

# BIG APPLE BLUES

Richard 'Dickie' Tapp remembers the New York research trips made for Juke Blues magazine in 1986 and 1989, which provided the impetus for a new book on New York City Blues and R&B.



Larry Dale, Harlem, New York, 14th May, 1986. Photo: © Paul Harris

**A**head of setting out for New York in May 1986, John Broven, Paul Harris and I prepared ourselves as best we could in those pre-Google days. As an example, I recall contacting Peter Grendysa through the newly-founded Juke Blues magazine, knowing he had written extensively about Buddy Johnson – who I was starting to research – and might have contact details for Ella Johnson.

Grendysa generously wrote back not only with those details but also those of several other New York-based artists who could be of interest. The lead to our first interviewee, Bob Gaddy, came through Ray Topping and Ace Records. Ray had recently spoken to Gaddy when compiling a fine LP of Gaddy's Old Town recordings ('Rip and Run', Ace CH164) and gave us the great pianist's address in Harlem. Nevertheless, we set off for the interview with some trepidation as Harlem was seen then as a dangerous environment being still in the grip of drugs and gang culture, with white people being potentially vulnerable. However, it was reassuring to find Gaddy living in a neat apartment block with its own security system and we nailed our first interview in genial circumstances. He was a self-effacing man but still with a sharp memory. He recollected that shortly after settling in New York in 1946 it was Brownie McGhee who got his career rolling. McGhee needed a pianist for his band who could play and sing the blues, and found that man in Bob.

Whilst in Gaddy's apartment, he phoned his good friend Larry Dale, who was also on our list of interviewees, in no small part because of his stunning guitar work on Champion Jack Dupree's classic 'Blues From The Gutter' Atlantic album. Initially Dale was reluctant, saying he had given time to previous European interviewers but nothing had come of it. However, with Bob's encouragement — 'I think these guys are in a different league' — we arranged to meet Dale the next day outside the 'A' train subway station on 125th Street. He assured us, 'I'll be able to recognise three Englishmen on the corner of St. Nicholas

Avenue'. What a productive day it proved to be. Not only was Dale a fine interviewee with good recall about his career and recordings, but he also told us that the sessions he played on, including Frankie Lyman and the Teenagers' huge hit, 'Why Do Fools Fall In Love'. There was no pride in being on the session of such a major record, and he was very dismissive in describing the group: 'To me they were just another bunch of little hoodlums'. After the interview Larry drove us around Harlem pointing out music nightspots such as The Baby Grand and Smalls Paradise, kindly stopping the car to be photographed at each venue, then to cap it all he contacted Bobby Robinson and arranged an interview for us the following day. We were on a roll.

Robinson was running late which gave us time to take in Bobby's original Happy House record store on 125th Street where his manager George Schneider kept us entertained and safe. When Robinson eventually appeared, the resulting interview was both lengthy and memorable. Bobby's first love was the blues and whilst always a wonderful raconteur, he was delighted that John wanted to focus on his blues recordings including those by Elmore James, Lightnin' Hopkins and Buster Brown. We heard some great anecdotes as Robinson was totally in his element. After bidding farewell, we headed to see veteran saxophonist and bandleader Paul Williams, who was still involved in the music business, running a booking agency, The Entertainment Bureau, from the front room of his house on St. Nicholas Avenue. Although the interview proved to be disappointing with too many mumbled answers — Paul said he was writing his own biography — it was there we had a stroke of luck. We had been trying to contact the hitherto elusive guitarist 'Wild' Jimmy Spruill, who we so wanted to track down. The number we had was out of date and we asked Williams if he could check his bureau files. Bingo, there was the number we needed.

We didn't meet Spruill until the following week and, even then, the interview nearly didn't happen due to a mix-up over exactly where we were to rendezvous in the Bronx. Misunderstandings out of the way, Jimmy proved to be an effusive interviewee. He had stepped back from music, telling us he hadn't been in a recording studio for ten years, but was happy to chat freely looking back with no regrets and proud of the chart-topping hits he'd played on. These included Wilbert Harrison's 'Kansas City' for Bobby Robinson and which Bobby had featured in our interview a few days before. The interview with Spruill had to be high spot of the trip and consequently was the first to appear in *Juke Blues* (issue six, autumn 1986) with one of Paul Harris's photos adorning the front cover. The interviews with Bob Gaddy, Larry Dale and Bobby Robinson were published in quick succession and together I believe helped to establish the magazine's reputation.

Finally, a quick mention for Rosco Gordon, who couldn't have been more hospitable. After an interview over a fried-shrimp lunch he also took us for a drive around Harlem, proudly playing us a cassette dub of his new recordings. Rosco also kindly stopped off at Ella Johnson's apartment on St. Nicholas Avenue, only to find she wasn't home. However, thanks to Rosco we knew the precise location and we did get to meet Ella later in the trip. Sadly, we found her in a confused state, suffering from dementia, and the much-anticipated interview didn't materialise. At least I did get to meet one of my favourite artists and that in itself was personally rewarding.

Looking back, my one disappointment is that we failed to track down Cousin Leroy (Rozier). We now know from a feature in *Living Blues* in



Rose Marie McCoy and Doc Pomus, Lone Star Roadhouse Cafe, New York, 8th May 1989. Photo: © Paul Harris



Ella Johnson, Harlem, New York, 20th May 1986. Photo: © Paul Harris

2012 that Rozier was living in New York at the time, but can only reflect that it wasn't for want of trying on our part. We asked around extensively but no one knew what had happened to Leroy (we thought our best bet was Larry Dale) and there was no trace in the White Pages phone directory, which could be a good bet back in those days.

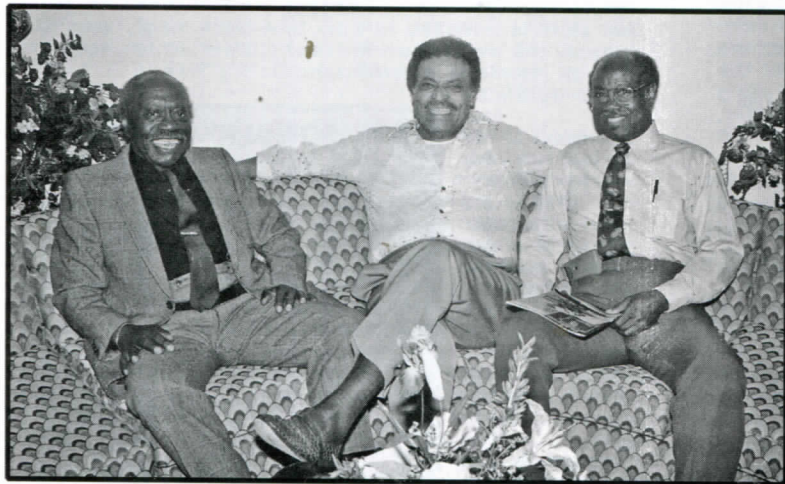
### 1989 Trip

We headed home more than satisfied with our trip, but another visit beckoned as there were still stones to be returned. Therefore in May 1989 we headed 'over the pond' again. This

time John Broven and I were joined at Gatwick Airport by Tony Collins, who was researching his Wynonie Harris biography, 'Rock Mr Blues', whilst Paul and Veronica Harris hooked up in New York, flying in from New Orleans after spending a few days in Louisiana. One interview we thought was in the bag was with Arthur Prysock, Buddy Johnson's one-time vocalist. I had been corresponding with his wife and manager, Jean, having found the address in the New York musicians union handbook, which we had picked up on our 1986 trip. The Prysocks lived in a smart neighbourhood in Searington, Long Island, where we spent a most enjoyable afternoon. Nevertheless, over a mouth-watering meal it soon became clear that Arthur was in no mood for an interview, he was more interested in talking about the vegetables he'd grown in his garden and that we were savouring.

All was not lost as Jean had invited former Johnson bandmembers Purvis Henson and Geezil Minerve for the occasion. Around the table it became apparent that Henson had a great story to tell, from his days growing up in Itta Bena, Mississippi, to those as Johnson's tenor sax player and right-hand man. Henson was still working at the famous Manny's Music store on West 48th St in Manhattan and we met him there the next day before walking back to our hotel for an interview which exceeded our expectations. It has never been published in full but extracts were used in the booklet notes when John and I compiled an Ace CD of the bluesiest of Buddy Johnson's Decca sides (CDCHD 623 'Walk 'Em'), whilst I was able to include several paragraphs in the Buddy and Ella Johnson feature I wrote for *American Music Magazine* (issue 148, September 2018).

But the riches didn't stop there. John Broven had made contact with Billy Bland through Ray Topping at Ace Records. Billy had a soul-food restaurant, Eleanor Barbecue, on 143rd Street in Harlem. However, this meant he could only meet us in the evening. We were a bit wary as this was our first trip to Harlem after dark and the restaurant was a fair distance from the nearest subway. With this in mind we took an uptown bus which we knew would drop us outside the establishment. It was worth the effort; Billy was another outgoing character who talked about his early days as a stand-up singer at the Apollo with Buddy Johnson through to his recordings for Hy Weiss's Old Town label where he enjoyed his Top ten hit, 'Let The Little Girl Dance'. Bland still had his Old Town records on the jukebox and he took delight in singing along to them, regaling us over the course of the evening. The only problem came when leaving the restaurant. Thanks to New York's one-way grid system, we had no idea where to find a downtown bus. As if by magic a city cab appeared, truly a rare sight as back then most yellow cabbies wouldn't venture into Harlem at night. Paul, Veronica and Tony dived in but John and I were left to scratch our heads. Luckily it was pouring with rain, the streets were deserted, and we soon spotted downtown buses one block away. Phew!



Harold 'Geezil' Minerve, Arthur Prysock and Purvis Henson, Searington, New York, 9th May 1989. Photo: © Paul Harris



Rare 'Blues From The Gutter' stereo album label on Atlantic by Jack Dupree, Cousin Leroy 45 courtesy Victor Pearlín, UK Melodisc and Top Rank courtesy John Broven.

We also renewed acquaintance with two artists we had met in 1986. One was Billy Butler who we'd met at the West End café when he was playing an engagement as part of Sammy Price's trio. Butler was pleasantly surprised that we knew about his magical guitar work on Bill Doggett's 'Honky Tonk' and gave us a faultless rendition during the show with Price in support. An interview was arranged in 1986 but had to be cancelled at short notice. This time one was possible, taking advantage of a break between performances when Billy was part of the theatre band in a show at New York's Lincoln Center. A modest and unassuming man, he was happy to share his stories including exactly how 'Honky Tonk' came to fruition and Doggett's initial reluctance to record the number. The second re-acquaintance was with songwriter Doc Pomus. In 1986, we'd enjoyed a champagne brunch with Doc, but hadn't had the time to prepare for an interview. This time around there was no such limitation and we were not left disappointed. Pomus was gregarious and chatted about his early days as a jump-blues singer heavily influenced by Big Joe Turner, through to his songwriting partnership with Mort Shuman which yielded sensational hits.

But perhaps the high spot of the 1989 trip was the interview with Rose Marie McCoy. It was unplanned; by chance we spotted her name on an office door when we'd had occasion to visit 1650 Broadway and were walking through one of the corridors. It was such a surprise although we did know the building was home to many songwriters. Noting her phone number, Broven made contact and Rose Marie kindly agreed to an interview next time she came into the office from her New Jersey home. Fortunately, this would be during our stay. She proved to be a charming lady and she gave her time generously. John's interview touched briefly on her own recordings but the main focus was on Rose Marie's songwriting skills and her partnership with Charlie Singleton, one of their first hits being 'Hurts Me To My Heart' by Faye Adams, whilst her big royalty earner came when Elvis recorded 'I Beg Of You', which Rose Marie had co-written with Kelly Owens. John followed up with an interview in May 1992 and the resulting article featured in *Juke Blues* number 26 (Summer 1992). An added bonus came when Rose Marie provided a stunning Kriegsmann publicity photo which was used on the cover of that issue, to my mind one of the best covers in the magazine's 25-year existence.

*'New York City Blues Postwar Portraits from Harlem to the Village and Beyond'* is by Larry Simon, edited by John Broven, with photos by Robert Schaffer, and is published by University Press of Mississippi. There are contributions by Val Wilmer, Paul Harris, Richard Tapp, Bob Malenky and Anton Mikofski, making the first-ever book devoted to New York blues a true transatlantic enterprise. Full review by Chris Bentley in our next issue.