

Mississippi bluesman Bill Perry is a very busy man - "My days go from anywhere between fifteen and twenty hours and that's six and seven days a week." He has been playing and waxing blues, gospel and soul records going back decades. He plays regular gigs, records, has led his own family band, is a DJ on WROX in Clarksdale and is to appear in a film with Cuba Gooding Jnr. Mike Stephenson interviewed Bill for B&R at the studios of WROX in Clarksdale last year.



Bill Perry, Clarksdale, 2007. Photo: Mike Stephenson.

BILL 'HOWL-N-MADD' PERRY

Interview by Mike Stephenson

I was born over in the South Western corner of Lafayette County, which is four counties away from Clarksdale. I spent my first years ripping and running through them hills, and as far as music is concerned, I first started getting interested in live music because there was a guy named Ned Boles who used to buy home made whiskey from my daddy and whenever he would come by, he would come by with his guitar.

My dad is what I would call a country hustler. He was a sharecropper for a lot of years and he spent a lot of time working in the woods and he would supplement his income by selling home made whiskey.

I picked cotton, worked in the fields, but it was something I didn't have to do, but it gave me a way to make my own money - which I enjoy up to this day, because I work like a mad man! My days go from anywhere between fifteen and twenty hours and that's six and seven days a week.

I landed in Chicago in the early 1960s when my family moved there. I lived in Madison Street and Howlin' Wolf had a club. I could see the back door of the club from my studio - so I grew up listening to guys like Mighty Joe Young, Muddy, Wolf and a whole host of guys that was playing back then. But I started out playing gospel not blues and I went from local gospel music to professional gospel music in Chicago.

By the time I was seventeen years old, groups had picked up on my talent and they brought me out as a guitar player. It was great training for me knowing how to play and knowing how to play with other people and how to get along with other people and giving me a chance to see and travel the country.

I played with the Salem Travellers and Clefs Of Calvary and a group out of California called the Soul Searchers. I played bass and lead guitar with The Five Blind Boys and Shirley Caesar.

We did an album on the Clefs Of Calvary in 1966 called 'Keep On Marching' (H.O.B. LP 268). It ended up being a big record for us. We played a twelve-day stint at the Apollo Theater in New York. We then went to Memphis - after we had partied the money away! The show was cancelled. I was in Memphis with no money, so I went out with my best clothes on and went to a club where Little Milton was playing - the Salem Travellers were recording on the same label as Milton - Chess Records. I was on one of the albums that group recorded for Chess, so Milton offered me a job and that was my first venture into playing blues. That was in the late 1960s and I've been playing blues ever since.

Milton gave me my first opportunity and he also discovered that I could sing - so he gave me an opportunity to be his warm up act. While I was with Milton I got the opportunity to play behind T-Bone Walker, Freddy King, The Moonglows and Clarence Carter. By the mid 1970s record companies were trusting me enough to record other acts for them.

So I cut the Salem Travellers for ABC Records and I worked at the old Chess studios. Chess Records had already been sold, but the studios stayed open another few years. I was there from 1971 up to when the doors closed. I was recording a lot of people - Fontella Bass for Stan Lewis out of Shreveport; a guy named Charles 'Coal Black' Brown; Cash McCall, The Violinaires and gospel singer Albertina Walker, who were on Jewel Records. I was doing session work with these artists playing guitar and I did some bass work on a lot of sessions. We also recorded a singer for Willie Dixon - a guy called J.J. Taylor, and I got chance to do background work on a Chuck Berry album.

I did a single with Stan Lewis by myself for Ronn, called 'Sitting On The Banks Of The River' and 'Can't Let You Go' - that was in 1973. I also played with a funk band out of Chicago in the early 1970s called The South Side Movement and we had out a record at that time called 'I've Been Watching You', which was a big seller for us.

NB: The South Side Movement were a soul-funk band. The disc Bill mentions was issued in 1973 and taken from their debut album on Wand - although Bill is not listed as playing on the disc.

Being a musician and in order to stay busy, I had to be able to play more than just blues, that's the only way I could keep a nice piece of money coming in. When I was in the Chess studio I taught myself how to play bass and learnt how to be a background singer so I could keep busy and I was in the right place at the right time with the right people. I was called in when they wanted me and the great Ralph Bass was responsible for fifty per cent of the stuff we did because he was in charge there until the studios closed up.

Back in 1970 I was known as Billy Easton and I did a thing out of California, a single. The tracks were called 'I Was A Fool' and 'Can't Let You Go' (Dispo 700) and we recorded them in Chicago. It was a good record for me and I saw it for sale the other week online for \$30:00 and I bought it and it's on my wall now. I also did another disc that was for Fantasy Records, out of Berkley, California, in 1976, which was called 'Funky Like A Donkey Part 1 And Part 2' - it was a crazy song! (Issued as by Bill Perry & Rammitt on Fantasy F-773)

I had been playing with Johnnie Taylor and we ended up out on the West Coast and Little Richard asked me to join his band, which I did. I then had a friend in Chicago who asked me to come to the city because he was planning on doing stuff with Fontella Bass and others in the studio, so I went because I had always wanted to be inside a studio. I never learnt to read music. Cash McCall was involved in this and we hooked up and started recording these people. With Stan Lewis he used the Chess studio at times and I used to write songs for some of his artists.

We recorded two albums with Cash McCall, but I think only the 'Omega Man' (Paula 2220) album was released. Out of the twenty songs he recorded on those two albums I had wrote or co-wrote about eighteen of those songs. I went under my own name when I wrote those songs, which is Billy Perry. We did a disc on Lee Shot Williams for Jewel, 'Checking Out' and the flip side was 'Baby, Baby, Baby' (produced and arranged by Cash McCall) and I was part writer on both of those songs. I was around all these guys and I was real young and learnt a lot.

Towards the end of the 1970s I was burnt out and I thought I wanted to retire from the music world, which I did for eight years and that was the most miserable time of my life. I was living in Los Angeles at the time. I realised I was denying myself my talent so I decided to refocus and I moved back to Mississippi in 1987.

I got a band together called Howl-N-Madd And The Relaxations and we did an album in the late 1980s called 'Guitar Man', that we recorded at Muscle Shoals studios in Alabama and we had a single out entitled 'Mississippi', which was one of my original songs.

During the 1990s I had my family band, we was called The Perrys. My kids just wouldn't leave music alone and they wanted me to teach them what I knew and we played a lot of blues and top forty type stuff and we played a lot of fraternity type shows and wedding receptions and things like that, and we made some good money. My daughter Shy she played bass, my son Billy was on lead keys and we had a drummer. We got to be pretty popular and we travelled to China and Indonesia, but mostly played around Mississippi. We released two CDs; 'Voodoo Charm' was released in 1997 and 'Got What It Takes' was released in the summer of 2000. Following 9/11 the overseas thing dried up, so my family they decided that they were going back to school to get their degrees and stuff.

The last few years I've been playing regularly, I have a couple of musicians with me and my son still goes out with me on special occasions and plays. But usually I pick up a drummer and I have a bass player Wakabe Moore who lives here in Clarksdale. I've done some recordings and I'm trying to get as much music down as I can and get my name out there.

I'm now part of the Arts and Education Programme at the Delta Blues Museum, making sure that the next generation know and understand the blues. Besides teaching about guitar and stuff to



Bill Perry, Clarksdale, 2004. Photo: Mike Stephenson.

the students, I show and teach as far as my knowledge will allow me. It's the history of the music that I'm interested in getting across to them.

My recent recordings have been on the 'Reason I Sing The Blues' CD, which got a very good response and I recorded that in Clarksdale. I've also done the CD 'Juke Joint Jump', which features Super Chikan on one track.

I'm not your typical blues man. I'm stable and in a stable marriage for many years, so I don't sing about love lost and things. I look around me and see what I see and write about it and sing about it. The sounds that Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, Charlie Patton and all that stuff that they was playing, I have tried to take and borrow from that and add in my own special blend of experience over the years.

I do some work at WROX in Clarksdale, as a disc jockey and a record pusher. We want to make sure that the up and coming blues artists get a chance to get their stuff heard over the airwaves and I try and make that happen. I encourage artists to send us their products.

I do some acoustic blues stuff and I am also half of a duo and at other times we have a full band. Whatever the venue calls for I try and be ready to be there and satisfy the fans. Roger Stolle from Cat Head asked me to come to his store and do a solo thing, which I hadn't done in my life. This was about four years ago and it worked out real well and I thought that I would keep that going. I had a blues show on the TV out of Greenville and it got expensive for us there, so we moved to Oxford, Mississippi and it's a possibility that we may be bringing it to Clarksdale, so I'm trying to add a little more here and there.

Music is a full time occupation for me and has been for years. There is nothing more fulfilling than to lead my life the way I want to.

Bill was also involved in filming 'The Way Of War' with actor Cuba Gooding Jr. Bill plays the character of 'The Bluesman' in the action thriller. 'The Bluesman' is the owner of a nightclub frequented by powerful political personalities. Filming began late last year in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Recommended listening by Bill 'Howl-N-Madd' Perry.
The following are self-released CDs.
2003 - 'Casino Dream'
2006 - 'Reason I Sing The Blues'
2007 - 'Jook Joint Jump'