

Bill Gilmore interview

At B.L.U.E.S., 2519 N Halsted, Chicago.

September 21, 1982. 9 pm.

This started off as several Elsewheres, didn't it?

The first Elsewhere was May of 75, which was 2760 Lincoln Avenue. That ran until November of 76, and the second Elsewhere was Elsewhere on Clark, which opened February, March actually, of 77, and ran till November, which seems to have been a bad month, of 78, and then we opened here in April of 79, and are obviously still on-going.

Why did the others shut?

The first one was landlord problems; we just had a situation where the landlord was living upstairs and didn't like the noise, and the crowds, and the people, and it was just an intolerable situation, for him and for us. The second was just too big, it was not a good layout for blues, it was too much, it had been a neighbourhood restaurant called the Cottage for years and years, then it was a disco called Jamie's. It was an enormous place, it was 5000 square feet, and unfortunately not much of that was really usable. There was a music room, there was a bar room, there was a game room, there was a kitchen, and somehow when you work it all down you never got that much real useful space; it just didn't work. And there were problems in the neighbourhood that we just didn't anticipate. Yeah, it was a major drug-dealing centre right around there, which we had no part of, but which kind of kept people away from coming to the place. This place is a lot like the first Elsewhere, it's about the same size, about 1100 square feet.

Would you say that was about right?

Well, in Chicago as in most cities, there are two markets, there's the week night market, and there's the weekend market, and for the week night, Sundays through Thursdays, this is just about perfect; for the weekends it's too small, obviously, we lose people, it's overcrowded and people leave. But given the choice of being proper-sized on the weekends and empty during the week, or proper-sized on the week nights and losing people on the weekends, which seems to be the choice, I'd say what we're doing seems to be about the right size.

Did you have a partner in the Elsewheres?

I had three partners actually, one working partner - excuse me - two working partners, and one silent partner; then after the second place they were no longer involved. I still see them to play cards with them, but we're not in business together. Rob had the bar here, he had a kind of a college, Paul hangout, and he had the space, and I thought I had an idea that would bring people in.

You're the blues partner, and he's the business partner?

Right.

And the Elsewheres did nothing but blues?

The first place started as a neighbourhood bar, and we'd been there a couple of months, and Erwin Helfer, a blues piano player, came by, and said oh, you have this old piano in the window, which we indeed did; he said well I'll come up with SP Leary

and play Friday nights and we can pass the hat, or play for a percentage of the bar, or whatever, and we started out with that. I'd heard a lot of people myself in the sixties in Chicago, the old Mother Blues, and the Big John scene on the North Side - I never really went to the West Side that much, but Theresa's on the South Side, and - my mind goes blank - Pepper's. And then through Erwin I met, or re-met, a lot of people like Sunnyland Slim, Eddie Taylor, Homesick, John Brim, Floyd Jones, Left-Hand Frank, John Wrenck her, people like that. So we started off booking one night a week, and by the time we agreed to move, at the end of the first Elsewhere, we were running 7 nights a week of blues. We did originally have a folk night and a piano night, but that was dropped after a while, and we ended up doing 7 nights a week.

So it sounds like you ran into the blues bar idea by accident. No, as most blues bars in Chicago didn't really start out that way. Actually B.L.U.E.S is one of the few that was planned from the beginning as a blues bar - the name and everything.

And it seems to be working.

I think it's working financially and it's working aesthetically, it's going well on both ends.

Do you find that at all interesting? It's something of a phenomenon.

I'm always interested when people share my own case, which I never assume anyone does. I tend to book in a very eclectic manner, which I'm sure you've noticed. To the best of my knowledge, as I keep saying, I've booked more blues in the last five years than anyone else in the world. I don't even think there's a close second. I just book an average of twenty-five bands a month, and yeah, to a large degree that surprises me that it's working as well, but also when I did start this place I did kind of consider what would work: since I don't try to book the best-known blues people, I thought well, I'd better get a small place. And when we opened actually, Rob and I, most nights he was working the bar and I was working the door - that was the whole staff, we had no waitress - he did the bar and I did the door, and that was the payout. So we never lost money, I don't think we've had a really bad month, but we had a very low overhead to start with, the two of us. It's a lot less pressure than if you try to do a place where you've got three bartenders and four waitresses and a doorman and everything else that goes with it.

Do you book bands you like, or do you book bands you think deserve it, or what? What's your policy, if you have one?

I have one somewhere. I do a combination of things that work for the bar. I do feel an obligation to my partner to make it financially successful, so I don't go totally off the wall. A lot of people just don't play otherwise in the North Side, I do feel an obligation to bring people up that would not otherwise play in the North Side, like Smokey Smothers, Homesick James, or Eddie Taylor, some of the older guys who are not currently as well known perhaps as some of the people I also book, like Jimmy Johnson, Johnny Dollar, Phil Guy, Magic Slim might be better known right now. I try to keep it varied; I book Little Brother Montgomery, John Davis,

mostly people I like personally. I'm not really close, I don't really hang out with musicians - I occasionally get invited to parties at their houses, at bars in the South Side or the West Side, I don't really hang out with people though. I don't think I'm personally prejudiced; there are a lot of elements . Obviously you look at who does money for the bar - if you don't make money, you don't stay in business, you're not supported by the Ford Foundation, you got to keep the money coming in, or get in another business. I also listen to what the employees say, the people at the door, the waitresses and the bartenders have very strong feelings about different musicians for one reason or another. Well, I don't want to make the employees unhappy, because that will then affect how the bar operates. I listen to my partner, I listen to the customers, but it's basically my responsibility to book. Let's go outside. (We go out, the band having started. A small group of thrill seekers, probably amateur wrestlers, and already a touch smitten with drink, ask what's going on inside, and appear unimpressed. Bill attempts to lure them elsewhere, advertising the Lincoln Avenue strip: "Up on Lincoln Avenue it's probably totally empty, if you want to beat the two blocks and go up to Lincoln Avenue. Nobody on Lincoln Avenue. 180 pesos; 43 deneiros; 67 pezuza. Lincoln Avenue's a fine city. Current exchange rate's 70 to the dollar. I'll just tell you." They go in anyway.)

In my four months here, I've seen only two acts in here which are white: Scotty and the Bad Boys, and Cub Coda. Is that a result of any definite policy on your part?

Essentially most of the white guys get work one way or the other. There are several factors involved. One is that most white guys cannot sing the blues. They mean well, and they try, and there are a few exceptions, but there's a real voice that you have to have to sing the blues. And if I tried to do it, or if you tried to do it it would sound vaguely ludicrous. It fits in with the whole key structure of the music, and everything, and to get a white lead singer who can actually sing the blues, there are a few guys that can do it, but it's fairly rare. Now as opposed to blues guitar, where a lot of the young guys can obviously do the chords and the changes, and then play guitar very well. I tend to feature black artists because I feel that by and large most of them have not worked that much, as they should, they're mainly overlooked; they have not received the recognition due; mainly, as a rule, they're older, and they're more interesting. Most of the guys I book are forty and up - there are a few exceptions - but even the young guys, like Phil Guy's over forty, Johnny Dollar's over forty, Magic Slim's over forty, Little Brother Montgomery is somewhere beyond seventy, as is John Davis, as is Sunnyland. Possibly if there were whites in their fifties and sixties, I'd book them, but they're very few. Charlie Musselwhite comes to mind as someone who's in his forties. He's sort of the senior citizen among the white Chicago blues guys. I think a good deal of it is just plain age, you know, that twenty-two year old white kids, and twenty-two year old black kids, by and large, and again there are exceptions - Eddie Shaw's kid's an incredible guitar player, he's 22 maybe, Lurrie Bell's an incredible guitar player, and Steve Freund, who is white and in his twenties or maybe early thirties is very good. Pete

Crawford who's in his early thirties is also quite good, and also has a good voice for singing. But as a rule it's probably age as much as anything else, and until fifteen years ago most whites had no idea about Chicago blues, that it existed.

Hence the comparative youth of its exponents.

Yeah, among whites, mainly twenties and thirties, whereas the black guys are mainly forties and up. Just to me, it's more interesting.

Yes, that's interesting.

Yeah. I think again it's - new wave, punk rock, whatever you want to call it, a lot of that is people who are thirty or forty who are trying to act like they were seventeen, which is ludicrous. I'm not any more, I'm thirty-seven in two weeks, I'm not eighteen anymore. A lot of the current rock'n'roll just loses me, I'm sure if I was eighteen it would sound really good. I'm not, why pretend you are?

How did you start listening to blues, originally?

In Chicago in the mid-sixties, when I was going to school, as I say, I started hanging out in the early Wells Street music scene, which was originally Theresa's, Big John's, and another place which I forget, and then from there I started going to Theresa's; did I say...? Mother Blues and Big John's on the North Side. Wells St between, roughly, Division and North Avenue, a big entertainment business for a while, and there was a place called Mother Blues, which was probably the first North Side club, I've got to do a little research into that myself someday. I think probably the first North Side club to do really mainline South Side Chicago blues, South and West Side, Muddy Waters and Howling Wolf, people like that. That would have been beginning maybe 1965, I'd have to get the dates exactly, but I know I was going there in late 65, early 66. And a place called Big John's, where Bloomfield and Butterfield played, and Elvin Bishop. And there was another place again, and the South Side; I never really went to the West Side places.

I arrived at the blues having travelled backwards through rock, and some did it sideways through folk...

I was a little of each, myself. About the same time as the first Rolling Stones record came out, I started listening to blues, and also the folk, yeah, through Big Bill Broonzy. You know, you'd start listening to Pete Seeger, and he'd say, well, I learned all these great guitar licks from this old guy, Big Bill Broonzy, you find he was living in Chicago.

It must be quite a discovery, to find yourself living in a city where all this is going on.

A lot of people haven't made the discovery yet. It's always interesting to me that people are oblivious of it.

How long do you see this lasting? I was here in 1979, and it's much fuller now on average than it was then.

Good question. I really don't know. A lot of the guys who are working now are, again, in their thirties, forties. There's always someone who doesn't know Chicago who does an article on the blues is dying out. Obviously some of the guys are well over seventy and are not going to live forever, but still. It's going to be interesting whether it will be the next big thing or not, I don't know.

One can't help looking at country music, and seeing how it's gone completely overboard. With some skilful PR work, I don't see why blues can't do the same.

Yeah, a lot depends on what the rock'n'roll press does; if Rolling Stone and the Village Voice and People magazine start covering Chicago Blues, yeah, it's going to get a lot more attention. Country phenomenon I think was somewhere off the Urban Cowboy movie. The Blues Brothers came out the same time, although The Blues Brothers is not really a blues movie - not one scene in that movie took place in a blues bar, although I think there was a scene in a country and Western bar, and there was the concert scene. There were some good scenes, but it really didn't get in to the blues sub-culture in Chicago. It did very superficially, one scene on Maxwell Street. It was more a Belushi and Ackroyd vehicle. It really didn't get any of the ethos, if that's the right word, that Urban Cowboy did, of Gillies in Houston. The other side of that though, of course, is that right now people in Chicago and New York are sneering at anyone who's wearing cowboy boots or a cowboy hat, kind of Who is that yoyo? United States tends to chew up pop culture at an astounding rate, you know, one week everybody has a Farrah Fawcett poster, and the next week everybody's sneering at it.

That's an inevitable fate for any mass culture, I think. One thing that impresses me is that, in one form or another, the blues has lasted the best part of this century, with development but no substantial changes.

In terms of record sales or media hype or money, even if you want to take BB King, who's certainly not straight Chicago blues, but definitely blues, blues area, he still probably gets less in a night than the average mediocre Rock band. You know, Blue Oyster Cult or Black Sabbath I'm sure make a lot more in one night than BB does, and somebody like Muddy Waters makes far less than that, and somebody like Koko Taylor or Son Seals or Albert Collins makes far less than that, and somebody like the people I book make far less than that, so...

I remember Bruce Wiegman quoting some remark that Tom Petty is supposed to have made, along the lines that if he didn't make it in two years, he's give up. You can't imagine someone like Magic Slim saying that.

No, the guys don't give up.

It's more of a lifestyle.

It's probably largely why they stay so much in Chicago, because their friends are in Chicago, neighbourhood bars; churches, where their kids go to school; it's one reason why Chicago has remained the centre, probably to a degree unprecedented in Nashville say, or progressive rock in Los Angeles, or Dixieland in New Orleans. Probably if you just name off the top hundred blues artists, you're going to get ninety to ninety-five being out of Chicago, and they just stay here; they could make more money elsewhere, some have moved, like JB Hutto to Boston, Guitar Jr's on the East Coast, and some people have left town. Some guys; like James Cotton, are almost always on the road, Muddy when his health was good was almost always on the



road; but most of the guys just stay in Chicago, just because that's where their centre is.

Which in turn keeps the centre going.

Yeah, It's early now, we'll see what happens later, but on the average say Tuesday night - usually have 25 to 30 musicians in the place during the course of the evening, and that keeps the level of the music up, because they know the people out there know the difference, and they're not going to just go up there and play crap and assume no one's going to know the difference, which they do in a lot of other cities. Well, sometimes some guys do that.

It must be a nice feeling at the end of the evening to find that half your audience are people who play here at other times.

Yeah. Certainly on the North Side I think we get more musicians than any other club, blues musicians. I don't know how strong the scene is on the South Side and the West Side, because I haven't been able to hang out there that much lately, I'm just too busy on the North Side. But it is a nice feeling, because obviously they have a good time, a lot of people have said this is my home base in Chicago, and when I'm in Chicago I'll be here.

I was in Theresa's last night, from very early until about midnight. The band outnumbered the audience for the whole of that time.

Who played?

Sammy Lawhorn, Pee-wee Madison, Muddy Waters Jr. Good stuff.

Yeah. As I understand it, the south Side and the West Side clubs, during the week, are pretty slow right now, as a rule, because the economy's fairly dreadful, and people in the neighbourhoods don't have a lot of money to spend. The whites in the North Side, basically they never go to the West Side; people from the North Side don't go to the Majestic. But even Theresa's and the Checkerboard are about the only two ghetto, if you want to use that word, blues bars where whites show in any number, and they usually do on Friday and Saturday night.

Theresa was talking about blue Mondays in the past, when she opened the door at 11 in the morning, and there was food, and it was crowded.

I think the proximity of the Checkerboard has taken that away, though. And also the Fish Market, on a Friday and Saturday, on the West Side, has taken a lot of that, whatever the word for that is, I'm not sure: community or walk-in unusual times - business away. We run pretty normal hours up here for music, we open at eight and the music starts about nine thirty, except on Sunday when we start early, five thirty.

Do you think you might extend that? The Sunday thing is sort of your version of an old blues Monday party.

Sort of. Sunday's really the nearest thing we have to an open stage, where virtually anyone can play, no matter how bad they are.

Across the road Doc's got his Monday blues jams, which don't work well as far as I can see. I don't know if you've been over...

I've been over there a few times. Problem with blues jams on the North Side is you get a lot of young white kids who think they can play, and again as you mentioned before, I frequently get accused of being racist in reverse for not booking more whites, but most of them, quite frankly, can't play that well. They're not Johnny Dollar or Phil Guy or Magic Slim or Jimmy Johnson or Eddie Taylor or Johnny Littlejohn, and they should know they're not. And by the time you've heard the eighth version of Mojo in one evening... see, other problem is that you've got four or five different guys up there who haven't played together; they only know so many songs. They know Sweet Home Chicago, and they know Mojo, and Downhome Blues - everyone's doing Downhome Blues this year - but they don't really know a whole lot of things they can play together unless they just do standard changes. And there's not really a community feeling the way there used to be, as I understand it, on the South Side and the West Side. Yeah, Sunday varies. It can be fascinating or it can be dreadful, a lot depends. Smokey'll let virtually anyone up there, Smokey's just not going to say no, and some of the guys are real good. Some people aren't!

How do you go about booking a band? Does he come to you, or do you go to him?

I try to get out to the South Side and the West Side, and hear bands, I haven't really been doing it that much this year unfortunately. I don't do auditions, I don't really find that means anything to me.

You just try to hear the guy first?

Yeah, either hear him sit in with the band I have playing, or sometimes we'll bring whole bands in and sit in. I don't listen to tapes, as I say they don't mean anything, I have no idea who was on the tape when it was made, anything like that. I try to hear people in person. If I think someone's interesting I'll try to say give him a shot say on a Thursday night, a two-band night, or a Tuesday night, or whatever, and see what happens. Every July I book 31 different bands, so I usually get a lot of new people in then, and I listen to them. I really have more good bands than I have nights available, as I'm sure you've noticed. I do average about 25 different bands a month, and there are probably about 40 or so + try to keep in some kind of rotation. There are just really too many good bands for the time available, and I wish more people weren't so conservative in how they booked in Chicago, because there are certainly enough good bands around.

Have you ever looked someone up to play who has retired or been forgotten, or have the people you have booked all been current when you booked them?

Well, I tend to talk to people, say Otis 'Big Smokey' Smothers brought his brother Abe 'Little Smokey' Smothers in, who hadn't played in some years, and things like that I follow up on. I can't say I really go to say 67th and State and try and find so-and-so who hasn't played in twelve years; it's a good story, but I'm just too busy to do it, unfortunately. Somebody should be doing that sort of thing. At this point I'm not really an archivist, I don't have the time to be so. It's nice if someone's doing that, but I'm really kind of overwhelmed with good working bands I have working right now. What I usually get are stories of so-and-so's in town;

Sam Lay I've kind of been looking for, I haven't seen him for a while, he's been in a couple of small clubs, I've missed him, but I try to read the Reader each week, and talk to Jim and Amy of living blues. I do get leads on people. Certainly Magic Slim, who hadn't played the North Side too much, people kept saying You gotta get this guy up on the North Side, I think he'd done a couple of gigs at the Wise Fools, maybe a couple at Biddy's, and never been picked up on a regular basis, and I just kept hearing, and finally I got him in, and I said yeah, I got to get this guy up here on a regular basis, they're right. Hubert Sumlin, I try to get him when he's in town. There are people I do kind of look for, but again it's something I wish I had more time for. I'm right now trying to do booking and run this place, and do some other work - there's just a limited number of hours in the week.

Do you have a day job, or is this your livelihood?

At this point it is. I was - I still am on the board of directors of a dance company, The Chicago Dance Centre, the Chicago Moving Company; it's not at this point a paying job, it's not a forty-hour a week job, I'm just there as an advisory. Used to be I was the administrative director and it was a full-time job, but I've sort of gotten taken over by the blues. I spend most of the summer in New York city trying to set up some things there...

Yes. How's that going. It started this summer, right?

Yeah. We ended up doing eight weeks in and around New York City. The suburbs and the colleges around the city went very well; the city did not go as well as I had hoped, financially, although the music went well. There's a place called the Interlude, about thirty miles north, a college there called Rocklin Community College, those are the main places. I made some other contacts too, but those are the main places, and that end of it went very well. But the city, I think I underestimated the difficulty of working in New York - I had a rough idea, but I now have a much better idea - there's so much going on, it's very tough to get attention; also the people there, I don't know... let's say if you've been to London four years ago and seen the contemporary rock music, and then you tried to write about it, not having been back in four years, you'd probably be missing a few things. There's been a lot happening in blues in Chicago. (The amateur wrestlers of page 3 leave. This all on tape? one asks. He's taking a deposition. I'm being sued by Jane Byrne, says Bill. Carry on, comes the reply; silly fuckers.)

I'm glad they left soon.

That's fine. There's just an awful lot that people in New York don't really know, which is hard to tell them, because New York people tend to assume they are the centre of the universe, which in many ways they are, in the arts, say, in dance and theatre, they certainly are. But they haven't heard Phil Guy, they haven't heard Johnny Dollar, they haven't heard Magic Slim, they haven't heard Lefty Dizz; you can go on and on with what they haven't heard. They're thinking in terms of Junior and Buddy, and Son Seals and Koko Taylor, and Muddy - not that there's anything wrong in thinking in those terms, but there's a whole other area out there that they're not really familiar with. They know maybe half a dozen bands out of a hundred, and to try to convince them that there's a large terra incognita out there that they



don't really know and should probably find out about is going to take a lot of work.

So this is kind of a crusade then.

Yeah, I like New York, I've always got along with the city, so I'm probably going to be back there in the late fall, early spring, and do some more work.

Who went?

Let's see, it was Magic Slim, Sarah, Johnny Dollar, Sylvia, Hip Lankchan, 43rd St, Phil Guy, and Lefty Dizz. A pretty good eight weeks.

Last question. Would you like to see more of these places up on the North Side?

Oh, sure. People always ask me who my competition is, and I really don't feel I have any. Not to put other bars down. Kingston Mines books, Wise Fools, Biddy Mulligans, a lot of places do, On Broadway do some nights, but there's just so many bands, and if I do my job I'm going to get people in the place, and if my help does a good job, people stay and have a good time, if the bands play well, likeways they're going to stay and have a good time; if I do my job in booking and writing ads I'll get people in the place, and frankly I think if there were five more blues bars in the block we'd do that much better, because I think I wouldout-book anybody else. I admit that's egocentric. (An extremely drunk young white man, who has just left, re-appears; he can barely stand. Is this the door? he asks. Yes, says Bill, helpfully, the handle is right here.)