Bruce Kaplan Interview
At Flying Fish Records, 1304 W. Schubert, Chicago.
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When was the first University of Chicago Folk Festival?

First one was in 1961, and it's been annual ever since then. I was not real... actually I wasn't the founder, I was at the first one, I was still in High School. It was basically founded by a group of people who had been to the Newport Folk Festival, the first one, it happened I guess that summer, summer 1960. And they just felt it was too focused on the commercial artists, and there was no real good place for the traditional artists to receive attention. So I started going to the University of Chicago, it was more traditionally oriented, and it's continued in that vein since then, a real traditional festival. Up until four or five years ago, all the musicians that played there were first-generation traditional musicians, not revivalists. At this point in time that standard's kind of been loosened a bit, just because it's almost impossible to get a programme that's going to be entertaining to an audience that doesn't include any revivalists, you know, because times are changing, most of those people are dying.

Bob Koester mentioned something about urban blues appearing at the festival very early on, which is quite interesting.

Yeah, I think the first year I was there, 1963 I guess, they're in January, so right in the beginning of the year every time, they put on Junior Wells, and it was the first time somebody like that had been at a folk festival, and he was big hit. He had just had a substantial local hit, Messing With The Kid, six or eight months, so a lot of people knew that, it been all over the radio in Chicago, and people were dancing all over the aisles and stuff, and it was quite a change from the traditional mountain ballad singers and stuff who had been mostly at the festival. I think that same year they had Fred McDowell and Bessie Jones, so it was quite a blues thing, musically.

What about blues at the first two festivals?

The first year I remeber Memphis Slim and Willie Dixon were there, also Arvella Grey, who was a Chicago street singer. Second year - I'm pretty sure Gary Davis was there in the second year. Virtually all of the well-known people from the blues revival were there at some point, Skip James, Fred McDowell, Son House, Booker White, all played at that festival. In some cases, like Fred McDowell, it was his first gig outside, you know, in the North. Son House had played a concert for the Folk Society, and it was like his second or third gig in the North, on his first tour. Most people played there pretty early in their rediscoveries.

Was there some man of Vision behind things who could spot trends? Junior Wells was there shortly after his hit with Messing - was his appearance because of the hit, or was it arranged before that?

Oh. Well. That was the first year that I was involved with the festival. I think

it was more or less coincidental. It wouldn't literallyhave been arranged beforehand, because people are booked in October, and the hit was in the summer. But the people were already familiar with him who were running the festival, and essentially he's easier to hire than Muddy Waters or Howling Wolf at the time. Both of them eventually played in the festival too. The Staple Singers were there in one of the early festivals.

I would have thought that Junior Wells would have been pretty shocking to a 1963 Folk Festival audience.

Well, one of the reasons was there was already a good deal of interest, not so much in the Folk Festival, but on campus, in Chicago blues. Paul Butterfield was playing for dances every Wednesday night or something, on campus, one night a week on campus, you know, with Bloomfield and Sam Lay. There was a lot of interest, and to the people who were running the festival, not so much to the audience, but to the people who were running the festival, there was more interest in putting on someone who was somewhat unusual, being a little more oriented towards what was currently popular black music than Muddy Waters or Wolf would have been, because we'd seen the other ones more ourselves, and I think that was the reason then they picked Junior Wells.

And that predates his white popularity by some years.

Four or five years. Yeah, later on, the Folk Society, the same type of people started sposoring blues festivals too, and they were mostly the Chicago blues artists, they had Robert Nighthawk for one, Arthur Crudup for another. I rememeber a power failure in the middle of Arthur Crudup's set, and I had to get up and tell jokes for ten minutes while the power was restored, so I remember Arthur Crudup's appearance pretty well. And we were able to have one of Little Walter's very last shows at one of these blues festivals. Within the Folklore Society there was always a sort of dichotomy between people who were much more into the country blues, and people who were into the Chicago blues and urban stuff, and Zydeco and electric, Clifton Chenier kind of thing, Rockin Dopsie engendered quite a controversy. There were a couple of sides to it, on one hand, as a folklore thing, obviously I would say that urban blues is equally valid with the rural blues. On the other hand, in terms of trying to present it in a show where everybody else is playing acoustically, it can present a problem, because it's so different, it's so much louder, the set-up time is so long in comparison with the other groups. There are certain problems in that vein, presenting blues in that kind of a show. And also there's a certain amount of the audience that just doesn't like it, that's come to hear the other stuff. But in general there's usually been at least one or two electric acts, usuallly a blues group and some other, a cajun band or something else, country. What exactly are you doing?

Abook. Started as an obituary, but I've realised that that wouldn't be appropr iate.

Oh, Chicago blues is quite lively now. It's in better shape now than it was four or five years ago.

Are there going to be some more blues records from Flying

Fish as a result of this?

It's possible. Again there's two sides. I like it. The thing we're doing pretty much in that line is Big Twist, I don't know if he's a blues band, but he's rhythm and blues anyway, and they're really pretty popular around here, and we do well with that. There's so many people going after all these Chicago artists. I'm not really a very competitive soul myself! I mean if Bob Koester and Bruce Iglauer and Jim O'Neal and Earwig records and Razor records, and all these people. I don't need to fight it out with all of them. Unless there was something that was to me so exceptional and so different, I would want to do it. It could be, if it comes along. It's not as if it's not going to get recorded if we don't do it, for the most part, so I'm not real competitive about it. And also to make a record that's really saleable you have a few things you need, a combination of elements that's often not present in the local blues bands. Well, the main thing is some kind of management, or something that's going to get them out playing, beyond just the local area, and a lot of them just don't have that, and without that you really are dealing with a specialty. Well, even with it it's a specialty market, but without that it's a real specialised thing, you sell a few in Chicago, and then just a few to real hard-core fans elsewhere. That's exactly what has made Alligator records so successful, is that they've gotten the artists on the road, people know them. The records are good too, I'm not denying that, but what really distiguishes them is that they've got artists that go out and play, as compared to a lot of the other blues labels. Not just local ones, the British label, that record somebody because they're fans and they're interested, which is fine if you can do it - but it's very hard to do that and do it for a living. You know, you have to have some other source of income if that's the way you're doing it. I'm trying to think of something else real interesting about the Folk Festival... one thing we discovered in booking the folk festival, it's getting very difficult to book country blues, find somebody that's going to come out and do a good programme, and communicate with the audience well, and be an authentic country blues performance. They're real hard to find, there's very few left.

There's RL Burnside.

Yeah. Son Thomas is OK. What he does isn't that original, but it is authentic.

Do you still do a lot of blues at the folk festival?

Well, we still try to have blues, and we usually do have some, but the interests of the people running it have probably shifted a good deal towards - there's a growng interest in Irish, well, Celtic-type music, and so they do some of that. There's still a lot of bluegrass and country. Last couple of years there's been a renewed interest in stuff that's kinda protest music, kinda thing, so we've got women's music, and we've got union, professional union organisers . Also, the biggest thing amongst folkies is an interest in all kinds of ethnic music that people didn't really used to care about, but are now getting interested in. Chicago's a very good town for it, you get Serbian bands, we had a Bulgarian women's chorus last year. All these ethnic groups are here, and at least some section keep up the traditional music and customs. That's one of the directions it's been going. There's still

always one or two blues artists there, it's just like I say, particularly for the country blues, getting harder and harder to find the artists. Even if you want to repeat people. Yeah, it's just an unfortunate situation; the era for that has kind ofgone. I in many ways kind of prefer that. This is as anaesthetic thing, it's more interesting to me that urban. It's like bluegrass versus the traditional mountain ballads - it's much more regular than the country blues, it's all straight time, you know, and the tunes all fit into fairly simple chordal patterns, whereas you take the country blues, again, the same thing is true of the old mountain music, it's usually not chordal at all, with a rather irregular rhythm, it's just more unusual, musically.

I noticed your first records were blues, and then you strayed from the beaten track.

I guess you could say that, one two and three were all black records. There was Erwin Helfer and Jimmy Walker, the Zion Harmonisers, and Martin Bogan and Armstrong. Actually, when we started, there were really six projects that were getting done initially, that I had produced and were originally going to come out on Rounder, and then when I stopped working for Rounder wanted them coming out on my label. There were those three, Norman Blake, he's a guitarist and singer and Vassar Clements, and people bought the Norman Blake record and the Vassar Clements record! And I guess one of the things that tended to focus my interest that way was that they were much more successful.

This was about '74.

Yeah. And probably even now, we still sell more of the Vassar Clements records every year than we've sold of the Zion Harmonisers since we released it - you know, in total. I mean, I like all three of those black oriented records, they're good records I think. Martin, Bogan and Armstrong, they're the only ones that did much touring at all, and they sold the best of them, but even then people - they weren't the kinds of artist that people bought records of. They'd go to see them, and enjoy the show a lot, but we didn't sell that many records.

When I was looking up your label all I could see was the blues stuff. I was very surprised to see hundreds of records in your catalogue.

Yeah, most of them aren't blues. There's two Martin Bogan and Armstrong, there's Erwin Helfer and Jimmy Walker, and there's this other Erwin Helfer, who's this blues style white person, there's the Zion Harmonisers, which is a gospel record; the Mandingo Griot Society, which is African music, and the Big Twists. There's ROy Bookbinder, who's a country blues revivalist, and I just put a record out by Paul Jeremiah, who's a country blues revivalist. Actually the most exciting black music we've done, and certainly the most commercially successful has been a group called Sweet Honey in the Rock, a black women's acapello group; also the persuasions; we've done better with Sweet Honey. They're five black women who do most of their own tunes, in kind of a gospel style, all acapello. It's kind of a remote offspring of stuff like the Fisk Jubilee Singers, but pretty remote, it's changed a lot. It's stylistically very traditional, although the songs are about someone like Joanne

Little, who was a black woman in North Carolina, who killed the jailer and escaped - apparently he'd been trying to rape her and she killed him, took the keys and escaped, and there was a big man-hunt, or woman-hunt I guess, for her, and it was quite a news event in the States, the story. And you know, talking about South Africa, and a lot of spirituals too.

The blues you've recorded is traditional. Is that your taste, or is urban blues too much like hard work, or what?

Well, I think that it's some of both. Right at the start, I'd done one Bob Reidy record for Rounder, and it was an urban blues thing with a lot of black artists on it, although he was white. He still is white. And then I did one for us. I think the one on Fish has some real nice Carey Bell stuff. Yeah, they got good stuff on them, but it was largely, I am interested in blues and the country stuff, bluegrass, but the bluesgrass was appearing more profitable. And again it's much more exciting, as well as being more commercially viable to work with touring groups. Unlike Alligator I didn't really want to go into the agency and management business myself, it was a lot easier to find people who were doing country and bluegrass stuff and folk stuff than finding people doing blues stuff, that fit into those categories. I still would record a blues band that met those criteria, and was real good. I listen to blues tapes all the time, but usually something comes up, something prevents us from doing it. A lot of the time, essentially, a lot of the tapes just aren't that good, various revival bands that just don't make it. We came very close, for instance, to doing the legendary blues band. They've got a record for Rounder. We came real cloes to doing them. They went with Rounder. And we're also handling another label that does a lot of blues, that we're national distributors for, Blind Pig. They've got a Buddy Guy Junior Wells that I think's been in England for a while, Matruex, and they have a Big Walter record, one Roosevelt Sykes, a couple of Boogie Woogie Red records. They do a fair amount.

How is the label's general health?

Could be a lot better. We're affected by the general economic downtourns too, just like everybody else, but we're making it, we're getting along. We've cut back on expenses a lot, and we're either doing records at a lower budget, or we're doing fewer. But we're making it. It's hard times for us, you know, as any small business. We're likely to start doing alittle more reggae stuff.

That seems to be where the future lies.

There's a lot of interest in it here. I've always been a little mystified why, for the most part, people who write about blues consider Zydeco, and even sometimes regular white Cajun music appropriate to write about, but usually don't write about reggae. I mean, you know, sociologically it's very similar to the situation around the Chicago blues of the forties and fifties.

Apparently reggae came out of New Orleans R&B heard on the radio.

Yes, you can hear a lot of the connections, the kind of rhythm and stuff. But it's really pretty much self-made and self-defined music of poor black people, as opposed to soul music and stuff, which although it's music that's predominantly bought by

poor black people, really to a large extent comes from outside the communities that are buying it. Reggae music is really pretty much generated within the community. And it's even in English, unlike Zydeco, it's easy to understand the words. Not that it's easy, but it's easier to understand that Zydeco, for me.

Garbled sentences.

Alligator in particular has really been remarkably successful. I mean, selling 20,000 Hound Dog Taylor albums, or whatevr, is really a remarkable achievement. I would have listened and said this band is enjoyable, but it won't do well on records. In many senses I don't think it does, but it's probably because he went out and played, and people got to know who he was, and excited about him. I think that is a lot of what happened. It is to me, still, hard to listen to on records.

Iglauer's doing something right.

I do think it's a case, that it is mostly, even in Chicago, a white music, in the audience, and to a large extent, even in the black live bands nowadays, the players, you know, a lot of the black live bands have some white musicians, or even a majority of white musicians. Plus there's a whole bunch of course of white bands. Chicago really is the place. It has more black oriented blues radio than anyplace in the North, and probably anyplace in the South too. It's still keeping going, which a lot of people wouldn't have thought would have been the case, ten years ago or five years ago, even.