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Subject: The Furry Lewis Thread

Posted by [compasspnt](#) on Sat, 05 Mar 2005 15:50:18 GMT

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Many of you may not be familiar with the blues artist Furry Lewis. He was a famous and good-selling blues artist in the 30's or 40's, but then disappeared for many years. I was privileged to record many of the blues artists of the region in their later years, and Furry was one of them. The story of that day's session is one I thought some blues fans might find interesting. Furry sang and played in his own bed, in his own apartment just off of Beale Street in Memphis, and I recorded him on location there. Following is the story of that day, taken from liner notes of one of the resultant CD's, and which will be included in a slightly longer form in a book that is being written at the moment. I've also provided a link to the CD's, if anyone is interested. I'm not here trying to hawk a CD to you; believe me, I've spent more on this stuff than is ever returned, or ever will be. I just think that some things (as in the previous Gimmer thread) need to be preserved for history, and I like to play a very small part in being able to do that.

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It was an almost spring day in the South. Almost warm enough for April, but the cool threat of February lurking on the edges. Nothing felt definite. There was a dulling layer of clouds, yet no sense that it would rain. No sense of emotion emanated from the many occupants of the other vehicles threading their way down Union Avenue that day... the faces visible through the streaked polarized safety glass at the stoplights belied merely a sense of extreme sameness, an almost boredom, one that seemed somehow satisfying to them.

March 5, 1969. Almost the Seventies. But still very much the Sixties. I was piloting a maroon Ford Fairlane through the capitol of the Delta, Memphis, Tennessee, in search of the Blues Magician, Furry Lewis. In the back seat I had a Crown half-track stereo tape recorder, two Sony C-37 microphones, a Leica IIIf, three reels of Scotch 202 tape, eight years of recording experience, and a love for the blues. Riding right seat was my friend Jere Cunningham, writer and photographer. He had a Nikon in his lap, and some black and white film in a brown bag on the Fairlane's front floor. The plan was simple: find Furry; I would record, Jere would photograph. Beyond that, there was nothing but whatever the future would hold.

I had known Walter Furry Lewis for four years already. Most everyone around Memphis music in those days did. He had been rediscovered; in the early 60's, sweeping the streets of Memphis with a push cart and a broom; the halcyon days of his successful recording career were long over, and the sometimes harsh realities of life had set in. Much has been written on these historical matters, so there's no need to rehash them here, save to say that Furry had, indeed, begun his comeback; My first encounter with this very special gentleman happened when I showed up at a Memphis club, The Bitter Lemon, for my rock band's engagement one night to find the opening act; an old, withered man with a Gibson guitar in his hands and a slide made of a piece of pipe on his finger, already holding an enthralled audience in the palms of those gnarled hands. He danced, twirled the guitar about, slapped the wooden body of his instrument for percussion, and generally thrashed his way through his set with the verve and tenacity of a teenager. I (and everybody else there) was amazed. For Furry Lewis was somehow able to cast a spell. There are stories about how his guitar could seem to play itself at times, or how other strange things might happen in his presence. He was somehow part musician, part magician, part clown, part philosopher. But he was above all else an entertainer. Some of his playing that night, as well as his singing, was suspect at times in the strictest sense of proficiency, given his age and the amounts of alcohol he consumed, but most of both were truly awesome. This little old man possessed the ability to weave a magic web over an audience, employing time tested entertainer's techniques mixed with some sort of happy voodoo spell to force the entertained to transcend their normal lives. He sang blues, he sang gospel, he reverted at times to an almost vaudevillian type of ragtime pop music from his youth. But whatever he did, he certainly evoked a positive reaction from the packed coffee house. After he finished, I went up to him and introduced myself, telling him how much I enjoyed his performance. As I later found that he always was, he was even then most gracious. He gave me his slide (which I still have today), he politely answered my probably inane questions (Did you know Robert Johnson.....Did you ever meet Blind Lemon Jefferson....?), and he even stayed for our band's performance, which he politely professed to like. I saw him perform many times after that, in clubs, at folk or blues festivals, or in his various places of residence. Furry came to be an icon, at once both a vibrant symbol of a revered music of old, and a living statue which those who feared that an era was ending were compelled to visit. When The Rolling Stones played Memphis, they requested Furry as their opening act; when Joni Mitchell played Memphis, she went to see Furry sing in his home, and was so touched she composed a poignant song about him. Countless other musicians paid their homage in one way or another, and he always happily played and sang, whether he was paid or not.

Fourth Street exhibited little of the modern "charm" of Union Avenue. It was too close to Beale Street. It almost was Beale Street. This was only a block or so from where the young Walter Lewis had hung out with the famous W.C.Handy, so many years ago, yearning for musical mentorship. This was only a block or so from where the vibrant Furry Lewis in his prime, along with Gus Cannon and others, had entertained so many in one of Beale Street's heydays. And in fact, this was one of the very streets the middle aged W.Furry Lewis had swept with his broom and cart as a city sanitation employee, day after day, starting before daylight, ending often after sundown, trudging along on his one real leg and his one wooden one. Year after year after year. This was home. This was the corner of Fourth and Beale, and it was where Furry lived on March 5, 1969. The old apartment building which stood there was in pretty sad shape by then. Entering the dark, wooden entry way the senses were assaulted by dust, creaking floorboards, the smell of years of stale urine mixed with chicken frying and greens cooking. The clerk in the small snack stand next door had no nose, only two small holes in her face. Babies cried and old men cried out. Mothers quieted and wives scolded. The sounds of life quietly seeped from behind the aging walls. It took a while for the eyes to adjust to the low light, making our entry a hesitant one. Up the shaky stairs to the second floor; a knock at a door. As the door was opened, just a crack, a female voice enquired. It was us. And we were welcomed in, obvious intruders into a very different, special, and private world. But the woman whom Furry claimed was his wife was as gracious as he was. She presented cookies, and offered to go get drinks. Furry took her up on that. He wanted some quarts of beer to help him get over the remnants of the flu. He was there in bed, a large old creaking bed which dominated the room. In retrospect, I doubt the bed was as big as I thought; I think rather he was so dominant himself that it just seemed so. His leg was removed, and he was propped up on a couple of old pillows.

The sounds of the street filtered through the windows along with the diffused March, 1969 light. A fan whirred somewhere in an apartment nearby. The whispers of history's ghosts settled across Beale Street for another day's work. And Furry played and sang again.

It was just as if fine old friends of the family had dropped by; Furry and his companion seemed happy to have the company. I set up the recorder and microphones, and Furry took up one of his guitars and began, playing and singing while sitting up in his bed. Jere snapped pictures. (I'm not sure what happened to those shots, but it would be interesting to see them now. I stupidly didn't take any photographs myself that day, busy with my sonic endeavour). The day wore on, the magic of the man permeating the dusky afternoon. He performed some of his

standard repertoire, some things you didn't hear that much, and I believe he made some up as he went along. He even invited me to play with him. Then he grew tired, and slightly drunk, and it was time to go. Back to the street, back to the car, back out Union Avenue, back to the rest of the world. But at least this special day can never evaporate completely, as most do, because that particular Furry Lewis moment was captured forever. The first installment of this day's recordings was released in 1992 as "Fourth And Beale" on Lucky Seven LS9202. It had previously been released in Europe on Barclay Records vinyl in the '70's, and has recently been reissued there on CD by Universal. This second installment has never before been released. While it may be argued by some that many of the better performances the already 76 year old Furry did that day were put onto the first record, this second installment nonetheless contains an incredible glimpse into this wizard-genius's life. And these may very well be the last original recordings by Furry Lewis ever issued. Very little editing has been done, save to eclipse boredom. Much talking and tuning between takes has been left, on purpose, in an attempt to help portray the mood of the time. The blues medley "Fourth & Beale/F&T Rag" includes me playing a second guitar with Furry, and was left off of the first album so as not to seem to be encroaching upon his professional life. It is included here because it did indeed happen, however brash of me at the time to intrude upon Mr. Lewis's artistic sensibilities. I apologise to musical history for that. In addition to his normal blues numbers, as well as a foray into early twentieth century pop music, the two gospel songs included were not often heard by most listeners. But Furry just seemed to feel them that day. "God Be With Us & Til We Meet Again" I think has one of the most understated, yet powerful vocal performances I have ever heard, and certainly makes a fitting final Furry Lewis number. Furry touched many hearts in his time. He was a gentle, loving soul who exhibited a vibrancy anyone would envy. He had two music careers, separated by a long spell of "working for a living." He is a genuine part of the history of blues music. He is enshrined in at least one Hollywood movie, W.W. and The Dixie Dance Kings. His life is chronicled in several important books of blues lore. His work exists on several albums still selling well.

He unfortunately grew more tired and more old, and he eventually died. Most knew it would happen someday. Others weren't so sure.

Terry Manning, 1998

(story copyright 1998, Lucky Seven Records)

<http://www.luckysevenrecords.com/CDStore.htm>

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Subject: Re: The Furry Lewis Thread  
Posted by [Radd 47](#) on Wed, 09 Mar 2005 18:44:34 GMT  
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Cool story!

Those guys are leaving us on a daily basis.

I really like that video, I think it's a Rhino or Alligator or Arhoolie release, of a very old Son House doing Levee Blues. Pretty spooky.

I have a Sonny Terry video also. Man, that guy used his hands to get so many chops off the harp.

I also have one of the only Lead Belly videos around. Pick a Bale of Cotton. Man, that guy was hypnotic.

I think he was the cat's ass as far as old school musicians are concerned.

And howabout the Rev. Gary Davis. Talk about possessed!

Then there's Robert Johnson.....

and.....

so on.....

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Subject: Re: The Furry Lewis Thread  
Posted by [Gordon Rice](#) on Wed, 09 Mar 2005 19:06:06 GMT  
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Hey Terry--

That's an absolutely beautiful piece of writing. Thanks as always for sharing.

--gmr

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Subject: Re: The Furry Lewis Thread  
Posted by [maxdimario](#) on Wed, 09 Mar 2005 23:29:29 GMT  
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great story.

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Subject: Re: The Furry Lewis Thread  
Posted by [Curve Dominant](#) on Thu, 10 Mar 2005 04:08:51 GMT  
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Terry,

I felt like I was there as I read that.

And the thing that struck me about it, was how, with music, one can be so poor...

...And yet live so rich.

Does that make sense? I dunno, it's just a feeling I get sometimes, and I got it reading that story.

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Subject: Re: The Furry Lewis Thread  
Posted by [compasspnt](#) on Mon, 04 Apr 2005 03:18:23 GMT  
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Eric Vincent wrote on Wed, 09 March 2005 23:08...

And the thing that struck me about it, was how, with music, one can be so poor...

...And yet live so rich.

Does that make sense? ...

This is the real lesson of the music industry.

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Subject: Re: The Furry Lewis Thread  
Posted by [Level](#) on Mon, 04 Apr 2005 03:53:14 GMT  
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Thank you so much Terry for sharing once again!

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