

Steve Freund interview.

Genessee St, San Francisco.

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I'm originally from Brooklyn, NY. I grew up in an apartment building... [janitor] I remember this guy, his name was Paul, and he was from the deep south, and he lived in the bowels of the building, way in the back, and he had a big dog, a chow, blue tongue and everything, and he was a cool guy, and he lived down in the back, underbelly of the building and he kept live chickens in there, and it was real country - he would kill em and cook em, and he used to play these old records. I was like four and five years old, and my mother, we'd just had a new baby brother and so I was able to sneak away quite a bit, and I would just go exploring and I would always end up down in his apartment... from the sounds of it, now that I know what it was, it was Bessie Smith, and it was Louis Armstrong - must have been 78s. Real old blues, that was my first taste of blues.

And then on the TV, of course Rock & Roll was our popular music of the time, so that was blues related. You had Little Richard, you had Fats Domino playing, Chuck Berry and all that stuff in the early 50s. I still remember that.

Louis Armstrong was still very popular on American TV at the time, so I still remember that, and that was always fascinating to me. I didn't really know what to call this music, but it's really blues... Louis Armstrong, no matter what he played, it's really blues. I could sense the feeling of it - I'm just sensitive to that type of spiritual...

Was there one particular musician who made you pick up a guitar?

Pick up a guitar? No. But to play blues, yes. There were many, but I do remember the night, I picked up the guitar in 1968 when I was 16 - summer, I rented a rented cheap guitar, it was horrible, a horribly high action, it was very hard to play. I tried to teach myself, we would just hang out down at the beach, I guess I wanted to impress the girls a little, tried to play things like House of the Rising Sun, and I couldn't really do it. It was a shitty guitar, it was terrible, so I brought it back. The next summer, late spring, I actually bought a guitar and actually started to teach myself to play blues, and around a year later I remember going to ... we used to go to the Fillmore East, it was Albert King.

I was into all kinds of stuff, I was into James Brown when I was 12, soul music and stuff, but I couldn't put it all together into where it emanated from, this blues thing. But I just remember this concert, and I was under the influence of whatever, and Albert King was playing... him and B.B. King are the two closest people to create English words on an instrument, the way they play - I could decipher it... maybe I was just conjuring it up, but to me they were speaking to me in the English language. I could understand it. And that's how I decided that this was what I'm going to do, and I'm going to dedicate myself to blues guitar.

One time we did get chatting in B.L.U.E.S about styles and you basically referred to the 'new style' and the 'old style'. Can you define those a little more?

The new style to me is anything post 1969. I don't want to sound too elitist on this, but with the downfall of Fleetwood Mac and Peter Green, to me, that's about as far as my influences go, I mean I really haven't been influenced by anyone since. So if you were to say Stevie Ray Vaughan or something, well it may be fine music, I would say it's really new style...

The way I break the music down into where it emanated from, the original blues would be King Oliver and Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith, and it's so weird because the older style was actually a very intricate style of music - they had a chord for every note the bass player played, the piano player had a chord. It wasn't just 1, 4, 5, he had all these passing chords - 1, 3, 6, 2, 5, and 4 with a diminished, and the augmented, and all these chords, and if you listen to Bessie Smith, the pianist Clarence Williams, he was almost like a classically trained pianist playing blues.

So that's the very old style. And at the same time we had the more primitive style, the simple, simple style of the Delta bluesman and women. And you had the string bands and the jug bands. We don't really know what was before the recordings, we have just descriptions of it.

The first generation of Chicago blues is basically an offshoot of that, because those guys travelled up during the first great migration, right post-WW1, 1919-30, big migration to the stockyards in Chicago, many jobs, a lot of African Americans came up and many of them stayed. Many were musicians, and many became musicians. So that's the first generation of Chicago blues. That would be guys like Little Brother Montgomery, again Louis Armstrong who lived in Chicago for a while, and the second generation would be guys like Sunnyland Slim and Muddy Waters and Big Bill Broonzy, he's my main guy, my totem - he's the catalyst. Everybody I've spoken to who knew him from Sunnyland Slim and Muddy Waters who I spoke to about him, and Little Brother Montgomery and other people who knew him, Francis Clay the recent drummer - he was the catalyst, he would help everybody. He would encourage and help all the young musicians. And Tampa Red was another guy - the pre-war guys. Basically there's the pre-war blues and the post war blues. You take a guy like Little Walter and Muddy, they're mostly post war blues - that's when they became popular.

So your style, the new stuff I was calling it, I would say the British stuff, and then American like Canned Heat, the stuff from the late Fifties onward, would be the new stuff, and I think that's what I meant when I was saying to you 'the new stuff'. It's great stuff - I love that stuff too - but at the time... see when I came to Chicago in 76, pretty much all I was into was the newer stuff - although I had Big Bill records, I had the old records - but what I was capable of playing was mostly the lead guitar, what we call the Three Kings style. BB, Albert, Freddie. And that's what Clapton and Peter Green were playing too, for the most part, and so that's what I knew. And it served me very well in Chicago at first, with Sunnyland Slim, because I went there with that goal in mind, to become his guitar player. Because I met him in 1969, in New York, and I was just 17, didn't hardly have any facial hair, and he was already 62 years old. So we went to

a show and we met him, ad Otis Spann and all the guys, and Sunnyland gave me his business card, I said I've just got a guitar, I'm learning, I want to play blues guitar - and I'm just this little 17-year-old kid from Brooklyn, and he said, when you come to Chicago look me up. Gave me his card. Seven years later I did make an exploratory trip and I ended up looking him up - I went to this club and I pulled out the card and said you remember me, seven years ago? I had a little battery amp, a little Pignose or whatever, and guitar, and he let me sit in, and I was playing single-string, lead guitar stuff, and he loved it. Started bragging about me to all his friends and they all came to see me, and I was going out every single night jamming, but he wouldn't hire me as his guitar player because I wasn't adept enough yet at the accompaniment, the rhythm and the special things you need to really become a good accompanist. It took me a couple of years to learn all that other stuff.

Whose records helped you do that?

Robert Lockwood Jr especially, I listened to his records a lot, and Louis Myers was there - see I didn't have to listen to records because I could actually go out and see Louis, and Hubert Sumlin was a good friend of mine. If I ever had teachers, or mentors - not personal friend mentors, but musically - I would go out every night, and I mean every single night for the first ten years, I never stayed home. Either I got a gig and was working, or I was sitting in, I was driving a taxi, and I would take two hours a night and I would go into the clubs and hang out.

Which clubs?

In those days BLUES had just opened up. Before BLUES there was a place called Elsewhere. the very first club I went to in 76 was Elsewhere on Lincoln, and they had a different legend every single night, no cover, pass the hat, sawdust on the floor, cheap beer... Then when they lost their lease they opened up another place called Elsewhere on Clark. That only lasted about a year or two. Then the owner of that formed a partnership with the kid who owned Blues on Halsted - that wasn't a blues club yet - then there was always the Kingston Mines, which I used to go to all the time, there was a place called the Wise Fools; and then I used to go to the South Side and occasionally the West Side -I used to play in those clubs too.

The Checkerboard and Theresa's were used to tourists. There was always a guy looking out for you. It's always good to drive...! I think it's worse now because the population has grown and there's that many more guns on the street and crazy people. But it wasn't too bad, it was very rare that I heard of one of us guys from the North Side getting into any hassle...

Left Chicago in 1994, after 18 years.

I went back in 85, and then again in about 92, and things had changed. Did you notice things changing? Audiences?

The audience is always changing because yesterday's child in diapers is today's alcohol drinker. I play at a club now and I'm playing to 21-year-old kids, so that means I was 40 years old when they were born, and that means their parents may have been in high school when I was performing in Chicago. It's a generation thing, it changes.

Blues Etc, 92 - atmosphere completely different.

They wanted more people with more money, and so they put bigger acts. On the nights when they had smaller names they would block off half the club. I played there with Bo Diddley one night, in August, probably 1990 or something, it was like a sardine can, it was the sweatiest night of my life, because Chicago never cools off, it was probably 101 in the day and probably 95 at night... I wore a purple suit... So that was just the money, it was a partnership between a few guys, high rent.

I was at BLUES a few months ago, and popped in there, it's the same thing. The musicians are not nearly the same - there's hardly any of what I would call the traditional blues at all being played in Chicago any more. Very rare. It's more funky. Pumping bass, it's more rock - Stevie Ray Vaughn, Hendrix, whatever.

I was thinking about Johnny Dollar...

I was talking about him just two days ago. His brother was Lefty Dizz, and they had a third brother, Woody Williams - I think Woody moved to Europe early on, he got out of there. The other two guys are gone. I loved Johnny Dollar. A terrific singer and very very good guitar player.

I never really believed it when he played blues...

You have to really define this blues thing. It's more than just music. To me it's a spiritual commitment as well as just a vocation. I daresay I could get a guy out of a music college, Berklee School of Music, and put the music in front of him and I bet he would play it note for note. But what I want to know is, what's going on in the person's mind at the time of the performance, and that's when you separate the blues musicians from the people on the bandwagon just out to make a dollar. And people do use the blues, people use anything for a stepping stone to success. A public defender might not have his heart in defending poor people, but to him it's a stepping stone to notoriety and maybe a job as a DA or a job with a firm. A lot of people use the blues as a stepping stone, they don't want to play blues. I've seen a thousand of 'em. And that's how I am, when I play the blues I'm spiritually connected, and I'm sure BB King is, I'm sure Peter Green was/is, and all the old guys. They don't even have to think about it because they are spiritually connected ... These are black guys from the Deep South who went through slavery and segregation which I personally didn't really go through. I mean I went through a little bit of it being Jewish, so I went through some of that, growing up... we had some Jew-haters in my neighbourhood.

Plus there's the history in Europe, which ended a decade before you were born...

We were slaves in Germany, and brutally murdered. So we have empathy, Jews are always going to have that, although people don't want to admit to that any more, there's a lot of stuff going down. I've always found myself involved with black folks, culturally. Growing up where I grew up, my neighbourhood was one of the very first neighbourhoods in the country to be integrated - our schools were integrated, that's what they used to call busing, because the black kids would be bused in from the bother

neighbourhoods. So in fifth grade all of a sudden I had a whole set of little black friends, and it was a culture clash but wasn't turbulent, it was fun. And we picked up a lot of things from each other.

And that's what's good about blues. Blues is a people's music, it's a folk music. What we play is electrified folk music. It brings people together.

In 82 I considered you to be one of the best guitar players in Chicago, one of the best I had ever heard. Bob Levis was another - I really rated his playing...

I just played with him in March. Rockford, Illinois. He's doing OK.

I was interviewing all these black guys. It never occurred to me to ask you for an interview, or Bob, because you were the wrong colour. As a fan that was the way I was thinking and it was fairly common to regard the black musician as somehow more authentic...

Well they are, they are. Culturally they are. Life experience is part of blues, you know what I mean? Back when I was 30 years old when you first met me, maybe I wasn't worthy of it yet, maybe my story wasn't big enough yet, but my life certainly has taken a lot of twists and turns. I can tell you this - I'm not the world's greatest musician, but I dare you to find anybody who loves blues more than I do, and loves to play them. The essence of the music is your love and desire for it, and not to play for fame and fortune. Fame and fortune is nice - for me what that shows is reward for good work, but for me the essence of the music is to continue to - as Studs Terkel used to say - keep the spirits green, of the old guys, keep the spirit green, don't let it wither. And that's the legacy I'd like to leave - I helped a lot of younger guys, gave them opportunities, let them sit in and turned them on to things, turn them on to good music - I do that even on Facebook, I always pop in my little two cents' about 'you should listen to this, listen to this.

One thing that's always a problem with art, and music is art, is the human ego. Ego plays a big part. Without an ego you couldn't be a musician or any kind of performer. It's the driving force, kind of like a life force of some sort. Everybody has it. Say your life is a chariot and you've got these horses in front of you, and that's your ego and it's pulling you. You have to have those horses under control - you've seen pictures of chariots and horses rear up and the whole thing falls over - we don't want that, it's out of control ego. So you want to have a powerful engine that's pushing you and you keep your mouth shut and you don't brag too much about yourself, and be humble - I think humility... it's always been a struggle for me, or it was. Now I pretty much keep my mouth shut, the last 20 years. But it's always been a struggle with the ego, people call you arrogant and everything, when in reality you're just struggling sometimes to maintain self esteem or self worth, to keep on doing it. And being a white musician back in Chicago in that black blues world, you're basically being judged by other white people - they're the ones who own the nightclubs and the ones who are booking the events and they're the ones who can make or break you. And so you're almost held back by your own people. All these things it takes years and years to come to grips with.

Out here it's a whole different thing. There's not that many black blues players. We have some fantastic musicians out here, more than Chicago by far, but most of them are not African-American.

Obviously back then the musicians are judging you too, because all musicians judge each other, I would imagine...?

I was accepted by the black guys way way more than by the white club owners. The black guys loved me, that's why I worked every night for so many years. I think they saw that my dedication the music was very strong, and that I was learning the old styles that they loved, and I think they felt that I would carry the music on. There's a bunch of us guys who carry that old feeling, and old stuff, I'm not the only one, but I think that's what they liked about me. And they could count on me. Do you remember Big Walter Horton? There was a ten-week period in 1979 when I was in Europe with Luther Allison. But I was there, I played with Big Walter from 78 until his death, minus that ten-week period, and they held the gig for me, so when I came back I could walk right back into my gig. Playing with him every two years, every Sunday and Monday, was a huge thing. And Floyd Jones - he was a big supporter of me, he was in my corner... Homesick was the very first guy I sat in with, the very first night I was in Chicago. That afternoon, though, a hot 100-degree afternoon, we went to Eddie Shaw's club on Roosevelt Road and knocked on the door, me and a friend of mine, they were rehearsing. Hubert Sumlin, it was Howling Wolf's old band, and they let us hang out with them and we went to their gig the following night and they let us sit in and it was unbelievable. Every night we went out we were treated like royalty by these guys. And these are all legends. They just loved young people coming around and wanting to play their music - but it all depends how you play it. You gotta play as a team player, you gotta enhance, the whole trip for me is to make the singer sound good.

Why leave?

I left Chicago when a lot of the old guys started to die, basically. The music was changing. They weren't... the traditional stuff any more. Big Walter was gone, Johnny Littlejohn died, Floyd Jones was gone, ? Jackson had died years before, Sunnyland was getting towards the end of his lifespan, I was touring with James Cotton a little bit, but for the most part the gigs - it was really crappy gigs, the same old stuff over and over and I was just tired of it, and I was touring with James Cotton, and we played out here in California, and we drove up and down the coast and I just fell in love with the coast, with the state. And my marriage had fallen apart the year before, we were going through a divorce, just starting, my mother died the year before, and I didn't have anything left in Chicago, it wasn't exciting any more. And I'm getting older, I'm starting to think ahead: I'm 42 now, do I want to die here, do I want to grow old here, in the heat and the ice, the extremes? And do I want to play these crappy gigs over and over? Or do I want to maybe make a change? Now I have a garden, and live in the sunshine, and I made that change. I came out here, started over. I live 35 miles from this spot, in Vallejo, California.

Current playing - a bit like jazz, to me...

No, you should hear the real guys who could play that jump and swing guitar. No, I'm a piker. Didn't you hear me play that fingerstyle, country

blues? That's what my forte is. Playing with Sunnyland, we did a lot of those uptempo numbers. Robert Lockwood was a big influence to me and he would play some of them. So I learned it, but the way I play it, I play it more as a blues guy would play it. When these guys out here play the jumps and the swing stuff - the west Coast - they play it more as a jazz musician might play it. I play it more like BB King might play it - coming from more of a Mississippi style of guitar, because deep down I'm more of a Mississippi style of player. I'm not like a NY or LA style of player.

The single note, BB style seems to come from Texas?

No. I can give you my opinion. The single-string guitar started in NYC with Eddie Lang - the jazz guitar player. If you want to hear the earliest recorded examples of that kind of stuff you would listen to two songs by Bessie Smith where he accompanies her called Kitchen Man and Wild About That Thing. Listen to those and you'll see. It's very early Bessie Smith. Another guy who was very influential was Lonnie Johnson. Lonnie started out more as a finger picker, really technical, and later on he just became more and more simplified. But he and Eddie Lang recorded together, two beautiful albums called Blue Guitars vols 1 and 2, which is a must-listen. There were also guys playing that too there was Scrapper Blackwell, played with Leroy Carr, played a little bit later than that, they were more the 30s. So yeah, they were the main guys that started out that type of thing. Then Charlie Christian was a huge, huge thing. Goodman's was the first integrated band to go play live performances... before that they would record together but they would never perform together.

Audiences here? You don't have to play in a rock style...

I play what I want to play. I just booked a gig with a club where I played there once before and we talked about the gigs and he said 'would you do me a favour? Our audience is really young, in their 20s, would you play more uptempo stuff and not too many slow blues? I agreed. It all depends where I play - the venues in the city itself are usually young kids, who like to come and drink and yell and scream loud. They dance to almost anything you throw at them after a few drinks. The thing I've noticed about Calif is it's a dancing country, they love to dance here. They don't even care that much about the lyrics and the story - to me the beauty of the blues is the story, it's little short stories, every song is a little vignette, it's like a little trip. That's me, that's what I listen to, but the kids they just want to hear the beat and dance and everything. Occasionally we'll play to older crowds, people who grew up listening to folk music, and they like the lyrics and they like the slow blues, as long as it means something. In Europe, which I will be going back to, supposedly this Fall - Belgium and possibly France, November - the audiences are a little bit maybe more aware of the history, the Germans are very aware of it... in England it was a lot of kids, they like the guitar, they like Clapton. But it really depends on the age of the audience, the 20s and stuff they just want to dance to the rock beat of the guitar; kids now in their 30s and early 40s who were part of that swing thing 15 and 20 years ago, there was a big thing about swing and they were playing all that Benny Goodman stuff - it was a huge phenomenon throughout our country. Started I would say the very late 80s, all the kids would dress up, Betty Page, the WW2 retro look - zoot suits, girls with black hair the little bangs and the dresses with

prints and stuff and they would dance jitterbug, and it was all boogie woogie and jazz stuff like Louis Jordan stuff. When I first arrived here that was in full swing. So that's another audience, sometimes they want to hear that stuff. All this stuff is being recycled. We seem to end up like our parents somehow. The clothing and trends change but people inside are basically the same, human nature doesn't really change.

Sunnyland - I was his right-hand man probably from 78 until late 94.

Help with the business side?

I would book some gigs, actually I booked quite a few trips for us, a lot of trips to Canada, and we did a few trips to NYC, just me and Sunnyland, we'd drive to Canada we did that many times, we brought our girlfriends with us. We had a very sweet gig in Toronto, kid named Jordy Sharpe I think, a banjo player, a young kid but he knew about folk music, was into bluegrass, his father owned this huge hotel called the Four Seasons, part of this huge chain, kinda like a Hilton, a magnificent place, and he also owned a nightclub called Albert Hall, and they used to bring artists up there for six nights in a row, and then they put the artists up in a suite in the Four Seasons. So they gave me my own suite, and they gave Sunnyland his own suite, and the money was good enough, and we drove up, Sunny and his girlfriend - actually he brought a singer named Zora Young up with him a couple of times, and I brought my girlfriend who was later my wife and now my ex wife... so we had our own suite and six nights, six days to walk around Toronto and go eat in Chinatown and at night play the gigs and drink wine and smoke and everything.

Later on, Sunnyland had a stroke - he broke his hip and then he had a stroke, it was a mess, he couldn't use one of his hands too well. We'd still do trips together - he'd be in a wheelchair like this, and he'd have his feet up on those blocks and he'd hold the guitar and I'd wheel him through the airport. And when he went to the bathroom I would do his zipper, and he'd do his business and I would zip him up - and we never had an accident, it always worked out good! We did a lot of trips like that, and I would always get a contract and show him the contract and make sure that everything was kosher and he was happy, we never had a problem with that.

Musicians getting ripped off...

Yes. Willie Dixon was the first guy to really study the whole copyright and publishing BMI deal. He got a lot of stuff in his name. But after he started doing that a lot of the musicians started learning how to do it. The record companies still, to this day, if you write a song and they put it out, they're going to make you an offer: 'I'll do a record on you but part of the deal is I get 50% of the publishing rights'. So all of a sudden you're in partnership with them. I've done that with Delmark, I've done three CDs with Delmark, I don't begrudge it, it's part of the game. But when you don't know how the game is played, when you're not aware of the rules of the game, and two years down the road you find out it's not what you thought, you have a problem there. The early guys probably didn't care, they just wanted 150 bucks now and they want that record out. Lester Melrose, the guy who had the Bluebird record company which is all the Tampa Red and Big Bill and Blind John Davis and Big Maceo and all that stuff, he

didn't have any contracts or royalties or anything, it was just flat fee. You could negotiate your fee, but that was it.

Who would you most have liked to play with?

I never played with BB King. I'd love to. He's my favourite musician of all time. I think he's the world's greatest guitar player, the greatest blues guitar player. Because of how acceptable his music is, and because of the catalyst that he is and all the people that he has attracted... without BB there's really no Clapton or Peter Green, there's no Michael Bloomfield... They would be in their 70s now. that's the generation before me, and they were doing what I'm doing now but ten years before, so these guys are important inspirations, examples of what can be done, we all follow in each other's footsteps. BB King was the main man who turned everybody on. And his style - BB King defines blues-rock guitar, in my opinion. He rocks - he turned up the volume, he bent those notes, he played fast when he wanted to - he did everything. Everything Clapton and all those guys do, BB could do it better. I've seen him and heard him do it. He could play like Django Reinhardt, he could play like Wes Montgomery, he could do anything - and that's soul, that's creativity, that's God-given, it's almost like mental telepathy when you do something like that. It's like 'be here now' to the ultimate, ultimate, Zen, kharmic, everything, all these words wrapped up into one, that define creativity and spirituality. God gave it to people like BB, and Louis Armstrong - they're the two main guys that to me emanate that spirit. There's other fantastic musicians who could play faster, but when you come to tone and pace and timing and singing - cos singing is so important...

He used to regard himself more as a singer than a guitar player...

The real early stuff, Miss Martha King and Three o Clock Blues, the earlier stuff from the 50s he wasn't a very good guitar player; he was pretty raw. But his singing was always pretty nice. But he practiced and practiced and he was able to channel his spirit through the guitar. One note kills you.

He also didn't have much gear... On Live at the Regal he flicks that switch and changes the emotion instantly...

Like a hot knife through butter. That's what I mean, it's electrifying and his voice is electric too. It cuts through the horns and everything. Electrifying is the word, he defines electric guitar.

He had reverb, and he might have jacked his reverb up, but the BB King guitar at that time was a stereo guitar, state of the art, it's called the Gibson ES-355, and it has on it five or six positions called the VariTone (sp?). In position 1 it's just your big full body sound, and as you go indent to indent to six, each one makes it thinner and thinner and thinner, and you get that thin sound and you turn your volume up and all of a sudden it's like a crackle, almost like lightning, a not of lightning - maybe that's what you're thinking of. That's one of his trademarks, in the old days. And when you talk about BB King you have to talk about Lonnie Johnson - T-Bone Walker and Lonnie Johnson - but Lonnie Johnson was the main man for many years although he hardly doesn't get nay respect. I was turned on to Lonnie Johnson in about 1970 by a friend in Brooklyn, Lonnie and Eddie

Lang at the same time. You have to listen to Lonnie Johnson - a very very very heavy guy, very important.

Did you play with Jimmy Rogers much?

Not too much, but a few times. Sweetest singer in the world, a great person, a good guy. He was one of those I guys I chatted up about Big Bill Broonzy, because Big Bill was one of those guys who was really nice to him too, when he first came up. Very simply playing, beautiful playing, he wrote some great songs. Very nice man.