

Black Liberations Movement Mosaic
Under the direction of:
Professors Jeremy Ball, Kim Lacy Rogers, and Amy Wlodarski
Community Studies Center
Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA 17013

Black Liberations Movement Mosaic
Oral History Interview
with
Ms. Bill “Howlin’ Mad” Perry
By Atandi Anyona, Ryan Koons, and Tiffany Mane
The Delta Blues Museum, Clarksdale, Mississippi, USA
November 4, 2008

Interview with Mr. Bill “Howlin’ Mad” Perry

Interviewed on November 4, 2008

Location: Delta Blues Museum, Clarksdale, Mississippi, USA

Interviewers: Atandi Anyona, Ryan Koons, Tiffany Mane

Transcriber: Ryan Koons

Language: English

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Transcript edited by narrator

Ryan Koons: We are recording.

Atandi Anyona: Okay, my name is Atandi. I'm from Dickinson College and I'm interviewing Mr. Perry. Do you give us permission to record the interview?

Bill Perry: Yes.

Atandi Anyona: All right. All right. Then I'll start by asking you to give us a background of yourself, where you were born, how you ended up until here?

Bill Perry: Well, I was born about 80 miles from here over in what we call Lafáyyette County. And, well, in the rest of the country, the word is known as Lafayette, but for some strange reason we changed it to Lafáyyette. And it's been a long journey to sit here today and it would take a long time to tell you the full story, so, let's see how much of it we can get done and everything.

Atandi Anyona: So, you were born 80 miles from here.

Bill Perry: Yeah.

Atandi Anyona: Can you tell me a little bit about your family, like your mother and father, and your brothers and sisters?

Bill Perry: Well, I have two more brothers, younger one and an older one. I have one sister. My mom and my dad both are deceased—have been for quite a few years. They was great people; they were sharecroppers for most of their lives, and, well, myself by the time I was 10 years old, I could pick 200 pounds of cotton a day. So, that basically was where it all got started, you know, for me. As far as my siblings are concerned, none of them are, you know, they are not into music or anything like that. No musicians, no singers, nothing like that. I ended up, well, I guess I am literally the black sheep of the family. [Laughs]

Atandi Anyona: Your father was not a musician either?

Bill Perry: No, my dad, like I said, was a sharecropper. But at the same time he made homemade whiskey, which was called moonshine, white lightning, hooch; quite a few names for it. But no, he was not musically inclined or anything like that but, my very first guitar—he was also a gambler. And the first guitar that I ever had in my life he won it at a crap game, a dice game, I should say. That's been over 50 plus years ago. Although I'm 27 years old. [Laughs]

Atandi Anyona: How did you, I understand you teach blues music...

Bill Perry: Yeah, right.

Atandi Anyona: How did you come up to that stage of teaching?

Bill Perry: Well like I say, my story goes back to the 1960s—early 1960s. I started out playing gospel music locally. 1961, my family moved away from Mississippi to Chicago. So, most of my influence in music is the Chicago scene, not so much the Mississippi scene. But, the first person that influenced me to play was a guy named Ned Bowles that lived over in Lafáyette County. And he was definitely your typical hill juke player. But, moving to Chicago, I spent a couple of years playing local gospel. I got good enough that the national gospel groups picked me up, so, for quite a few years after that I traveled the country playing with different gospel groups and, along that journey, you know, I got the chance to meet and know a lot of the older groups—some of them still out today like them like the Five Black Blind Boys, the Mighty Clouds of Joy, and groups like that. And, but the late great Little Milton Campbell gave me my first opportunity to play blues. That was the late 60s; '69 to be exact. From that, well, a lot of different opportunities came my way. I got an opportunity to work the studios, stuff like that, around Chicago. I got a chance to write, play a lot of sessions, stuff like that. And, believe it or not, I got the opportunities not even knowing how to read music, and stuff, but I've always been pretty good at learning and picking up on how things are done. So, zigzagging through the 70s; the 80s; and 90s; different people, Clarence Carter, I got a chance to play a show with him once;

the great T-bone Walker, I shared the stage with him several times in Texas. Freddie King; I played for awhile with the late great Johnny Taylor; I got the chance to write, play, and coproduce with Little Johnnie Taylor; the late great Ted Taylor. I even got a chance to do a session for the Willie Dixon label on an artist that he had back in the early 70s, a guy named JJ Taylor. So, and, it would take me awhile to kind of remember all the different people I've been associated with and ran into over the years, but, during the 70s, blues had kind of, as far as on the black scene is concerned, it had kind of ran its course. And if you wasn't a funk player, you know, what we call funk music and stuff, you know, you was kind of out of luck as far as making money was concerned. And, but, so I had to play what I had to play to make a living because, I mean, this is something that I do of. You can only be in this and stay in it as long as I have been in it if you love it, you know, because other than that it just don't work. So, leading up to the late 70s, the disco era came in, and, I even tried my hand at recording a couple of disco songs that, well, it's kind of laughable now. [Laughs] But, you know, it worked out for whatever represented at that time. But, then I kind of stopped for a few years. But by the late, getting towards the later part of the 80s, I realized that the love was so deep that I couldn't just walk away from it, you know. So I had to come back. So I came back to really do what I really love from the beginning, which is playing the blues. And, it's been a roundabout journey since the late 80s leading up to hear, but, through all of that experience, a few years ago, I was asked to be a part of this arts in education program here at the Delta Blues Museum, and, when it was first mentioned to me, I turned it down flat. And the reason why I did it was very simple: I didn't think that I had the patience to really sit down to teach, to show anything like that, you know, working with young folks. I just didn't feel like my patience would allow me to do that. But then I was asked to think about it. And I did. And I talked to my family about it and I decided to

give it a shot. And now it's an unimaginable love. Okay? Because with these young folks, you know, they are our future. And, so, to pass on the knowledge that I gained, the little bit that I know about playing stuff is an absolute pleasure for me to do. And, I mean, it's like, why else would I drive over a hundred and some miles each day to come here to do that? Well, although the price of gas now is coming down a little bit, but imagine what it was like when the price was way up there? But, I never missed a day, not unless something forced me to miss a day. But other than that I'm right here because, it's just, you know, seeing the excitement in the face, in their faces when they learn a new note, a new chord, or something like that, it's just, well, money can't buy happiness like that. And, so, you know, and just, it's a love, and I'm really enjoying it and it helps keep the old blood flowing, you know what I'm saying? And, although there are days that, you know, they might give me a migraine, but it's all worth it. You know, I still love it.

Atandi Anyona: So, what instruments do you teach?

Bill Perry: I play guitar and I play bass guitar. And it's basically it. As far as drums is concerned, I'm not a drummer. You've got to have what's called coordination and rhythm, you know, to play drums. I don't have either. It may sound funny, but if I take my guitar off, my rhythm is gone, okay? And I become like a joke; I don't dance because I've got, well, it's the old saying, "two left feet," okay? So that's what I've got. I never learned to dance, anything like that. But, I know exactly what a drummer supposed to do. And, although I can't physically sit down and say, "here it is here," but I can talk them through it and show them exactly where they're supposed to be out on any given song whether it's up tempos, slow, or medium, whatever

the case may be. Same thing goes sure with the keyboard: in fact, just yesterday when I am—I guess she's about a six or seven-year-old—working on the keyboard. And I told her I've got five of them at home, which I do. But, that's basically it. I mean, the keyboard has never been my instrument, although both of my kids play keyboard. My boy's basically a keyboard master and he didn't get it for me: just put like that! But, at the same time, I can again show—I can even, due to the fact that I can play and I know a little bit about chords and stuff like that, maybe we'll make a chord or two and tell them how it should go or how it fit and stuff like that. But basically I leave the keyboard and stuff like that to the other experts here that, you know, really can play.

Atandi Anyona: You said for a while you played gospel music.

Bill Perry: Mmhmmm.

Atandi Anyona: How does gospel music relates the blues?

Bill Perry: Good question. Well, let me see, how can I answer that? You know, I guess... let me think about this for a minute. Because, you know, to me, it's just... different words are being said, okay? In the blues, you may be talking about some type of hard times, but in gospel it's basically the same thing. In blues, you may be talking about the love of a woman, or whatever the case may be. In gospel you talk about the love of God, or the love of Jesus, or whatever the case may be. But music is music and that's another thing that I tried to get across to some of the young students who come here. And I've had quite a few of them say that, "my mom and my grandmom wants you to learn me how to play a gospel song." And I tell them, "well, see, there's

no such thing as learning how to play a gospel song, not unless of course you know you can play a song." Music is music. Because an A chord in the blues is the same a chord you would play in gospel. And, but the relationship, I mean, going back, looking back, well I guess they both kind of come up at the same time. And, because of times—hard times, I guess I should say—a lot of people, you know, in church, well that's their way of, how can I say this? because I don't want to say anything that's going to make people upset! And I'm known to do that! But, let me think, let me think here... well... again... the feel... the... what's the word I'm looking for?... well, I don't really know, I'm kind of caught up in my own mind right here and stuff, and and I really don't know how to answer what time trying to answer. But, you know the two are basically, you know, it come from hard times, I guess you could say. And, some people relieve it in church, some people relieve it in clubs. With me, when I was in gospel music... well, see, I was always taught that blues music was devil's music, so stay away from it. And, it was one thing when I played local gospel music, but when I went on the national scene, everything changed. It's changed me forever. It made me see that, you understand, I mean, it's like, if you want to believe that if you play a certain music, you can go to hell or whatever, well, you got that right to do that. I don't believe that. I believe that you supposed to do whatever you do as long as you're not harming anyone else, and, if you feel good about doing it, do it. And, I really feel good about what I'm doing because, I mean, I love the attention although I'm an old man, and I always loved it—I've been doing this stuff since I've been 17 years old; I'm 61 now. And, so the attention. Seeing people come out that has maybe had a hard week at work, relieving that energy, you know, that's stored up, just having fun and being able to lead that party, it makes me feel good, and I really love it. And, as far as gospel music is concerned, a lot of folks that I knew back when I was playing gospel, it was a common thing for them to want to leave gospel and come

over to what we call the, well back then it was more all R&B than blues, okay? And for some strange reason, thinking that maybe it was, like, easy to conquer, to break into, the average one didn't last [snaps fingers] no longer than a finger snap.. But I left, like I said, in the late 60s and I haven't returned. And, you know, it's... I could have had that option; a lot of gospel groups have asked me to play. And, I don't have no objection to sharing my knowledge with gospel groups. In fact, I've taken several groups to the studios and help them to record and stuff like that. But, I could never get back into it personally, you know, to play and everything. Because of what I know deep down inside. And, I'm the type of person, like I said a few minutes ago, I got this bad habit of, kind it, pissing people off, okay? By not biting my tongue. And, so I lack the freedom of being able to be me, expressing myself however I want to express myself, and I'd have to put on a front, understand what I'm saying?

Atandi Anyona: I get you.

Bill Perry: So, I really love that, and that's, you know, helped make me who I am. Because, well, school never meant nothing to me. First of all, leaving school from here in Mississippi at the time I left, moving to Chicago, taking up in the same grade that I left here with kids that was my own age, they was light-years in front of me as far as learning, because, we learned from old books—books that was, you know, kids would use today just to look at, and laugh at. And, so, it was hard for me to play catch-up. And plus, I had this learning disability, I guess you would say. And it took special attention with me and nobody took that attention; nobody else really cared that much about me and stuff, so, I left school, I've never looked back. But, the one thing I stressed all young folks today, get your education. I tell young students here that if I even

dream—have a dream that you're thinking about dropping out or anything like that, I'm going to come visit you personally, because education is the key. You guys and these younger guys around here is the future of America. And you must be educated in order to lead. Now, I've educated myself, I never stop learning, and that one thing I try to stressed that... I mean, I picked up situations from 10-year-olds in here. And I tell them, "you know, you just taught me something." And they go, "huh?" I said, "you just taught me something." So in other words, always keep my ears open. And I advise everybody to do that same thing, keep your ears open. Never shut you know, yourself off from thinking you know everything. Because when you reach that point in your life, you may as well go dig a hole, jump over in it, and cover yourself up because it's over for you: you already know everything. And there's no such thing as one person knowing everything.

Atandi Anyona: In terms of gospel, did you feel differently when playing gospel and when playing blues, or you feel the same?

Bill Perry: The same. You see, again, you know, being brought up the way I was brought up, I thought a certain thing to be a fact. And again, when I made it to the national scene, and all of that fact I thought was supposed to be, wasn't. And, I hear a lot of people say, okay, and I know the rituals and all that stuff, and the whole 9 yards, but that's never been a part of me. I've never had that feeling in church that made me want to jump up, run around the place, you know, scream and holler, none of that. I just was enjoying what I was doing: I was playing my instrument, entertaining the people that's all it's ever been to me. And, you know, like I said earlier, the difference with me between the two is being for real. Not having to put on a front,

because if I have to put on a front, then, I would dig a hole for myself, crawl over in it, and cover myself up. Because I'm just—that I won't do. I love being who I am, and I won't—and I'm only speaking for myself. I can't speak for other people and everything because other people will tell you different things about this and that and the other. And, privately I would give them one heck of an argument about certain things, but you know, only in a private setting if you get to certain situations that are being talked about. But, the feel is the same feel: there's no different.

Atandi Anyona: And who can you say has been your greatest inspiration in either gospel or blues?

Bill Perry: [Laughs] Well, you know, I don't want to sound like I'm some egotistical maniac, okay? But, there has been some people that's influenced me. There's a group out of Chicago called The Pilgrim Jubilees—the Graham Brothers: Clay and Cleve Graham are the lead singers. Clay, you know, has been one of my favorite gospel lead singers since back in the day. As far as my overall inspiration: myself. When I'm writing, I only listen to my music. You know, again, it goes back, see, I basically had to teach myself from a very early age. So basically, everything about me is because of me, you know, and again, I don't want to come off like I'm some egotistical maniac, but this is just the way my life has been. I have been my greatest, what's the word I'm for? I inspire myself to want to, okay? So again, there's people that's out there who like Milton, the late great Milton Campbell. He taught me a lot. But he wasn't a great inspiration my life. And I can say the same thing about several other people: Ned Bowles, the very first guy that I saw playing, but he wasn't a great inspiration in my life and anything. You know, I had to get out and do it for myself, and, I mean, it still holds to this day. Although, you

know, I do have other people come you know, on the team working with me, making a lot of things happen. But, again, you know, it's like, when I listen to music, I listen to my own music. Now when I was at disc jockey on the radio and stuff like that, you know, I played other folks music and I played it with enthusiasm, okay? But that was as far as it went. Once I was off the air, it was my stuff all the way, okay? You know, I just love listening to myself.

Atandi Anyona: Among the things recorded yourself, is there a song that really stands out, one you made that really stands out?

Bill Perry: Well... as Bill "Howlin' Mad" Perry, my Reason I Sing the Blues CD is a short simple song—that's the title of the CD: "Reason I Sing the Blues." I guess if I were going to say one, that'd be it, because I basically tell a few reasons why I sing the blues. And, you know, the rest of them, you know, well I wrote them, and, like, most of all writers, everything you write you think is the greatest there is. [Laughs] But, you know, there's always that one you go back to and say, "yeah, okay." Because that kind of explains myself and, the second one would be "Guitar Man-I Can Play" ["I Can Play (Guitar Man)"] and it tells the short story of my life. You know, when I was a young boy about the age of five, I wanted to play the guitar, you know, I mean that's no lie, that's how long ago it started. And, those two. But, "The Reason I Sing the Blues." And there is a bunch of reasons why I sing the blues, but I only tell a few.

Atandi Anyona: Can you give me just a couple of them?

Bill Perry: Just a couple of them?

Atandi Anyona: Just couple of them.

Bill Perry: Well, see, in the song, I refer to a mean old landlord that didn't take no excuses.

[Laughs] You see, it's stuff like that that makes you sing the blues, okay? And... see... there was a time I guess I thought life was all the way fair. But in the song, I made via, I have a line that says "I'm going to go down tomorrow and I'm going to apply for some welfare." But, that's something I've never done. And the reason why is very simple: I don't when get used to anything that can be snatched out from under me. That that I get I want to earn it, okay? Because, see, if you don't earn something, you really all respect it, okay? So therefore, you know, the lack of... I've heard, there's an old saying when I was growing up, and I've heard a few people even use the phrase, like, "Money is the root of all evil." [Shakes his head] It's not. The lack of money is the root of all evil, okay? Cuz some of the meanest, maddest people I ever met in my life was broke, you know, one thing. I mean, even if it was something as simple as a new pair of shoes, okay? It's really sad to want and not be able to have. That can give you the blues. I can go on and on. But I'll let you ask another question. [Laughs]

Atandi Anyona: Is there a way you can either give us a sample or sing for us just a bit of that song?

Bill Perry: Sure. But we'll have to stop the camera for a minute, let me grab a guitar.

Atandi Anyona: oh yes.

Bill Perry: okay.

[Tape paused]

Bill Perry: Can I give you a little setup on the song?

Atandi Anyona: Mmmhmm.

Bill Perry: At the time the song was wrote, I have three cars that were sitting in the driveway that wasn't working. So, it goes something like this:

[playing electric guitar and singing] I got three junk cars that don't run no more,
a mean old lady always talking about "I told you so,"
too many mouths I got to feed,
that's why you see people that I be so in need,
that's why, the reason y'all I sing the blues (x 2)
because as long as you live you going to have some blues.

Nobody ever said that life is going to be fair,
I'm going down tomorrow, I got to apply me some welfare,
my rent-six months behind,
I got a mean old landlord that don't take no excuse,

that's why, the reason, y'all, I sing the blues,
that's one more reason I sing the blues
because as long as you live you're going to have some blues.

Let me tell you fellows what I think is sad
I've been working hard all day come home to find your old lady mad
there's nothing worse than taking a mind whipping
from a mean jealous woman that said come on you're tripping
that's why, the reason, y'all, I sing the blues
that's one more reason I sing the blues
but as long as you live you're going to have some blues.

[Applause]

Bill Perry: And you've noticed I used the line "there is nothing worse than taking a mind whipping."

Atandi Anyona: Yeah.

Bill Perry: So, see, there's a lot of things that give you the blues. And, I am not saying [obscured] [laughs]. But when you got one that do, and you get that mind whipping, it will make you sing some deep blues.

Atandi Anyona: And did the civil rights effect blues music?

Bill Perry: Did it? let me see. What? Say that again?

Tiffany Mane: Or the other way around. Did blues affect civil rights or did civil rights effect blues?

Bill Perry: Well now, let me see; how can I answer that? You know, yeah, yeah, I'm, you know, sure they did because I mean, it's like, you know, when you look back at the history of where we were, and where we are, so of course it's had a heck of an effect. Because there was a time in my life that, here in Mississippi, to think about going to the polls to vote: it didn't happen. But see, I got up this morning, I went to the polls, and I voted. So, big change you know what I'm saying? So of course, I mean... the things that some of the old guys sung about... you know, imagine: it's a July day, it's 98°, you're sitting out there on a tractor with no top, no canopy, or anything over your head; the sun is blaring down on you all day long, okay? And let's just say, you know, looking back to when I was young, you may have been making a couple, maybe three bucks a day, okay? I can see that making you sing some blues, okay? But see, today, you go out and see these guys on these tractors, and man, they got air-conditioning, you know, they got their telephones in there, CD players, and the whole 9 yards. So, you know, a big change. So, I mean, it's like of course there was an effect. It's like a... you couldn't sing about the same thing; you have to find other stuff to sing about. And when you look back even farther, let's say you can't afford a tractor. Imagine, again, it's 90-some degrees, you've heard of people chopping cotton, right? Well, imagine you're up before daybreak. By the time the sun come up, you're in the field,

and you are out there all day long. And the sun is blaring down. That can make you sing some blues. But see, you don't see that anymore. What you see is these crop duster's coming down, you understand what I'm saying? They are spraying and stuff, and the grass and stuff is dying. And, you know, there's a lot of comparisons you can make. And, you know, I've heard folk those, you know when they be talking about Robert Johnson, Charley Patton, or some of e guys and stuff. And, I've heard a lot of different stories, and people's opinions. But then, I try to look at everything from the human point of view, okay? Like BB King once one time said that, I think on that tractor, he was making, something like, \$.22 an hour. But he would come to town on the weekend and he would make over a hundred bucks a day sitting on the corner just in tips playing his guitar. So which one do you think would influence you more? Sitting on a tractor or sitting on the corner? Okay. And as far as, you know, it's like I heard people explain how these folks were working to be innovators and stuff like that. Sure they was working to be better at what they was doing. You know, you always want to get better. And the reason why they wanted to get better was because they didn't want to go out there in them fields. Does that make sense?

Atandi Anyona: Yeah.

Bill Perry: Okay. [Laughs] And, you know, I try to look at it from a human point of view. And, so, you know, any escape from it, and if you worked hard, like for instance Robert Johnson, you know, I'm sure that you probably know this story, probably read it. And, but, at a young age he wanted to hang out with the big boys of that time—some of them better players. He wanted to play. But he couldn't. And they laughed at him—they made fun of him and stuff. And see, that happened to me. But see, rather than give up, I went, and what we used to call "going to the

woodshed," okay? And that's what Robert did. Robert went back to Hazlehurst and key showed back up two years later and that's when the old saying started about, "boy, you must have sold your soul to the devil." Nobody could believe he could play that good. But see when you put your mind to something and you work towards it, you can amaze people with what you can do and that's what Robert did. And his legacy today, well, I don't have to explain it! [laughs] The whole blues world noticed, you know what I'm saying? And... but see they, they paved the road for guys like me. And again, you know, like I said when I talk, I always try to tell it the way I see it from a human point of view. Not as, you know, something magical or anything like that. I don't believe in stuff at that. I believe you make things happen by working hard to make it happen. And that's what those guys did. And they went as far as they could with what they had to work with, you know, during their times. But again, they paved one heck of a road for us today, and I will always appreciate that. And, could I have dealt with it myself? Sure. You [indicating Atandi] could have. You [indicating Tiffany]. And you [indicating Ryan]. See, it's just not of the time coming if you would have lived in the time you would have found some way to do with what you had to deal with. So, they found a way and, again, you know, today, you know, we can look back and be thankful for a lot of things. And, knowing what those guys did, what they went through, some of the stuff they had to take, okay. I remember reading... this was about [obscured]. He could play the big rooms in Vegas, but he couldn't walk through the front door. He had to come into the kitchen. But he was, like, the headline act. Same thing happened with Josephine Baker, you know. I mean, there's just a long list, again, [knocks on a chair] knock on wood. You had those people that was there. They paid the dues, they pave the road, and that's why, again, being here involved in this arts and education program, I just, I bend over backwards to try to show and to teach, you know, the importance of believing in yourself,

believing in your dream, no matter what nobody say. Don't care who it is. Because nobody has a right to tell you what you can or you can't do. They only have that right if you give them that right. And to this day, you know, I don't have a lot of people around me that, especially around my home, nothing like that. Most folks around where I live, I mean, they stay way away from me, okay? A lot of folks won't get it within 10 feet of me because they are afraid that lightning may strike them. I'm serious about this-I'm not making this up. See, I just have that belief in myself, I believe anything is possible, if you work hard to make it happen. But you must believe. And that can go into any realm. You can look at it from the religious end of it, okay? Or the nonreligious end. It works as long as you believe. But you must believe and know for a fact within yourself that you can. And, strange as it may sound, I like to use the child book, The Little Engine That Could. I like telling a story because, see, the little engine just didn't think he could pull a certain strength over the mountain. But he did. And as he kept going his confidence kept building. You know he went, "I can't do it," to "I think I can," to [laughs] "I know I can," and I just think it's a great story and I love telling it. Sounds strange coming from old man!

[laughs] But you'd be surprised what you can look back on that, if you can see beyond just the words, and reading in between the lines, and, you know, even the Bible itself—as nonreligious as I am, I read the Bible because there is a lot of things in there that make a lot of sense. And one of my favorite passages in that whole book is the 18th chapter and the 19th verse of Matthew. And basically what it says is that, "if the two of you can agree-if the two of you- basically on anything, [obscured] our father which art in heaven." That might not be an exact, correct quote, but it's close to it. And, when I was first pointed out to me, the next question was, "who's the 'two of me'?"

Atandi Anyona: Any two people...?

Bill Perry: It don't say anything about "two people," it says "the two of you." See, that's the whole thing. Remember what I said about, you know, the words? [Laughs] Okay, reading between the words and stuff. So, again, you know, it's just... let me ask you a question. Has there ever been a time in your life when you consciously said, "I'm going to do such and such and such." But there was a feeling that was telling you not to. And you didn't listen, and you went and did it anyway, then you ended up being sorry. Has anything like that ever happened to you?

Atandi Anyona: Too many times.

Bill Perry: Too many times? That's the 'two of you.' Because, see, that inner voice ain't never going to lead you all. So that's why, you know, they say, "if you only listen." And I try to do that because, anything in my life that I look back on that created something negative and I ended up being sorry, I had an option because that voice was always there warning me. I just didn't listen! And I was, like, 30-years-old you before things like that was pointed out to me. Because that's part of what makes us human; that's our connection with [obscured] intelligence.

Atandi Anyona: And now, now you're playing in the Blues Museum, and there's a lot of tourism around. Has that affected blues or will affect it in the coming future?

Bill Perry: Ask me that again?

Atandi Anyona: Now there's a lot of tourism year as a blues, right? Has that affected the music and will it affect it in the future?

Bill Perry: That's a good question. I don't think it has. And I don't think that it will for the future for those that think. Because, see, again, either you try to, you know, move on to something, or used in the same place. But there are some people that think that blues is not supposed to be no more than what Robert [Johnson], Charlie Patton, Tommy Johnson, and all them guys did.

That's as far as they can see the blues. But see, I guarantee that if any of those guys was alive and was around today, they would tell you, "don't try to be like me; take it farther." Okay. And, you know, quite a few people have told me that, over the years, and "don't try to be like me; take it farther." So, for those that's faking, you know, they're always be something new to write about. And, I got a feeling, come tomorrow, it's going to be a new page in history turned, there's going to be something new to write about. I've just got that feeling. And I will jump on the bandwagon-you're damn right I am. [Laughs]

Atandi Anyona: The first song you played for us...

Bill Perry: Reason I Sing the Blues

Atandi Anyona: The lyrics, are they everything that's happened to you or, like, you said you had three cars, that's how you started out, right?

Bill Perry: Mmmhmm.

Atandi Anyona: Are all the lyrics something to do with your life, or something...

Bill Perry: Well, you know, you see, like I said, this is a short simple song like you said. I literally had three junk cars that didn't run, okay? And my wife and I have been together for 40-something—42 years and, I mean, she won't hesitate that if I mess up or something like that, "I told you—I told you!" [Laughs] And see, let's just say: you done been out there, no matter what it is that you're doing—you don't have to be playing blues. You could be policemen, fireman, doctor, lawyer. You'd done had a hard day, okay? And you come in and basically what you want to do is sit back and relax for a minute: play your head out. But all of a sudden, you get this mind whipping! [Laughs] So, absolutely. Absolutely. When I get a mind whipping, I deserve it. Usually when I'm told, "I told you so," I deserve it. Okay. Like I said, the only thing in that song that's not true was when I said, "going down to apply for some welfare." It just kind of rhymed with the lines that I did before. Because I do believe in... you know, looking at me, seeing me move around, you wouldn't think I'm handicapped. But I am. I was partially paralyzed. I couldn't walk for about a year and a half. The doctors tried to put me on disability. I refused to take it. I was literally crawling on the floor. I had three specialists to tell me that, "you won't ever be able to move around like you've been used to moving around. You need some kind of support. Crutches, cane, or Walker. Come on, take the disability." "No, I will not do that. Because first of all, I'm going to get up, I'm going to move again, and I am going to make my way in life like I've always done." Because, believe me, I've been working since I was a little old boy—I told you, by the time I was 10 years old, I could pick 200 pounds of cotton a

day. And I didn't start the year before picking cotton to be able to do that. I was in the fields and stuff probably before I was five years old. And, with a... we call them burlap bags, but back then we used to call them "crook sacks." You have a belt tied around it, it be hanging off the side. That's when I started picking cotton, about the time I was 10 years old, I was pulling a 9 foot and I could pick almost as much cotton as my mama and, well, my dad, he could pick 4-500 pounds a day. So I've been literally working all my life. So, you know, depending on handouts, welfare. The only way I would take disability is that there was no way I would be totally paralyzed, there would be nothing to do for myself. Because other than that, I believe that you should take care of yourself, work at what you want. You only get one time round of this planet. Make the best of it. Do what you want to do. And for whatever, you understand, it's like, this a big old world we live in. See some of this world, as much of it as you can; experience other folks, other cultures, and you'd be surprised. And I have been really surprised in my life. I've been fortunate enough to go to odd places; I spent five months in China. I never thought that I would never ever get that far. And that was one of the experiences that I'll have forever with me because it was great, people was great. All the—it was funny when they try to teach me Cantonese. My response was very simple: "I can barely speak English!" [Laughs] You know, explain to me that a word a word that you may say in Cantonese may have as much as four or five different meanings, just all according to how you express yourself when you say the word. So, when they told me that, I said, "no thank you! I'll just keep an interpreter with me, okay?!" Because again, it's like, the little bit that I speak, again, it took a lot of work, mostly from having a video camera, taping myself, listening to myself, and wanting to better myself.

Atandi Anyona: Thank you very much. Are there any final... is there anything you want to tell me that I haven't asked about the blues or gospel or anything?

Bill Perry: Well, all I can say is, is that, like in my song, matter what the case may be, you're going to have the blues. The blues is here. The blues is here to stay. And, with the audience constantly getting bigger, you know, put it in a position to know that it'll be here as long as mankind is on this planet, okay? And, as long as I live, I just went to play my own part like I do, and hopefully that every audience that I perform for enjoy what I do, enjoy my songs. Because, once again, I write for my heart, I tell it like it is, I make my stories short and simple. And, it will just always be a part of me. As far as gospel music is concerned, it's another form of music that will be here as long as mankind is on this planet. And for those that believe it's always work for them, and, but either way it goes, you know, both are great forms of music. They share a common ancestry, okay? So do jazz. I mean, the, well I guess you'd say the offspring of blues is rock 'n roll, R&B, and stuff like that. And funk music. And when you look at disco and all of that, well what can you say? And, now, all the, what's known as hip-hop, rap music, it's not associated with the blues, not whatsoever. Am I right, bro? I mean it's hip-hop—it's rap. The two ain't even supposed to be in the same conversation. I'm going to tell you something: listening to some of the lyrics in some of the rap songs I've heard, those guys have got some blues going on! [Laughs] It's just expressed in a different way, you know what I'm saying? And, you know, no matter what label we put on it, whatever the case may be, blues is here to stay. And, you know, like country music, for instance. Country music. I'm telling you, listen to some of the songs, if those guys don't have the blues, the blues ain't never been had. It's just expressed a different way. And, so, you know, all of it's great music, it's always going to be

here, and, there will always be the audience: the blues is getting bigger and it's going to get bigger and bigger. Because every year [obscured]. And again, you know, just to play a part, and one day I may be able to sit back and look at the next superstar of blues and know that in some kind of way, I had some little kind of little influence on the that person, male or female. That makes me feel great. As the old saying goes, "if you can reach just one, you've done your job." Hopefully I can reach that one. Hopefully I can reach a lot more, but if I reach that one, I will go out of this world with a big old stupid smile on my face.

Atandi Anyona: Thank you very much for the nice interview and thank you for playing for us.

Bill Perry: No problem. Thank y'all for wanting to sit and talk with me. This is been great for me. Thank y'all very much.