Interview
with
Eric King

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Interviewer:	David S. Rotenstein
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Eric King (**KING**)
Interviewed by
David Rotenstein (**ROTENSTEIN**)
Blind Willie's
Atlanta, Ga.
October 24, 1990

[The interview took place at the bar. Equipment used: Sanyo microcassette recorder, internal microphones. Recording began after King and I began speaking. The interview was conducted to collect background information on Blind Willie's and the Atlanta blues scene. At the time, I (David Rotenstein) was working as a freelance writer for an Atlanta weekly entertainment newspaper called *Footnotes*. I and writer/musician Bryan Powell alternated writing the paper's weekly blues column. Other speakers include Roger Gregory (**GREGORY**) and Joel Murphy (**MURPHY**).]

KING: Anyway, we put together a pack with a lot of the old press clips and stuff. When we first opened, it was almost five years ago, Blues Harbor had been open about six months and it kind of stung the blues community here – what there was of us – because we thought here's a guy – none of us knew McDaris, Jim McDaris, who opened Blues Harbor. And we'd all talked about it for years and this guy, he goes out and he does it.

No [unintelligible], he just went out and did it and it came in with a full concept, which you had to respect. Maybe it's a little too prepackaged, but it's a good idea, you know. And economically, it makes a lot of sense.

So we're kind of licking our wounds and we had had Blind Willie's on the drawing board back then. This was in – we were talking about it in eighty-five, around January of eighty-five. We started construction that fall and had it open the next February, February of eighty-six.

ROTENSTEIN: What was in here before you opened?

[1:22]

KING: It was an electric store. But the building was so charming because this wall was all covered with mortar and Chicago Bob chipped it all off with an air hammer. I mean the bluesmen built the place. Joel Murphy, the guitar player in the Shadows nailed up all this stuff. Michael Catalano, who plays here early in the evenings in Friday and Saturday, he stained and varnished this. I laid-up a lot of the drywall and designed everything else in here.

And it was kind of unique in that we figured we wanted to have a place where the local blues guys came first because we just didn't feel particularly welcome at many

of the clubs aimed at younger crowds. And the blues, we didn't think, appealed that much to the twenty-one to twenty-five group. But later on it seems like they realized that blues wasn't some – or at least their concept of the blues – maybe wasn't nearly as much fun as our concept of the blues.

Beth went to Emory. I mean she's been sucked into the blues vortex over the years. She used to come see the Aztecs, that was the Shadows before that. And she was a rock and roller who got sucked into the blues.

ROTENSTEIN: Give me a little background about yourself?

KING: Well, Bo Emerson did a story, when was that, in April, which pretty much covered where I'm from. I'm trying to figure out some things that he didn't – My background, of course, is just some suburban kid from Ohio, from Cleveland, but we had a real eclectic collection of records around the house. Everything from big band to Harry Belafonte to folk music.

And Cleveland at the time, back in the late fifties, early sixties, when I was living there, had some good AM blues stations. Transistor radios changed my life. Man, I was always listening and if I couldn't get rock and roll, I'd listen to whatever else I found. And late at night, I heard, you know, Howling Wolf and Muddy Waters and this was some real raw stuff. It must have been, you know, a weird DJ who just liked playing some of the originals. I was, "Damn, what is this?" But it was the real thing.

I got lucky. There was a small folk club in Cleveland that was a stopping-off point for people going east-west, west-east and they were right on the cutting edge. They did everyone from the Gordon Lightfoots and the [unintelligible; 4:20], Judy Collins and those kind of acts where you could see them in a room a little bigger than Willie's but not much.

But they also brought in some great blues and that's the first time I saw Cotton, was about in nineteen sixty-eight, sixty-seven, something like that. And he had a little four-piece band and they couldn't even get a drink of liquor in the place so we had to go across the street and get him a bottle at the liquor store across the street so they had something to nip. This was strictly a beer and coffeehouse kind of place.

So I got lucky in Cleveland and got a chance to see some vintage blues even then. And then I moved, I went to college in New York and, you know, I lived right in the Village so I saw everyone from the coffeehouse-style blues acts, the Sonny Terrys, the Brownie McGhees to Albert King at the Fillmore East, you know. It was a nice era to be in the Village.

ROTENSTEIN: Where did you go to school?

[5:18]

KING: NYU.

ROTENSTEIN: What did you study there?

KING: Business, actually. But the key thing for me was I was on the newspaper staff and my heart wasn't in accounting or marketing or anything but I did love the newspaper stuff because I got passes to everything. I had a season pass to the Fillmore East. I mean everyone from Ten Years After and Albert King to Santana and I thought, "Man, this is my kind of –" [unintelligible] with newspaper work.

In fact, Leonard Maltin, the movie critic, worked for me on the paper. A terrible writer but the nicest guy in the world. I mean he loved Hollywood films. It didn't make any difference [unintelligible] they were. But Lenny was always a really nice guy.

In New York you got a chance to run into great people. You know, you had interview opportunities with – Ten Years After, you want to talk to Albert, Lee, or Lorin Hollander, the concert pianist. Clive Barnes was one of my teachers there, the theater critic and New York just was overwhelming. Wonderful city for someone interested in the arts.

And of course it was a political time and I ended up doing a lot of antiwar protesting and joined VISTA and got sent to St. Louis. My VISTA project there was working designing plans for a street academy for the community. And that, you know, after a couple of years the school board instituted that so I was looking for someplace to go and I met some friends who are still here in Atlanta. They were VISTAs in St. Louis with me and they said come on down and visit. I fell in love with this city.

ROTENSTEIN: What was it, what part of the city?

KING: I live in Candler Park now and when I came down it was the same neighborhood I was living with friends in, this little part of town.

ROTENSTEIN: What really hooked you into Atlanta, though?

[7:27]

KING: If you've ever been to St. Louis, it is the epitome of urban removal. They take down an apartment building and they pave a solid city block. More paving contracts must be let in that city than anyplace else in North America. And they'll put a phone booth right on the corner. That is the total public services they provide. You can call, you know, that's it.

And it was a harsh town, real racist at the time and I was – being a hippie at the time, I was getting a lot of flak for dealing with the political, a progressive political element.

ROTENSTEIN: Were you involved with the blues scene in St. Louis?

KING: The music scene was – there was, located in a couple of areas in St. Louis, still, guys like Tommy Bankhead and the El Dorados, whose got a new album out. Let's see who were some of the other cats. Chuck Berry had a farm near St. Louis, which was pretty notorious, even back then, for wild parties.

Who were some of the others. Oliver Sain was still around St. Louis. But it was not a lucrative scene and these are cutting cheap clubs. I didn't hang out there too much with them.

The St. Louis – this was a poor, poor city. And also, this was – disco came in strong then. Disco knocked the hell out of live music in a lot of the black community, especially in St. Louis. Everybody can be a star at disco. Why pay five bucks to watch a band?

ROTENSTEIN: So what year did you come to Atlanta?

[9:21]

KING: Seventy-three. And started working with kids in an adolescent treatment center. And I still do – I have a day gig, I work with teenagers. It keeps me young. It keeps me tuned in with teenagers [unintelligible]. Now this has been about as much fun this last five years since Willie's opened as anything. As the old Egyptian curse, may all your dreams come true and this has been it.

This has been remarkable. We managed to – And when I say "we," that's another important part of this. There's a couple of guys that we hooked up with over the years. Some are musicians here in the club now and a couple of partners. I have three partners, you know, a couple of other owners in the club. But when we started it, there were four of us and – Phyllis Melton, Tom Robinson, and Roger Gregory. And Roger's been real key because he's not only a partner in the club but he runs the Shadows and has been a real headliner on the blues scene for years with all his bands, Aztecs. He worked with Chicago Bob Nelson, Dry Ice, and recorded with him and he put together the album with Houserocker Johnson.

ROTENSTEIN: At what point did you see yourself going from blues fan to active blues promoter?

[11:12]

KING: It had a lot to do with getting involved with WRFG, the radio station.

ROTENSTEIN: When was that?

KING: That was about seventy-eight. I'd just split up with my longtime partner and let's see, we'd been renovating a house and did a lot of traveling to folk festivals, blues festivals and stuff. And after we split, I needed something else to do and I'd been listening to WRFG so I took a broadcast class, wide-open broadcast class, and they had a slot opening and submitted a proposal for a blues and folk show. Well, the blues end of it just kind of swallowed up the folk end of it and so I started Saturday mornings and then ended up getting a better, more convenient, slot Thursday nights. And I've been on the air like twelve years.

ROTENSTEIN: Same style?

KING: Yeah, same style, just more and more blues. But it's everything from Bessie Smith and Lightening Hopkins to the contemporary musicians. Like Li'l Ed, who's coming up this week. You know, it's a pleasure being able to keep the tradition going. His uncle was a great slide guitar player, J.B. Hutto. And we were just thrilled when the album came out. We called Chicago looking for him. Bruce Iglauer at the record company said he's not touring. He doesn't tour. He's got a day gig at the carwash, you know.

And we kept after him and we were on the first tour he did out of Chicago coming down here. But with WRFG putting on more and more programming, right now they have probably twenty, twenty-five hours of straight ahead blues all week long. There has been more of a blues interest in town.

ROTENSTEIN: What do you attribute that to?

[13:17]

KING: This has always been a good blues town. The Royal Peacock was the black entertainment focal point for Auburn Avenue. There were some other clubs over there and Houserocker Johnson and Fats Jackson, Billy Wright can tell you a lot about those because they all hung out there, played and whatever.

And they've always been on the scene here in Atlanta. But Houserocker was playing little juke joints and country fish frys and Billy Wright was a little more flexible. He ended up doing emceeing disco shows and all this other stuff. And Billy was a fabulous – is a fabulous – singer. Had a string of hits for Savoy records back in the fifties. And Fats Jackson recorded with them on those songs.

So these guys have always been there. Hey, what was Fats doing? He was doing weddings and society gigs and maybe a few chitlin and, you know, he'd sit in with some of the guys when they came to town. Like Omar and the Howlers would always get him to come over and play with them. Or Roomful, you know, stuff like that.

So the blues people were here but man, when they could hear it regularly on WRFG, we'd get great requests. There are wonderful blues fans here. And it's led to more

interest in where are these guys playing? Where's Fats playing? Where's Billy playing? Where's Luther playing?

And that really has helped their careers. You know, hey, Luther and Fats got new albums out this year. Sensational. I mean this is a benchmark year for those cats.

One of the guys that you don't hear mentioned anymore because he passed away about three years ago was Roy Dunn, a country bluesman who lived here in Atlanta. And this is how Roger Gregory and Joel Murphy and I all got together. I met Roy through the radio show. I interviewed him on the show and he had just recorded an album for a country blues label called Trix records.

And Roy was as much a character as a Lightening Hopkins. I mean he could tell you stories. He was a repository of history. So he'd tell me about all these people and I'd end up meeting some of them, right here in Atlanta. And so this started getting him little jobs. I asked him if he wanted to play anymore. So we met Roger at an open mic night. Roger was playing bass behind Willie Guy Rainey, another old blues guy here in Atlanta. And I asked Roger if he – hey, speak of the devil, here's Joel Murphy.

This is David from Footnotes. We're doing a little interview. I'm trying to explain how the blues scene has rolled along here in Atlanta. So we're on the air here, keep it clean.

So Joel was playing guitar in the Aztecs and so he played second guitar with Roy so Roy could concentrate on his slide. Roy was – you should have seen Roy's hands. All busted up, pointing every which way, but he had this beautiful gospelish voice. He could just, you know, raise the roof.

So then it was J.T. and Roger behind him, we said let's take this show on the road. So we, brassy as we were, I started making calls up north and we made a couple of little tours with him on the coffeehouse circuit up there.

And so we played some nice rooms, folklore societies. So it really got – Joel and Roger and I tight. So they worked with Roy. When we opened the club, Roy was still alive so Roy would have his regular night of the week.

ROTENSTEIN: How much involvement have you had with folklorists?

[17:42]

KING: You run into the folks in different places. David Evans over in Memphis, Worth Long right here in town. Let's see, Richard Spottswood up in D.C. Gary Pearson, Joe Wilson, NCTA up in Washington. They all have different interests as far as real blues.

ROTENSTEIN: How do you see those differing from mainstream society's interests in the blues? People who actually love blues., the academic perspective as opposed to them?

KING: We brought in some performers that do nothing but festivals.

MURPHY: Precious Bryant.

ROTENSTEIN: I did an interview with her.

KING: Yeah, and we've had Precious at the club and Precious is a wonderful entertainer but awfully inconsistent, which causes us problems. She can be great for the first set and maybe not nearly interesting enough for the last set. I mean she really doesn't – and you don't know how much you want to interfere with the real folk, the real development process. I mean, can you urge her to drop this song or that song? Or play a little more up-tempo stuff? She plays the blues like she feels it on an evening.

And Roy Dunn was the same way. Very inconsistent. We could have him on the road and he'd play great in D.C. and the next night in New York City, he wouldn't feel like playing a bit. We wouldn't understand why.

But neither of them see each other as real professional musicians. I mean it's not like Johnny Copeland, who knows that he's got to crank it out. Or even a Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee. There's a certain consistency with those performers because they do it all the time.

We had a group from Alabama, Albert Macon and Robert Thomas. Totally interesting performers but one, they had a real small selection of songs that were really tight enough to play. And, if you've got to put on two sets a night, that's real difficult in a nightclub. So we're kind of torn. How much to put on the festival-type performances, you know, where you have everyone gets fifteen or twenty minutes and then off versus people come to expect a certain polish in even blues acts.

So we're kind of torn. We have probably messed around with someone like Roy Dunn and got him to learn songs he would never have bothered with before because they were crowd pleasers. I ended up writing down the lyrics to a John Lee Hooker song that he never played in his life.

And he learned this song pretty good. Little Wheel.

MURPHY: Oh yeah, that was a great song. That was a better song.

KING: You know, but it was a fresh song for him and he enjoyed playing it after a while. Of course, he had two guys backing him up so the rhythm would be easier for him. That was half of Roy's problem, you know. Sometimes those fingers were –

MURPHY: Too busted up to play. He had a bullet in his foot that had never been taken out –

KING: You know, so what can you say? He's sixty-five years old and you're getting him to learn new songs off a record, you know?

Some folk guys would say, "Hey, you're messing up, you know, the tradition." But hell, you know. Roy learned a lot of his songs off the record anyway. [unintelligible]

MURPHY: [Unintelligible]

ROTENSTEIN: That's the way it happens.

[21:35]

KING: So we have to have a certain polish in acts that we put on here in the club night after night. But we put on some festivals where we can bring in some – Hey, we had an eighty-five-year-old piano player from Chicago in here and I don't think anyone else has booked eighty-five-year-old Chicago piano players for a while. We had Sunnyland Slim this year. Yank Rachell. These are vintage performers who maybe can't go out on tour every night but we set it up so they can get down here, do a couple of nights, get paid good, and feel that glow again of performing.

We put together some old friends that hadn't seen each other in years. We had a night where we had Pinetop Perkins in here and I surprised him and brought in Jimmy Walker, this eighty-five-year-old piano player a day early for his gig. It was like watching a couple of high school kids. Pinetop got Jimmy up on the piano and Pinetop was out in the audience strutting his stuff. Pinetop's no teenager, either. He's seventy-four. He's walking the crowd like he's Frank Sinatra or something. But he was just so happy to have his old buddy with him, you know.

So that's the kind of nights I remember, you know, putting those – bringing those vintage guys – who's going to bring, you know, Jordan Walker or, yeah, R.L. Burnside from Mississippi's coming up. But R.L. doesn't have a manager. You've got to call a drugstore in Holly Springs and leave a message for him and he'll call you back collect in a couple of days, you know. There's still those guys out there. But man, when he gets up here, people say where's he been?

MURPHY: Did you see R.L. in Guitar Player magazine?

KING: Really? Hey man we've got him coming in a couple of weeks.

MURPHY: There's a picture of him standing on his front porch.

KING: Well the last few years, we've really – we hit it lucky. We've been the host club for Benson and Hedges for the three years it's been here, right from the beginning. And that has given us a foot in the door to the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. They asked us to book a revue for the last two years to go down there. One year we took all Atlanta people. We took Houserocker Johnson, Chicago Bob, the Shadows. And this past year, we took down [unintelligible] Lee and Snooky Pryor, from Chicago. They came here, did a couple of nights with us then we loaded them up and drove to New Orleans for that show.

And it looks like -- well, we also book a stage each year at the National Black Arts Festival. Let's see, who else have we worked with? The last two years we've worked with Montreaux Jazz Festival, here in Atlanta, the host club. And this year they invited us to take over the Blind Willie's Blues Revue. So Houserocker and Sandra Hall and Fats Jackson and the Shadows performed with John Lee Hooker in Montreaux, Switzerland.

And what else have we done here in the last couple of years. When Piano Red was still alive, I was doing some bookings for him and we booked him into the National Folk Festival and New Orleans World's Fair and stuff like that. But that was on an as-is basis.

ROTENSTEIN: How involved do you get people outside of Atlanta, festivals?

KING: There's a nice loose-knit network of people. The biggest festival promoters in the country are Festival, Inc., up in – Festival Productions up in New York and that is George Wein and Quint Davis. They put on the Newport, they put on the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. They put on the Benson and Hedges festivals all over the country.

And they have been real supportive and just a ball to have them – you're sitting there and these are the biggest festival promoters in the country and they love Willie's because it's the way they remember seeing blues back, you know, twenty-five years ago. A little cleaner, you know. It's not quite the Westside of Chicago or anything.

And through our booking – I also book the Shadows via True Blues Productions, that's our little production arm. So they get a chance to go make a couple of tours every year up in the northeast. So we've got friends that they stay in touch with. So we've got a little circuit from New Orleans up the east coast.

ROTENSTEIN: I remember you did some writing for Living Blues magazine detailing blues in Atlanta. Was that pretty successful?

KING: The magazine is the Bible for blues people. I wasn't really writing any biographical pieces. This was just a what's happening in Atlanta column. And they ran those – except they got so much interest from blues societies and club owners

and everything else sending them information they couldn't carry that stuff anymore, which actually makes sense because [asks for another beer] –

Were we touring. What were we talking about? Festival connections?

ROTENSTEIN: Living Blues.

KING: Oh, Living Blues. And the guy who opened Living Blues out of Chicago, Jim O'Neal, he moved down to Mississippi and we run into him regularly at festivals. Nice dude. He's interested in finding what's left of the most rural performers still out there because he's found a couple of great ones. A guy named Roosevelt Booba [pronouncing it "Booby"] Barnes and we've had Booba here a couple of times. Now Booba's just like a –

MURPHY: Booba. Booby or Booba?

KING: "Booby." He spells it different. You know, he's named because his brother came back from the Korean War or something and said "Booby" – you're always making trouble in these little traps and stuff. It's like being back in the war. We'll call you "Booby Trap."

MURPHY: I thought it was boobie bird.

KING: Well anyway, he's got his own little juke joint in Greenville, the Playboy Club. And it's just been in this last year that Jim got him recorded. We've had Booba a couple of times. And he's one of these guys, he starts playing at ten o'clock; he'll stop about four. I mean he will play all night. The idea of him doing an hour set or a forty-five-minute set is unheard of. Just keep playing, you know.

ROTENSTEIN: How is it getting these rural types or festival folks to play for a more organized audience like you've got set up here?

KING: Well, that's why we've got Roger and Joel to help run the bands. They work with the most eccentric of all these performers. Occasionally we'll have someone come in while these guys are out of town. I make sure when there's the Booba Barnes or H-Bomb Fergusons or the RL Burnsides, when they're here, I make sure the Shadows are backing them up because one, the Shadows are the best.

Hey Tom [walks up to bar]. This is Tom Robinson, one of our other partners in the operation. David's from Footnotes and doing a little interview.

But with the Shadows, they have backed up Johnny Shines, Rufus Thomas, Johnny Copeland, Homesick James. You know, an enormous selection of vintage blues performers. So, you know – and the other thing, we've got another guy in the band, Albie Scholl, who's got this immense record collection. You know, we say, hey, we've got Roscoe Gordon and Floyd Dixon, a couple of piano players from the fifties. Well

these guys play two really different styles. Hey Albie, bring over some records so we can figure this out, you know. And it went beautifully because of that, that kind of dedication. You know, this is their postgraduate course in bluesology as far as they're concerned.

And these guys have gotten – they've gotten tremendous acclaim for it, too. This is the reason they're at Jazzfest, you know. Quint Davis says, hey, look, I'd like a couple of these guys from Chicago I saw at your club last year. Let's bring them down with the Shadows.

They've been great at it over the years. And they had some of these guys, not only are naturally difficult to work with, but almost don't like the idea of them sounding so good together. This guy, Joe Duskin, who is a great boogie-woogie piano player, he thought it was fun to try and change keys on them in the middle of a song. They're still mad at him, you know.

But some of these other guys are so sweet. We had a one-eyed piano player from Memphis named Mose Vinson. This guy thought they were the greatest thing since sliced bread. He wanted to take them home.

MURPHY: Mose Vinson.

KING: Mose Rascoe is the other one. Yeah, Mose Vinson. I mean this guy – How old's Mose, eighty-three?

MURPHY: It was like playing with an iguana, man. That fucking eye rolling around.

KING: He had one eye, a big razor slash through the other one.

MURPHY: He was the best piano player that's even been down.

KING: And then you've got some of these cats come in and they – this is the big city. Where are the women? Where's the booze and let's have some fun, you know.

I mean RL can have somebody come in here, made friends with him, took him down to a strip club and he needed to be playing that night, you know. I mean we find him about one o'clock in the morning, he comes back in drunk, you know. What are we going to do? Can't put him on stage.

ROTENSTEIN: Ever have to bail anybody out of jail?

[32:33]

KING: Yes. Yes. One of our recent acts, as a matter of fact. In fact, recently featured in the magazine. It was a NOLO plea and then back to Louisiana.

ROTENSTEIN: Ever have any over-anxious fans try to bust the bar up? I've been in some places where they get people going so hard, you've got tables going out windows.

KING: People thinking blues must have a rough reputation. We probably don't have nearly as many incidents here as your average [unintelligible]. This is a club for music fans, primarily. And if you aren't a music fan when you get here, and you realize music is featured – this isn't a meat market even though we've got a lot of swell looking folks coming in here. The important thing is at ten o'clock the show starts. And you may not know who was playing with the Shadows or Pinetop Perkins or Tabby Thomas or Henry Gray but by the end of the evening, you're going to have heard some fine blues and maybe realize that this guy's significant to a lot of music that came after.

Henry Gray was Howlin' Wolf's piano player and recorded with him for many years. Lives down near New Orleans, Baton Rouge, now. And has a new album out on Blind Pig as a matter of fact.

You guys are probably garbling the tape a little bit here [says to nearby folks speaking loudly].

MURPHY: I'm sorry.

KING: That's okay.

I laugh about the Emory kids coming in. We've been here five years. We were open when Emory kids could drink at nineteen or twenty or something, right? [to woman]

[Woman]: What now?

KING: When we opened, the drinking age was twenty, wasn't it?

[Woman]: Yes.

ROTENSTEIN: Yeah, because when I was in college, you guys opened.

KING: We've kind of grown up with a lot of Emory kids. They've been real faithful, Emory folks. They've been real faithful fans and the thing is, they're willing to take a chance. I love it when we're standing out front, somebody comes up and says, "Who's playing tonight?" Looks around, reads the blurb. "I don't know who it is, come on man, we're going to have a good time."

It's important that they realize the blues is a real expressive music and it can be just as expressive of having a good time as having a lousy time or something goes wrong in your life. And they've given that a chance.

Plus, the Shadows are a goodtime band. I mean they can backup a seventy-year-old blues singer but they also do a lot of old rock and roll and rockabilly stuff. J.T. can just tear up some old soul songs.

So you're going to have a good time. You know, we do a lot of different – on Fridays and Saturdays, we always got three, maybe four singers during the course of the evening and different styles.

ROTENSTEIN: How about the people that listen to the music here? How would you characterize them? Is there any age bracket? I know you've got lines down the block every weekend.

KING: We get a lot of people who live in the neighborhood coming here a couple of times a month or maybe more, which I like because they're the kind of people who will tell me, "Hey, you know, that band wasn't as good as the last time we were here" or, "The drinks have been lousy this week," you know, or, "Get rid of the spare rib and get something else on the menu."

I mean we've got to have that kind of feedback to stay in the business.

ROTENSTEIN: So you're a neighborhood bar –

KING: But the focus is still on the music. I've had two weddings here, a couple of divorces. I mean we actually had a wedding, in the club, the preacher was up on stage. It was one of those situations, they met here or something like that or this is their favorite place to honky tonk.

I mean we're not open the hours of most neighborhood bars. I mean, we open at six but usually we don't start really doing anything till eight here. So it's not the kind of place you while away an afternoon. But we have a jukebox with real vintage stuff and then we try and update it when somebody's coming from out of town, we make sure their latest forty-five's on the box. Hell, we've worn out some vintage forty-fives on that jukebox just because we wanted to play them. We didn't care whether it was the last Sun copy of something that T-Model Ford recorded. We wanted it on the jukebox.

ROTENSTEIN: The blues that developed in Atlanta in the twenties and thirties, what's the blues listening style? I mean do people want Chicago style? Do they want Delta? They want Piedmont?

KING: I think the fans here have seen enough blues between Blues Harbor and Willie's, they're used to a broad spectrum. They want expressive, traditional music or at least the folks coming here and Blues Harbor. But, they also want to hear some Cajun and Zydeco from time to time and we've had real good luck with singer-songwriter nights, people like Townes Van Zandt and Guy Clark. More country and western oriented than straight-ahead folk performers. But we've had Jonathan

Edwards in here, Tracy Nelson, Dave van Ronk, John Hammond, Brownie McGhee. You know, it's a – Those acoustic nights are – you know, that's what I grew up hearing in coffeehouses so it's important for me to be able to do those, also.

So we don't do much straight-ahead country and western. We do a little rockabilly once in a while. Somebody like Sleepy LaBeef or there's an old rocker out of New Orleans named Joe Clay who had some hits in the fifties.

But there aren't enough of those guys to do them regularly anyway and our people want to hear blues. And for the most part, that means a blues band. Now we've got different styles in our regular acts. We've got Lotsa Poppa who's been holding down Wednesday nights for over a year. He does a real solo act, real chitlin stuff. He's almost got a little fan club of ladies, they come in here on Wednesday nights to hear him. "Oh Poppa, sing that song," you know.

And then we've got, you know, Fats Jackson from the honkers and the shouters. And Luther, who's more Chicago-oriented or Jimmy Reed or Muddy Waters stuff. And the one style we don't get enough of as far as I'm concerned are piano players. You know, and that doesn't have to be just boogie woogie piano players but since Piano Red died, we just don't have any guys down in Atlanta that can pound that out.

So we've tried bringing piano players – because they fit in real good. We don't have a piano player in the Shadows. So that's a whole other instrumental sound we'd like to hear.

ROTENSTEIN: Do you really think Atlanta's been that much of a piano town?

KING: It hasn't. There was, I think, a guy named Tommy Brown that played piano along the same lines as Piano Red. But it just has not been – who knows why? This is a big twelve-string guitar town. Blind Willie McTell, Barbecue Bob Hicks. Roy Dunn had twelve-string. Why these guys, you know, why so many of them – they're country boys. They come play in the city for a weekend, they want to make as much noise as they can. Those twelve-strings would cut through it. This is what Roy told me. He said they're louder.

ROTENSTEIN: Bruce Bastin wrote that Atlanta was a little over-characterized as a twelve-string town.

KING: Well, look at it. I mean, why would that whole group – what, did they borrow each other's guitars? I don't know why. It's just that – why are the most, you know, Barbecue Bob and Blind Willie are two of the most significant bluesmen. Why does Roy pick up twelve-string? Because Willie had one. Roy and Willie were old friends.

ROTENSTEIN: And while you're on Blind Willie, why did you pick Blind Willie's name for the bar?

[41:58]

KING: Of course Blind Willie McTell is the Atlanta blues figure. But we didn't necessarily name it right after that Blind Willie. There was also Blind Willie Johnson and probably a couple of more that we'll never know about them.

It was more to signify some reverence for all of the forgotten bluesmen and women, you know. We could have named it Memphis Minnie's, too, you know. But Blind Willie's seemed to us to be kind of a lucky way start it off, maybe as a little tribute to Roy, too, because Roy – Roy was with us when we opened the joint. He'd come down some afternoons and sit over here in the corner watching us clean up or something, you know.

He dug the idea of having himself a – in fact, his last interview, he had them take pictures of him just sitting up on stage, not even with lights on, just sitting against the wall with his feet up, you know. This is his little joint to hang out and called it his blues clubhouse.

I don't know. J.T., why do you think this was a twelve-string town?

MURPHY: What?

KING: Why do you think all those guys were playing twelve-string guitar down here?

MURPHY: I hate the twelve-string. They're a bitch to play. Maybe if you're a street singer, you know, you get more volume out of twelve strings, which is what Willie McTell was. You get more volume but it's a pain in the ass to play.

ROTENSTEIN: Do you see the club staying here or expanding, moving elsewhere?

KING: Well, we did open a larger club two or three years ago and it probably too big a place and the location was questionable and we put in some fine acts and tried but it broke our hearts and our pocketbook. I guess there were just too many problems. We put a lot into construction of the building and it was – we could have poured a lot more money into getting the sound right and to closing off sections of it so it was more intimate. But it was the damndest thing: The worse we did there, the better we did here.

The bands would quit playing over there, run over here and jam, you know. We knew we were in trouble. Over there, the band quit playing, boom, the place empties out and we'd come back here and everyone's here.

We would like to expand here. It depends on if anyone moves on this block. The landlord would probably like us to expand, also. And I know, you know, it takes a lot of – the customers have been wonderful. They realize they're in for an experience

and sometimes the experience is kind of uncomfortable and jammed-in here, but it's the only way we can financially pay the bands what they're worth and get them to feel – we get some wonderful performances out folks who maybe somewhere else wouldn't enjoy playing nearly as well.

I mean we had Taj Mahal in here between shows. I mean Taj hasn't played a place this size in a good many years and they were wonderful shows. Rufus Thomas, you know, to see that – he'd do the funky chicken onstage, a couple of our regular ladies got up there and danced with him. I mean, these are legendary shows.

When Li'l Ed came, first time out of Chicago, he left the stage, across the table tops and did a guitar solo on the bar without getting onto the floor. I mean that's the blues. That's show time, you know.

So the fans, they know it's going to be uncomfortable and they know it's going to be crowded but they're relying on us to put on a good show. With the Shadows running the stage show, that's what they get. I mean they play till four o'clock on the weekend.

ROTENSTEIN: So it's a profitable venture having a stable blues clientele?

KING: For us, the profitability – a couple of bands working real regularly and rotate front singers and then they bring in some out of town hitters every once in a while. But we're so small, so probably on the worst day of the week, Blues Harbor does more than our Friday and Saturday. And, we've got three partners in this – nobody's trying to get rich. We wouldn't be doing blues if we were. But we also, by the same token, would rather see this place a taco stand than to have to put on just boring kids' rock and roll.

ROTENSTEIN: I see Atlanta as what you can describe as a blues survivor. You've got clubs springing up. You've got a weekly that's got a blues column in it every week. Where do you see blues going?

KING: Well, we're in touch with touring acts and we're seeing things tightening up in other venues. In North Carolina, for instance – this is Roger Gregory. This is David – we've been rapping. J.T. happened to walk in. The question is why were there so many twelve-string guitar players in town?

GREGORY: When were they here?

KING: Well, you know, Barbecue Bob –

GREGORY: Because they could get a better sound.

KING: There you go, okay. There's a consensus. Okay.

Anyway, we've run him through the Roy Dunn saga and how we all met and he was asking how we keep some of these festival-style acts from falling apart. If we had any problems. I think R.L. Burnside disappeared into a whorehouse.

[People in background are speaking. Unable to discern individual voices in recording.]

[Unknown male]: R.L. he walked in like he was in a daze. But he's coming back.

KING: We go down to the bus station to get him and I swear, he comes off the bus. He's got his stuff in a grocery sack. And that's all he's carrying, a grocery sack and his guitar with no case. Whoa, this is country come to the big city!

GREGORY: They're just a pain in the ass [unintelligible]

KING: I lost the train there, also.

ROTENSTEIN: That's all right.

KING: But Roger, everything we've been able to do with the performers is because of Roger keeping them – a lot of these guys when we opened the club, we didn't have the money to put in a motel. They stayed at our house. I mean Yank, Yank and his granddaughter came down and I have an old Victrola for old seventy-eights and I wanted to surprise him. I had an old Yank Rachell seventy-eight, Rainy Day Blues, I think. And his granddaughter is a good singer, plays bass behind him. And so we're all around the house and it's a kind of cold day and I said, "Yank, you heard this one in a while?" Pulled it out. He said he never heard it since he recorded it. So I went over and cranked the old Victrola and put it on. He started yelling for his granddaughter. "Come here. You've never heard anything like that in your life." And I gave him the seventy-eight to take home. He said, "I never thought I'd hear those again," you know.

He hadn't even seen one in twenty-five years.

ROTENSTEIN: It's very personal [unintelligible]. Something you wrote.

KING: What I said before, it was a dream come true. It's funny, even in New Orleans, I went down to that jazz festival for ten years before we got invited to bring an act down to it. And I see these wonderful performers, the John Mooneys, the Beausoleils, the Files you know, the Cajun acts, the Zydeco acts. D.L. Menard and then all the other headliners down there.

I'd love to have a place to put on this music, you know? And we do! We do. Other than maybe being a little bigger, there isn't anything we haven't been able to do with this club. That's what's cool about it, you know. We don't have to lie, cheat, or you

know. People are nice, they want to come hear a seventy-eight-year-old mandolin player. That's weird, you know.

ROTENSTEIN: You're partly responsible for how people define the blues. I mean they come to your club and they can [unintelligible]. If you had to explain what the blues actually was, how would you put it in your words? The words you used, expressive tradition, is almost academic sounding.

[52:13]

KING: You don't need a five-piece band to play the blues, obviously. It's one voice. It's somebody that's clapping time. It's somebody with a harp. All that is the only way that man or woman's got to deal with all the aggravations, disappointments in their lives. But by the same token, sometimes they work through those disappointments and it turns out to be that rhythm is also going to make them happy or that catchy phrase, you know, I woke up this morning, I saw the blues coming down the street, you know.

It's a very personal, expressive style of music. I mean I don't – I guess other people could get that playing the violin or a horn solo. But I think with the blues is what for me is the most direct way of making that kind of connection with the reality of your life or my life. Whether it's – hey, I don't sing, I can't keep time to save my life. But listening to one person with a guitar sing, you know, a Fred McDowell or a Roy Dunn. I mean I play some of his stuff, I mean I'm just cruising around town thinking how great it was to know him.

He wasn't – a lot of people don't like him as a person but he could touch something in me that, you know, made me absolutely honest and sure that this is the way I'm feeling and I'm glad he's letting me know how he's feeling and expressing that to me.

So it's been a big influence on me.

[Background noise. Music and voices, increase.]

ROTENSTEIN: I learned it as a rich African American tradition that's crossed economic and social and geographic boundaries. Do you see any barriers in the blues?

KING: Do you mean will a nice suburban white audience appreciate an old Howlin' Wolf song sung by a modern son of the city like Luther Johnson? There are some universal qualities about the lyrics and then there's an expressiveness that Luther's got that is going to mean something and what's real nice is here in this club, it's particularly with this band, you know, with Roger and Joel we've run into that situation, you know. These guys are white, can you really play the blues, you know?

I have it because I don't have to face it and be onstage. I mean sometimes they get up in front of a – they played a club here in town that was ninety-nine percent black, they got up there, opened up with a couple of old rock and roll things and got everybody jumping around. Those folks didn't care what the hell was going on onstage. They just knew it was good. And then you bring on – we specialize in singers. That's another thing. Joel's got some good pipes for your basic young fella out of Fayetteville who grew up in the old South. I mean, Joel is Caucasian but he can sing some blues.

But the other thing is, we don't pretend. There aren't too many guys like John Hammond who is a white guy who can sing the blues without making it sound like an imitation. Or a John Campbell, a really fine, fine vocalist. Or a Charlie Musselwhite.

That's why, for the most part, we feature black vocalists. You know, they've got a set of pipes that, you know, it's just so genuine. You know, we're not going to pretend to have people imitating that sound. Let's have the original sound.

And that's a situation everyone runs into, you know, who's putting together a blues band.

ROTENSTEIN: What about that vague line that separates blues from rock or hillbilly? Is there a distinct type of music out there that can be called blues?

KING: You know, if you ever get a chance, go to Sun studio in Memphis because it's a good feeling The whole Memphis Sun thing when it got started wasn't just folks like Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, and Elvis. But it was also Rufus Thomas and Doctor Ross, and who was the guy who did Rocket 88? Jackie Brenston. I mean they were getting the best talent they could find in that area and it kind of melded together. It was a rockabilly sound coming out of country dudes listening to black singers. So that kind of country-gospel-blues thing all came together and what came out was rockabilly. You know, Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins, and Elvis stuff.

Or, you have Elvis taking That's All Right Mama, a blues thing that Arthur Crudup did and maybe jazzing it up a little bit, not even very much, and having his first hit with it.

So you go back and – everybody was swimming in the same river, you know. Let's enjoy it and what we got out of it was some great music. Those old Memphis days.

[I had a camera with me and I went to take a photo – slide film – of King. He gestured for others to come over.]

You'll get a real cast of characters in this shot.

[Shooting slides.]

KING: That was the glamour in the band. He's the only one with a full head of hair. We gotta keep him up towards the front of the band.

The band – they went and hired Albie when they found he had a bad back. They were counting on him to [unintelligible; 1:00:36], you know. Albie, this is David from Footnotes. He's doing a little –

The Blind Willie's story.

ROTENSTEIN: So this has been pretty much fun for you the past five years?

KING: Incredible. Incredible. We're just a little astounded that it's gone as smoothly as it has --

[End Tape Side A]

[Start Tape Side B]

KING: -- changes the menu once in a while, help comes and goes. But we have some regulars in the neighborhood been here monthly since the place opened and the music. You know, we knew that was our bread and butter.

Knock them dead. [To people walking out the door.]

ROTENSTEIN: Do you think you're accomplishing something important preserving and propagating the blues tradition?

KING: Look, these guys, they're going to be playing the blues till they pass out. I mean these older fellows we do bring in. You know, this is as much fun for me – we don't consider it an educating process but it sure is nice to put some blues fans together with some of these vintage performers and see what happens. And we're very seldom disappointed.

It's just such a thrill to – you know, these guys, some of them don't get a chance to play that much anyway. Hell, if they're seventy-five years old, they ain't going to be getting in a band and traveling around like a young man.

So we make it as – we try and get the publicity out. It infuriates me sometimes you don't get more cooperation but in other ways, we've gotten a real good response, you know. Bo Emerson and Russ DeVault at the Constitution have been wonderful. Doug DeLoach has helped us a lot. There are some new folks at Creative Loafing. Greg Land, who's been a big help. I wish I could say Tony Paris has been a big help but he has pretty much ignored the blues scene here in Atlanta.

There's been a couple of papers come and gone that had helped us a lot. Southline. We're glad to see Footnotes taking the blues real serious here in town. I have a hard time reconciling myself to when we bring in what I consider significant blues performers that we don't get a little more ink.

And I know we're not the Center Stage. We're not one of the sheds where Waylon Jennings is playing or Kathy Mattea. And there just is not enough coverage of traditional music. I throw blues, country and western, pretty much in the hat. I don't think any of them are covered as much as they should be in this town. Now here comes my diatribe.

Can I get another [orders another beer].

I think we're kind of underestimating the readership of the publications. So many people have come from other towns where traditional music is appreciated a lot more. Things like the Village Voice in New York or the Phoenix in Boston or the Reader in Chicago – these are alternative papers that cover the traditional music scene a great deal more than any of ours.

And it bothers me when – I remember one time, there's a big festival And John Lee Hooker and what was it, Bo Diddley? Yeah, they were both going to be in town and Etta James all on the same weekend. Creative Loafing didn't write about them. They wrote about the Pixies, some lightweight quasi- -- and then had the nerve to call them a roots rock band. And I was infuriated, you know. I mean – okay, last night, last night one of the finest little shows – little shows? It was a great show. Freddy Fender, Doug Sahm, the Texas Tornados. Footnotes missed it. I mean missed it bad. That show was dynamite and it had – luckily, Russ DeVault got off his ass and did a nice piece on it.

But that's one of the shows that will have people talking for a long time and not even a mention of it?

ROTENSTEIN: How would you suggest the local press rectify that problem?

KING: Well, look. You guys have made a big step with as much blues coverage as you have. There's a couple of clubs that are going to be featuring more folk and bluegrass music than any other. I'm thinking of the Variety Playhouse. You got maybe six freelance writers working for you now over there? Is that how it's set up?

ROTENSTEIN: [Unintelligible]

KING: It's hard for the clubs to know who to shoot all the material to. That's what I run into sometimes. For a while there I was giving three packages of promotional stuff down to the Constitution and it's kind of hard. I think having a couple of people. Okay, this is the press material we got from five different clubs on acts coming up in the next couple of weeks.

Knowing that these two or three guys are more receptive to the blues and to the folk stuff makes my life easier. I can set up the interviews, get you tapes, photos, all that a lot smoother. Plus, you know, working with you and Bryan has not been any problem. You know, I'm trying to figure what things you guys are most inclined to want to feature, you know. Russ DeVault, I know he loves the singer-songwriter old folkie stuff. You know, the Dave van Ronks, the Guy Clarks, Townes Van Zandts and occasionally, some of the more esoteric blues stuff. But not just the run of the mill blues band. That ain't his thing.

Bo is a little more bluesy, interested in that, so at least I know, hey, those guys are coming up – I'm glad you picked up on the Little Charlie thing. I don't think Russ would.

ROTENSTEIN: Well my orientation is more deep Delta. I ran into the blues in Helena, Arkansas when I was a state folklorist in Arkansas. I was there to interview a visionary artist and his daughter asked me if I'd ever been to town before. Nope. She asked me if I liked music. Yup. She said pick me up at eight. Took me down to Cherry Street, which the joint she took me to has been bulldozed for parking space for the festival, which is another story.

But ran into a man named John Weston there. I don't know if you've heard of him. He's playing Beale Street now. He used to play on street corners in Helena, Main Street Helena actually put him up on street corners Fridays to try to draw people into the downtown revitalization.

KING: John Weston. I know Uncle Ben because I just saw him down on Beale Street. He was playing out there. I was there a few weeks back. Why did you end up in Helena? I've only been there one time, but man it's the archetypical Delta town.

ROTENSTEIN: It's a shot back to the past, but what they're doing to blues down there is criminal. They've turned a nice local tradition of blues and they've monopolized it to bring money into the town.

KING: Is Sonny Payne still involved with the festival there?

[1:09:39]

ROTENSTEIN: Sonny Boy Blues Society, yeah. Peggy Simms, Bubba Sullivan.

KING: I've only been once, so I really don't have anything to judge. It was two years ago or three years ago. When did we go?

I thought it was nicely done and still small and manageable.

ROTENSTEIN: They were expecting better than seventy-five thousand people –

KING: That's probably ten times as much as was there a few years before.

ROTENSTEIN: What they've done is they've destroyed the Cherry Street district in order to accommodate those people for those two days. I mean the Cherry Street – it's a nice spot. It'll probably be my doctoral dissertation.

KING: Well are you going to be at that conference in December?

ROTENSTEIN: Which one?

KING: There's a conference here for – I've kept the pamphlet. It's a conference, they're bringing in a lot of folklorists, a lot of developmental people from the Delta region, Appalachian region. Doing a two-day conference with speakers, what's his name, Malcolm Wall is going to be here. Wigginton is going to be here. Ferris may, I don't remember whether he was on the list or not.

ROTENSTEIN: I pretty much dropped out for a year. I ran out of money so –

KING: That's the reason I booked RL that weekend, was the other thing. I figure I'm going to the conference anyway, I'll tell them where RL is playing.

ROTENSTEIN: I didn't even know they were having it. It might be a good –

KING: It's the first weekend in December. There will be some interesting folks here as a matter of fact. I'll Xerox the stuff and shoot it to you.

ROTENSTEIN: Great.

KING: But I think the focus is going to be on how do we merchandise folk crafts, folk festivals, other parts of the culture in different areas. And you know, I'm interested in that. We had contact with the blues festival in Barcelona, Spain, before the Olympics. But I would like to do some of the more traditional entertainers. But again, I can't take the chance of putting Precious Bryant on a plane and having her getting drunk in Barcelona and screwing up.

So what we're going to end up is some of our favorite, yet most dependable, performers. So again, there we're manipulating the folk process a little bit.

ROTENSTEIN: That puts you in a pretty tough position, on the one hand wanting to promote the tradition but on the other hand, being realistic about performers.

[1:12:37]

KING: You know, so is it fair to – like Taj Mahal was someone that one, has name quality; two, is totally dependable; and, three, he's the kind of person you can hook

up with a Yank Rachell and then you're going to have kind of a magical evening of old and – whatever you want to say about Taj, he's carrying on a lot of traditions.

And his heart's in the right place, even though he's gone through some false steps with his little international rhythm band. Do you remember his Caribbean, quasi-Caribbean Afro-band there for a while? Oh God, he must have had eleven pieces, steel drums, and every other Goddamn thing, you know.

ROTENSTEIN: The show he put on down in Daytona last year had a lot of that flavor.

KING: Well, he keeps it – see, sometimes he plays it real close to the vest, you know. Keeps it more straight-ahead and other times, it's yuppie, you know, let's all have a good time and go down to Margaritaville or something.

ROTENSTEIN: So he's just playing to the audience –

KING: Yeah. I think here he gave us a show we really wanted, a bluesy show.

Oh, the other thing. I had RL Burnside with him. Hey, RL can't do that kind of crap. So I think Taj realized we wanted straight-ahead blues, you know, let's keep it – you don't have to try and entertain these jokers, play from the heart a little.

Yeah, the festival stuff's going to be – the thing in Barcelona is going to be a lot of fun.

And then, we learned a lot doing Montreaux Jazz Festival. Everyone got along fine, but right away, if I ever do another festival in Europe, we're going to have to plan on doing a lot of cooking and maybe even bringing a cook.

That's the biggest problem we had over there. If we're going to be anywhere for six days, we may as well bring somebody who can cook like son-of-a-gun, cook for all the bands so people can get grits and biscuits, you know.

ROTENSTEIN: Something you have to –

KING: We learned, you know. That's the single thing that made everyone unhappy. They couldn't get a decent breakfast in Europe, you know. So let's keep everybody happy, make sure we can get some sausage and eggs in the morning. Good cup of coffee.

[Woman off to the side says something.]

No, that would be great. If you learn to cook before we go to Europe, we'll take you.

[Woman off to the side says something.]

We all are going to have to do double duty.

But anyway, that will be a challenge to see if we can put on an artistically and financially responsible show. Guys like RL – we know what to expect from RL and we'll be able to, you know, not necessarily control him but at least keep him focused on what's important, you know. I mean, hey RL we can have our fun, but it's show time right now. Let's show these people –

And it's going to help his career. He's got eleven kids and he's busted flat every time I talk to him in Mississippi. Still does farm work and a little fishing and it would be real nice to get him a decent album out the next few years and really get him some good money for these shows.

ROTENSTEIN: How much involvement do you have with the state folklife people? Annie Archibald?

[1:16:41]

KING: I don't know her. Like I said, we're pretty focused right here in Atlanta. We work with the Bureau of Cultural Affairs pretty closely.

ROTENSTEIN: So you're really not that affiliated at all with the State of Georgia?

KING: No, no, not at all. Well, look, we book a club three hundred and sixty nights a year and then we book several of the acts out of town. They know where we are. I can't be a publicist for all the acts that work here all over the state. You know, people are looking to see traditional music, traditional blues. Come out in Atlanta at least see what we've got. We may have Yank Rachell or RL Burnside this weekend. Of course we also have, you know, a band from Chicago that are fourth generation players, too. But we try and put on as many vintage performers as can still make it.

We had Honeyboy Edwards here a couple of months ago. He goes back to – he can tell me stories about Robert Johnson for Christ's sake, you know. That's getting back to – Johnny Shines, we've had here.

ROTENSTEIN: Do you think the Atlanta blues scene would be different if you had a professional folklorist like an Evans or a Ferris living in town?

KING: You mentioned Bruce Bastin. A lot of people remember him. We do have one – we have George Mitchell who lives in Atlanta. George was – I mean he put on a wonderful festival in eighty-four at the Moonshadow, the Downhome Blues Festival. And through that, I've gotten a lot of contacts from him on people he recommends. And he takes calls and in fact he put me in touch with the people in Barcelona. He is not tuned in right now to the contemporary blues scene, who's touring, how much they need, that kind of thing.

But he is tuned in to that network of folklorists. And George, he's got a lot of different things happening. He's got a play running right now. He's had several books, photography books he's come out with. And he produced, you know, thirty-five or forty albums. His heart isn't in rural country blues the way it was fifteen years ago.

ROTENSTEIN: How about John Burrison? Ever have any contact with him?

KING: John Burris?

ROTENSTEIN: Burrison, at Georgia State.

KING: Oh no, our colleges here are woefully backwards. Emory invited a few of the blues performers to play there. Roy Dunn and Piano Red played there. I think there is a little blues society trying to start at Georgia State or a class. Had somebody come down there and play, maybe Luther.

The colleges here, for a city with as large a black college system as Atlanta, it's embarrassing how little they call on the blues performers there. In fact, look, they've got any money – you know, their idea of a tremendous show is Clark Terry every year because he can lead the band I guess.

However, the National Black Arts Festival folks are much more in tune with what's going on. They have put on a couple of great shows on Auburn Avenue in the last – well, they've done it twice and we've been asked to do one of the stages each time. And we bring in sort of a road show of regulars at Blind Willie's plus some out of towners. And they've done a good job, Michelle Smith and those folks over there, David Chandler and that's been a pleasure working with them.

I don't know why – I even picked up a catalog one time from Georgia State and they had some folklore classes and stuff. But they don't really pay attention – I don't know, maybe a professor comes in here every night, you know, but they've never asked to have any of these performers play over there.

ROTENSTEIN: I know the folklorist at Georgia State is artifact-oriented. His area is pottery so –

KING: Okay, well –

ROTENSTEIN: He did write an article on Atlanta's fiddlers in the alley back in seventy-one, seventy-two.

KING: But I mean there's some real – I'll tell you, the children's' school called and asked if there were any bluesmen who would come over and talk to their fourth and fifth graders. And I was so surprised, I said sure, I'll find somebody. And they had

just done a section of class, social studies section, on Auburn Avenue. So I thought of Billy Wright. So we went over there for an afternoon, took some old Billy Wright albums, and spent a couple of hours with the kids.

And it was enthralling. Of course Billy came on like it was a stage show in a pearl gray, matched hanky. What did he have his Johnsons, his shoes on, and a pearl gray three-piece suit and looked like a James Brown of the blues. I mean he looked so sharp. The kids' jaws dropped. And Billy's a pretty flamboyant guy. Talk about flamboyant? Holy shit. Billy's pompadour actually got Little Richard started. They're old friends. I mean that's been Billy's look since the fifties, since the forties, early forties. And Little Richard – in fact when Little Richard came through town last time, he goes and visits Billy and they call us over here. "Hi, this is Little Richard." They left a message on my machine at home. I thought it was a gag until I found out it really was Little Richard.

[Woman at bar]: Yeah, he called here.

KING: But Billy's one of these guys who never has a bad word to say about anyone. He just remembers everyone at their best. He worked the Royal Peacock all through the really gravy years. And he ended up emceeing male impersonator shows there later on. He's seen the best and the worst. And now, it's just nice having a place for him to play regularly.

We occasionally do shows in other places around town with him too, but mostly he's got his – this summer he had an operation so he hasn't been doing a regular night since July. But he'll be here next Sunday and he is a real charming man.

[1:24:03]

ROTENSTEIN: How do you feel about being an educator, teaching people about the blues, especially the children?

KING: You have to have a way for them to understand and connect with their – what's gone on before or we're going to lose all this. I mean there are some – you know, you laugh about people listening to Ten Years After or the Allman Brothers and getting into the blues and then finding out that Chester Burnett, who was Howlin' Wolf, when you find out who wrote Smokestack Lightning. Or listening to the Yardbirds and going back from that. But that's the way a lot of people do.

I had seen James Cotton but I had to do a little backtracking from the Yardbirds, too, you know, just to pick up on some of their stuff.

But as long was we've got the originals, let's see them. They may not be the same way they were fifty years ago or thirty years ago but let's appreciate them.

The Billy Wrights and the Fats Jacksons – they are celebrating forty years of recording. They recorded forty years ago for Savoy Records in December. In fact, it would be nice if we could put you together with them for a little – we're going to have a special party and everything.

ROTENSTEIN: When will that be?

KING: It's going to be the middle of December. I don't know the exact date they did the recording but by the middle of December it will be forty years and I've got the recording session information and everything.

ROTENSTEIN: Send me a copy.

KING: Great, great.

And Fats has, like I said, later on been called to work with, sit in with Roomful or Omar and the Howlers or John Mooney and you're carrying on that tradition and that's part of the reason we wanted to do Willie's, you know. I like the idea of J.T. and Roger knowing and having played with Roy and him showing them, "Hey, this is the way I play Cornbread for her Husband, Biscuits for her Backdoorman. This is the way I do that change." That's the way the blues have always been carried on, you know.

ROTENSTEIN: With all of the aging in the blues and fewer young performers taking it up, do you ever see it dying out?

[1:26:54]

KING: No, in fact there's more young dudes playing blues now than there's been in a long time. And a lot of really good ones. Occasionally, they're more into the salesmanship than the substance of the blues, but there's some good players. Hey, Li'l Ed and his cousin, his cousin's the bass player. I mean, hey man, this is J.B, Hutto's blood in these cats. Kenny Neal, you know, part of the Neal people from Baton Rouge.

Let's see, Lucky Peterson, his dad's a bluesman. John Mooney, you know, he learned from Son House up in Rochester.

No, there's a lot of young players out there. I mean look, we're mourning Stevie Ray's passing. He turned a lot of people on to blues, you know, and he was always good at letting everyone know where he learned his licks, you know. Seeing Freddie King or seeing, I forget who, all of his heroes back then.

And blues is not just a young man's game. I mean a lot of these voices don't toughen up until they're forty or fifty. I think guys like Neal and Lucky Peterson are going to

get better the older they are, play with a little more control instead of just jumping around like they do a little too much of.

Shit, Chicago Bob's mid-forties, late forties. I mean he's got a long ways singing the blues yet. It isn't like you have to have a nice haircut and wear the latest styles, you know.

ROTENSTEIN: Where do you think the aesthetic lies for people today? What turns them on to the blues? Is it the way it's done? Is it the setting it's performed in? Is it the history?

[1:29:08]

KING: I think there was a certain attractiveness as it became a little risqué or – I know, where the club was located I used to hang out in, when I was eighteen or nineteen years old, it was a rough part of town. But that's where the blues was.

I remember going to the Apollo, me and a couple of roommates from college. Okay, there's a few college kids in a crowd up in Harlem. Everyone kind of got a kick out of us being there because they thought, "Damn, if they want to see James Brown this bad, we better have some fun with them too." That's the way it worked.

There's a certain emotional honesty and showmanship to blues, too. A communication. Blues lyrics, you've got to be able to hear. It's not necessarily a music that's going to appeal to your REM fans but hell, they've got time to grow up a little bit.

It's like there's a lot of fine young Zydeco bands out right now. I hope they can all make a living so the time when they mature and write some classics of their own instead of everybody singing the same dozen Zydeco songs every set.

ROTENSTEIN: This will be a fun one to transcribe.

KING: I'm sorry. I'm being pretty superfluous here.

ROTENSTEIN: No, you're just as important as the bluesmen themselves because if it's not for the people with the clubs and the promotion, it's just going to die.

KING: Well, we've had a lot of cooperation. The radio station has been wonderful and the bluesmen have put it back. That blues barbecue, I know you were a little hot and uncomfortable, but the point was at the radio station, we don't have much money and to be able to make that much money in one afternoon, that's the way we do it.

ROTENSTEIN: I was just echoing what I heard people around me. [I had written a review of the WRFG Labor Day Blues Barbecue the month before.]

KING: Oh it was hot as blazes in there.

ROTENSTEIN: What was it, Albie's girlfriend couldn't even get food.

KING: Well, you know every year we plan on a bigger crowd and every year we run out of food and beer. And the fans are even more accommodating than they were the year before. I wish we had another venue where we could control the – we tried to do it here with the stage in the parking lot one year and it rained, wiped us out. We still made good money, but it was about half as much as we made with this year's.

ROTENSTEIN: Where do you think you'll have it next year?

KING: We're asking around. I just don't know, to tell you the truth. You don't want to be a nuisance wherever we are.

ROTENSTEIN: Do you see the barbecue turning into a mini-festival and then a festival in its own right?

KING: Well, we've about maximized the amount of money we can make without taking any gambles like setting up big tents, like contracting with performers months and months in advance. Our idea is to make as much with as little investment because the radio station's never got money to invest. We underwrite that every year, Blind Willie's. And in this case, the last two years, the city has been kind enough to offer that facility [Inman Park Trolley Barn] plus allow us to bring in acts for the Montreaux festival and those same acts, we can get a good bargain on because the two headliners we actually pay. And so luckily, the city has underwritten that the last two years because we've been booking them for the Montreaux.

So I make all kinds of deals with these people. You're playing in the park on Saturday, at Blind Willie's on Saturday night, so they make enough so everyone can come up here for a day or two.

I hope the – see, if we had a place twice as big but I couldn't imagine us doing it with less expenses than we have right now and that's the problem. We just never have much seed money for these events.

ROTENSTEIN: What do you think will happen if the barbecue does turn into a full-blown blues festival and Atlanta finds itself actually gaining a name as festival holding city?

[1:34:35]

KING: Well, I tell you, it's going to be hard to surpass what Benson and Hedges is doing here with the five or six day event they put on the last couple of years. This

past year it was down at Lakewood Amphitheater, which I dislike as a facility. And at that level of investment, seventeen thousand whatever it takes to fill the place, you have to do the Stevie Ray Vaughn level acts.

ROTENSTEIN: That's a national circuit type festival. I'm talking about something homegrown, like the barbecue –

[Pause]

KING: I can't even – you know, I've spent years going to New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival and the Mississippi Delta Festival and Helena, the Mariposa up in Canada. We don't have a site like any of those places available. That's a big – I don't think we could – maybe someplace like Chastain if the neighborhood – I mean that's a big if over there. If you find a two-thousand-seat venue like that let me know and – I looked. Again, could you get the audience to the festival site. You know, you couldn't do this out at Lanierland or one of those kinds of things.

Even Piedmont Park, the city has put on – that last show that we did Saturday over Labor Day, I mean you had Sam Brothers Five, John Jackson, Blind Willie's Blues Revue, Koko Taylor, Dirty Dozen Brass Band. That's an incredible show.

Other than having several other stages, smaller stages set up, I don't know any other way we could do that. That was –and that's because the Bureau of Cultural Affairs is operating – they've got some talented people there, Rob Gibson and Marian Sandburg, and they've got some support on city council. Rob Pitts is a stone blues fan and a delight to work with. And Rob's in here regularly and brings some of his buddies in here.

And Rob and Harriett and – both Robs and Harriett were with us in Switzerland as representatives of the city and man that made it go so smooth. The city of Atlanta is held in high repute in Montreaux, Switzerland. They think we've got a blues scene you wouldn't believe. We got most of the reviews translated and they were – they may have come on late but they kicked everybody's ass on the schedule, you know. We didn't get onstage until probably one-thirty. The ones who stayed after John Lee Hooker loved it.

I don't know. Other than Piedmont, I can't imagine an outdoor facility really working. One that isn't too big or too far out located or something.

ROTENSTEIN: How about the Olympics? Here you've got this large international crowd that's going to converge on Atlanta. Do you think the blues has an opportunity to expand?

KING: Sure. But I hope people don't think with their wallets and these grubby little schemes. You know, it's going to be a great opportunity for Atlanta to show the world, hey, we're ready to care about people and show you a good time. I've always

liked Atlanta because we make mistakes but we're still young and alive enough to bounce back and luckily we're in a good climate. The economy's better for us here than in Youngstown, Ohio. And we've got some flexibility in the city government, the business community. People have decided that Atlanta, you know, let's make it a workable city. And if we go at it that way instead of cab drivers taking the Olympics people around the I-285 for four hours then we're –

ROTENSTEIN: [Unintelligible]

KING: Yeah, geez oh man. It bothered me, you know, the Savannah people – when we got the Olympics, the first thing I hear one of the people say from one of the hotels is how much money they're going to make. If that's all you are thinking about the Olympics, then, you know, Goddamn, get away. Let's show the people in Europe that this is still a wonderful place to be living.

The blues will work out but believe me, we're not going to be the Olympic blues bar or any bullshit like that. But, we are going to put "Welcome" in several languages over the doorway, you know.

ROTENSTEIN: All right. I'm not going to totally burn you out here.

KING: We've got a lot of folks coming in because they read about Blind Willie's in Living Blues or something like that. We get a lot of European folks.

ROTENSTEIN: You advertise t-shirts in Living Blues. How many do you actually get requests for?

KING: Everywhere from Poland. They had to swap us records or tapes, you know. He couldn't get records in and I think we sent him a t-shirt just to send him one.

Japan. All over in Europe. Of course France and England are stone blues fans there. Spain. Africa. South America. One of the cutest ones was from Japan. Bluesboy Takamura [??] has an elaborate letterhead. Bluesboy – picture of an old R and B band, graphics on it. Letterheads and business cards. I don't know what the hell he does, but I think he sells memorabilia or something. I sent him a stack of old eight-by-ten glossies. Bluesboy Takamura [??].

She's capitalizing on that hurt finger, isn't she?

ROTENSTEIN: I need to make a quick pit stop. [Tape paused.]

KING: Very few of these older blues guys, the one we run into, very few of them seem to be disappointed by their – if you want to say lack of public acclaim. They've been with a pleasant surprise. They go on to work hard, rehearse with the band. Write new material. Fats is playing – you know, he's got a regular night here. He's coming up with little stage things he hasn't done in thirty years. He's walking the

room, going out in front of the club and playing. Going back to the bathrooms. I mean this is the old kind of R and B stuff he used to do, you know.

And maybe he didn't even do it that much. He saw some of the other old sax players doing it. He's doing more of it now and he's all excited again. But again, he got an album out this year. He's seen some nice reviews, a couple of nice articles.

Luther's younger. With him, it went right to his head and he wanted a raise as soon as he saw his name in the paper.

And Billy's always been so gracious. I mean he just – a real gentleman. To be in a town where there's not that much jealousy amongst each other. I guess they figured we weren't ever going to make much money off of it, we can at least have a good time in the meantime.

ROTENSTEIN: I was just talking to someone about the so-called house bands around town and it doesn't mean anything to go to each other's clubs and sit down and jam with each other.

KING: Well, last night, you know, Fats was here. Big Joe comes down and Jeff Sarli from Principato's band. And I happened to see them in New York when I was up there two weeks ago. I walked into the little club they were playing on Eighty-First Street in my Blind Willie's t-shirt. Joe likely fell off the drum stand, you know. I got right up in their faces, you know, I said, "What the hell are you doing walking in here?"

[Woman speaks to King]

It's a definite change from Texas Tornados.

You know, take all that with you [copies of clips, press releases]. I'd like it back, you know, sometime, you know, if you just drop it off at the bar. But have at all that stuff.

ROTENSTEIN: Yeah, I'll run a Xerox of it.

KING: It will give you a little bit of an idea of what we're –

--- END INTERVIEW ---

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