about 45 mins away from us.

Uh, but the Blues here in Holly Springs Mississippi it’s different than Memphis Blues. Um…it’s a different style, it’s a different rhythm, different beat, as well as Delta Blues…When you think of Delta, you think of Clarksdale Mississippi…You know and uh, Cleveland Mississippi…You know it’s a lot of Delta Blues, uh, in that area casue it’s the Delta.

Well we’re bout’ two and a half hours from Clarksdale you know, and so the rhythm is just a little bit different, the, the beat is a little different…and just like they created the Delta Blues in the Delta, we created our sound in the Hill Country, you know…the Hill Country Blues… and so people might think, you know the Hill Country Blues is Delta Blues, but when they hear it…I get asked this question sometimes, why is the rhythm different? Because it’s different music.

Tripp: Mhmm.

Cedric: You know?

Tripp: Last question, last question… this is just something I been wonderin man, every picture I’ve ever seen of your grandfather, man he’s always smiling, always laughing…you know always looks like he’s havin’ a good time. And then on his album covers, he just looks so mad, man…like you know, was he just like posing? Or what was going on? I’ve just been curious about that.

Cedric: Well uh, if you’ve ever looked at the album cover on “Come on In”…uh he’s smiling he’s just got a really big smile you know on that cd. Um, sometimes my, my big daddy will have a straight face…and people would ask him you alright R.L.? and he’s like yeah, you know he just have that face um, so I think that’s what some of those pictures are, is just him having a straight face and not because he’s not happy or enjoying life it’s because they might have shot him with a straight face. And on some of his photos and CDs they would tell him to look a certain way, like on Mr. Wizard…

Tripp: Mhm…

Cedric: When he makin that face on there with the weird lookin hat he got a weird face you know, like a mean face but they want him to look like he got a weird mean face because he’s a
wizard. Um, but he overall was just a happy, genuine, loving guy. You know and that’s really you know, all I can say about it. He was just a beautiful guy. Had a beautiful heart.

Tripp: Alright, I think that’s all I got, man.

Cedric: Alright, alright man.
Garry Burnside

Interviewer: Let me go ahead and start with this. I guess my first question, man, is, what are your earliest memories of music and hill country music?

Interviewee: What's what now?

Interviewer: What are your earliest memories of hearing the hill country music?

Interviewee: Man, I started playing when I was maybe about—I made my first CD about 11, when I was 11 years old. I was playing with Junior at the time on bass. He had showed me stuff on the bass guitar. I'd been hearing it all the time through my dad and all this stuff.

Interviewer: When I was listening to one of Cedric's albums, he says that he was beating on buckets and things, and also Garry is with him.

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: Did you guys really used to beat on buckets and stuff and just make music however?

Interviewee: Man, hell yeah, man. We were about eight, nine years old, coming up, that's how we learned cuz we couldn't afford instruments. When my dad had something, we wouldn't just—we didn't know if we could play or not, and it was hard to get instruments. They ain't gonna tear the shit up. We had to show and prove that we could do a lot of shit. Yeah, man. We've been playing together, man, since he was about seven, I was about nine. Then I started playing with Junior at 11, and I think I started with my dad about 13, 14 years old when he started playing.

Interviewer: I know you play bass and you play guitar and you play a lot of other instruments, but—so what age did you exactly learn how to play?

Interviewee: I'd say about nine, I was playing drums. I could play drums about nine, and I could play a little bass guitar. Junior heard me play. Junior Kimbrough heard me play. He used to come over. He stayed right next door to Junior right beside his club, so he used to come over about two or three times a week and teach me stuff on bass guitar, on the bass. I've been doing that the longest. I ain't been playing lead guitar, you know what I'm saying, that long, not in no clubs. I'd been playing at the house mostly and was learning as I was going. Bass and drums. Drums were my first thing, then bass, then lead guitar.

Interviewer: I heard this one song you got on your SoundCloud. It's called Promise My Dad. You talk about playing the guitar and stuff. Was that one thing you told your dad you were gonna learn how to do was play the guitar?
Interviewee: Yeah. Yeah. You know what I'm saying? They figured we were full of shit cuz we were so young, we don't want to learn, but I always let him know, you know what I'm saying, that I could—that I was gonna play and get everything right. Cuz coming up as a kid down south in Mississippi, it's hard not to be in a lot of shit, in a lot of trouble. I was playing music, but I was doing a lot of other shit too, you know what I'm saying, as a kid.

I let him know that I wasn't gonna go to jail. I was gonna play music. I was gonna make it, playing my guitar. By the time I really got to—I got to show them, get my own thing and everything, he was already up in age. You know what I'm saying? Then when he passed, I just made it—I thought of my dad and let everybody know I'm still gonna keep that promise to him. Even though he's gone, he's still here to me.

Interviewer: When you were growing up, man, what was it like? I heard your dad was real encouraging. Cedric was like, "Man, he didn't care what it sounded like. He was like, 'Just play. Just play.'" What was your dad like teaching you? Did he just enjoy it?

Interviewee: Yeah. I loved playing music. Yeah. He wasn't that strict on you about how good your technique was at playing. He just liked to see us trying to go it, regardless how long it took us to get great at it. We was young, but we could catch on ASAP, quick. It was just in us to do it. To me, it don't seem like it took that long. I just picked up the guitar and started playing it. I know it took a while doing it, but I was playing since I was young, little, so it really doesn't seem hard to me. I know it couldn't have been easy.

He was a good dad, man. He was there for us, and he always was telling constructive stuff and everything, made sure we was on the right page and shit. Yeah. It was really fun learning from him, my brother Duwayne, them, all of them, the all-stars. I learned from a lot of people, man, just being around them growing up. I had the best life to be around a lot of big-time musicians that's big-time, really big now, you know what I'm saying? They wasn't that big then, but I had—we're still like family. I had a lot of time to learn from them then, and as well I still can go see them and do that, you know what I'm saying, now.

Interviewer: I was wondering, do you remember the first time that you played with your dad in front of people?

Interviewee: Yeah. I probably was 13. It was at Junior Kimbrough's juke joint cuz my dad used to come in there and play the juke joint when he was in town. He didn't have no bass player. It was a few shows of me and him. Him and Junior had the same—they were with the same record company. We had the same venue in our city. Other than that, I really didn't play with him.
We played mostly at home, like house parties at Junior's, somewhere like that, at house parties, like Junior's juke joint. I was about 13 years old.

Interviewer: You were pretty much a bass man for the earlier part of your life?

Interviewee: Yeah. Pretty much, I was—I'd say about 22, 23. You know what I'm saying? I played bass with Junior from 11 until I was 20-something years old until he died. Then I started my own thing with me and Seth start the Burnside Exploration Band. Then after that, we went our separate ways. He got his thing, and I got my thing. We had different ideas of music at the time, different styles and way we wanted to go with it.

Interviewer: I heard from a lot of people I've talked to, man, they say in order to experience hill country music, you've got to go to the hill country. I heard people used to come from all over to pull up at y'all's house and just sit to hear your dad play. Do you remember anything like that?

Interviewee: Yeah, man. Lots of people, man. I don't even remember their names or a lot of names, but man, we've been in magazines, man, and stuff ever since I was in diapers. I'm talking about all the people that come out on videos, that plays on YouTube. I ain't big enough to play. Once I got big enough to play, you know what I'm saying, I remember a lot of—like I said, around about 12, 13 years old, you know what I'm saying, 11 to 13, I'm out with Junior playing. I was out there too when they come around. They've been coming around since I was in diapers, man. They sit down, man. We had some people used to come stay with us to learn stuff from Dad, learn his style, his way. If you got the time to go play with somebody like that, man, who wouldn't take it? Yeah, I've seen a lot of that stuff, man.

Interviewer: People would just come up and hang out with your dad and he was cool with that?

Interviewee: Yeah, man. You know what I'm saying? A lot of musicians, man, that I know nowadays, it's hard getting them to sign autographs when they're backstage. At his first show, he was so cool. He didn't care who you was or what color you were. If you were interested in playing, you want to know his music, you know what I'm saying, he could show what you he know. You know what I'm talking about? That's all he could do. He was cool with that. I also teach music myself too now.

Interviewer: You have that same way about it where you just—music is music, and you want to share with anybody.

Interviewee: Right. Right. Right. Because that way, your music lives forever through other people.
Interviewer: Yeah. That seems to be—especially in the hill country, man, I feel like everybody—like it's a tradition, they keep it going, whereas in other places, it dies out.


Interviewer: You spent a lot more time with Junior, I guess, playing-wise, huh?

Interviewee: Right. Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: It's funny because a lot of people got stories about your dad. I feel like a lot of people, they said we was real outgoing, and he would go places, but a lot of people said Junior was a real private guy, so I don't know that much about Junior Kimbrough. Could you describe him at all to me as what he was like a person?

Interviewee: Junior was a great guy, man, and a wonderful teacher. You know what I'm saying? Teaching music and stuff. Junior had his ways of—my dad was more of like a family man. You know what I'm saying? At the house, you know what I'm saying? Junior was a family man, but he never liked to—even when he had two or three women at a time, Junior was [inaudible 13:17]. You know what I'm saying? He had that kind of lifestyle going. He also had his own club, so he didn't have to travel as much as my dad cuz he mostly made people come to him cuz he knew he made his own money by having business.

All my dad did was travel. We went overseas two or three times, but not as much as my dad traveling. Junior wasn't big on the traveling, man. You know what I'm saying? He taught me street life. You know what I'm saying? Real life, to know about the streets and stuff. You know what I'm saying? A lot of stuff that I wouldn't have learned from my dad because he didn't hang out like that. You know what I'm saying? He was cool guy, man. He cared about his music, did his music right, you know what I'm saying, didn't interfere with his music, man, you're hanging around. He's the type that got time to hang out, kick it with the guys. People have said the thug guys. He was that type of guy.

Interviewer: Some of his music's really crazy. It's like, he's got "Meet Me in the City", which I just love that song, man. It's a beautiful song. Then he's got songs that are dark like "You Better Run". How did Junior write his stuff?

Interviewee: He'd just sit there. He'd write by experience. Like I said, he had a lot of women. He might just look at a woman and tell her, "Girl, you look so good." They're talking to him, pointing at them and shit. It was like that.
That's the kind of life he lived [inaudible 14:46]. He might be with this woman, this woman might run up on him like that.

Interviewer: What do you remember most about, I guess—what is your first memory playing with Junior?

Interviewee: I'm gonna say at the club, man, because I was just fascinated by being out. You know what I'm saying? I was so young. He believed in me to know his music and really was serious about it. He gave me a chance with it. I was in the club when people my age couldn’t get in. My friends would come in, and I was playing and jamming and shit. He showed me a life that I guess I liked it. You know what I'm saying? [Inaudible 15:35] playing at his club, having fun. It was something.

Interviewer: Let me say, man, when you think of the legacy that Junior and your dad had, everybody knows they made the hill country. Before then, there was no—people would call them the Delta blues and stuff. What was it about your pops and about Junior that made them—I guess made them so special?

Interviewee: Man, I guess their attitude and their style, their timing, the beat of their music. As far as I know, you know what I'm saying, they cared about their music, and they always did their best when they played somewhere. That would help anybody. I guess that's what made them, you know what I'm saying, made them fascinating people. They wasn't all stuck up like a lot of artists is now today.

Interviewer: I know people said that all these famous people used to come to Junior's joint, man. They said the Rolling Stones came. They said U2 came. All these people. Do you ever remember any of those people coming in?

Interviewee: Yeah. I remember a lot of them coming there, man. A lot of stars, man. Back—you know what I'm saying—from TV. Everybody come over there and just hung out, man. They did this movie out here. They come down here. Yes, a lot of big-time people come there, man. A lot of musicians too. I got to play with Big Jack Johnson, a lot of other musicians that are from the Delta and from everywhere else. They'd come down and just jam to be with Junior. They said Junior's band always [inaudible 17:08] guitar players come there. Some nights, I might be playing bass, man. We'd start at 5:00 in the afternoon, and I'd probably get off the bass at 1:00 that night, playing with everybody, especially my dad and my brother Dewayne [inaudible 17:22] Jim Dickinson. Everybody.

You just come down there and just jam. I learned a lot of different kind of music playing that way, playing bass behind people, so when I got the guitar with that style I learned and then my own style, come up with the
style that I got now, what I do. Yeah, man. A lot of stars came down there. I seen a lot of stuff. A lot of amazing shit happened at Junior's that a mother wouldn’t believe, unless you was there because of the way the place looked. This was a juke joint. You know what I'm saying? Wasn't no B.B. King's club, nothing fascinating like that. It was just old pictures on the wall, [inaudible 17:57], and some good music coming out of there. It brought motherfuckers from everywhere, TV, everywhere down there.

Interviewer: You got any good stories?

Interviewee: That ain't my story. You know what I'm saying? My story is just I had fun coming there. All the shows I played, everybody I played with. Playing with Junior, man, I got to meet a lot of people, a lot of stars right there, and I seen that you could make it work right there. You ain't got to travel. If people like your music, they'll come where you're at.

Interviewer: Yeah. Like you said, Junior seemed like he was more of a businessman. I heard that when he had his record deal, he wanted shit broken down. He wanted his food. He wanted to know how much he was getting paid. Do you think he looked at his music or his business different than your dad did?

Interviewee: I think Junior doesn't—he didn't really care about traveling. You know what I'm saying? Cuz all he wanted—I think this is why he got his business because he didn't—I don't think he liked to fly too much cuz we didn't go too much overseas and that. I think he just really didn't want to travel. He wanted just to help this man, you know what I'm saying, and I don't think he wanted to travel all the time. That's why I think he got his club. You know what I'm saying?

They both cared about their music in the same way, you know what I'm saying? They were both in it to make it. [Inaudible 19:13 - 19:16]. You know what I'm saying? Junior wasn't into it like that. I ain't big in flying myself, but if the [inaudible 19:23] you go to get on that and do what you got to do. That's what I think it really was. As far as both of them managing their things, about the same cuz both of them in it to win it.

Interviewer: After they got signed by Fat Possum, were they any different?

Interviewee: No. Man, it was all—they were still the same. They were still doing what they were doing. They didn't let it go to their head about being signed with it. Even though they were the top ones on the label, they still just still treated everybody the same. Anybody could play with them. They didn't mind teaching. They was cool guys. Everybody got started 19:58 cuz when they got—we all had a few shows together at certain venues. Then a lot of times, they go separate ways.
Interviewer: You guys were neighbors with Junior, or did you guys live by Junior, his juke joint or something like that, right?

Interviewee: Yeah. We stayed right next door to the club, to the juke joint.

Interviewer: I know Cedric said you guys used to play there, and sometimes, they'd hide together in beer coolers and stuff because the cops—

Interviewee: The police coming. Yeah. Cuz we're too young to be up in there.

Interviewer: How'd you get hooked up with Junior? I know he had some other people play with him, but how'd you and Cedric, how'd he talk you guys into playing with him?

Interviewee: He and my dad was friends already. Then, man, we just—he just heard me play, came up to the house and heard me playing the bass and told me to come over there sometime, and I started going over there. He started teaching me. When I got good enough to him, when I turned 11, I played my first CD with him.

Interviewer: Oh, shit. Really?

Interviewee: Mm-hmm. Been on all of them. Huh?

Interviewer: What was that? What was the first CD you did?

Interviewee: Damn, man. I can't think of the name of that motherfucker, man. You could look at the CD—you look up on YouTube. You look on there and check them out yourself. I was on all his CDs until he died. My name's on the cover as the bass player there. Me and his son, Kent Kimbrough, we was in Junior's band.

Interviewer: Man. You kicked it with Junior for a long, long time.

Interviewee: Yeah. Hell of a long time.

Interviewer: Wow, dude. Yeah. I didn't even know that. I knew you played bass with him, but I didn't you'd been with him that long.

Interviewee: Yeah. All the way until I got legal to buy alcohol. Yeah. I played from 11 years old to about 22, 23, something like that. Until he died.

Interviewer: Man, that's crazy.

Interviewee: Yeah.
Interviewer: Man, when people talk about the hill country music, man, hill country blues, I know they say it's a different style and stuff like that, but—I don't know, man. It just seems like it's a real special kind of music to people. I'm just trying to understand why that is.

Interviewee: I guess it's the beat, the tempo, the timing, you know what I'm saying, of the hill country music, man. That's what I think it is. Cuz everybody ain't got that stomp 22:43 and that timing.

Interviewer: Yeah. I was talking to Amos Harvey a little bit. He was telling me that—he said the first time that he really experienced the real blues was at Junior's. I've heard that from a lot of people. They said they went in there. It was something totally different. I guess when you're a part of that, did you know—you're sitting there and you're like, I'm playing some kind of special music, or was it, to you, I'm just playing the blues, I'm just playing the hill country blues?

Interviewee: Yeah. That's what it was to me. I'm out the house at nine, ten years old, you know what I'm saying [inaudible 23:28] just playing the music. When I seen all them stars and people come down there, I knew it had to be something about it to make them come all the way down there, but it didn't dawn on me until a lot later. Yeah. I was just happy to be out of the house at that age. A lot of kids in there watching Popeye. you know what I'm saying? I'm watching something else. Maybe [inaudible 23:45] [laughter]


Interviewee: That's all good, man. We had a good talk.

Interviewer: Yeah, man. I don't know. I'll tell you one thing. I was sitting there listening to—what album was I listening to the other day, man? I had on that "All Night Long", that one Junior's, man. Boy, man, that thing—

Interviewee: I'm on bass on that. I'm on that CD. I'm on bass on there. My name's on there. All you do is look at it. My name's on the bass there.

Interviewer: Man, that's a track right there. Amos used to tell me that sometimes, Junior could go into a club, and he could play a 60-minute set, and he would only play two songs though, but everybody was so into them, they wouldn't know that it was only two songs.

Interviewee: Yeah. I don't think he'd know it either. [Laughter] Yeah, man. He had some long songs. He knew how to stretch.
Interviewer: When you guys were playing together, did sometimes, you guys just jam or what?

Interviewee: Me and Junior?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee: Yeah, we did. Yeah. We'd just sit back. We [inaudible 25:30] a lot of times. Yeah. He'd just go do what he do.

Interviewer: A lot of guys around the hill country, you guys are all self-taught, right?


Interviewer: I know that they said your pops learned from Fred McDowell, but then he learned cuz he would just sit there and play sometimes too. Then they said Junior would just—he'd get his guitars from his brothers and sisters—his brothers, and he'd grab them and he'd play them. I don't know, man. I don't know. When you think of Junior Kimbrough, what's the first thing that comes to your mind?

Interviewee: Say what now?

Interviewer: I was saying, when you think of Junior Kimbrough, what's the first thing that comes to your mind?

Interviewee: [Inaudible 26:34 - 26:38] he wasn't lying.

Interviewer: Yeah. I did hear that, man. I heard Junior was a ladies' man.

Interviewee: Yeah, he was.

Interviewer: That's crazy, dude. I would never expect it. I'll be straight up with you. I never expected Junior to be a ladies' man, man.

Interviewee: Yeah. That's cuz you ain't known him probably about a week. [Laughter] You got to know him, come up with him. You know what I'm saying?

Interviewer: Yeah. Was he just suave? What was he?

Interviewee: I guess [inaudible 27:18]. I don't know. All I know, I had a lot of fun hanging out with him. [Laughter]

Interviewer: Oh, man. I don't know. I think that's all I got, dude.
Interviewee: Okay. Okay.

Interviewer: If you got anything else, I'm just—like you said, I'm just talking, dude. I got no real agenda or anything.

Interviewee: If something else comes across my mind, I'll hit you up, bro.

Interviewer: All right, man. I appreciate you talking to me, Garry.
Kenny Brown

Interviewer: I guess my first question, Kenny, is about—you’re from Nesbit, right?

Interviewee: Yeah. That’s where I grew up.

Interviewer: Okay. That’s in the Hill Country, what people call the Hill Country, right?

Interviewee: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. You grew up and Joe—how do you say Joe’s last name?

Interviewee: Callicott.

Interviewer: Callicott. Okay. You grew up and Joe was the one that taught you to play, right?

Interviewee: Yeah. I was already learning some, but not much. Then when I met him, he started showing me his stuff. I was going to his house every day hanging out with him.

Interviewer: What was it that attracted you to music or the Hill Country sound?

Interviewee: Well, gosh, I don’t know. I was born in ’53, so I was—when Elvis and Johnny Cash and all that stuff hit, I was there. When that stuff first started coming on the radio and TV and stuff. Then I heard the blues from other sources around.

I don’t know. I just wanted to play. I liked music. The country and the rock and roll and the blues was what was around. [Chuckles] Then when I met Joe, he started teaching me blues stuff. I just got in there, whatever, I just kept running into people like that.

Interviewer: Once you started playing and there were all different blues styles—I guess, when people talk about—one of the hardest things for me, or I think for people that are outside of music to understand is that people started calling it Hill Country in the 90s, but it had always been a different style of music or a different type.

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: Aside from technical aspects, what makes, I guess, Hill Country Blues different from Delta blues?

Interviewee: Gosh. Well, it’s more associated with the rhythms and the drums are the rhythms to it more than the Delta stuff. Most of the fife and drum bands, at least when I came along, they were up in the hills. They weren’t, as far as
I know, down in the Delta. The Hill Country stuff is more rhythmic, I think— a lot more rhythmic.

Interviewer: Yeah. That makes sense. I guess Joe [audio cuts out 05:16].

Interviewee: What?

Interviewer: I said yesterday when I was talking to Joe, he’d get his guitar and he’d play a couple things and ask me if I could hear the difference in it.

Interviewee: Yeah?

Interviewer: I could once he told me about it. I guess he was trying to tell me that there’s no need for a bass, ’cause he was playing the bass line while he was playing a rhythm. Is that what he was trying to explain to me?

Interviewee: Maybe so. When I played with RL, most times we never had a bass player, because— well, when I was learning from him we didn’t, because nobody could afford a bass or a bass amp, I guess. We never had one.

Then when we started traveling and we recorded, most of that was without bass. Then we started traveling, it was two guitars and drums. All the time the sound guys were like, “Where’s the bass player gonna be?” “We don’t have one.” Then they’d ask me, “Where’s the bass player?” I said, “Oh, he’ll be here at the end of the show.” [Chuckles] Then it was, “Well, okay, all right.”

Then every time at the end of the night, they’d come up like, “Man, you didn’t even miss the bass player.” I’d say, “Yeah, I know.” [Chuckles] That happened all the time. Yeah, I mean, you using your thumb and your fingers and trying to— well, I guess it came from when you were playing by yourself having to do it all.

Interviewer: Right. I’ve read an article or an interview with you a long time ago, and you were talking about something called “frailing.”

Interviewee: Yeah. That’s what Johnny Woods called it. It was what Fred McDowell did. Johnny called it frailing. I never really understood exactly what it meant by frailing. I think it was like when you’re coming down with your thumb and up with your finger. You’re doing all that at the same time.

That’s a lot of what me and RL did. You have to do that to get Fred’s sound. That’s a lot of how me and RL got the sound that we got, because we were both doing that at the same time. It creates a lot of harmonics and stuff. We wouldn’t be playing exactly the same licks, but we’d be real similar— sometimes the exact same licks.
When you’re coming down with your thumb and up with your finger and just steadily—that steadily doing that, that’s the hardest thing for people to learn when I try to show somebody how to play the Hill Country stuff and RL’s stuff. It’s that.

A lot of times we’d get to just—I swore a harmonica player was on stage with us before. You turn around and look and couldn’t find a harmonica player or a piano. Sometimes you get to hearing a piano. You’d say, “Man, who’s playing piano.” Turn around and look and it was just all the harmonics from the guitars and the hands and the fingers and the thumbs going steadily and having it cranked up pretty loud, too.

Interviewer: Yeah. That’s cool. One of the albums I’ve been listening to a lot, that Burnside on Burnside, man, that’s one of my favorites. That’s a bad album right there.

Interviewee: Yeah, that’s pretty much—it was pretty much—most of it, I think, came from a show on Burnside Street in Oregon—Portland. They recorded a bunch of shows over a week-long period or something or two weeks. I think most of it came from that one show. That record just pretty much sums up how we sounded live.

Interviewer: Yeah. That’s a question I got, how did you hook up with RL?

Interviewee: I beg your pardon.

Interviewer: How did you end up getting hooked up with RL?

Interviewee: I went to a show. A friend of mine had put on a show and had a band from the junior college there playing. It was a rock band. It was out in the pasture. He lived near RL. He had RL come and open the show up.

I met him then and told him that I played some guitar and I really liked what he was doing and I’d like to learn some from him. He told me where he lived and told me to come on down to his house. I went down in there. He was just a real friendly guy.

I went down there, started going down there two or three nights a week. I’d get off—I was doing carpenter work. He’d get off the tractor—he was driving a tractor—or come out of the field, whatever he was doing. I’d go down there two, three nights a week, and we’d sit out and play ‘til midnight a lot of times. I did that for quite a while.

Interviewer: Yeah, I’ve heard that from a lot of people. I had the opportunity to talk to Cedric, then Jerry the other day. They told me that RL was just—Cedric
said that he can remember the first time he played live with RL that—or just, he said they played on the front porch a lot, but he was just a real patient guy that he was just more or less just worried about playing and come to you later. Was that how he was?

Interviewee: Yeah, yeah. I mean, he loved to play, loved to have fun. He was just open and invited me right in to the house and they all became family to me. We were for years and years. They still are, all the family is still my family pretty much. He’s just a real friendly guy and just open. He’d show you anything. I miss him a lot.

Interviewer: Yeah. I had Cedric tell me a story that he said people from West Virginia and all these places would pull up to his house. He’d get out and he said he’d go get RL off the tractor. He’d get off, he’d come back on the porch, and he’d play whatever those people wanted to hear for ‘em. Then he’d just get back on the tractor and go to work.

Interviewee: [Chuckles] Yeah.

Interviewer: I just said, “Man, they don’t make people like that anymore.”

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: That’s just something right there, that story in itself. I guess, when you started playing with RL, do you remember—can you remember the first show you actually played with him live?

Interviewee: Oh, yeah, yeah. I remember it well. We had to play to make a little money at a juke house out in the country. We drove, oh, it seemed like forever through little country roads that looked like tunnels from the trees growing over the top of them.

We got to this big house out in the sticks out there. Went in there and there wasn’t nobody—I mean, there was people in there, but there wasn’t any white people but me. We set up and started playing. Played for a little while with people jumping and having a good time.

All of a sudden, RL said, “Well, Brown, you keep going, I’m going in the back to gamble some.” I said, “Oh, man, gosh. These people will kill me.” He says, “Oh, no, you’ll be all right.” I said, “Well, man, I really gotta play.” I went playing the best stuff I could think of. People just hollering, “Play it, white boy,” and all that. [Chuckles]

A little while later, RL come out. I guess he lost his money or whatever. He come back in there and went to play with me. We played quite a while. We never really made any money, but we played. Later on, we laughed
about it. He was just checking me out to see if I was gonna make it, I guess. [Chuckles]

Interviewer: [Chuckles] What year did you really start playing with him? I mean, when did you meet him?

Interviewee: That was about ’72, I guess, when I met him. It was probably a year later we went to that first juke joint. It might have been ’71 when I met him, ’71, ’72. It was about a year later, yeah.

Interviewer: You guys played a long time or a good bit of time before Fat Possum even signed RL.

Interviewee: Oh, yeah. Yeah, 20 years. I mean, not all the time. When I first met him, we played together a lot for a couple years. Then I moved down to Louisiana to stay for a little while. I’d come back and see him. I’d play with Johnny Woods. Me and Johnny, I’d go get Johnny a lot of times, we’d just go ramble for the whole weekend. We’d go see RL in different places, go play different house parties and stuff.

RL and I, we played off and on together for 20 years. The way I got with Fat Possum, I was playing with Mojo Buford, the harmonica player who was actually from the Hernando area, Eudora. He had moved to Chicago and was playing with Muddy Waters. He came back to Memphis and I met him in the 80s and started playing with him some. I think it was around ’90—’89 or ’90, playing.

We did a tour. We went up to Canada and we come back down, our last show was in Clarksdale. It was on Muddy Waters’ birthday. We were doing a tribute to Muddy Waters. I thought, “Well, I’m gonna call RL and get him to come down.” He came down to the show and some of the guys from Fat Possum, that was the first time I met them. They brought him down there.

Sometime during the night, me and RL, just the two of us got up and played. I guess they liked it. A few months later, they called me and told me they were doing a record on RL and wanted to know if I would play on it. I said, “Yeah, I will.” I said, “But why?” They said, “What do you mean?” I said, “Well, RL’s best by himself.” They said, “Well, we want to add drums and we want it to be rocking a little more.” I said, “Okay, cool.” I said, “I’ll do it.”

We cut a couple records in a couple of days down at Junior’s Juke Joint. That was about ’93, I think, when we cut that stuff, “Too Bad, Jim,” and, “Sad Days and Lonely Nights.”
Interviewer: Oh, yeah. Yes. Yeah, you played with Junior, too, right?

Interviewee: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Yep. I did a bunch of recording with him, played some live shows, too. More recording than live shows. Johnny Woods is the one that introduced me to Junior. He took me out when Junior was having house parties. He didn’t really have a juke joint, but he started rehearsing with his band on Sundays and got to where everybody is coming to his house.

He was doing a little bootlegging and the house would be packed. Johnny took me down there the first time, that’s when I met Little Joe and Junior and all those guys.

Interviewer: Man. I got to hear some pretty cool stories. I got to talk to Amos Harvey as well. Amos had some great stories about you guys on the road and stuff.

Interviewee: Yeah, he probably remembers more of ‘em than I do.

Interviewer: [Chuckles] He would tell me stories about—he almost made it sound like when he would tour with you and RL and Cedric that it was like a family.

Interviewee: Oh, yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. He was telling me stories about RL packing his suitcase with sausage or sardines and crackers or something like that. Then the band would open ‘em up.

Interviewee: Yeah. He used to carry a separate suitcase, especially when he’d go overseas of just food, like sardines and crackers and stuff. [Chuckles] ‘Cause the time difference, you might wake up in the middle of the night and not be able to get anything to eat. He had his stuff with him, and he liked what he wanted to eat. Different parts of the country have different foods and—

Interviewer: Did you ever go overseas with RL?

Interviewee: Oh, yeah. We went all over the world. We went all over Europe and Canada and Japan, Australia. Yep. All over.

Interviewer: Do you remember any particular trips over there where it’s just a show that stands out to you or something?

Interviewee: Hmm. I think they all were—they were all really good. I remember I hurt my back one time really bad. I could barely walk. Every night, I’d get on stage and I’d have a hard time getting on the stage, but I’d get on stage.
The first song would start off and it was like my back pain was gone. I never thought about it anymore. It was just healing me, I guess.

We played the same set probably for a couple of years. All the time, I would think, “Man, we’re playing the same set.” It seems like it would get old after a while, but it never did. It’s like every night it was fresh. We’d do it different.

You never know really when RL was gonna change or something. He might. [Chuckles] Especially if you were playing and there was some pretty girl in front of you dancing and stuff. You’re just looking at her. Sure as hell, RL played a different—changed a different time or something.

Now that you called my attention to it, not long ago we were playing at Minneapolis at the zoo one time. About middle way through the song, RL just got up, took off to go to the bathroom. He come back. We did a song while we were waiting on him to come back, me and Cedric. When he come back, he says, “When you gotta go, you gotta go.” [Chuckles]

Interviewer: [Chuckles]

Interviewee: Yeah. One night, gosh, we were somewhere up in North Carolina. We were playing a show with T-Model Ford and Paul Jones. T-Model, we got to playing, we were the last ones going. During our show, I look out in the audience and T-Model’s out there. He’s got some pretty little young girl right in front of him. He was standing behind her. He’s got a tit in each hand, just grinning and me from ear to ear and dancing and all. [Chuckles]

About halfway through the show, RL would always do a couple of solo numbers. I walk back in the dressing room, I looked over, and T-Model’s laid out on the couch, his arms spread wide open. His shirt’s tore loose and all. I said, “What happened to T-Model?” Somebody said, “He got hot.” [Chuckles] I said, “I know what he did.”

Interviewer: [Chuckles]

Interviewee: We had a lot of fun with those guys.

Interviewer: Yeah. That was one thing Amos told me. He said, “RL was the party man.” He said you were the serious one, RL was the party.

Interviewee: Mm-hmm. What we used to call him, the master of chaos. If something big could go wrong before we hit the road, you could expect something to go wrong somewhere.
We were on stage in Canada one night, and the sound guys, before we played, he said, “I got a smoke machine. You mind if I put a little smoke on the stage?” I said, “Yeah, go ahead. Just a little bit, not a lot.” I forgot to tell RL about it.

We were playing. We were about halfway through a song, all of a sudden RL looked at me, and, man, his eyes were big. He was making eyes at me and he’s pointing, saying, “Help me. Something’s on fire.” [Chuckles] I said, “Oh, I forgot to tell you, that’s the smoke machine.” He thought the building was fixing to burn down or something.

A lot of times, he’d go, “Man, we gotta play that long tonight?” I said, “Yeah.” We’d get done with the show and he’d act like he was wore out. We’d get everything packed up and get in the van. As soon as we’d get in the van and we’d start to go to the hotel or whatever, RL starts singing again or telling jokes [chuckles] like he was fresh as a daisy.

Interviewer: [Chuckles] Man, I heard about that. Amos was trying to tell me about a baby doll that had a bottle in it or something like that.

Interviewee: Yeah. The head would screw off and that was—the top was in the head of the doll. There was a bottle down inside of it. RL would get him a drink on stage. He’d call out, “Where’s my baby? Where’s my baby?” Amos would bring him the doll. [Chuckles] People would crack up. He used to love to tell a joke.

Interviewer: [Chuckles] Yeah, I heard that—well, the only joke that I got on record, I guess, is, “He ain’t your daddy.”

Interviewee: Yeah, that was a good one. The first time I heard that, man, I fell off a stool. I mean, we were at the El Mocambo in Toronto. I was sitting on a stool. I think that’s when my back was hurting. I was sitting on a little stool, and he starts telling that joke. I was changing the tune on the guitar or something. Then when he got to the punchline, man, I fell off the stool. [Chuckles] That was a good one.

Interviewer: I was listening to that album, and it’s funny, because after the first time he says, “That ain’t your daddy,” everybody thinks that the jokes over. Then he keeps going. Then the ending is that much funnier, ‘cause you’re like, “Man.” [Chuckles] I didn’t see that one coming.

Interviewee: Yep, yeah. [Chuckles]

Interviewer: Out of all RL’s jokes, what do you think the best one was?

Interviewee: Hmm, that’s probably the best one. That’s probably the best one.
Interviewer: Yeah. I heard he’s quite a character. That was funny. I hear him on a lot of albums talking about tomato juice. A lot of articles I read just try to say he liked Bloody Marys, but Amos told me it used to actually be Jack Daniels in there.

Interviewee: Yeah. He called it a Bloody Mother. I never could get up my nerve to drink on of ‘em. It just never sounded enticing to me. I don’t guess I ever drank one. I remember somebody was somewhere—and somebody drank one, and they said, “Man, it wasn’t half bad.” [Chuckles]

Interviewer: [Chuckles] Amos told me that when he’d be trying to—sometimes after a show, people would be wanting to party with RL. Amos said sometimes you’d have to be like, “No, we gotta go. We gotta go.” He said RL would be like, “No, I just want to hang out with these people.” That’s pretty cool. I bet that was probably a lot different for people that are used to seeing musicians that just get off the stage and go.

Interviewee: Yeah, yep. Well, yeah, he was usually—well, later on he got to where he was really ready to go to the hotel. Later on, I think that’s why he quit touring, he was just scared he was gonna die away from home. He loved his family so much. He didn’t want that to happen.

Interviewer: Yeah. I was talking to Cedric about that. That was one thing he got saying. I read a bunch of articles. It seems like RL mentioned his family in about every—damn near every article. He said he couldn’t be away from home that long. Amos said he’d be happy on tour, but if he ever had a chance to play close to home that he would. He’d load up Alice Mae and he’d load up the family.

Interviewee: Mm-hmm. Sure, yeah. They’d bring 15, 20 people sometimes. [Chuckles] If it was a place where there was free food or the musicians got food, I mean, they’d end up feeding 15, 20 people. [Chuckles]

Interviewer: Amos said people wouldn’t be too happy. The venue owners, they were giving away that much free beer.

Interviewee: Oh, yeah. I know it. I know it. He would play for almost nothing around here. I had a guy, after he quit touring—he pretty much quit, and a guy from Australia called me and wanted us to come over there. He wanted to know if I would talk to RL.

I said, “Yeah, I’ll talk to him.” He said, “What do you think?” I said, “I think he ain’t coming.” He said, “Man, I’ll pay him good.” I said, “Yeah, that’s good.” He said, “I’ll pay $25,000.00 a night.” I said, “That’s good.” I said, “I’ll come.” He said, “Will you talk to him?” I said, “Yeah, I’ll talk
to him, but I know what he’s gonna say.” He said, “What’s that?” “He’s gonna say, ‘We ain’t gonna make that one, Duke.’” [Chuckles]

I told him about it, and that’s exactly what he said. He said, “Well, I don’t guess we’ll make that one, Duke.” [Chuckles] I mean, but you know he had the attitude. I guess RL had been broke so much in his early life that he knew he’d survive being broke. [Chuckles] He didn’t give a shit about nothing.

Sometimes, I mean, I’ve known him to—when I started playing with him, I know we were doing a gig in Oxford one time, and I looked up and the sound guy was standing on the stage. He was just looking around the stage.

He was like, “I don’t believe this.” Just kept saying, “I don’t believe this. I don’t believe this.” I said, “What is it you don’t believe?” He said, “RL’s doing a gig here, and y’all actually have everything you need.” I said, “What do you mean?” He said, “Well, usually he shows up without even a guitar.” [Chuckles]

He maybe didn’t have one one time, showed up down there, and then the college kids run and get him a guitar or whatever he needs, just to get him to play. He thought, “Why do I gotta carry one? They’ll go get one for me.” [Chuckles] He just had a ‘don’t give a shit’ attitude, which is cool in a way. Just like if you can survive the world like that, I guess it’s all right. Duwayne and [cross talk 31:18] are like that, about the same way now.

Interviewer: Yeah. I caught that vibe from Cedric when I was hanging out with him. I interviewed him. He was playing a show the next night in Pensacola. I was in town visiting my family. We live right near Daphne, Alabama. He said, “Why don’t you come to the show tomorrow? Why don’t you come to the show tomorrow?” I said, “Okay, okay.” He said, “I’ll put you on the guest list for two.” I said, “All right.”

I had a buddy of mine that was gonna go with me, but he couldn’t go. My mom, she’s 64 and she loves music. She loves to go to shows and she goes to shows. She’s never seen any Hill Country stuff. I said, “You know what, Mom? I’ll take you with me.” We got there, and I think Cedric was probably more excited that I brought my mom than anybody else. He’s like, “Oh, I’m so glad.” I said, “I’m so glad for somebody else to hear this music.”

After the show, he just signed autographs. I mean, it was just unreal. You don’t meet people like that, that are actually—just from what I’ve done or interacted with a lot of artists, it’s just something different.
Interviewee: Yeah. I don’t know. Maybe that’s part of the attraction that people have. A lot of people don’t know that, but I know—well, like you asked about special shows. I remember one time I had a psychic tell me that my purpose on Earth was to raise the vibratory rates of the human race through music. They didn’t even know I was a musician.

Interviewer: No way.

Interviewee: One night we were doing this show in Santa Fe, me and T-Model and RL. I was on stage with RL, and I looked out across the crowd, and it was standing room only. People were packed in like sardines. I started looking at faces. I couldn’t find a face without a smile on it. I thought, “Man, that’s cool. [Chuckles] We’re making people feel good.”

Nowadays, I just try to make people feel better than they did when they got there. If they leave feeling better than they did when they came, I’ve accomplished my job.

Interviewer: Yeah. That was one thing I’ve noticed about, man, any time I talk to somebody about RL, see a picture of RL from a show or anything, I don’t think I’ve ever seen him not in a good mood. Maybe that was just part of his stage presence, but it just seems so sincere. He was just glad to be there.

Interviewee: Yeah, yep. We did a show in Chicago on time, it was me and Paul Jones and RL and T-Model and Cedric. We were running late, couldn’t find the place. It was a place called The Double Door. It was a big, big club. The Rolling Stones had played there. It was a pretty nice place.

When we got there, we were fairly late. We got there, the place was packed. It was sold out. There wasn’t a drum stick on the stage. [Chuckles] These people are sitting waiting for a while.

Interviewer: Oh, shit.

Interviewee: [Chuckles] We unloaded. I mean, it was 15, 20 minutes from the time we pulled up at the back door, the show had started. All these people were thinking, “Man, we’re not gonna see nothing tonight.” [Chuckles] Then all of a sudden we bust in and just 15 minutes and music’s happening. Everybody was happy at the end of the night.

Interviewer: He said RL used to call you the adopted son.

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: How’d that start out?
Interviewee: One day he started introducing Cedric as his grandson. Then one night he just introduced me as his adopted son or his white son or his adopted son. [Chuckles] Which, I guess, he treated me about as bad as he did the rest of ‘em. [Chuckles] He didn’t never treat me bad. We never really had any bad arguments at all. Yeah, it was like we were all family.

Interviewer: Yeah. I get that especially talking to anybody that’s from the Hill Country or has been involved with anything from the Hill Country. That’s what people usually say. I was talking to—I guess I was talking to Amos about it. He was talking about why Junior liked to play in Holly Springs, while RL probably moved back from Chicago. It was a place that—I guess it’s home, and people are polite and nice.

Interviewee: Mm-hmm. Yeah. I had a car wreck one night. When Alice, RL’s wife, found out about the wreck, boy, she was one of the first—one she was the first one that called me. “Kenny, are you all right?” I said, “Yes, ma’am.”

That’s one thing that’s changing around here though. A lot of people don’t realize it, but all these people from up north and places, they come down here for these shows and festivals and meet the people and they have such a good time. Everybody’s so nice, they end up moving down here for the culture and all.

Then especially the musicians that are moving here, especially somebody from Boston or New York or Chicago or something. They can sell a house up there and move here and live pretty good and buy a nice house for a lot less than what they sold the one for.

They come here for the culture, but it’s changing the culture, because musicians from Boston or big cities like that are—or LA even or whatever—they have to be a lot more aggressive in trying to get gigs, because they’re paying such high bills and rent and stuff. People down here are so laid back. Those people hustle a lot more than some of the people around here do.

Interviewer: Yeah. I can see it, because from talking to people and reading articles and stuff, it was—RL kept his job and would play. Junior kept his job and played. I mean, they just played because they loved to play. As long as they were playing music, they were—man, I was reading some article and it was after RL was signed. He was 92 or 93, and he’s playing a blues festival in California or something.

They’re like, “See RL in the side tent for $10.00.” I’m like, “Damn, man, $10.00 to see RL Burnside.” I was just sitting there thinking that from what people have told me, that I’m sure he was just like, “I’m getting paid.
I want the people to come to the show.” It was just one of those things that’s just like he’s playing, he’s getting paid, he’s happy.

Interviewee: Mm-hmm. Yeah. If you go to Clarksdale or Beale Street in Memphis or somewhere, I guarantee that half of the people playing there are from up north somewhere or somewhere else. Clarksdale, too, a lot of ‘em are. Yeah, RL just liked to play, which we all do. After you get used to it, you gotta do it. You’re too dumb to quit. [Chuckles]

Interviewer: [Chuckles] Yeah. When I saw you at Moe’s—God, this was so long ago, man—but you were telling a story about you taught Samuel L. Jackson to play a song that RL—or maybe you and RL taught him or you taught him. It was RL’s song.

Interviewee: Yeah. RL was dead before that movie came out. Yeah. Actually there was, I think—I’m not sure if they used what I played or not. I mean, I taught him, showed him the song. One of the songs, I think it was “A Bird without a Feather.” I think that’s me playing. They make it look like him playing. I showed him how to play and that’s one of the ones we played. He used to learning quick. He learned those songs pretty good.

Interviewer: Oh, okay. When people talk about—it’s hard, because a lot of people I’ve asked this question to don’t know both men equally. What was the major difference if you were hanging out with RL Burnside or if you were hanging out with Junior Kimbrough? Was there a difference? Some people just like to tell me that RL was, like I said, the party. Then Amos said that Junior was the iron fist, if that makes any sense.

Interviewee: Yeah. Well, RL never would really fool around. I’ve never known him to fool around with any other women or anything. Junior loved pussy. [Chuckles] That’s kind of a big difference. Junior, you listen to his music, and if you ever watch women listening to his music, it’s a lot more sexier music.


We started the first song, and when we ended that first song, I looked at my watch, we’d been playing 30 minutes. We ended the second song, we’d been playing an hour. [Chuckles] We just got the groove going. People were getting into it. Nobody cared whether you’ve been playing 30 minutes or an hour and 30 minutes.
Interviewer: Oh, man. I was talking to Joe. He was telling me a funny story. He was telling me how difficult it was to play with Junior—I mean, play with Junior if you didn’t know him and know how to watch him and stuff.

He said that some nights they’d be so loaded that he’d look over at Junior and he said he’d be leaned over. He’d almost fall asleep. Then all of a sudden, you’d hear, “All night long.” [Singing] He said he’d look up at him.

Interviewee: I’ve seen him fall asleep over there at the juke joint. He’d be playing one song, then when he woke up, he’d start singing another one. [Chuckles]

Interviewer: I couldn’t help but laugh. That was too funny. I didn’t realize that Gary played more with—I mean, from what Gary told me, he played more with Junior than he did RL.

Interviewee: Yeah, he did. Mm-hmm. He sure did.

Interviewer: He was trying to explain the differences between the two guys. He just said Junior was a lot more serious, I guess, about his music, about his original stuff and didn’t want anybody—

Interviewee: Yeah, he rehearsed with those guys a lot, with Gary and Cedric and Gary and Kent 44:32. He would rehearse with his stuff, on his stuff more. He was a little—he liked to have his stuff the way he wanted it. His stuff was different.

Interviewer: Yeah, that’s what I get from people. When I listen to it, it’s almost like I’m listening to a song like, “Meet me in the City,” just upbeat, just a beautiful song. Then you got something like, “You Better Run,” come on. I’m just like, “Damn. Two totally different songs right here.” Did you ever play any live shows with Junior?

Interviewee: Yeah, yep, quite a few, quite a few back when we first started getting around doing shows with RL and Junior. I recorded with him on two or three records. Some of that stuff, I never had rehearsed with him or anything. I just stumbled through it. [Chuckles]

Mainly, with all those guys, Paul Jones and RL and Junior and CeDell Davis and all. I tried to complement them, but to stay out of their way, too, and not try to hog the show or show out myself. I just tried to support them and do what fit good with them.

Interviewer: I was listening and—can you tell me the songs RL wrote that were original? ‘Cause I get ‘em confused. I guess there’s so many in the Hill
Country that are traditional or passed along. I’m trying to figure that out in my head. It’s hard.

Interviewee: Yeah. That’s a tough one, ‘cause I think “Bird without a Feather,” I’m pretty sure he wrote that one. “Poor Boy” and stuff like that, and “Going Down South,” a lot of those songs back—I mean, so many of those guys, they would hear a song somebody else doing one, and they’d go and they’d come up with their own version. It might be completely different than the one they heard.

I’m that way. I might hear something from somebody, but do it my own way. A lot of those, I mean, I don’t know how many people have told me they wrote “Hoochie Coochie Man.” [Chuckles] I believe Muddy Waters wrote it. He may have gotten it from somebody else, too. I’d have to look.

“Highway Seven,” and “Alice Mae,” I wrote those. I think on the records I gave RL part of the writer on “Alice Mae,” I know. Maybe on “Highway Seven.” Then somehow he gave me some writers on some of his stuff. I’d have to look at the records and figure it out. There were some that we arranged different. You can copyright arrangements and stuff now.

Interviewer: Oh, I gotcha. All right. I was always wondering how that worked. Which song does he sing and he says, “Love’s the devil, but she won’t get me?”

Interviewee: “Snake Drive.”

Interviewer: Yeah, I love that song.

Interviewee: That’s one we came up with. I think I used to have a tape, I can’t remember who it was, but there was a song, I think, called, “Snake Drive,” on it. It was different.

Then one night we were playing in Oxford, and we went over and played a party at somebody’s house afterwards. We got to playing that song “Snake Drive.” That was the first time I’d heard it, heard RL doing it. We got to working on it and I asked him about it. I said, “Gosh, we gotta remember that one.” We got to working on it and finished it up and put some words to it and stuff.

Interviewer: I’ve read all these stories about Junior’s Juke Joint and all these famous people coming there. Did you get to meet any of those people that come in there?

Interviewee: I don’t know. Some people claim The Rolling Stones came in. I don’t know if they did or not. No, I don’t think I ever met any famous people there, other than Junior and RL. [Chuckles]
Interviewer: [Chuckles]

Interviewee: -and the crack dealers. [Chuckles] They were outside. They kept them outside. I mean, Charlie Musselwhite called me one time. He wanted to go down there, but it was Christmas time and I had to go to a family party, but I told him—he asked me if it was cool for him to go down there. I said, “Yeah.” I told him how to get there. Told him, “Go ahead.”

I don’t know who else famous been in there. I mean, I can’t remember, it’s been so long ago really, who all I saw there. I took some people out there one time, and it was a black joint, we got there and there was a darn tour bus from Ole Miss there. There was more white kids than there was—whatever was with me said, “Man, I thought you said this was a black joint.” [Chuckles]

No, no, I can’t remember any famous people. I can’t remember who it would’ve been.

Interviewer: Was it different? I mean, I was reading an article and they said that once Junior or once people started to find out about Junior’s Juke Joint, it blew up from the deep blues and Fat Possum to a bunch of frat kids and stuff would start coming there. Did that phase anybody or Junior just didn’t care?

Interviewee: Well, he made more money, which was good for him. I mean, you never really knew whether Junior’s was gonna be open or not. We’d come in from shows on Saturday, I would drop him off on Sunday morning. I’d say, “Are you gonna be open tonight?” He’d say, “Yeah, yeah, we’re gonna be open.” I’d drive down from Memphis, and, shit, wouldn’t nobody be there.

Then maybe the next time, I’d say, “Junior, you gonna be open?” “Nah, I ain’t gonna open tonight.” Then on Monday I’d run into somebody saying, “Man, we had a hell of a time at Junior’s last night.” [Chuckles] You never knew. It was a crap shoot half the time whether he was gonna be open or not.

Interviewer: I heard that was the spot. I heard if RL was in town, he wasn’t on tour, he loved to just go up there and play just a little bit.

Interviewee: Mm-hmm, yep, yep. As I say, I think it was to recharge—charging your batteries, getting back to where you came from.

Interviewer: Yep. That’s why Junior never really liked to tour that much, from what I understood.
Interviewee: No, I mean, we went out some places. I don’t think he was real crazy about it.

Interviewer: Yeah. He said he knew he could probably make more money at his juke joint and get paid than he could on the road.

Interviewee: Yeah. He went out and did a tour with Iggy Pop, I know that, one time. I’m sure that was wild.

Interviewer: Yeah. I watched that documentary, You See Me Laughin’: The Last of the Hill Country Bluesmen. I saw you on there. I like that line—everybody’s talking about when they signed you guys to Fat Possum, and you said, “Everybody told me a record company’s going to screw you, it’s just a matter of which one.” [Chuckles]

Interviewee: [Chuckles] Yeah, or how much.

Interviewer: Yeah. I couldn’t help but laugh about that. Yeah. The guys on there said that Junior, the way he was, he’s just like, “I want my money laid out. How much for beer? How much for travel? What do I got for this? What do I got for that?” They said he was real particular. Joe said that, too. Joe said that Junior was just worried about getting paid.

Interviewee: Mm-hmm, yeah.

Interviewer: Joe had some pretty funny stories. He told me that sometimes he’d be sitting there and start to play one of Junior’s songs and Junior grabbed the guitar and said, “Don’t you play that. That’s my music.” [Chuckles]

Interviewee: [Chuckles] Oh, yeah.

Interviewer: I couldn’t help but laugh about that.

Interviewee: Yep. Joe knows all of Junior’s stuff. Actually, Junior gave Joe the rights to a lot of those songs.

Interviewer: Yeah, he told me. He said, “I got some songs nobody’s ever heard before.” He said, “They try to get me in the studio.”

Interviewee: Yeah, I’ve been trying to get him to go in. He just acts like he ain’t ready all the time.

Interviewer: Yeah. I think I just got a couple more questions for you, Kenny, if that’s cool.
Interviewee: All right.

Interviewer: Just one or two. I guess before RL and Junior were actually—I guess deep blues or—they were signed, everybody used to call them Delta bluesmen. There were a couple of articles where RL just says, “This isn’t Delta blues. This is Hill Country. You don’t have to be from the Delta to play the blues.” Could you think of when it started to shift, I guess, when people were finally—or Hill Country music, the started to call it the Hill Country blues?

Interviewee: Yeah. Nobody was calling anything Hill Country until after we started going out touring with RL. After we did that, “Too Bad Jim” thing, I think that started getting some attention to this part of the world and Mississippi state. Now they even formed—they have the Delta region and they have the Hill Country region. That wasn’t even done then. We have changed a lot of things, I guess.

Interviewer: You think that was probably around the 90s or something?

Interviewee: Yeah, yeah. It had to be, ‘cause nobody—everybody was calling everything Delta blues. It was either Delta blues or Chicago blues until we started coming out and spreading it around and calling it what it was.

Interviewer: Did you ever get to meet Robert Palmer?

Interviewee: Yeah, mm-hmm. Yep. I turned this guy on to Junior, and Palmer got a lot of his stuff from this guy, Randall Lyons, who was around Memphis forever and was a real genius and just loved music. I took him down to Junior’s one time after Johnny took me down there to his house. It blew his mind. He turned Palmer on to it. Yeah, he was a pretty cool guy.

Interviewer: Yeah. I read some of his—

Interviewee: I met him back in the 60s. He played in a band called The Insect Trust. I think they were out of New York. Kind of wild, psychedelic stuff, but the guitar player, Bill Barth, he was one of the first one of the ones that put on the Memphis Blues Festivals at the Overton Park shell back in the 60s.

He was a really good blues player. He’s dead now, and Palmer’s dead. I guess most of those people in that band are. They came by Joe’s house in the 60s and I met several of them then while I was still just a kid.

Interviewer: All right.
Joe Ayers

Greenberry: I’ll go ahead and start some questions up for you.

Joe: Okay. You come on right now.

Greenberry: All right, Joe. I guess my first question for you is what are your earliest memories playing music?

Joe: Oh, god, let’s see, let’s see. 1954.

Greenberry: Wow. What was the first instrument you started playing?

Joe: An old guitar.

Greenberry: All right, and you played bass with Junior, right?

Joe: Yeah, and I played rhythm, too. I played rhythm guitar with him due to when George Scales was playing bass.

Greenberry: Okay.

Joe: We had three guitars in there at some time.

Greenberry: I guess one question I have is I’ve been asking people a lot of questions about hill country and hill country blues and the difference between that and delta blues, but what makes the hill country music so special?

Joe: [Laughter] Well, the only thing I see about hill country music is special about it, 90 percent of the people that play music, they can’t carry bass along with their lead. If you notice hill country music is a one man thing. It can be played by one man, and they’re gonna carry that beat on with the rhythm.

Greenberry: Okay, so when you guys were playing together, who was really leading? Was it Junior that was setting it or—

Joe: Junior. Uh huh, Junior.

Greenberry: Okay. How did you meet Junior? Can you tell me the story about how you and Junior met?

Joe: Junior and I, we all come up in the same neck of the woods.

Greenberry: Okay. What was it like growing up? Did you guys always play music together?
Joe: Well, yeah. Uh huh. We played music together when we didn’t have but one guitar. He would play so long, and then when I learned to play one or two songs, well, then I would play them one or two songs to give him a break. Then he and my second cousin came up together as kids and babies. My second cousin is a year older than me, and he was an awful guitar player, and he’s still living.

Greenberry: [Laughter]

Joe: He won’t play no more. You’ve probably seen some—I heard something on him by Lindsey Boga.

Greenberry: Oh, yeah.

Joe: That’s my second cousin.

Greenberry: Okay.

Joe: Uh huh, so he and Junior, they came up together from little tots. My aunt Phoebe was Lindsey’s mother. Just about raised Junior since they were little kids cuz they were both were playing guitars at 12 and 13 years old. As a matter of fact, I got a picture at some point of them. Junior was 12 and Lindsey was 13. I gave it to a lady to put it in the museum, and she swore up and down that I didn’t give it to her. I didn’t give it her. I tell you what, that—see, I played with Lindsey. He just had came back from New York, I guess, a little before Junior died. He had been gone for some years, Lindsey had. I got him.

They wanted us to play at the funeral [inaudible 00:05:34] and so we all practiced up on what we were singing at the funeral. Channel 13 was there, and they blew the whole commercial [inaudible 00:05:49] up with us playing out there, Lindsey, George Scale, and myself, and David Kimbrough, little ole nephew. He was something like [inaudible 00:05:58]. He was on the draw back there playing saxophone.

To make a long story short, course then they blew it up and I had cut that whole section out of that paper, and I gave it to the school and they had it laminated. I gave that lady that big old picture with Junior laying there in the casket below our feet. We was standing up over him playing, and that picture of Junior at 12 and my cousin at 13 years old, she swore up and down that I didn’t give it to her. She pretended she don’t know nothing about, but she is a crook. That’s why I fell out with her just about there. Mm-hmm.

Greenberry: What song did you guys play at the funeral?
Joe: What’s that now?

Greenberry: What song did you guys play at the funeral?

Joe: “It Ain’t Over.”

Greenberry: Okay.

Joe: Uh huh, and as it was first recorded. During the time before they brought us onstage, while the MC was talking about how long we had played together, then I played then lead, real, real slow, and George, he was backin’ me up with no singing. “You Can’t Leave Me, Baby,” that’s the name of the first recording we did in 1966, at least we did that, and then went over there and so now we’re gonna bring it up to the band. Then when I started hollering how ain’t over, [laughter] just holding a long key, and let me tell you this, that’s the last thing I ever did cuz I never played, opened my mouth, all the years that we were playing, unless I was playing something of mine, but playing Junior’s music, I’d never open my mouth, all the years that we were playing together until then. I used to do it in the field or in the truck or something to myself when he ain’t around, but it’s the first time that I sang that song. I had done [inaudible 00:08:14] and I feel like I hadn’t [inaudible 00:08:17] I couldn’t get drunk [laughter] cuz I had to sing that song. [Laughter]

Greenberry: [Laughter]

Joe: Sure was good. I didn’t play it all the way through though. I played about half of it, and people starting clowning 00:08:32 so bad, then I broke it down. I broke it cuz it was about half. People, a lot of ’em were rejoicing. Some of ’em were hollering, crying, and screaming, so I broke it down. Mm-hmm.

Greenberry: Man, that’s pretty cool though that you guys honored him by playing his music at his funeral. That’s awesome.

Joe: Yeah. That woman, if you ever go up in there [inaudible 00:08:58], if you’re ever around town. I ain’t been back up in there since [inaudible 00:09:03] is up there. The whole piece was up there real big. There was a whole front page that we’re standing there playing up over Junior. Then that picture of Junior and Lindsey might not be there cuz people talking about how much money it could be worth, and that woman’s a crook. She is nothing but a crook, [laughter] on the run there. I thought she was so dedicated to that museum, I thought sure that’s an ideal thing that she’s gonna keep it there which she have a whole lot of black people’s heroes up there in there.
The people that I’ve known, whatever they had did without through life, they’re up in there. They were just coming back from the Army. He fought in World War II, some people from Holly Spring. I saw him playing at the Red Sox in Memphis back in 1945, all that kind of stuff, and so I thought she was gonna put that up there. Mm-hmm. That’s what I gave it up there for her to do, but she didn’t do it. She didn’t do it along while we was talkin’. That had been two years ago. David never got a chance to see that picture, but I showed it to Ken. Mm-hmm. I kept it in my vault here at the house. Then I gave it to her. She made me a promise though. We said that would be ideal thing. She wanted it real bad.

Greenberry: Yeah, so what museum is this at?

Joe: Huh?

Greenberry: Which museum is this at?

Joe: It’s at Ida B. Wells.

Greenberry: Okay.


Greenberry: What were you saying?

Joe: I didn’t ask nobody had they seen it in there cuz I turn my head every time I see her coming, every time. Looked like every time I’d go to town, I’d run into her. Mm-hmm. Yep.

Greenberry: A lot of people told me that Junior, when it came to his music, he was real serious. Was that the case?

Joe: Well, was he real serious you say?

Greenberry: Yeah, was he real serious about his music?

Joe: Oh, yeah. Yes, he was. Uh huh. Yes, he really was. He didn’t want nobody to play his music too much, nobody else but me, and David’ll tell you right now, there’s a song about his father. He’s about the only one who’ll sing it. I used to do it when I still was playing guitar. I used to play, but after he died, I quit for three years. People kept on wanting me to play, play, play, play, play, and so when I [inaudible 00:12:07] playing guitar, [inaudible 00:12:10]. Mm-hmm, cuz I played with him all my life from when I was at least ten years old, up until he died, at some point in time.

Greenberry: Wow.
Joe: Mm-hmm. Yeah, used to be all around, and Junior’d been playing them things all his life, and so people’d get him and they’d sit all around. It used to be where we were staying or living there was a big community. He’d be at somebody’s house [inaudible 00:12:42]. When I got in my teenage years, I started to run and find him. He’d, “Come on, help me out. We’re gonna be playing [inaudible 00:12:54] place.” I’d say, “All right.” At the old country houses, we’d play up there. When they’d get tired, they’d come and rest up, and I’d play other music. I never would play his music. Every time I did, he’d reach and grab the guitar and start playing it himself, wouldn’t let me sing it. [Laughter] Yeah, he was like that. Yeah, he was real serious about his music. Yeah. The day before he died, I was over there. I used to go over there and clean his house when he got out the hospital. He got up, and he said, “Well, I did all my shopping and running around yesterday.” He told me, said, “You can come and get your guitar.” Said, “I’m gonna go and get mine now.” I said, “All right,” and so the day before he died, I goes over there, and we were talking. The last thing he told me to do was to play Do the Rump. [Inaudible 00:13:58], and I played it [inaudible 00:14:00] before he died. That’s the last CD we did together, Do the Rump, High Water.

He and I, we did High Water, Do the Rump with High Water, but then he went with Fat Possum. He broke his contract. I wouldn’t go. Then when he got—not Cedric, Garry Burnside to play the song, play that same CD. All that’s different in that one that we did with High Water and the one he did with Fat Possum, he put “All Night Long” on Fat Possum. That’s what Fat Possum [laughter] bought it for, for “All Night Long.” Mm-hmm. Yep. They paid him a little money. Junior was crazy about money. He didn’t care nothin’ about no contract. [Laughter]

Greenberry: [Laughter]

Joe: Yeah, and so David Evans, he was our manager at that particular time, and our producer, also, and he told me. He said, “He’s still up in the water, up in the air.” I said, “It’s just a matter of time.” [Inaudible 00:15:29] Tennessee cuz that’s where High Water is, gonna bust Fat Possum. Yep.

Greenberry: They were gonna do what with Fat Possum?

Joe: They were gonna sue Fat Possum.

Greenberry: High Water was?

Joe: High Water, yeah, gonna sue Fat Possum, the boys from Memphis. That’s where High Water’s from.
Greenberry: Oh, okay, and that’s because—

Joe: When you say High Water, that’s the University of Memphis. Mm-hmm. I got all kind of people work on there. Yeah. High Water recording contract with the University of Memphis. Yep. Mm-hmm.

Greenberry: I know that a lot of people said that when Fat Possum signed him, he said, “I ain’t gonna play no covers.” He said, “I’m only gonna play my music.”

Joe: Oh, yeah, he wouldn’t play nobody’s music, but you couldn’t make him play nobody else’s music but his. That’s right. You couldn’t make—[inaudible 00:16:55] come out [inaudible 00:16:57]. Like we’re sitting around some days. He might have said, “Hit this.” Then down home blues, when it come out, oh, it was the going thing around here, and I used to have it bad. [Laughter] When I’d get around him, started out playing rhythm guitar, and George Scales was playing bass. When I started playing down home blues, George would come on in there. He would get mad. He had a good voice for singing. He wouldn’t do nothing but singing. He’d play a little bit, [laughter] then he’d sing a little bit, and then he’d quit. He didn’t want the people to dance too much off of nobody else’s music but his. Mm-hmm.

Greenberry: I know they said—I was listening to something, and Junior said he’d just be driving down the road, and he’d think of a song. It would just come to him, and songs, he ranged from these songs like “All Night Long,” just jamming, “Meet Me in the City.”

Joe: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Greenberry: Then he’d have a song like, “You’d Better Run.” How was it he was able to have so many different songs about so many different things?

Joe: Well, see, them songs, as I said, it’s just you’re used to it. Too old, I’ll put it like that, and a whole lot of peoples that just played “All Night Long.” “All Night Long” been here for decades, [laughter] but he sung it in a different voice. He loved it. He sang it different. That’s [inaudible 00:18:43] that he ever did was “All Night Long,” was the song, “All Night Long,” but it was real, real, real slow, and the words were backwards. I wish I could holler it cuz I ain’t drank my hemp juice this morning. [Laughter] [Singing] “All night long.” You sing it like that. [Singing] That’s the way the first one—I got it up in the car up there, and then the last one, would say it, “[Singing] All night long.” Something like that, but then it’s just the same way. [Laughter] Mm-hmm.
Greenberry: What about, I mean, I’ve always been curious about You Better Run. How’d he write that song?

Joe: I don’t. I don’t. He was playing that at Sonny’s Club one night. All white men were millionaires out there. I like to broke my bass guitar. Junior real—[laughter] all them old white ladies sittin’ out there, million dollar people sitting out there in the them big white dresses and all dolled up. He’s talkin’ about, “You better [inaudible 00:20:17] don’t sing that song. [Laughter] Don’t you sing that song up in there.” [Laughter] He died of laughing. He died of laughing, but he didn’t sing it. [Inaudible 00:20:27] all them millionaires up there and all that kind of stuff. “Uh-uh, we don’t wanna hear that tonight down here.” [Laughter] Yeah. I mean, we died of laughing. [Laughter]

Greenberry: [Laughter] I know that Fat Possum did a lot of stuff with R.L.’s music. They put a bunch of DJs and stuff on it, but Junior would never ‘em do that. Was that just his personality?

Joe: Well, one thing, you look at every song, just 90 percent of the songs that I sung, it was other people’s recording, but everything that Junior sung was always his own music, and so that made a big difference. That made a big difference. Everything, like I said, that I sang someone else already done did it.

Greenberry: Mm-hmm.

Joe: Everything Junior played, he played something that he had did hisself. They’re trying to get me back in the studio. I betcha I’ve got 15 songs that Junior—don’t nobody in the world know, ain’t never heard. We did that back in the first 60’s and latter 50’s, all that. We was on track cuz he sang one voice. I sit and sang another one. [Laughter] Yep.

Greenberry: Man.

Joe: Mm-hmm.

Greenberry: Boy, I bet Fat Possum wants to get ahold of you.


Greenberry: Yeah.

Joe: We’re bigtime friends. His wife was my parents favorite, and Kenny 00:22:42 on my case. I was down there Sunday, and, “You ‘bout ready
He already called down to Water Valley and told Bruce and Luke, so that Luke got the thing set up for me anytime I get ready to go down. I told him I ain’t quite ready. [Laughter] I don’t know. He messed up, Kenny did. [Laughter] We was talkin’ one day, and he said somethin’ about it, said, “Yeah, you just wait. I’ll make you famous, and I’m gonna make myself rich.” [Laughter] Yeah. I ain’t found time to get in the studio yet, but we said that, so I don’t know. Yep.

Greenberry: It sucks that—

Joe: Huh?

Greenberry: I was just gonna say I got to talk to Garry Burnside, yesterday, for a little bit.

Joe: Oh, you did?

Greenberry: Yeah. I got to talk to him for a second. He didn’t really have that many stories, I guess, but he said he toured with Junior for a long time.

Joe: He did. Not no really long time. It was in the last days, something like a year or two before Junior started getting sick.

Greenberry: Okay. I got you.

Joe: Yeah, he’s the one that did—like I said, did a whole lot of the last recording on that CD. The only thing that—well, the only difference on the CD is just “All Night Long.” We had done recorded “All Night Long” before then. We put it on DVD before we did on CD.

Greenberry: Oh, yeah. You were on that movie.

Joe: Right. It had never been recorded on CD before we did that movie.

Greenberry: Wow.

Joe: Uh huh.

Greenberry: Yeah, I know—

Joe: You know the play differences?

Greenberry: What do you mean?

Joe: The bass. The bass is played different on that DVD than it is on that CD.
Greenberry: I never noticed that. Is it really?

Joe: Yeah. Check it out.

Greenberry: All right. Yeah, I didn’t know that at all.


Greenberry: I feel like some [cross talk 00:25:28]—

Joe: Well, it’s different than daylight and door up 00:25:30. Junior, Calvin, and myself. We’re the ones that did “All Night Long.”

Greenberry: Man, I love it.

Joe: The beginning of “All Night Long,” the original. Yep.

Greenberry: How’d you guys know Calvin?


Greenberry: Oh, yeah, that’s right. That was Burnside’s son-in-law, right?

Joe: Right.

Greenberry: Okay.

Joe: That’s definitely bad. That’s my song he’s gonna play, but [inaudible 00:26:03] subject.

Greenberry: Oh, okay.

Joe: Mm-hmm.

Greenberry: All right.

Joe: Yeah. They’d be in Florida all the time.

Greenberry: Yeah, man, I got to see ‘em. That album they just came out with, that’s somethin’, man. That’s a damn good album.

Joe: Oh, yeah. Uh huh.

Greenberry: That first song, “Born With It,” boy, that’s just some hard stuff, man.

Joe: Yeah. Mm-hmm.
Greenberry: That gets my foot tappin’. I love that song. Just that’s a real album. Man, I just love it.

Joe: [Audio garbled/inaudible 00:26:39] they gave me. They gave me one or two of my songs [inaudible/audio garbled 00:26:45]. I’m saying that because [inaudible 00:26:55] when I was about to go for one. Then I was going through my—I’ve got a great big box with all kind of stuff about everybody that I ever did everything with, [inaudible 00:27:11] and all them, Blue, Wade 00:27:14, [laughter] and all them. I can’t find them cuz now [inaudible 00:27:21]. Mm-hmm. Yep.

Greenberry: I heard that Junior didn’t really like to travel that much.

Joe: I don’t. Hm-mmm. I’d rather just pull out my New Yorker buddies, guys play in Brooklyn on Halloween night and the night after. I don’t like to do no travel. I don’t like to play guitar, period. I used to, when Junior was living. I used to, a little, before I thought we was at the end of the rainbow. I thought we was at the end of the rainbow, and that’s the reason why I quit playing. I always did three jobs all my life. My wife—let me see. Somebody’s knocking at the door, but, anyway. Yep, she’s answering door.

[Extraneous conversation 00:28:29 - 00:28:52]

Joe: Okay, back at ya.

Greenberry: [Laughter]

Joe: Mm-hmm. That was someone coming here looking for my daughter. Mm-hmm. I’m back at ya now.

Greenberry: All right. When you used to tour with Junior, did you ever go tour with him?

Joe: Tour? Yeah, uh huh, but not—everywhere but overseas.

Greenberry: What was it like on the road with Junior? What’d you guys used to do?

Joe: Oh, drank all the way down, and all the way back with them boys. We’d laugh and talk about how some people cut up and this, that, and the other.

Greenberry: Mm-hmm.
Joe: We’d laugh and talk about how people are actin’ and how we act and whatever. Mm-hmm. Yeah. Just wind down and back. We used to be bad about drinkin’. We all did then and who drunk the most. [Laughter]

Greenberry: [Laughter]

Joe: That’s true. I have got so high, they had to prop me up. I never missed a lick when I played, and, yep, just go on and played it, and Junior used to be playing “You’re so Full of It.” Now that was just [Inaudible 00:30:15], “You’re just so full of it.” He’d be [inaudible 00:30:23] in the city, [inaudible 00:30:26], be the same thing for about 20 minutes, then everybody’d holler, [laughter] “All night long!” [Laughter] Another one. Think you could go to sleep on it. Back then, really, at that time, we talked to ‘em. You would do that. Whatever you’d be playing [inaudible 00:30:47] he’d go to sleep and wake up and then start singing. You [inaudible 00:30:53] anything and still be playing. [Laughter] Hold on there one minute.

[Pause 00:31:03 - 00:31:13]

Joe: Uh huh. I’m back at ya now.

Greenberry: All right. Yeah, man, I heard Amos Harvey. You know Amos, right?

Joe: Huh?

Greenberry: You know Amos, right?

Joe: What?

Greenberry: His name’s Amos. I think he used to tour with you guys.

Joe: Amos?

Greenberry: Yeah, I think you might know him. Maybe not. He said he used to come to Junior’s juke joint a lot, a little white guy.

Joe: Oh, god, look, let me see. There’s so many, so many. So many people used to come to that juke joint out there. Good god almighty. Ain’t no way in the world that I could tell you who was where. Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Greenberry: I heard a bunch of famous people, I heard the Rolling Stones came down there once.

Joe: Oh, they have, uh huh, and Stevie Ray Vaughn and all them, they used to be there. Mm-hmm. Yep.
Greenberry: Any of those guys ever—

Joe: Hmm?

Greenberry: Any of those guys ever try to play with you guys?

Joe: Oh, yeah, they would want to. See, Junior’s music is hard to play. It was hard to play with Junior. You had to know Junior just to play with him. Couldn’t nobody play with him. There’s been more folks try to play with him and couldn’t. They didn’t know his timing, and they didn’t know what the scale was, didn’t know what the scale was. He didn’t have no scales. You had to watch Junior, know Junior, when he’s gonna make his change. Mm-hmm. Yep. At the song, when he’d put a frown on his face, then he’s gonna jump a little bit. He fittin’ to change then. Yeah, but other than that, you didn’t have nothin’ to go on. You gotta do one thing 20 times. Mm-hmm.

Greenberry: Why did Junior like staying in Holly Springs more than he did going on tour?

Joe: Well, one thing, like I said, he liked the community. He liked the peoples. He always didn’t have nothin’ to leave himself cuz they’d come to him. Yep. He didn’t have to leave when they would come to him.

Greenberry: Yeah, that’s what I heard. I’ve heard that from a lot of people. I heard R.L. used to tour a lot, but they said that if you wanted to see Junior, you came to Junior’s juke joint.

Joe: Yeah, you’d go to the juke joint, yep. Mm-hmm.

Greenberry: Even before you guys did that movie, people kind of knew about the hill country, right?

Joe: Oh, yeah. They knew about it. They been knowin’ for long before that cuz we used to have blues festivals in Holly Springs, and people always did come to find that music, find Junior, when he got established. Way back in his younger days, he had a different woman [laughter] just about every month. When he wasn’t established, he wouldn’t stay with them for no time, so whenever he started settling down, that’s when people started coming cuz they used to hear about it then at different particular locations, and get there, he’s no longer there, and then them old women. I don’t know where he—that’s how he ended up with them 36 kids. Did you hear me? [Laughter]
Greenberry: Yeah. I was about to say, when I was talking to Garry, yesterday, I asked him. I said, “Can you describe Junior to me?” He said, “Junior was a pimp, man.” He said, “Junior was a ladies’ man.”


Greenberry: Yeah. When I was talking to Garry, I was talking to him about his dad, and he was telling me how different R.L. and Junior actually were.

Joe: Oh, yeah. Mm-hmm, there were differences. Mm-hmm. R.L. would be waitin’ on people to call him to go somewhere, but Junior, all he’d do is sit back at his own place. They would come. Like I said, they would come to him. Yep.

Greenberry: Did you ever play with R.L. at all?

Joe: Yeah, I played with R.L. Mm-hmm. Yeah, sometimes some of his kids would be out and gone somewhere. Last time I seen him, they had a band of their own and I played with Burnside at several shows due to all the kids wasn’t there. Then we used to sit around all the time and play, but Junior didn’t like that.

Greenberry: Oh, he didn’t?

Joe: No. Hm-mmm.

Greenberry: Why? Was he just more particular that you played with him or what?

Joe: He just wanted me to be with him at all times. Mm-hmm. Same way with George. Mm-hmm. He didn’t want his band—cuz Junior, yeah, he was funny, yeah, real funny.

Greenberry: I’ve heard from a lot of people and a lot of articles I’ve read, they said Junior was a real serious guy, but then a lot of people say he was real funny, too. Was he—

Joe: Yeah, he we was funny and serious, too. Yeah, uh huh. Yes, he was funny. Mm-hmm.

Greenberry: You got any good stories about when you guys were coming up and—

Joe: Not too much that I ain’t already told, nothing special. If you look back, as I was recording, you can look back on the back of that and see all that old stuff where I used to tell on that when I was coming up and things that I did as a young kid, and now a grown man, too, [inaudible 00:38:55]. Mm-hmm. Used to love [inaudible 00:39:00]. Yeah, I got the whole history
there printed back of some of those—if you look at the fine print on our recording, High Water.

Greenberry: Oh, on the High Water. Okay.

Joe: Mm-hmm. The first, the interview I reckon I had with High Water. Mm-hmm.

Greenberry: Were you with Junior when he was writing all these songs, these original songs and stuff?

Joe: Yeah, writing ‘em, mm-hmm. [Audio garbled 00:39:43 - 00:39:53]

Greenberry: Yeah, that’s what I was gonna ask you. Would you guys just be sitting there, and he’d just think about this, or how’d it work?

Joe: Yeah, just thinking, just sit there and think about it. Add something to it after you started. It started off, okay, like you would get one voice in it and you join that voice, but then you find something else to mesh that voice, find something else mesh with that with, find something else to mesh that with, and the next thing, you’ve got a song. You’ve got to have a vote on a three-minute record, three-minute phonograph’s record. Yep, old boys would make a record.

Greenberry: Yeah, I was about to ask you that. The first album he did was Do the Rump, right?

Joe: First one that I did with Junior?

Greenberry: Yeah.

Joe: Yeah, uh huh. Yeah, but all his songs that he ever did, you see the same songs on Do the Rump [inaudible 00:41:16] and “Meet Me in the City” and all that. That was on Do the Rump.

Greenberry: Oh, wow.

Joe: Yep.

Greenberry: All the stuff that Fat Possum did, Junior had been doing that for a while.

Joe: Oh, yeah, everything on there. Was 13 songs on Do the Rump, and two of ‘em, he and Joyce did, he and Joyce [inaudible 00:41:45] did, and [inaudible 00:41:50] which had been promoted down through the years, and 11 of ‘em that he and I did that they had been played also down through the years, but it just wasn’t on recording. Then when Burnside
did it, they used the 13 songs, plus—not “Done Got Old,” “All Night Long.” They’ve been played time by time. What Fat Possum got, it had been played time by time, and no difference other than “All Night Long.” That was what Fat Possum bought it for, “All Night Long.” He let the Black Keys have six of ’em.

Greenberry: Yeah, I was about to ask you about that, actually.

Joe: Yep, I got it in my truck there. Yep.

Greenberry: The Black Keys cut that after Junior passed away, right?

Joe: They did it after—no, they got it before Junior died. They got right then when he got it.

Greenberry: Really?

Joe: Yep.

Greenberry: What’d you think about that album?

Joe: Lord, they’ve made bukus 00:43:16 off it. They’ve got fairly rich off of it. Yeah.

Greenberry: Was David Evans that recorded you guys with High Water?

Joe: Mm-hmm.

Greenberry: Okay.

Joe: No, he didn’t record us. No, Sylvester Oliver recorded us at Rust College.

Greenberry: Okay, I gotcha. I gotcha.

Joe: Then he was working on it, David Evans. They recorded it. Then they sent it to Memphis, had it mixed over there with David Evans. They recorded it, and the one recorded it, Lewis Carter, Sylvester Oliver.

Greenberry: What do you think, when Fat Possum signed Junior, did that do anything different for his career?

Joe: Yeah. Yes, it did. He offered Junior a lot more money, I understand, for that label than High Water. That’s why Junior went there, I’m thinking. I don’t know for sure. I wouldn’t swear to that, but I just feel that’s what it was all about.
Greenberry: Mm-hmm.

Joe: Yeah, he actually wanted All Night Long cuz he seen what All Night Long would’ve made. That’s what made our gold. Due to Junior’s old lady, she saw it off of that. I saw it off of High Water royalties. She saw bigtime money off of—she saw bigtime money off of Fat Possum royalties. Yep.

Greenberry: When I’m thinking about this, and I’m listening to those stories about you playing the guitar with Junior the day before he passed away, playing at his funeral, man, you guys, were just real close.

Joe: Oh, yeah, we were real close. I mean, when he was in the hospital and everything, I would be there. We were right there for one another all our lives, right there for each other, like when he got sick. His old lady, Mildred, when he had a wreck, when Junior had a wreck. I ran a bulldozer all my life, and I was doing some work up there at Rust College for Rust College with the bulldozer. A good friend of mine had a wrecking service. Junior turned his car over, and then it rained me out from work. It was raining when Junior hit that little slick spot in that curve there and turned his car, it was ran over.

Then I come on in that evening. He said, “Junior, your buddy, [inaudible 00:46:50] water. He wrecked his van.” I had called out there once, and I said, “Huh?” He said, “Yeah, heard he had a wreck.” He told me [inaudible 00:47:01]. He said, “No, he [inaudible 00:47:03] and then turned it over on its side.” I said, “Oh, no.” Then I broke out there. He hadn’t told Beatrice, his girlfriend, the one that they stayed together. They didn’t stay together, but they had been for years on and off. He’d be there every day.

I broke out there. His car’d always be out to her house and one of ‘em be up at his house. He had wrecked it, and they had done towed it off. Then he went out to his girlfriend’s house, Mildred, so they was in that car. I broke out there. He hadn’t told her nothin’ about he had had a wreck. [Laughter] [Inaudible 00:47:50] I said, “You ain’t get hurt in that wreck, did you?” and we busted out and went to laughing. She said, “What wreck?” I said, “The wreck he just had.” She said, “You had a wreck?” Then he bust out, “Yeah, I turned my van over,” cuz I messed up, [laughter] but she was gonna find out anyhow.

Greenberry: [Laughter]

Joe: Then next morning, “You need to go to the doctor.” He said, “Oh, ain’t nothin’ to help.” I said, “I don’t know, Hoss. That right there.” I said, “You need to go to a doctor.” Somewhere over that nighttime, Junior was big anyway. She said his leg swolled up big as a gallon bucket that’s
shiny, like it was about to bust, like a watermelon. She made him go. They went to the doctor. From that then they rushed him to the hospital, and they had to operate on him. God, all mighty, they found out he had cancer, too, then, but he did not know it.

They won’t let nobody—he stayed in the ICU for I don’t know how long. I would go by there and write a note, put it on the door, and the nurse said, “We’ll see to him gettin’ it.” Now she didn’t never come out over there. Then he come on back to the house, and he got to doing pretty good. I’d come and clean his house. We’d laugh and talk, how he wasn’t big as a building. I’d never know. I’ve known him all his life, but, now, when he was comin’ up, real young, he wasn’t nothin’ but just a little skinny somethin’. Mm-hmm, but he got fat in his older days. I was there that day. When we left, he called me and told me I could come and get my guitar. I got a guitar in the house, in the room. That’s the one we recorded “All Night Long” with it. It was in that movie. If you all see him, if you all seen movie, “All Night Long,” Deep Blues movie.

Greenberry: Yeah, he’s got that red guitar, or is it black?

Joe: Uh huh. No, a black guitar.

Greenberry: Yeah, he’s got a red shirt on. He’s got a black guitar. That’s what I’m thinkin’.

Joe: Yeah, uh huh. Yeah, uh huh.

Greenberry: Okay.

Joe: Yeah, uh huh, that guitar over there sitting back up there in the corner. That’s what he recorded “All Night Long” on, and so that’s the one I picked up. Went over to his house the day before he died. He told me—I was sitting on the couch with him. We used to play “All Night Long” never [inaudible 00:50:30]. I picked it up. I played that, but, see, I didn’t know that he had no real means of royalties off that CD.

Then, about a month later, once he died, I got a letter from High Water wanting me to verify that that’s my right social security number, real name, and real address. It said, if so, I don’t have to respond back to it. If not, I would write the letter to Dave Dean 00:51:14 at the University of Memphis to make a correction cuz due to I got a royalty to be coming along with the sale. I didn’t answer it. In about three more weeks, I got a check, a real big check from ‘em, from international, how many sold in the U.S., how many sold in the foreign country. I’ve been getting that along with the sale, and I got one this year. I knew how long they’re gonna go. I get one ever six months due to the sale. Yep.
Greenberry: Around the hill country, I know that your son plays with Cedric, and the Burnsides were close with the Kimbroughs and all that kind of stuff. A lot of places don’t have that connection, but the hill country and Holly Springs seems to. You said you grew up with Junior like that real close. Is it just something about the hill country is like that?

Joe: Oh, yeah. Yep, the hill country. I don’t know why—let’s see. I don’t know what year that was when I first heard the word “hill country,” but that was the first year we had a blues festival at Rust College. The first time I heard of hill country, and we just had so many blues players there. We had it 15 years, and that’s been 30 years ago, I imagine. I’ve been knowing about hill country about 30 years ago, but I just found out recently, within the last three or four years, what the difference in hill country, how they class it as hill country.

Greenberry: Are you saying how did they?

Joe: Yeah, that’s how I found how what they determine hill country from the other music, something they tell.

Greenberry: Yeah, cuz they say the delta and the hill country’s two separate types of music.

Joe: It is, if you listen at it. Delta’s got a frail 00:53:54 type to it, got a frail type of music cuz it is not together. I’m gonna let you listen to just a little wee bit of hill country in just a minute or so. [Playing guitar] Now you hear that. Could you hear that?

Greenberry: Yeah. Was that you playing?

Joe: Yeah, that was me playing. Uh huh, but, see, that’s different. Hear that boompty-boomp? It was still saying one thing, and our lead would go on doing something else. I talked to a whole lot of people who want to know how can we hold that bass, that beat, and then take our picking finger and do something different, make it say something different. See? You still didn’t get it, did ya?

Greenberry: No, I got it.

Joe: Do you know the difference of what I’m trying to explain, the differences?

Greenberry: Yeah, so you’re basically playing the baseline while you’re playing the guitar, too.

Joe: Right, right, right. Uh huh. Yep. Mm-hmm.
Greenberry: Okay, so in the delta, they got a man—they don’t even have the bass, do they?

Joe: Uh-uh. They’ve got a fret, or they play all their strings at one time, I think. Mm-hmm. Yeah, that’s different than—hill country, automatically, the baseline is automatically different from the rest of it.

Greenberry: It’s like you’re playing two separate things at once.

Joe: Right, right, right, right.

Greenberry: Okay. Yeah, I’m pickin’ up what you’re puttin’ down now. All right.

Joe: Mm-hmm. Yeah. That’s how it was explained to me. That’s the difference between hill country and delta music or other music.

Greenberry: How’d Trey get into playing the guitar?

Joe: Me.

Greenberry: He just grew up around it?

Joe: He grew up around it. He was playing a guitar since—I didn’t never know he was. I could find a guitar string broken every once in a while, but I was drinking, back in the time. I would say, “Hmm, I done broke a string and didn’t know it.” I walked in the house one day, and Mama was livin’ then. He was very young, very young. He might’ve been nine years old. He was sitting up in his room. He was playing the guitar, watching TV. He wasn’t missing nary a lick of one of Junior’s songs. I opened the door. I could hear, and holding that door, he never knowed I’d been in the house to date. He had that door up, and he was playin’ the devil out of that guitar, the same old song. I’m gonna play a beat of it. [Playing guitar and singing] Yeah, he was playing that song, but he wasn’t singing, just playin’ better than I could play it. I said, “Oh, this boy done picked up on that.” I never thought he could pick up a guitar, but his mama knew he could play. Yep.

Greenberry: Was Junior like that, too? Was he like that as a kid playing the guitar?

Joe: Yeah. Junior never did get a chance to hear that boy play, and I wish so bad that he had. Mm-hmm. Trey started playing all of Junior’s music, and then he went on to start playing Jimi Hendrix style of music. That’s what made him so good, but then people got to talkin’ to him, said, “Jimi Hendrix music ain’t gonna make no movement around here, so you need to play the blues.” He started playing the blues, and then started playing with different boys. He played all over the world with Mississippi Morris,
Blind Morris. You might’ve heard of him. Have you heard of Mississippi Blind Morris?

Greenberry: I might have. I’m not sure.

Joe: Yeah, he’d play harmonica. Slick Bafford 00:59:38, he was a white—well, he would’ve done lots of other stuff, if he hadn’t started going preaching. They were the same age. That boy was so good, until—oh, lord, he was a good actor. Oh, he could on a show. Don’t you think he couldn’t, at a very, very, very young age in his teens.

Greenberry: Who could do this?

Joe: His name was Slick Bafford.

Greenberry: Okay.

Joe: Mm-hmm, and so he fell in love with that boy of mine and they started playing together. He’s about played all over the world, the United States. Mm-hmm. He stopped and started preaching, that little ole white feller did. Mm-hmm.

Greenberry: What was Junior like as a performer when he was coming up when he was a kid? You remember any of that stuff?

Joe: No. Junior just played his music, just played his music. That’s all he did, worked on and played his music.

Greenberry: Yeah. I noticed that, man. I noticed that even after Junior got signed by Fat Possum, he still kept his joint. It was something in him, like he was glad to have the money, but it was more. It was like—

Joe: Yeah. Junior just loved to play guitar. I mean, he just loved to play guitar. He’d get up in the night, middle of the night, and play guitar. He used to start crying when he’d start playing guitar. Yep, and I have seen him cry many, many days. Yep.

Greenberry: Just playing the guitar?

Joe: Yeah. Whenever he’d get the blues, he would start crying. He didn’t care who he was around or what.

Greenberry: He would just play, huh?

Joe: Yeah.
Greenberry: That was kinda like his way of—

Joe: Yeah, mm-hmm. Yep, that was his way of life.

Greenberry: That’s cool. Yeah.

Joe: Yeah. He loved it. He used love it, loved it. He loved his guitar.

Greenberry: He never wanted to play anything else, did he? He just liked the guitar.

Joe: No, guitar. He played the harp a little bit. He didn’t like it. Yep, and he had his own tuning. I don’t care if he was playing with, if you couldn’t tune to him, well, you just had to get out the way cuz he wasn’t gonna tune his guitar to nuttin’ but his voice. There was something black and deep. We’d be tuning with these tuners. Hm-mmm. Folk quality, hm-mmm. He didn’t want that. I can tune my guitar with my eyes shut to his tuning right now. I don’t care where you’re at. If you play one of his records and give me a guitar with nary a string on it, and somebody puts some strings on it, and I tune it to—I’d have to go in the other room and tune that guitar. Then you play his record, and I guarantee, it won’t be too off. I know the sound of his tuning.

Greenberry: That’s awesome, man, and you guys just spent so much time together. It was one of those things.


Greenberry: You started playing with Junior when you were how old, you said 13?

Joe: Yeah, about 13 that I started. Yeah, mm-hmm, about 13, I started playing around him and working on one of his songs or something I was playing. He hated he learned me how to play it. [Laughter] When he learned [inaudible 01:04:12] like I learned all the rest of ‘em. He told me I thought I was smart, one time, after he walked in on me somewhere where I was playing music. [Laughter] He told me, “You think you’re smart, don’t you?” I sure did. I heard Junior’s nine years older than me, I thought, yeah. Mm-hmm.

Greenberry: I think that was all the questions I got, but you got any other songs?

[Laughter]

Joe: Got another song?

Greenberry: Man, you got me itchin’ to hear some music now.
Joe: Well, I got a lot of songs that got heard. Yeah, I’ve got other songs of his that have never been recorded. Mm-hmm.

Greenberry: Man, you gotta lay some of that stuff down.

Joe: I might [inaudible 01:05:11] I done gone old. I don’t like to do this music too much now. I might not—now [inaudible 01:05:18]. I played one the other day. [Inaudible 01:05:30] when he was up in his room, and I just picked up the guitar and I was playing. He’d broken in, and he looked. He looked and he said, “I also wondered how was that did.” He looked at me and say, “I also wonder how was that did.” I don’t know did he pick up on it or what? Right now, I can’t tell you what the song was. My memories are getting real, real, real short.

Just when I’m coming out of it, I can get over to the middle of a song now and forget the name of the whole song I’m singing in that verse or something, and so it’s embarrassing. That’s the reason I’m getting out of it. I don’t know if it’s Alzheimer’s, what y’all call it, or what, or it go along with age, I reckon, but anyway, it haul out on me trying to sing a song. Mm-hmm. A song like I was singing all my life, I can forget. I don’t know one verse of it. Sometime I forget it. Mm-hmm. Then I sing all of my songs now I sing, I make my hand sing, make the guitar sing with me, make it sing with me and keep me sort of in line. Every song I sing, just about, the guitar will sing it, too, as I play it. That’s another hill country style.

Greenberry: Yeah. Did Junior used to do that, too?

Joe: Oh, yeah. Yep, cuz you know that 90 percent of his song is saying the same thing he be saying.

Greenberry: Yeah. I’m gonna have to back and listen to it.

Joe: Okay. When you listen to it, then you put it together, and then call me and tell me, say, “What you said is true.” Such as, listen. [Playing guitar and singing] Now you listen. That next song that you listen at, you might not have played it [inaudible 01:09:24] just what I was saying, just I’m picking the same way. Yep.

Greenberry: You’re picking it hill country style, where you were playing the bass and you were playing—

Joe: Yeah.

Greenberry: Okay. Yeah. I could hear it that time.

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Joe: Huh?

Greenberry: I said I could hear it a little bit that time.

Joe: Oh, yeah. Mm-hmm. All right then. I haven’t sang [inaudible 01:09:52], but anyway, those songs are go down anyways for that reason.

Greenberry: All right, Joe. Well, man, I appreciate you talking to me so much.

Joe: I’ll get over there.

Greenberry: All righty. You have a good one.

Joe: Exactly, you the same.
Amos Harvey

Tripp: Um, so first question, uh, you grew up in Mississippi whole country, correct?
Amos: I did

Tripp: um, did you say you were from Holly Springs?

Amos: I was actually born in Greenwood, uh, never lived there I was only birthed there and then I, uh, grew up in Columbus, Mississippi, which is kinda northeast Mississippi and when I moved uh in the, the what I consider the “Golden Square” of north Mississippi hill country music, I moved over and started going to school at the University of Mississippi in ’89.

Tripp: Okay

Amos: Okay I went to school uh at the University of Mississippi and then around ’91, ’90 or ’91, I learned about Junior’s Juke Joint and that was out, uh, in, uh, off of Highway 4 and around Tullahoma, Mississippi and that’s where I got to know Junior and R.L. cuz I started going there uh, every Saturday and Sunday, or whenever I heard music was playing there.

Um, the first time I went though, was because there was uh, a fundraiser because one of our RL’s houses burned, and uh, so that was the first time I went out there in order to kinda give some money and see what everything was about. Um, but yeah, so I’ve lived there, I’m 45 now, and I’ve lived in this area since about 20 or 21 so about, you know, 20 years plus uh I’ve been in this area and the way I got involved with uh working with R.L. and Junior from going out there, you know, so often I got to be pretty good friends with them and around the same time is when the label “Fat Possum Records” was, uh, coming to 5:00 feration?? and everything and they have recorded um, I think Bad Luck City was the first uh record that they uh put out by R.L, then all night long by Junior and at that time they were also doing shows with Stackhouse records or actually Rooster records over in Clarksdale.

So there was kind of a booking agency, a loose, that’s a loose term, but a booking were going on between the Rooster Records artists and Fat Possum artists and so I got asked to help take these guys on the road um for those shows, for some of those shows. That’s really where the relationship grew to be more uh from taking R.L. and Junior and even big Jack Johnson and ***6:00 Launy*** Pitchford and uh folks like that uh, on tour.

Tripp: Okay, um do you remember, uh, the first time you heard Junior play, and can you kind of describe to me uh, how that music affected you and what drew you to it?

Amos: Yeah, the first time I heard him play was uh when I went out there for that fundraiser for R.L’s house being burned and um when I went in, it was actually a pretty, pretty fun drive, you’re driving somewhere in pitch black night , uh, you know drinking a few beers on the way and you know you’ve been told the directions, but uh, you don’t know what it is, so you know, there’s a little bit of anticipation and excitement and uh you know also, being on your guard and everything, and as we were uh, topping a couple of these hills right before Junior’s place, it was getting kind of excited, or exciting because, you know, we knew were very close and when we got up on that third hill, there were cars lined on both sides of this little 4 lane road, or sorry. 2
lane road, highway 4, so like we kinda rose up on this hill to a very populated section of the highway, with just a little kinda wooden uh building over to the right, so we parked and uh went up to the door and we were actually warmly welcomed…

Which we didn’t know, you know, how we would be uh received, just because we were a few white dudes in a predominantly black you know club and everything so we were there with good intentions and everybody there were there with the same intentions so that felt really good and welcoming and once we got in, uh, we paid I think it was like 2 or 5 bucks, back then, it couldn’t have been more than 5 dollars, but yeah all of this was going towards RL…

We walked in saw the pool table, you know, lots of people were there, and uh so the music hadn’t quite clicked to me yet, we kinda heard it pulsing outside we got in, we kinda had to move passed the pool table and then really heard the music. Didn’t know who was playing it though, because the, we called it the pit, but the little place where the musicians played was kinda, if you walked in the front door, it was to the back right in a little area that had a low ceiling, so didn’t get to see where the music was coming from, but it was pumping and it sounded pretty much like nothing else I’ve ever heard, I mean, you know, I recognized it as blues for sure, but it was definitely more hypnotic than any other Twirl bar blaze or, or traditional blues really that I have grown up hearing, and as we made our way closer to the pit, um, you know lots of dancing, and dancing close and, uh, some great moves by men and women um walking passed to see who was playing and it was Junior, Kenny Kimbrough and Gary Burnside, is who I ended up realizing who it was and I think even Joe Airs was there and they traded out on bass, but uh, long answer it was, it was amazing.

I mean I knew right then I was hearing something I’ve never heard before and I wanted to keep hearing it forever, I mean it was amazing, like I said it was hypnotic, it was more of a vibe than anything, uh really is what it was feeling, it made a good feeling kinda wash over me and the people we were with and we knew we were someplace special and uh, I think the song was all night long and throughout the years, I realized that song can be you know 7 minutes or it can be 47 minutes, and that when we walked in, it was about a 47 minute, or it, it just kept going on, it was pretty great, and um so that was the first time I heard Junior and they way it made we felt was good, haha.

Tripp: All right, what time period was that, when that took place.

Amos: So this is probably ’92, okay, ’91 or ’92, I’m, I’m, um probably the beginning of ’92.

Tripp: Okay, um, kinda, I have kinda um the same questions for uh RL, the first time you heard him and if you can kinda describe that as well.

Amos: Yeah, later on in that night, uh, after Junior did a few more songs, he retired from the pit, and you know went and got a beer and he introduced, we we kinda introduced ourselves together, and then, uh it was RL’s turn to go up, basically what happens is they switched off most nights, and R.L would never really get paid, it was more like beer and food…
So sometimes he would just show up and sometimes he wouldn’t, either one or if he was on 2-or-2 , or if he just felt like it or not, but when R.L got behind there, his grandson Cedric was there, you know, and this was brand new so I didn’t really know that Cedric was his grandson until R.L announced it later while he was playing, but Cedric I think was 13 back then, so basically it was this little kid getting behind drums on him, and uh, it was R.L by himself and then Kenny Brown came later, but the difference to me between R.L and Junior was R.L was fun, and Junior was dark, you know Junior was dark and like I said hypnotic and a little more introspective feeling…

When R.L got there, it was like a comedian or a jokester up there, not that Junior didn’t have a sense of humor because he did, big time, but R.L was more of a kinda an entertainer type vibe to him, and his songs were more upbeat, but they were also trancey and a little hypnotic as well, they didn’t change you know at the 12 bar process is basically what uh, you know it was similar but different to what Junior was doing, but a lot more like Muddy Waters style, um John Lee Hooker style stuff going on, kinda jump bougie type blues…but again, the fact that he wouldn’t change on the you know, normal 12-bar blues charges made it something different.

…and uh, you know its been described as dance music and stuff and it really felt like it, you know everybody was dancing, and the thing, what happened was when he stayed on a rhythm longer than those 12 bars, it kinda created this anticipation for like when is the change gonna happen?

But then you forget about it and you fall back into dancing and whatnot, then all of a sudden the change would happen, and then itll go back into it, and it was a really good way to build up the music and then fallback into the swing of it, but uh, the biggest thing when I heard RL was that he was very entertaining and very engaging uh, from what he was, his style, and that style you know, being pretty different from what Junior was doing, uhh…. but both, getting to see both of those guys that one night was pretty darn lucky and uh, again, knew that we were in some place special, and I knew that I would be coming out there a lot after that night.

Tripp: All right, but, so, this was the first time you got to see these guys live, can you kinda tell me about what was the reputation, or what was kinda like, what were these guys in the music community the kinda, you know, lure they had around them, you know how did people describe them, were they viewed as legends or the golden gods, or what was people’s perception of those 2 guys?

Amos: Um, I think from that first perception, or the perception I got of my first time there or the first few times there is that they were definitely respected, uh, very respected, I mean Junior didn’t allow any gambling inside uh his place, he didn’t allow any drug usage or anything like that either, and people respected that, and that was something I immediately got, and fighting, if there was ever even a tussle, it was, uh, put outside quickly, so there was a lot of respect for both of them, I mean, again kind of back to the way their music was, R.L was kind of like the comedian and Junior was kind of the iron first, uh, of that, that realm…

But during the day, you know, it was R.L still who drove the tractor , and worked on some of the Woods property and it turned out later on year or 2 later I realized that he had worked for years
for my uncles family, uh, driving a tractor for him and doing, you know, doing farm work for him, but uh, I don’t know if there was any kind of legendary persona going on, uh other than a lot of respect, and knew that you know they were great musicians, kind of what Juniors felt like though was, uh, it was kinda like a social club out there, you know…

On Saturdays and Sundays, everybody has worked all week, and on Saturday and Sunday you get to go relax, before you go back to work that week and some of these people hadn’t seen each other all week, so it was a time to catch up, and uh come share what happened that week, and I always liked that feeling there too, it was, sometimes… it’s not like the YMCA, but its similar where you can just come hang out and you know, swap stories and catch up with one another.

Tripp: So were the Juke Joints and I guess, uh, Mississippi hill country, were they different from the ones from the Delta?

Amos: Um, you know I’ve only been to a couple in the Delta, uh, but the one thing I did notice, is some of the places in the Delta, a lot more white people went to, and this one not so much until it started being known, and then there were being like, fraternity folks coming out there and sorority folks coming out there, but uh, I think mainly the music was different, there was, uh, always an openness, uh, actually whether is was in the Delta or in the hill country, with the places that I went…

I think it was you know people were interested to see somebody who was interested in what was going on there, if you cause a problem, you’re not popular quickly, you’re asked to leave, that gets solved so you know the difference I think is more the music between the regional juke joints, uh, as opposed to you know any certain way somebody is acting toward you or the vibe there, I mean, its uh you know, its… which is nice, you know.

Tripp: mhm… so I’ve talked to a couple of people, and they kinda tell about how the culture in the Mississippi hill country is very different from culture in the Mississippi delta, having grown up in the area and lived there, can you kinda tell me about that, and if you see that or if you don’t think that’s true?

Amos: Yeah, I definitely think there’s a difference, um, the Delta, you know, has an old, well has a history of the plantation mentality and the sharecropping uh, mentality, more the mentality it just it happened, and in the North Mississippi area a lot more black people were able to own their own land, you know, it wasn’t these huge cotton fields because it was hilly, so it was farmed, but it was also had livestock a lot and uh the hill country I think, when emancipation proclamation happened uh a lot of people stayed there, um…

And I hear tale from older people years ago that, you know, when that happened, things didn’t change that much and people actually started getting to own land and from what I understand in the Delta, that wasn’t the case so much, um, and there was just more of an openmess and more of an open mindedness that I felt in the hill country versus the delta, um…

The delta was ruled by white people, and it still feels that way, the hill country obviously you know, slavery and all, obviously was still there, but there was something that was not as ugly
feeling as what went on in the delta regions and what not, and you know, I wasn’t around in those times, so I can’t, uh, articulate really much better than the way I felt about it, in the way that when I was around you know the country folks in the hill country was just warm and uh and opened and you know there was a little bit more of a happiness going on I mean… Yyes everybody is on different levels of income and you know different levels of poverty and what not, but there was some kind of general feeling of well being in the hill country, whereas in the delta uh there was a lot of skepticism and it you know, it felt poor and uh , not that its bad or good, you know, we don’t want people being poor, but it was definitely a different feeling, It’s hard to articulate…

I didn’t feel comfortable as I did in the hill country when I would be in the delta basically, and uh, a lot of white people that I encountered acted uh, still acted like they owned town, or the people or you know, it was pretty racist, still, and you know, that carries on out even throughout today, uh but that’s a good question, It’s hard to articulate other than things felt more comfortable, you know I think the black people owning their own property and what not probably had a big effect on the way they felt about themselves, which in turn you know, I think a little bit effects how people treat others you know when they feel good about themselves, they’re able to pass that on if uh you’re down trying and broken, not, it's a little harder to carry that smile, uh, than to not.

Tripp: Do you think because um, the hill country, you know, blacks had the opportunity to own their own land, and like you kinda said has a homey feel, do you think that’s why artists like RL and Junior elected to stay there as opposed to you know BB king and these other guys that were from the delta uh you know moved to Memphis or moved to Chicago like Muddy Waters do you think that because of the atmosphere that’s why Junior and RL had no problem um staying there, and they wanted to stay there

Amos: I think that’s a big factor, a big factor, what you just said, that it was comfortable for them, to be there, and you know things, you think about the path of Delta musicians, you know, they wanted to get out of there and musicians usually did and that path was usually up the Mississippi river or wherever the train was leaving and whether, you know, it was from New Orleans up to the Delta, to Memphis, uh, to St. Louis, Chicago you know on up…

I think it was like trying to get out and to find something better, and uh, you know, that homey hill country vibe didn’t really push people out that much, I know R.L left and went to Chicago for a while and like his dad and maybe I think 2 of his brothers were killed there so he took his ass back to Mississippi and was like I’ve had enough of that you know, uh, but I think you’re totally on uh, on a good point there, something about this homey, little more comfortable feel of the hill country, definitely affected Junior and R.L was like, not needing to go out, uh, and it also kept them a little bit isolated from the crappy world, you know.

Tripp: Yeah absolutely, and that’s one thing I found, I found that you know a lot of people kinda talk about the culture of the hill country and how its been preserved because it is kinda isolated whereas the delta has more traffic and things like that…
But one thing I’ve noticed, is these guys, um, you know they weren’t internationally known but they were more of, kinda like, not secrets, they were, they didn’t have the same exposure as these other big artists, do you think that’s because they were in a more isolated place like the hill country?

Amos: I do, I do, you know there is a worth long recorded RL via the Alanomacs Travels, uh, but, you know George Mitchell was really one of the first people to record RL and that was, I think that was, I know a lot in the 80s, uh, but in the, I believe in the 60s he possibly recorded him as well, but I think they were just off in the beat and path, you know these blues lovers, from uh, all over the world, just uh haven’t learned more about delta music, since its on the beat and path, more records have been made by artists that were been in that area, so yeah, it was basically a hidden gem…

And um, you know Tab Falco and Robert Palmer uh Jim Dickinson and folks from Memphis you know who played with a lot of country blues guys there and more rural blues guys in Memphis you know were turned on this North Mississippi thing and thank goodness they were because it helped repel them into the world whether they wanted to be or not, you know, but it taught us about this amazing style of music that’s right in our backyard, that’s basically kind of overlooked and you know…

It may I think what part of it was too, it seemed not as sophisticated as some of that blues that was coming out of the delta into Memphis Chicago and everything because you think about all those towns you end up, I mean there are black crowds and white crowds, but in the Delta and on up through that path, you know, people are getting citified and having to perform a little bit glossier and more refined music they think to be accepted to move on up into that modern world, whereas what’s happening in the hills, staying rural and everything from Fife and Drum to RL and Junior its that’s the way it was 50 years and 80 years ago, you know and there was nothing wrong with it then and there’s not wrong with it now and its awesome that it didn’t evolve too far away from its sources, you know

Tripp: Mhm, definitely, um, that’s one thing i’ve gathered just from doing research, the culture in the Mississippi hill country has almost been preserved, I got to go to the Clarksdale Juke Joint festival, I heard the um, what is it, I cant remember his name, Ogle? Uh, the Fife and Drum..

Amos: Oh, Other

Tripp: Yeah, other, yeah

Amos: Yeah, Other Turner

Tripp: Yeah I got to see him, or his grandsons, everyone still playing, it was pretty incredible, um that was really awesome to see… um, I do have a question, so, um when, so when Fat Possum started that was around the 90s, correct?

Amos: Yeah
Tripp: And the first 2 people they signed were Junior and RL right?

Amos: That’s right

Tripp: Um, so, a question I have, uh, is, these both by industry standards, you would say these guys were signed when they were older, um, you know there were a lot, BB King and these other guys were signed when they were young and they were out there touring and all that kinda stuff. So do you think because these guys were older, it was harder for Fat Possum to market them?

Amos: Um, I don’t know, that’s a good questions, uh, I don’t think… I think it was kinda easier, because they already had a life ahead of them, with a story. And uh, you know, that’s a good question, I don’t think, I think 1. Fat Possum was drawn to the music ultimately, not, and I doubt, they had a business plan that was thinking about how to promote these guys, because the music said it all…

And after you got to know these guys and their life also, uh, said a lot, you know and as far as what people think is credible, uh, you know, in the blues world a hard life gives you credibility for whatever reason, uh but I don’t think being old was hard to market, or had an effect for eve why Fat Possum started really, um I think it would be harder to market a young blues player to be honest, uh back then and now, uh, unless you seen the what people call virtuosoa or blues phenoms that are come out young, but uh, I think generally in the blues market people are hungry for the older sound.

Tripp: Mhm… when…the, so how, when was the uh, first time you met Junior and uh, was it before or after you started tour, tour managing with them (him? 3:10)

Amos: Uh it was before…it was that first night I went out there so uh, I wasn’t working with the label then, that was just something me and friends went out there to um, to go here and play and also to help give some money to R.L’s burned down house.

Tripp: How, uh…how did you get into tour managing and working with Fat Possum?

Amos: Um, I was asked, you know I had been going out to Junior’s a lot so I had a relationship with him that was a good relationship, just hanging out and listening to music and um they asked if I could uh, take them on the road and that was before I knew the term tour manager or road manager and I just got asked to go on a tour with em’ and at first things were pretty regional. You know, over to Tugalow? (31:07) or up to Memphis. Um the first show I took R.L. to in Memphis was with Calvin Jackson on drums and uh, and, and Kenny Brown wasn’t playing with us…but it was R.L. it was uh, you know, Calvin and we played at this little club near, near the river and I had no contract, it was a verbal contract that I was told about.

And we got there and one it was fun, it was awesome but, Calvin was kinda loaded and he had to go to the bathroom and asked me to sit on the drums and I was like I don’t play drums, I’m not a drummer…and so I basically ended up keeping a beat with the kick and the snare behind R.L and R.L. turns around and he was like “what are you doing here?’ and I was like “I’m sorry…”
(laughs) you know? “…Calvins loaded and had to go do something” and Calvin came back pretty quickly and was like you don’t play drums do you?

And I was like no. Um, but, so from that beginning from that tour management was basically making sure they got paid, making sure the artist got there safely and you know, finding a place for us to stay. You know, this was well before cell phones. Um, and then as it, as I got to take more shows and stuff with them you know, I’d have a contract in hand… and I started making day shoots to where you got a address to the venue and an address of the hotel if you have one and load in times and things like that, so, I basically learned the profession while I was doing it.

And uh, I think, you know…Fat Possum trusted me to, to go out there with them, I mean I don’t thin, I know they did. But they trusted me to get the whole job done. You know and they didn’t have a template for me to go by. And uh, I don’t think I would have wanted one if uh, the way it organically grew into a job and figuring out what needed to happen was a good way to do it…um, but yeah, they…they asked me to help and you know, as…as time went on you get better and better at something as you figure it out and uh, you know, it was really fun. It was like having a, a couple of granddads sometimes on the road. You know sometime those roles would reverse. Sometimes I would be the dad or granddad depending on how much somebody would drink or you know somebody, when we needed to leave and what not… so it was actually kinda interesting and uh, to you know be a young dude uh, direction the show.

Uh, it wasn’t ever like “don’t tell me what to do” type thing it was always you know the decisions that were made were in the best interest of everybody. Whether it was when to leave or when to eat or what made sense for our travels, so…there was never any weirdness or uh, deal of…uh, trying to help, but I did get accused by people and on the road from fans and stuff like that, that… you know… Fat Possum’s controlling the artist and all this stuff and it’s just always ridiculous and pretty frustrating to hear. You know, cause I’d be sleeping in the bed as R.L. on the tour, we’d all be in one room, driving, doing the same thing…like nobody’s controlling anybody. It’s trying to make the show happen and what not. So it was, it was interesting but it was always easy to assume you know, from a distance if you’re not actually doing it.

Tripp: Right, um….yeah. I mean I know just from doing Bonnaroo and stuff and uh, talking to kinda tour managers, it’s, it’s wild and seeing how different they all operate, you know? Some of them do, some of them are on power trips, some of them are just like part of the band, you know? And um, I can definitely see how you know, from the outsiders perspective, you know from not knowing the job and how it, how it works…um, could kinda see that um, but…

Amos: Yeah and I think it’s different styles of tour managing, but it’s also respect for people, you know? What it comes down to with me, uh, I…you know, wanna be treated the way you treat yourself, and you expect… I expect that as grown people that uh, that’s the best way to tour…you know?

Tripp: Mhm.
Amos: Is respecting people uh, I think maybe that’s why me and uh, Fat Possum artists did get along well, you know? It was because it was mutual respect that was being passed back and forth.

Tripp: Can you kind of tell me what it was like uh, managing R.L. and what it was like on the road with him and his personality and y’all’s interactions…you know maybe some stories that stick out to you…

Amos: Yeah. Um it was always a pleasure and it was more of a pleasure if he decided to do the uh, tour. You know, there’d be some tours where you get to a house to pick everybody up and he doesn’t wanna go for whatever reason, doesn’t feel good or maybe had a hangover, or decided it was too long to be on the road, but once we did get on the road it was always fun. Like he was always in a good mood.

There would definitely be drinking and what not, but not all daylong, or anything. And he would have anecdotes to almost any situation…and I wish I had written all of them down. But uh, you know, just riding down the road and seeing some road kill, run over dog, you know he just, would always pipe up like, “dog gone”… um, which is, the dog is gone…(laughs) like simple you know, little punny things and uh, “dead buzzard on the side of the road doesn’t make good dumplings” type thing.

It’s just… he upbeat. And uh, as we went through different cities and stuff he would remember uh, traveling or touring around from time to time and uh, you know say “we went through this town back in the 60’s”. And Junior did the same thing. I took him up to uh, Jackson, Tennessee years and years ago to this uh, I think it was to Sharon Street Blues Festival (37:45 it’s either Sharon or Shannon) but uh, he pointed out two places on the side of the road from Holly Springs to Jackson uh, going up 7 um, that used to be clubs that he used to play in. You know, one was non-existent and one was fallen in. Uh, but that was, that was really interesting and uh, fun to hear about.

Um, excuse me just a second…

Tripp: Okay.

Amos: Got an eight year old…

Tripp: Okay.

Amos: …who’s bored around me as well…um, but touring was fun um, and you know it was a long drive. Some, it was usually just me and sometimes Cedric and sometimes Kenny driving but um, yeah. A lot of 12 and 13-hour drives around the United States um, the, the most stories that I can remember because they’re burned in my memory are more T-Model stories than anything.

It was uh, T-Model was a little more wilder than uh, R.L. and Junior, it was more just playing the gig and drinking and uh, having a good time, you know? I, I know that I do remember about R.L.
that whenever we would travel, he would always pack Vienna sausages or sardines and crackers and stuff in his suitcase. Um, so a lot of times when he would open that suitcase, it would be rank as can be. Because he was, either something had busted open or just from putting the Vienna sausage back in there and travel, so that was always, it was always kind of a bag of tricks to see. What snack was gonna be in R.L.’s suitcase.

Uh, and he would travel with like uh, milk of magnesia bottle too, and a lot of times that would have Jack Daniels in it. So he would keep that on the, you know, under the, on the floorboard, or on the dashboard uh, in clear sight. If we ever got pulled over it would be a milk of magnesia bottle, disguising you know, what he was drinking. But you know, his drink of choice, I’m sure you’ve heard was the Bloody Motherfucker which was the Jack Daniels and tomato juice, or basically like a Bloody Mary with Jack Daniels. But, it’s an acquired taste for sure. But, uh, you know, that was pretty unique and his signature.

For a while we toured with uh, um, I had some dream to make a moonshine baby and uh, for some reason I had a literal dream. I went, found a baby doll and took the stuffing out of it and put a little 10 ounce bottle in it and filled it up with moonshine and uh, took the baby’s head off, cut the neck to where it would fit on top of a bottle cap and so we would drink out of that.

And eventually he ended up incorporating it into his show. Uh, when he would get to the middle of his set when he would break down and do solo for a few songs, he would introduce Cedric as his grandson and then he would introduce Kenny Brown as his adopted grandson or his adopted son, and then he would go to the solo. Then he would ask for his favorite grandbaby, was actually you know, on the side of the stage and he would ask me to bring out his baby, and people didn’t really even know what he was talking about. And I would hand him the baby and he’d pop the head off and take a swig out of the body. And it was usually a, pretty uh, big applause or you know, people were like “what the hell is going on?”

But he’s, he was, he has fun like that. That, that was a big thing you know? And uh, again different with Jun-Junior was a little more reserved, even though he was funny as can be and told jokes a lot more too. But he was more reserved and dark. He wanted to do the gig and leave, you know? There was no hanging out, uh; usually he would be like “how long do we have to play?” Uh, not till we have to play, but how long do we have to play basically. And, yeah, whether it was an hour or an hour and 15 minutes, or what not, you know there’s been plenty of times when I’d say you know, it’s a 60 minute set and he’d play two 30 minute songs…

Tripp: Wow…

Amos: Uh, which you know, are awesome. They go through this evolution where you forget that it’s the same song for thirty minutes and that was the beauty of what Junior could do with his kinda hypnotic evving and flowing of uh, the dynamics of his songs.

Tripp: What were the crowds like at these shows?

Amos: Uh, the crowds at uh, at most of these shows were very receptive, young, for the most part, white, for the most part. Um, you know, in the bigger cities, it uh, uh, got to be an older
crowd...you know, definitely after the Johns Venture record came out, it was you know, uh, hipsters wasn’t really used that much anymore, but or yet. But yeah, it was uh, young rock rollers a lot at the shows.

Um some, in some of the cities like Chicago, and places like that, it would be a great mixed crowd. You know, blacks, whites, young and old. But um, people were always affected by this music. If they knew about it, they were there. If they had heard about it and it was their first time, they were hooked, you know? And that was just...I, I don’t even know that I could ever say that somebody said “I don’t like this music” or you know, walked out for some reason or didn’t find some sort of connection to it.

Uh, and R.L. is just, again the difference is uh, R.L.’s the party and Junior’s the darkness...in a good way.

Tripp: Mhm.

Amos: So after R.L.’s show, I mean, it was absolute energy. You know most of the time he’d (43:52 not entirely sure what he said) something driver, going down South or something like that. And it just, it felt good. And the energy, you know? People were, it was a partying atmosphere, too. Lots of drinking going on. Lots of alcohol sales for the venues.

Tripp: And then Junior was more, after shows...what was the environment like after Junior’s show?

Amos: Uh, he was ready to go...

Tripp: Mhm.

Amos: It was not because he didn’t like the people, uh, he just...he’s a homebody, you know? He wanted to uh, do the show get the money and go. And, and it wasn’t like uh, uh...it wasn’t like “I’m only doing this for the money” it was, “I am doing this for the money” but, it’s like, let’s do this, let’s get home cause I can play Saturday and Sunday night. (laughs) And you know, go 20 minutes away, instead of 7 hours to do this.

So it, he you know, he could just uh, take it or leave it. He wasn’t, it didn’t matter to him, really. So a lot of time it did felt like we were like pulling teeth to get him to tour. And there’d been plenty of times when I drove, drove up to Holly Springs to pick him up to start a tour and he’s like “no, I’m not gonna go.”

And It’s uh, it drove booking agents crazy, clubs crazy, but they’d always try it again...

Tripp: Mhm.

Amos: You know if they could get it once, uh, they wanted it bad. And you know, it got to where we had a couple of booking agents drop booking us because of it and that’s understood. But after
a while then it’s not professional, but yeah. Sometimes you knew there would be a 50/50 chance and you’re just crossing your fingers that it would uh, be the good 50.

Tripp: Mhm. Did, uh, you know, you’ve toured with other bands since then. Do you think that Junior or R.L. kinda sometimes if they were like you know, just not feeling it. Do think it’s cause they were in a different position than you know different artists? Or is it because they were you know, older or they were set in their ways, or you know, what then you’ve toured with different…

Amos: I think…Yeah. I think it was never…I think it’s always had something to do with health, or the way they were feeling, or what they had to do the next day. I don’t think it was ev-ever like “oh this place doesn’t feel right” or you know, or “I’m not being treated right type thing. It was always either a hangover or, you know, they had a house party to do two days later…for 50 bucks? Instead of caring about hopping on a plane and going to Amsterdam and doing severl shows and coming back with a couple grand…

Tripp: Mhm.

Amos: You know? To… to do that much travel and, and “work” quote on quote was uh, you know, sometimes a pain in the butt to em’. Uh, so you know, it’s…it’s interesting, it’s like they’re for the most part, pretty happy not doing it. I mean R.L. had a huge family and Junior did too but you know he didn’t take care of uh…people didn’t live with him…

Tripp: Right.

Amos: …like R.L. did. R.L. had 7-9 people living in his house. Junior had you know his wife, Mildred. And that was it. So it was, it was different. It was a lot easier for Junior to exist and R.L. financially.

Tripp: Mhm.

Amos: So-yeah. R.L. made great money and he knew that if…to keep supportin’ his family uh, he would do the tours, you know? It was a great way for him to get ahead…you know, he’d get back home and give his money out basically to almost everybody, and yeah uh, quickly…quickly share his spoils, and you know, have to go on tour, again. Or not “have to”, luckily another tour would come up and you know, kinda start the processes again.

Tripp: I’ve read some articles about um, you know, from newspapers and interviews with R.L. and he almost just sounded like music was secondary to him. He was gonna do whatever it took to provide for his family. And you know, after a tour he’d say “you know we need to cut this tour short” because um, you know, “I got work the next day at my real job.” Um…

Amos: Yeah.

Tripp: …it was almost like he viewed music as something that he loved to do but not as a means to an end.
Amos: I know. And it was more like extra curricular, or, or at times possibly therapeutic… but it was definitely something that was secondary. Um, well and that changed a little bit when, again when R.L. started making better money when he was going on he road, you know he realized that he didn’t have to do farm work anymore.

But at the same time he would wanna get home cause he would get a call that so and so’s sick. You know, or somebody’s in the hospital. And it meant more to him to get home to be able to contribute, or to be around for that, then be like alright, let me go 21 days and I’ll make this much more money. You know, if somebody was sick in his family, he would be home.

Tripp: Mhm.

Amos: And uh, and for a lot… I think he probably would have toured longer, if we could have afforded to have Alice May with us all the time, or had a tour bus type thing. Casue a lot of this was in the van, you know? And he didn’t wanna make her sit in the van all the time, you know doing 13 hour runs but, they loved each other. And when they were on tour together it was awesome.

Tripp: Mhm.

Amos: And uh, and not that it wasn’t awesome if she wasn’t with us, but uh, he loved family. You know? And there’ve been numerous, numerous show where if it’s in driving distance, there’s gonna be 7-15 people with him. You know, family and cousins and friends. And you know, sometimes clubs don’t take too kindly to that cause now there’s 15 people drinking the beer…and trying to be fed, as opposed to, 3 musicians that were hired.

Tripp: Mhm.

Amos: So you know, every now and then that could get uh, a little hairy, but uh, when you step back… it, it still goes back to that family thing, you know, of sharing.

Tripp: Right. Yeah I’ve uh, um…the archives at Ole Miss, there’s uh, three folders for R.L. Burnside and there’s one folder for Junior and it is slim. Um…

Amos: Yeah.

Tripp: …so I get the impression, especially from talking to you and talking to other people, that Junior did not like to leave um, the Mississippi Hill Country.

Amos: No, he…he kept to himself and he, he was perfectly happy, you know, being where he was. And you know, you have to respect that. He, he liked playing. He’d play enough to make a little money, you know on the weekends and that was, that was plenty for him, you know?

Tripp: What uh….what was your reaction when Fat Possum released the um, that Black Keys cover of the Junior Kimbrough songs?
Amos: Um, I thought it was good…I mean the Black Keys are, grew up with, Dan…grew up loving Fat Possum. I remember seeing him up in Cleveland when I’d be with R.L. or T-Model…he would be at Uklid (51:26 don’t know the name of tavern) Tavern or, you know, uh, I think Uklid was in Cleveland…there was another place we played in Columbus, and uh, Dan I think was from Akron.

But he would be at any show up there and he would travel down to Mississippi to meet Junior. I took him to uh, not meet Junior, uh, meet, uh…T-Model, cause he, Junior had already passed. But uh, he was totally into all that music and uh, and I…and I like that somebody was. I think he had a band called the Barn Burners back then that was like a Blues uh, band that he had. But that, I thought that the, the music he did was fine. He, he gets what Junior is, and was and uh, has a dark spin on it as well.

Um, so I’ve you know it’s been interesting to see some of the uh, kind of Blues duos that channel the Fat Possum music you know, go on to be very successful and I remember seeing one of the Black Keys first records was reviewed in Rolling Stone, uh, kinda next to one of T-Models… not next to it but you know, in the same issue. And uh, I think T-Model had 3 and a half stars and the Black Keys had 4…or you know, something like that, it was close. And I called Dan and was like did you ever think you’d be being reviewed in Rolling Stone next to T-Model and beating him? You know, and he was like “no, not really”.

Uh but, its gone on to North Mississippi All Stars um, you know play a ton of Country Hill music too, and are really good about you know, giving the nod to where it came from. And the Black Keys are too, to a certain extent. But, at this point in their career it’s, you know, they’re not turning people on to uh, Junior and R.L., I don’t think…you know? I think it’s, it’s grown past that uh, but I thought the record was good. You know and if it gets people into Fat Possum, that’s a great…or the artist on Fat Possum, you know, that’s a good avenue.

Tripp: Mhm.

Amos: Uh, when Iggy Pop did um, You’d Better Run…which was uh, a pretty dark, that’s a dark song to begin with, you know? It’s about rape…

Tripp: Mhm.

Amos: …basically uh, Iggy Pop did a good version of that. But um, I think the Black Keys have done well to perpetuate some of this music. But I think it’s like a lot of uh, music that people hear later…is you don’t really know where the source is. You know if people try and find the source, they’re gonna find some good stuff. Uh, with the Black Keys career and how many records have been put out and you know, producin’ with Danger Mouth and stuff like that uh, you know, I think that’s a little bit forgotten now. You know, where their sound came from. But I mean you could listen to Junior once, you could listen to the Black Keys once…you know where the Black Keys got their sound, you know?
Tripp: Mhm. Um, I guess my last question for you uh, to rap it up, would be um, I guess it’s a two-part question…sorry. When um, do you think if these guys would have been signed earlier in their careers, do you think they would have had a bigger following or you know, um, you know, if their career had lasted I guess longer than before they were signed you know, when they were younger…do you think that would have had a different impact?

Amos: Um. That’s a good question…I don’t know. I mean you know there was this folk revival that came along in the 60’s and what not where old country Blues artists were being rediscovered and what not. And I mean they may have had, they may have had a little bit of a good go during that, but…I think that for the most part um, the rural style they were playing and the un-polished way that they play, you know, might not have been working for em’...uh, in the 60’s, 70’s and 80’s.

You know Blues turned a really kind of uh, you know, polished kind of strat playing, how many notes can you put between a run, type thing. And uh, to me just personally, I’m not uh, attracted to that more modern sound. And so, I don’t, I don’t know if it would have done them any good or not. I think they would’ve like had their, like had a good little go when they were younger and then they would have been forgotten…kinda like what happened with the old country Blues artists, you know?

Tripp: Mhm.

Amos: I think it, it…it was better for their career that their career happened later…to be honest. Uh, their music you know has been the same for so long, but popular music, you know, chews you up and spits ya out. You can be a darling you know, for a year and then whatever next style or the next newcomer comes along uh, you know, gets the most attention. And uh, the fact that they play the same way…they have played the same way basically all their lives, is awesome to me and I don’t know if they…

Sound Machine groove kind of changed with the times. You can tell it’s a little more, funky. They’ve got uh, all this family that’s playing, Joseph and what not and uh, you can hear some 70’s influence on that, on the family band. But uh, yeah…I think…I don’t know it’s a good question. There’s a lot to think about there, but I feel like they would had a little career in the beginning and then interests would have died off and maybe there would have been a resurgence.

And you know, it kinda was like that a little bit. Uh, David Evans recorded those guys you know, in I guess their probably 40’s maybe? Uh, possibly 50’s and didn’t get much attention at all, you know? Maybe a tad regionally and then later on when it was presented as a raw-er item um, yeah. It came along. Uh, at some time people were more interested in raw version of the Blues instead of the polished stuff.

Tripp: Mhm.

Amos: Um, so I don’t even know if I really answered that for you…but uh…
Tripp: No, no. Absolutely. Yeah, yeah. That’s…I was kinda looking for someone else’s insight, you know?

Amos: Yeah.

Tripp: Especially on that and watching these guys evolve. Um, can you tell me like this is the last part of the question, uh, when you were touring with these guys…can you tell me around what time period you really noticed like “hey, these guys are, you know…these guys are a big deal, people are starting to catch on”. Can you remember a specific time when you knew that, or you know, a show that you were at or something where you’re just like “wow”…

Amos: Um, I know that uh, one in particular was when R.L. played the Portland Blues Festival or uh, I can’t remember what it was called though… it might have been Riverfront Blues Festival is the official name. But that Portland Blues festival, you know, looking out into the crowd and seeing thousands of people be into it, was…was huge for me…and, and there had been killer shows in Chicago and places.

But I guess being so far away from home…you know theoretically it’s I know it’s still in the United States… but it’s basically inversely proportional to North Mississippi up in Portland. But uh, seeing that crowd at that festival react and love him, was really cool. I mean I always knew I was lucky and taking these guys around was super special. And but, it’s hard to deny several thousand people giving some love and not feel it from that.

Tripp: Mhm.

Amos: Um, and you know Junior, you would always see people connect um, to it. But again he didn’t tour like R.L., but with R.L. the more I felt that. Even with T-Model, I know you’re not doing this on T-Model…but uh, he played at the 9-30 club opening up for Squirrel Nut Zippers (1:00:20 I really hope that isn’t actually what he said…) years ago, was on of his first time, times being in front of a couple thousand people and uh, sometimes you just feel it click and it’s and you feel that click when the people are giving it back to you. You know?

Tripp: Mhm.

Amos: So I would, I would say that Portland Blues Festival was a big one for me. Um…

Tripp: You know what year that was?

Amos: That was early 90’s as well.

Tripp: Okay.

Amos: That, that was early 90’s uh, possibly 95’ maybe…you may can sure the uh, go to Portland Blues Festival…and I know it’s not called that. It’s either riverfront or rose-something…there’s the city of roses up there…

Tripp: Okay, but it’s in Portland?
Amos: Yeah.

Tripp: Okay.

Amos: And it’s their biggest Blues festival. Um, the other thing is…at the time, uh, R.L. had this hat that a fan had made that said “Burnside Style” and it was uh, kind of crudely sewn with you know like yarn, or thread across the top of a blank hat…

Tripp: Mhm.

Amos: And I just thought it was…awesome. And so I was going on the road with them a lot and I had uh, um, a t-shirt company in Oxford make up a hat that said “Burnside Style” and you know, I picked a nice hat or a you know a more sturdy hat…

Tripp: Mhm.

Amos: …and had them embroider it on there and uh, that was super fun to see people eat that up. And we sold a ton of them. And I remember we took a box out to that Portland festival and um, that was another kinda…during that time cause it, it felt good cause we sold out of the hats you know, within 10 minutes, and uh, it kinda started spreading the gospel of R.L.

Tripp: Mhm.

Amos: You know from there. And really after that, uh, and a little bit before that, Portland, Oregon had sold more records… more Fat Possum records but more R.L. Burnside records in, in specifically the whole world.

Tripp: Wow.

Amos: And I don’t know if that’s because Burnside bridge, out there and all the streets named Burnside that might have a little bit of a you know, an affinity or affection around it from the people out there but, uh, I’ve always felt an inversely proportional relationship between uh, Portland and North Mississippi…and uh, yeah. Just those record sales alone because I helped work with marketing with Fat Possum for a long time as well…you know, he sold like gang-busters out there. And it was awesome.
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BIографическая характеристика

Greenberry B. Taylor, III, has a passion for telling stories. He began working as a print journalist at the age of 21, and held positions with several different publications such as the Mobile Press-Register, Lagniappe, and Sense Magazine. In 2012, he took a hiatus from print journalism and moved to Colorado to become a children’s ski instructor, while also serving as music editor for the online blog, Fishbowl Records. It was in Colorado that Greenberry found his renewed passion for journalism, upon which he decided to return to graduate school. He has served as an instructor at both Spring Hill College and the University of Florida. His research interests are rooted in popular culture and emerging social media technologies. Greenberry’s ultimate goal is to receive his PhD and pursue a career in higher education.