It is welcome that this long-awaited collaboration between bluesman Phil Wiggins and journalist Frank Matheis has finally arrived in print. Centred around Phil Wiggins’ recollection of his life and career as a blues artist, he and Matheis provide welcome documentation of the Washington D.C. acoustic blues scene and community over the past half-Century or so. In addition to Phil Wiggins autobiography, they give an overview of the D.C. blues scene in the 1960s, of performers that have been and are part of the D.C. acoustic blues scene, Phil Wiggins’ tips for harmonica players, and Barry Lee Person’s interviews with John Cephas and Archie Edwards.

The book observes the rise of interest in whites for the blues that took place in the 1960s when the likes of Mississippi John Hurt and Skip James played Ontario Place and other venues. At the same time as D.C.’s own homemade acoustic blues scene was being carried on by members of the African-American community such as Mother Scott, Flora Boloten, Chief Ellis, Archie Edwards, John Jackson, John Cephas and Phil Wiggins who were carrying forward with a songster and Piedmont blues tradition.

In the introductory chapter, Wiggins and Matheis observe that a convergence of cultural forces helped make Washington, D.C. so special to sustain a thriving country blues scene for forty years. Archie Edwards’ Barbershop, with its Saturday afternoon jam sessions, was, and is, a central meeting point for blues musicians, young and old. There were also chroniclers such as Barry Lee Pearson and Otis Williams. The Smithsonian Institution, with its Folklife Center and annual Folklife Festival, provided opportunities for performances before substantial crowds. In contrast, organisations like the National Council for the Traditional Arts and the Travellin’ Blues Workshop, publications like Unicom Times, musical venues, blues radio programmes on WPFW by the likes of Bill Barlow, Nap Turner and Jerry ‘The Mama’ Washington, and other local radio stations provided a foundation. Also prominent was an older generation willing to carry on the acoustic blues traditions.

Phil’s story is split into three parts. The first part deals with his early life, how he started playing music, his entrance into the D.C. acoustic blues community and the beginning of his career as a musician. The longest part of Phil’s story is devoted to his partnership with John Cephas. The final section is dedicated to Phil’s various activities since John Cephas passed.