

Steve Cushing interview.

At the Jazz Record Mart, 11 W Grand, Chicago.

September 24 1982. 11 am.

How long have you had your show on WBEZ?

Oh, the show has been on about two and a half years. It's on the overnight, the Saturday night overnight, which is a pretty good time for it actually, and we're on from midnight to five a.m.

How did you get it?

Well, about ten years ago, when I first started getting caught up in blues, one of the things I wanted to figure out how to do was how to make a living at it. Because most of the people, with the exception of a handful, do something else, and then have a side interest in blues. A few guys like Bruce, and Jim and Amy, and Bob, have been able to pursue it and still been able to make a living. I thought it was kind of a tough angle. At the same time I was going to broadcasting school, and I figured well, this would be a pretty good tie-in, I could broadcast blues. So I went to a broadcasting school here in Chicago, and I had a little hour spot there. When I got out of there, I found a college station out in the western suburbs where I live that was open to the idea, and I went out there and did it. There for three years. At the same time I was working for the Board of Trade here, in commodities, as a phone clerk, and an opening came over at BEZ as an operating engineer, and I figured that would be the best way to get a show there, because the guy who ran the place was sort of prejudiced, he didn't like black people at all and he hated blues. Actually I couldn't see it going at a commercial station, I knew it would probably have to be at the public radio station. So I went to work there even though he was the programme Director, and about half a year after I worked there as an operating engineer, he was booted out. And there was a woman there, who was sort of their consultant for black programming, and when she found out that I actually knew what I was talking about, she went to the station manager. Because the station is run by the Chicago Board of Education, and as an affiliate of the Board of Education they're on a strict racial quota, and on the basis of black programming, they thought it was maybe something they could use. Even though they had a white host, they put it on. That's how it all happened.

Have you any idea what your audience is, in terms of black and white?

Well, it surprises me, it seems like it's almost split down the middle between young white folks and old black folks. There are some young black folks and there are some old white folks, but... What I programme for, the way I figure it, is somebody who's black, and between sixty and sixty-five; so when they were young, they may have heard the classic blues singers, and the country blues singers, and they probably grew up with Louis Jordan, and later on Wolf, Walter, Elmore, all the post-war folks. And I get a pretty good reaction, as much for the jazz-influenced things that I do, as from the post war, Mississippi. Because I will play Jimmy

Rushing, and Billy Eckstine, and Joe Williams, and those kind of things too, because the station is basically a jazz station, I follow a jazz programme and so for the first couple of hours I do things like the Nat Cole Trio and the Charioteers, and Helen Hughes, and all those sort of things; and then about two-thirty I turn it over and go into the alley. The first time I play a harmonica, I lose all the jazz fans. That's one thing I found right away. If I put little Walter on in the first hour, the jazz fans are gone. There's something about people who like horns that they won't listen to harmonicas. Yeah. So usually I can get something smooth, for instance I can get T-Bone, or I can sneak in Tampa, or Maceo, and they'll sit through that. But the first time, say, Elmore James, they're gone.

I was in Bob Koester's car the other night, and your show was on. You played something obscure, and said who you thought was on it, and I said something to the effect that you were reading the liner notes, but Bob said that you often get weird tapes and stuff no-one else has got. I suppose you must get some stuff sent to you.

Yeah, and being on the show, it enhances your chances of getting that kind of stuff. Who was it?

I can't remember. Post-war, Chicago.

No, I sort of object to reading liner notes, too, because we have people who do it, but it's sort of self-defeating, because you can stumble around and sound like you're not reading the liner notes, but once you get smooth enough, that you can sound like you're reading liner notes without reading the liner notes, you're back to where you started.

I used to have a show, and I used to read a lot of liner notes.

Do the record companies send you a lot of stuff?

No, not necessarily. Most of them don't have enough of a market that they can afford to give away freebees. I mean, you can't get anything out of Nick Perls' Yazoo. Let's see. I got things out of Mamlish, Don Kent was just beautiful, he just said here's the whole line, go ahead with it. That's come in so handy. Route (?) Disc, I don't seem to be able to find an address for them. Bruce Bastin was very nice, and said he'd let me have them for two bucks apiece, but I find that by the time I send him the money, and he sends me the promos, they're old stuff already. So I find that I'm not able to wait for the samples to get here, I buy them out of the band, and just grin and bear it. Some people have sent me things. What I end up with, unfortunately, for the most part, I end up with all these white blues bands here in the states, that send me these horrible records, that I wouldn't touch, and I have a stockpile of those things at home, that I still haven't opened. Somebody that's been real good about it is Jonas Vernal from Route 66. He's getting into some postwar too, Lonnie and BB and Lowell Fulson; in fact I even think I have him talked into doing a Mamie Smith re-issue, that's a possibility. He's sort of open for anything, you know. I don't know where he gets the money, but he's open. He's been real good about sending me promos. But for the most part, no, I just work out

of things that come out of my own pocket, or that Bob'll lay on me; and the last couple of years I've been buying 78s, mostly. I booked out for a long time, I didn't want to deal with 78s, because they were so expensive, and I had a lot of things to buy that I didn't have, that were already on re-issue. The thing that finally started me buying 78s was, when I started doing the show, I had a lot of black people call me up, and say, hey, I got a stack of records here, why don't you come over and take a look at it; so I went over there, to this woman's house, Clara Smith, and she had an amazing collection: the first Mamie Smith, the first Bessie Smith, the first Trixie Smith, the first Lucille Hegamin, and she just said here, take 'em, you have more use for 'em than I do. And from there a lot of people started laying things on me, and I started buying. It's pretty ridiculous sometimes.

Yes. What does a 78 cost?

It depends. You can buy a Mamie Smith, like an Okeh for three bucks. On the other hand, I'm tracking down obscurities: Black Swan of course are cherished by collectors; and just recently I tracked down a Lulu Whitby. Lulu Whitby had one record, on Black Swan. I paid a hundred bucks for it. And Katie Crippens, there are two records by Katie Crippens on Black Swan, that's all she ever did, and I paid like 75 apiece for those. But actually, Classic blues singers, the women of the twenties, are not in demand. At this point I have just about a free hand in getting anything I want. Because blues collectors who collect country bluesmen will pick these things up - you know, if they buy fifteen records and two of them happen to be Mamie Smiths, in order to get part of their money back, they'll bring them along to me, and I'll buy them, because they don't care about them at all. But actually what I'm paying right now is peanuts compared to what I see some people paying, like Paulus here. Are you familiar with George Paulus of Barrelhouse records? Well, he's got one of the finest postwar collections in the world, I mean like the second or third best collection, and he's out buying country bluesmen... you know, ... I think he bought like, a mid-Patton, and paid like fifteen hundred bucks for it! The prices are going up. They're not coming back down, they're going back up.

There's not a lot of blues on radio these days. People like you and Pervis Spann are flying a flag, in a way. Do you feel you're doing a public service, at all?

Well, God. I guess if you want to get up on your hind legs about it, sure. I'm sort of conscious of trying to preserve an art form. I think the idea of my show, what I think about is I want to expose people to as many tunes by as many people as I can. Like Pervis and I and Big Bill Collins go separate ways when it comes to repeating tunes. Big Bill Collins, you hear the same ten records for months. I happen to like him, personally, very much, and I listen to him, too, but that's one of the shortcomings of my shows, I don't like to repeat songs. Like, I don't like to play 44 one week and then again next week, because with a black audience you can get caught up in that, because they'll just ask for the same things over and over again - hey I heard it last week, why don't you play it again? You know. I try to avoid that.

I was talking to Pervis Spann, and he says he does nothing but

blues; but his idea of blues is somewhat different to ours when you listen to his show.

It's amazing - this will sound sort of egotistical - but he wouldn't touch a post-war record till I got on the air. All he was playing was soul and disco. And then when he found out that I had a following, playing things from the fifties, then he started picking the things up. It was real interesting. They started up that station of his, XOL, a couple of years ago, and they billed it as the blues station, and we're hearing Tyrone Davis, and all this other stuff which really wasn't in our alley. And then when I started playing this stuff, I couldn't believe it, about six months later, he started digging out his Walter records and stuff. I enjoy listening to him, too; I don't like his music too much, but...

As a DJ he has a certain Charisma. Are you from Chicago?  
I'm from the Western suburbs.

I was wondering if you'd listened to Big Bill Hill when you were a youth.

No. As a matter of fact I was a rock'n'roll fan up until about 1970. It sounds ridiculous in terms of what came afterwards, but I couldn't make the change, I couldn't get next to Rod Stewart. And when Rod Stewart came on the scene, I said, well, you know... leaves me cold, so I'm gone. Then I started listening to vintage rock'n'roll, Chuck Berry and Jerry Lee Lewis, Little Richard. It's sort of interesting, - the reason I got into blues was we had this disc jockey here in town named Clark Webber, who now runs a talk show; he's an old man, relatively, he's in his sixties now I believe. The time he was forty, he didn't care about rock'n'roll at all, he'd just pick things up and play them, and he was on in the early mornings when I was in High School. And for some reason, when Fleetwood Mac put out Albatross, he played it. I think I heard him play it three times, and nobody else in town touched it. And I heard it, I was in the bath tub getting ready to go to school, and the song really caught me right? So I went out and I bought the album - in fact I got real adventurous, the same day I bought Fleetwood Mac I bought Doctor John, Gris gris(?) which I still can't get next to; and I started listening to Fleetwood Mac, and I really liked it, only I didn't realise it was blues; I thought, you know, here's something that's a little bit different, it's rock'n'roll, but... And then I went to Barbara's book store, I was familiar with Fleetwood Mac and bought all their albums, but still didn't realise it was blues; and I went to this bookstore in Old Town, called Barbara's Bookstore, where Paul Garon worked. Now Paul Garon would sit in the back and play blues records all day, and I walked in and he was playing Coming Home by Elmore James, and Bam! just like a bolt of lightning. And that was it. I said who is that? And he said, well, that's Elmore James, and the next day I went out and bought my first Elmore James album, and got sucked in after that.

It's funny the routes different people take to arrive at the blues. Amy O'Neal was telling me that for her it was the Animals, and what other band? It might have been the Stones, but the Animals sort of struck me. Didn't they do Take it back to Walker and Boom Boom? A couple of others.