

Charlton Oral History Research Grant (2014-2015) Final Report

Talking the Blues: An Oral History of Blues Musicians in Austin, Texas

The oral history project *Talking the Blues: An Oral History of Blues Musicians in Austin, Texas*, documents the lives and experiences of ten Austin-based musicians who are integral members of the blues community there. Although several of the narrators who participated in this project have been interviewed in journalistic settings over the years, for many of them, this was their first opportunity to sit down for an in-depth oral history interview. This Final Report summarizes 1) the project's focus, 2) the narrators who shared their stories, 3) the primary themes and other areas of interest that emerged in their narratives, and 4) future projects that I hope to develop out of this new archive of material.

Project Focus

The primary focus of this project was two-fold: First, it sought to chronicle the under-documented history of Austin's evolving blues scene and, in the process, better understand the complex history of the city itself, especially desegregation and its impact on contemporary race relations there. Its second goal was to explore the identity politics of authenticity in the blues and shed light on our society's ongoing fascination with authenticity today.

The project was successful in achieving both goals. First, it gave ten blues musicians, some of whom have been performing in the Austin area for several decades, the opportunity to discuss a wide range of topics that provide the public with a richer understanding of the city's blues scene. Austin's blues history has been under-documented in comparison to other well-known blues scenes around the country (e.g., Chicago, Los Angeles, and any number of areas throughout the Mississippi Delta), and the interviews that were recorded for this project help address this gap in the historical record. Although the interviews did not yield as much detail about desegregation and contemporary race relations in Austin as I originally hoped for, many of the narrators did candidly discuss their own experiences with race, especially as it intersects with authenticity.

Indeed, the portions of the interviews where narrators addressed the concept of authenticity in the blues—what it means to them, how and why we struggle over it, and in what ways it intersects with identity categories such as race and class—make an important contribution to our understanding of the relationship between music, identity, and authenticity today (and especially what they mean in this particular community in Austin, Texas).

The Narrators

The original goal for the project was to interview twelve musicians. Although over a dozen artists expressed interest in being a part of the project, scheduling conflicts and health-related issues with several prospective narrators resulted in ten individuals actually participating. They are:

Sarah Brown: A respected bassist and former recording artist for the national blues label Blind Pig Records, Brown was a part of the house band at the famed Austin blues club Antone's. She continues to tour and perform in the Austin area with several bands today.

Omar Kent Dykes: A native of McComb, Mississippi (birthplace of Bo Diddley), Dykes settled in Austin in the 1970s. As leader of his band Omar and The Howlers, Dykes toured relentlessly throughout the United States and parts of Europe, in addition to performing in and around Austin, where he continues to appear in local clubs today. He is perhaps best known for his 2007 collaboration with Jimmie Vaughan that resulted in the critically acclaimed album *On the Jimmy Reed Highway*, which was the focus of an episode that aired during season 33 of KLRU-TV's long-running program *Austin City Limits*.

Joseph Patrick Whitefield: This long-time Austin native was one of the original bassists in The Fabulous Thunderbirds alongside Kim Wilson and Jimmie Vaughan. He also worked for Clifford Antone as one of the first bassists in the Antone's house band, where he backed blues musicians such as Buddy Guy, Albert Collins, and Sunnyland Slim. He continues to perform with the Little Elmore Reed Blues Band at their weekly Monday night residency at the King Bee in East Austin.

Mark Hayes: A founding member of the Little Elmore Reed Blues Band, drummer Mark Hayes has toured with Texas artists Smokin' Joe Kubek & Bnois King, Guy Forsyth, and many others. In recent years he has played an instrumental role in bringing the blues to East Austin clubs such as TC's Lounge and the King Bee on a weekly basis.

Wes Starr: A Georgia native and son of a WRGA radio engineer, Starr grew up watching respected blues and jazz artists (Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Fats Domino, Little Walter) who made live appearances at the station. He relocated from California to Austin to play in Omar Kent Dykes' band and, later, with Marcia Ball. He continues to play in the Austin area and is currently the drummer in blues veteran Mark Hummel's Golden State/Lone Star Revue.

Mark "Kaz" Kazanoff: Like Brown and Whitefield, harmonica player and saxophonist Kazanoff performed with the Antone's house band for many years. His musical résumé is extensive. In addition to earning a Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of Texas at Austin, he worked as a producer, arranger, and recording artist for Black Top Records, and has led the respected Texas Horns ensemble since the late 1990s. His latest album, *Blues Gotta Holda Me*, was released on the VizzTone Label Group in 2015.

Pamela Filip: Filip, a Texas native who goes by the stage name Pamela Allen, is a powerful blues vocalist who lived in the Chicago area for a time prior to relocating to Austin. She currently performs in Austin-area clubs with blues guitarist Terry Richards and Dialtone Records owner and bassist Eddie Stout.

Mike Buck: One of the first drummers to perform and record with The Fabulous Thunderbirds, Fort Worth, Texas, native Buck is a member alongside Eve Monsees in Eve & The Exiles. The two are also co-owners of Antone's Records, an independent record shop in Austin, Texas. Buck currently hosts the popular "Blue Monday" program on radio station KDRP.

Eve Monsees: As the youngest narrator interviewed for this project, guitarist/singer Monsees is part of the newer generation of blues musicians who are shaping the Austin scene. She met Clifford Antone when she was still in high school, a relationship that opened opportunities to perform on the Antone's stage at a young age. In addition to leading Eve & The Exiles and running Antone's Records, Monsees is one of the featured performers in The Bluebonnets band.

Orange Jefferson: An outspoken artist who is passionate about his blues, harmonica player and vocalist Jefferson was born in Houston, Texas. He has recorded for the Austin-based blues labels Catfish Jazz and Dialtone Records, and he is the leader of Orange Jefferson and the Seeing-Eye Band.

Primary Themes

Below I detail some of the themes that emerged in the narrators' interviews.

Antone's Blues Club: The famed Austin blues club, founded by Clifford Antone on East Sixth Street in the summer of 1975, was a common theme running throughout the interviews for this project. Narrators discussed the central role Antone's played in bringing nationally renowned blues musicians to Austin, including B. B. King, Muddy Waters, Buddy Guy, and others. They also spoke fondly of Clifford Antone himself, including his generosity towards musicians and his willingness to nurture young talent. Antone's is often described as the "Home of the Blues" in Austin, a topic that was also discussed by some of the narrators. Joseph Patrick Whitefield, for example, noted that there was a vibrant blues scene in East Austin (a historically black community) long before Antone's opened its doors. Clifford Antone "introduced white people to hard core blues," Whitefield said. "Does that make it the home of the blues? It makes it the home of the blues for white people."

East Austin Blues Scene: As noted above, the black community in East Austin nurtured a lively blues scene there that was centered around several historic clubs such as The Victory Grill, Ernie's Chicken Shack, and, more recently, TC's Lounge. Some narrators recounted their experiences visiting East Austin clubs while this scene was still active, where they saw musicians like Freddie King and Albert Collins perform. They also spoke of the local musicians who were an integral part of the house bands at these clubs, such as Henry "Bluesboy" Hubbard and Donald "Duck" Jennings.

Austin's Blues Scene Today: Austin may be marketed to tourists as the "Live Music Capital of the World," but these narrators had varying opinions on the state of the blues (and music more generally) in the city today. Mark Hayes, for example, observed that it has grown increasingly difficult for professional musicians in Austin to earn a living playing in local clubs. There seemed to be a general consensus that the blues scene is not as active on a whole as it was in previous decades, but there are still talented artists who have carved out spaces for the blues throughout the city (e.g., the King Bee club in East Austin where Hayes and Whitefield play weekly, or the stage at the outdoor food court where Wes Starr books performances).

Authenticity: One of the more interesting themes to develop from this project relates to authenticity in the blues. In response to my questions, the narrators discussed what authenticity

means to them in the context of the blues genre—both as musicians and fans of the music—including how it intersects with other identity categories, including race and class. Opinions on this topic were wide-ranging, with some narrators discussing the politics of framing authenticity in the blues as something that only black artists can attain, the pitfalls that some musicians fall into when they attempt to sing a song whose lyrics do not reflect their life experiences (e.g., a young white musician singing about picking cotton), and the connection between authenticity and lived experience.

Future Projects

I intend to prepare a paper based on these oral history narratives for presentation at the 2016 meeting of the Oral History Association in Long Beach, California. The paper will focus on the Antone's blues club and the historic role it played in Austin's blues scene. Based on feedback I receive at the conference, I also intend to revise the paper for publication in an academic journal such as *Oral History Review*.

A long-term project I also hope to complete is a book that compiles edited versions of the interviews conducted for this project in addition to other interviews that I would like to conduct. The book's focus will be on the blues scene in Austin, Texas, as read through the lives and memories of the musicians who call the city home.

Conclusion

In closing, I would like to thank Dr. Stephen Sloan, Mr. Steven Sielaff, and all of the staff and student assistants at the Institute for Oral History at Baylor University for making this project possible. In addition to funding the project and providing professional recording equipment for the interviews, they invested a considerable amount of time and energy offering feedback and processing the interview materials—including transcribing all of the oral history recordings. I am grateful for their assistance and look forward to collaborating with the Institute again in the future.

Roger Davis Gatchet, Ph.D.
West Chester University of Pennsylvania
September, 2015