

Interview with Fernando Jones

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Interviewer: Robert C. Sharpe

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Sharpe: Good morning. This is April 12th, 2012. We are in Chicago, Columbia College, at the Center for Black Music Research. I'm Robert Sharpe and am going to have the privilege today to interview Fernando Jones, one of Chicago's own Blues musicians.

Jones: Thank you, Mr. Sharpe. I appreciate it.

Sharpe: Fernando, maybe we could start with your personal and family background history. Where were parents born?

Jones: My parents were born in Mississippi, the wonderful state of Mississippi. They migrated to Chicago, like so many African Americans, in search of a better life.

Sharpe: When did that happen?

Jones: I don't know what year my mother came to Chicago, but my father came to Chicago, October 5th, 1945, after he got finished serving the country in the war.

Sharpe: Did your father and mother have musical backgrounds?

Jones: My dad told me that he might have had a piano lesson or two, but by no stretch of the imagination was he a musician or a failed musician or anything like that, you know. His relationship with the piano could have been a five minute session, one day in his life.

My mother didn't have any music in her background. This is the first time I'm saying this part here, because I never even related it to anything. But, my mother was like a designer. She made her own clothes, for the most part, and she made her own patterns to make her own clothes. That was really brilliant. As a matter of fact, the first little band that I had, when I was a little kid, I called the band "The Designers." Seeing it to say this here, there was a creative piece in my mother, you know. I never ever looked at it before, but my mother was an artist.

Sharpe: What about your grandparents? Do you know much about them?

Jones: Well, I know very little about my father's parents, because they passed while he was a young man. My mother's mother passed about a week after giving birth to my mother's baby brother, Uncle Earl. Her father passed away a year before I was born. He was a carpenter. He served in the United States Navy, and, as a young man, something happened with his stomach, you know, being in the military, where it messed his stomach up. I guess it was some form of seasickness, where certain foods, he couldn't eat. So, when he was finished with his tour in the United States Navy, he got some kind of benefit, where he got some extra some money. I don't know if it was called a pension.

Sharpe: Disability?

Jones: Yeah, but he was normal. He just couldn't eat certain foods. So, I imagine, once he got to where there was stuff that he could eat, he was normal. So, he was a carpenter. Going back into Mississippi, I assume that my grandfather, like most African Americans... My father was born in 1921, and he and my mother were around the same age. So, I would assume that my grandfather would have been, you know, eighteen to twenty years older than my mother, twenty-four years older than my mother.

My grandfather was born, probably at the turn of the century or a little bit before. Whatever time that he was serving, he probably put his age up, like most kids did, just to get out of the South, you know. I think the age limit might have been eighteen, and guys were going in at sixteen. So, saying when he got disability, he was probably twenty-one or twenty-two years old, at the max.

So, he had money that other people in Mississippi didn't have. As a result, he was the first one in the town, black guy in the town, with a car. Many whites probably didn't have them, so that kind of posed a problem, but he was a mild mannered guy, and he was a carpenter. He was soft spoken, and I wished that I could have met him, you know. But, unfortunately, I didn't. So, that's the profile on my mother's side.

My father's father was a preacher, and my father's mother was a school teacher. My father had one brother, and he was mysteriously killed. It was a Ku Klux Klan killing or a group of Caucasians that were unofficial or sworn Klansmen, because he was an educated black guy. Educated black men, particularly in the South, whether they had book education or they just had a skill set of biblical scholarship, you know, a man is a man is a man. Sometimes that didn't play well. So, he was murdered. He was found by some train tracks. And my father carried that with him. He would talk about it, probably once every two or three years or so, you know. It was almost like clockwork. My father just passed, about two years ago in May. My father had a really nice baritone voice. He would be considered quiet by comparison to my mother, who was beautiful and the life of the party.

So, you know, my dad, he was the type of guy that he really didn't say a lot, but what he said, you listened to it, because it was hearing him talk was far and few in between. He was welding, also, while he was in the military, and then I think he went to the trade's school or whatever and got his certificate. When he got out or something, one of the things that bothered him, he said he went to get a job, where they wanted welders. He said "I have my paper in my hand." And, you know, they needed workers. And he didn't get the job. I'm sure that was a cross that he carried for his entire life.

But, fortunately, he got chance to get a job at the United States Post Office. He was a tractor trailer driver, so that took care of the family. It was a relatively easy job, because, you know, he drove the tractor, and he parked it for two hours. They loaded it, took two or three hours to load. He drove it for an hour or two somewhere; they unloaded it, two hours. So, that was his day. Overtime was the latest craze when he and his buddies were working for the post office.

But those are the type of things that shaped my parents and inevitably shaped me. So, I guess the cord that you will see that, be it my mother making clothes or me cracking jokes or whatever, I guess it's part of the whole—not necessarily the African American, but the underdog's way of surviving, in any situation, from not being bullied. So, I think music or entertainment or something like that has given my family a reason to live and a reason to participate in life.

Sharpe: What part of Mississippi where you from?

Jones: My father's from Brookhaven, Mississippi, and mother's from Aberdeen, Mississippi, and my mother still has a sister there.

Sharpe: Have you gone down there and visited?

Jones: Yeah, I've never went to Brookhaven, but I will go down there one day. I was just in Aberdeen in February, doing the International Blues Challenge in Memphis. I had one of my brothers with me. Then, I said, "Well, let's go by and see Aunt Luck." So we went by, and he said "No, man." I thought it was just an hour. I thought she was just an hour from Memphis, because that's what I thought. That's how long it was the last time when I went, but it was about two and half hours.

So, we were just driving and driving and driving, and some of our first cousins were there. They fixed some catfish and some corn fritters and all kind of little Mississippi stuff for us. We had a ball. We got a chance to see my aunt. She has Alzheimer's, and she was laying in the bed.



I was looking at her, and I was trying to see my mother in her, you know. When you look at her one way, you could see your mother, and it's almost like...because you don't want your mother to die. So, anything you see that looks like her, you hold onto it, even though it's not her. So, we would look her in the eyes and stuff. It was like, you know. So, in your mind, you make it say that she's trying to communicate with you and stuff. Then you're like a centimeter from crying. It's like, well...let me be a scientist here and just put my own selfishness out of the way and see. Maybe she is trying to communicate with me and tell me something.

So, I went to the car and got my guitar and started playing for her. She kind of pepped up. It was just like watching a baby that might be...I don't know what month they would be, but, when a baby is just starting to get their neck and head skills together, where it's like they're trying to look at you and trying to focus and stuff. It was one of the most beautiful things that I'd ever seen, and for that moment, the gift of music gave me an opportunity to bring joy, neurologically, to my aunt and make my first cousins, who were her daughters—about three or four of her daughters were there—and they're like, "Look, look, look, Mom. She ain't did that in two weeks or two month." I don't know how I got on that subject but—

Sharpe: Oh, it was about visiting back.

Jones: Yeah and the catfish.

Sharpe: Were there any sort of family stories about music being back earlier than...

Jones: Yeah, yeah. Well, music... When my folks came from Mississippi... Most blacks that came from Mississippi to Chicago, they brought everything they had with them. In most cases, everything they had was nothing. So, they had to bring the intangible things, such as music, their religious beliefs, with them, whether they were Baptist, they were Pentecostal, you know, maybe there were a few Catholics sprinkled in there. But, they brought those teachings.

They brought their Bible. My mother, they would always quote the Bible and use parables and things to teach us right from wrong. And they would bring their music because, when they came, either somebody—black folks, part of the great migration—some would come up. If they had a car, they would come up or they come up by Amtrak and get off, right at Roosevelt Road. My dad, when he came, he got off on Sixty-third, right by Gastonia, out on Cottage Grove, whatever that stop was, whatever that New Orleans train is, New Orleans Express or whatever. Blacks that got off on Sixty-third, by train, they stayed on the south side. Many that got off on Roosevelt, you know, migrated to the west side.

When they came, the two intangible things, which I said before, their music and their religious beliefs. The physical things, clothes on their back, maybe a couple of pieces in a suitcase, and they had to bring their own lunches or their own food on the train, because they couldn't get off and go into the town and buy stuff. They couldn't stop on the side of the highway; you know. They had to pick where they even were to get gas. They couldn't get off and go get gas, like now, if you get off, you know.

So, Exit 1, 2, 3, you see, it's a BP sign. You get off, and then it's like about a half mile into the town, and it's still a straight away, but it's a half mile. You can see the big sign marker sticking up. You kind of do it now, still. Sometimes it's kind of dangerous, but, back then, if you got off and got some gas, and the sheriff, they hung out in those little, one police-car towns. They hung out at the service station, because that's where everything would happen. And, if a black person went to that, if they felt like messing with you, they figure they could get some money out of you, they'd lock you up, and you'd have to pay to get out. If you didn't have it, then you went from just being black to be getting a sentence. Or they would trail you all the way back to the expressway and trail you all the way to the next county, to make sure that you got out of the county. So, those were things that my folks went through, just to be American. That's a good title for a book, *Just to Be American*.

Sharpe: Got to be hard, even if you served in the service.

Jones: Oh it is. It is, man. You know, you do that, first of all, the whole thing... I'm not military, but I was talking about this yesterday, with one of my brothers, who served in Vietnam. Can you imagine being eighteen years old; you're in high school, and if you're well adjusted, you leave saying, "Yes, sir. No, ma'am." You have a curfew. Then you go to your basic training, and then you go to Vietnam, an undeclared war. It becomes a war, and you fight in that war for two years or three years. You become a killing machine. Not just some person protecting America, but a killing machine is what you are.

My brother tells me many times, he says, "We're working in the yard a couple of weeks ago, when it was hot, seventy something degrees, for about three or four days. So, we move back a stone, and there was a pretty garter snake, a pretty black garter snake, with a yellow stripe down it, and he was all coiled up. If you probably uncoiled him, he probably would have been... he would have been over a foot long, maybe about fourteen or fifteen inches. He was so pretty and coiled up. I told my brother, and he didn't see him. I said, "Hey man, watch that snake." And he jumped back. I said, "Man, how did you serve in Vietnam, with all those tigers and big snakes that looked like logs, and you scared of a garter snake?" Then he jumped back, and his American pride jumped out. He say, "When we went out," he say, "the commander had two big boxes of hand grenades." He said, "He had two forty-fives." He said, "I had my belt on, with all my bullets in them. I had a M16. The commander told me, he said, "Jones get as many hand grenades as you want." He had two hand grenades. He started patting his body, you know, lower left leg. "I had two grenades here, (patted his lower right leg) two grenades here." He lit up, so he was like, "Hey, there was nothing that I couldn't handle then, but now, we're in the front yard and there's a garter snake." So, that was the American pride of being a military man and being a Marine.

Now you fast forward, and you get out of the Marines. You're twenty-one years old or twenty-two years old. Most kids in America, twenty-two years old, are still trying to find their way or just getting out of college or looking for a job, but now you're an accelerated man. So, you're caught between two worlds. You are older than the other twenty-two... You're like a fifty year old man, compared to these twenty-two year old people that you're next to. But, in another way, you're a baby, because you've missed two years of your life "in the world."

I forgot where I was going with us, but I know I jumped from us working in the yard and talking about the garter snake and my brother. Oh, you said, it must be hard for my father to have served in the military and come back and not gotten a job. That was just kind of like how it was. I was thinking the thing I was saying about my brother. You come back, and there was no treatment. I mean, for some guys, if they jumped on a police department, they could debrief themselves. But, can you imagine, when you're eighteen, nineteen, twenty years old, and you got all that weaponry? You're the most powerful man in the world. Then, you come back, no gun, no

hand grenades. You're aggressive; you can't sleep; you've been fighting; you've been killing; you've been almost killed. And you're treated like you said, like a second class citizen.

So, one form of refuge, once again, what the black folks from Mississippi during the Great Migration, music becomes a drug, becomes a sedative. Religion becomes a drug, becomes a sedative. They become two factors that, particularly, would focus on the Blues, two factors that help us cope. That experience with my brother, and I'll probably end up talking about this twice. When he came back from Vietnam, a lot of young guys over there, you know. Uncle Sam provided everything, so, when they got paid, it was like free money. So, they bought a lot of electronic equipment and shipped it back home. So, he had a reel to reel, and he had records by almost every artist that I knew. You know, all the Motown folks, all of the muscle show stuff.

I remember, I was first introduced to Nina Simone through my brother. I'm going to call him today and tell him, because it was the song on there, *Four Women*. That song just blew my mind, when she says it goes out, "*They call me Peaches.*" Because I was a mannish little boy, I don't know if [I] knew what the song was about. But, I don't know if Marvin went in 1968 or came out in 1968, because I was four in 1968. I could remember seeing, I think, King. Was King assassinated in 1968 or so?

Sharpe: Yes, yes.

Jones: Okay, I can remember seeing on a black and white TV. I can remember seeing there was a flag on his coffin, or was that Kennedy's?

Sharpe: Both.

Jones: Okay. I remember seeing the horse drawn carriage, real slow and stuff in black and white TV, at our neighbor's house, Booker and Gwen's house, that lived in the next entrance from us. I can also remember... So, maybe he got out in 1970, because I remember the Marines coming to our house. He got wounded. But, I thought that he got shrapnel and almost lost his eye. But I didn't find this out, until about, within this last year. I thought, as a kid, that they came to the house to tell us that he was wounded, but that's not what they came for. He got lost, and they thought that he was dead, you know, because they found his helmet. He got lost in the jungle. I remember two guys, a black Marine and a white Marine. They were the most beautiful guys you ever seen in your life, the blue on those pants, the red stripe, you know...

Sharpe: It's impressive.

Jones: It's impressive. They came, and I don't know if my mother, father gave an immediate reaction, simply because that's all I remember, them coming up to the house. That was really interesting. But connecting him with music, he had all this wonderful music.

Sharpe: Before you leave that. Did they think he had died, when they came?

Jones: You know what, since I thought that they came to the house, that he was wounded, my mind blocked whatever else had happened, because I was probably four, probably, still in '68, at worst, '69, when they came. If they did think that he died, my mother, I guess, being a God fearing, God loving woman, she didn't go nuts or anything like that. So, maybe she just went numb, or maybe she said, "No, you all lying. He'll be alright" or something. It's her coping mechanism.

But, like I said, I thought that it was because he had gotten wounded, because, when he told me that, and now that I'm talking about it, it would be like, wow, if they did think he was wounded and dead, why didn't we cry? Or did I, as a child, say, "Will he be okay?" or something like that, because, going back to a kid, you know, tying all this to music, I know, when somebody listens to this a hundred years from now, it'll sound like I'm tangential. But, people that jump points, we are the creators of the World Wide Web, okay. So, that's how we talk.

Sharpe: (laughter)

Jones: So, I remember 1970, Jimi Hendrix died, right? I was six years old. I got my first guitar, February 6, 1970. Hendricks died '70 or '71 or whenever he died, okay. I remember it coming on the radio, because my brother Greg, the one next to me, was a musician, and my eldest brother was a musician. Like I told you earlier, when I was four, I was twelve. So, everything that my brother did, I did it; I watched. They listened to Iron Butterfly. I listened to Iron Butterfly. They listened to Black Sabbath. I listened to Black Sabbath. They listened to Deep Purple. I listened to Deep Purple. You know, those album covers, I used to read the line in those, when I learned how to read. I remember the Deep Purple album cover, when they had the faces. They were like candles or something, and the faces were the candles. Then they recalled... you know, when something's like demonic or too sexual, they will recall the album covers or something.

So, I remember going back to Jimmy Hendricks, as a little boy. Just showing you my innocence, it came on the radio that Jimi Hendrix was dead, right? I knew who he was, because he was black. I didn't really know about color, but I was able to identify, when I watched television, the people that looked like me. I was attracted to his sound, but I was also attracted to his physical guitar. I was attracted to the Stratocaster, or the telecaster, because it looked feminine, versus the thicker body Gibson guitars that B. B. King and those Chuck Berry were playing.

So, like I say, even as a kid I was mannish though, and now I'm looking at it, it was because those guitars are shaped like women. So, when they said about Jimi Hendrix, they said that he died. Then, my brother said, he

said “Man, I sure hate that, because I was going to go see him. He was supposed to come to Chicago next week.” or next month or whatever. And, as a child, I said, “So, are they going to put him on strings?” See, I didn’t understand. I understood part of death, but I didn’t... I figured that. Well, they could put him up on strings, and he could still do, you know. Think about a little first grader, an innocent kid that was still kid, but he was still a man child almost, you know. So, like I say, that was part of my indoctrination into music.

On the other hand, my brother, Foree, he was contemporaries with Buddy Guy and Junior Wells. When Buddy had some sort of throat surgery, in the early ‘70s or late ‘60s, my brother sang for him. My brother had an Albert King-esque type of a sound, and he was a big dude. He was a man’s man, and he was really tough on me. It was almost like nothing I would do would be right. When I’d be playing the guitar he’d say “Man, you got to squeeze it! You got to squeeze it.” I was like man, oh, what’s he talking about? I’m going to play all these notes. But then, I learned what he meant. He meant, it was all about feeling.

It was like he was really hard on me, but he would brag on me to his friends, you know, because I was the first one in the family to go to college and graduate and all this kind of stuff. I probably owe a lot, probably equally as much, to Greg, because Greg was part of my formative years. Well, Foree was too.

But Foree was there for me, in the adult life, up until the time he passed. It’s partially because of him that I turned out to be, I think, a pretty good song writer, because I had him in my group. When he was in the group, it was almost like having a bully. Maybe that’s what big brothers do. I had got to the point where it was like, “Hey man, I can’t take it,” but I was dependent on him, because he had this hell of a voice. I had to have him because, if he sang and I played—and I was a pretty good player; my nephew played bass and we had a heck of a drummer—if my brother sang, we get the gig again. So, I didn’t have the confidence, nor did I have the voice.

So, what I had to do, I had to start writing tunes that suited my voice, because I was timid. I was timid, vocally, and I was not good enough to sound like anybody else, because most people pattern themselves after somebody. If you sound like Luther Vandross, you do the whole Luther Vandross repertoire. Then, you get signed, and then somebody else writes some songs for you. Then, ten years later, you become yourself. Well, I had to become me, out the box, as an adult when it came to singing, because I don’t sound like anybody. That’s not necessarily good or bad. It’s just the way that it is. So, I had to—

Sharpe: Did you consciously think about that at that age?

Jones: Oh yeah, I did; I did. You know, I'm fast forwarding to, like, a late teenager now, because, as a child, I would write songs and stuff, like I was telling you. To remember about this little song I wrote when I was in first grade, about my baby leaving. I think it was called "The PG Train," and I would call it "The Piggy Back Train" or something, you know. I hadn't been exposed to the other 2,000 songs that were written about trains leaving and Robert Johnson watching the lights on the train go by. I just saw a train. I mean, the only modes of transportation that were used, a car; you saw a train; you saw a bus, you know. I don't even remember, as a child, looking up and seeing planes in the sky, because it was foreign to me, until... You know, you grow up a black kid on the south side of Chicago. I was fortunate to have two parents that had cars, so I rarely looked up to the sky, because we all, we had a car. (laughter) I didn't have to dream, you know.

So, yeah, it was a conscious decision, as an adult, because I had to survive. My ego was saying, "Hey man, you're a musician, and you got to stay in the game. You can't let your brother run you out of it. Maybe he does love you, up under all the harshness, but man, he's kicking your butt, and he knows that you depend on him." That's what the killer was. He knew that I had to depend on him, because he knew how good he was. There was like a, probably, twenty-some year age difference. So, you're not talking about an older brother that was just three years apart. You're talking about a guy who was just like a father to me. His daughter is the same age as I am. So, you're talking a man, a hero and a brother.

So, I said, "Well, if I'm going to survive, either I'm going to be the world's greatest side man guitar player." I knew that, you know, just playing guitar with no vocals, unless you're Jeff Beck, it's rare. If you want to get some attention, and you're playing the guitar, and it's your group, you know, you got to sing. So, I'd write one little tune, two little tunes, five tunes, then, because I would open the show, I do three or four of them first. You do a piece of a song. Then you call him out, and he'd steal the show. Then you do three songs, four songs, and now he's watching and watching his student become a man.

Then, you get to the point where you get a call, "Hey, Fernando, do you want to play this festival? Do you want to play so and so?" So, you don't have to take your big brother, not out of spite, but because you can handle it. Your training wheels are off. And then we got to the point where it was like a mutual respect.

By the end of his life, man it was so beautiful, because I had a play going, called *I Was There When the Blues Was Red Hot*. There was some funding and some love and some encouragement. We could bring it back, you know. It tells the whole story of the south side blues man from Theresa's. It was an interactive comedy, dramatic comedy. It ran at the Palm Tavern in 1998, and it's all documented, even in my archive pieces here at the Center for

Black Music Research. It was supposed to run two days, October 2nd and October 9th, 1998, two Fridays. And it was so successful it ran for 256 performances, almost three years. In addition to at the Palm Tavern, we got invited, the whole cast... One night we did the play down there, and only one person came to the play. The cast, they were looking at me and it was like, "Hey, man." First there was not nobody there. Like the show was supposed to start at nine, and I said "Okay, we'll wait until 9:30."

One girl came in about 9:25. They were like, "Hey man, are we going to run it?" And I say, "Yeah, we going to run it." So, we ran the play, and the little girl, she was a student at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, all documented. Her professor—I didn't know who he was and still don't know who he is—saw the play, and he sent her down to recruit. They invited the whole cast—so we got paid—and they flew the whole cast to Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio. The mayor's office of special events had the play, and we ran it right by Picasso, by the Bird, the lady or whatever it was called. We ran it outside, publically, there. We ran it at Chicago State; we ran it at Olive Harvey, you know, with no budget.

Sharpe: So, you wrote this and then performed in it, as well.

Jones: Yeah, yeah I wrote it and performed it. It came out of my life experiences as a blues' guy. One day I went and saw a matinee play, down at the Goodman Theatre. I don't even know if it was the new theater or the old theater. So, whichever one it was... Maybe it was still the old one. It was in 1998. I'd been in a play the fall—let me see; how did the year go? So, I saw this play in the spring of 1998. Yeah, because I wrote my play, and by June, I was down at the Checkerboard, when it was on 43rd, with actors doing readings.

So, the fall before that, I was in a play at the ETA Creative Arts Foundation, and like most people with a healthy ego say, "Man, I want to act one day." So, you pray to God. You say, "God I want to act." But really, what you mean, you want to be in some film with some super model or something, with very little dialogue. But mine came in the form of theatre. This one guy had me come out a couple years earlier to do a reading, no, to play.

They were trying to do a Robert Johnson piece. During this time, it was coming up on... yeah, Robert Johnson died in 1937. So, fifty years later, '37, '47, '57, '67, '77, 87, so, yes, around '87 or so, it was like his fiftieth year dead or something, some big thing. Around the time, when they were doing this reading, they needed a guitar player. So, I would hang out with a lot the actors and stuff, because I had a lot of female friends that were actresses, right. But they didn't know very many young blues guys. So, they had me to come, and I played. And, you know, he said, "Okay, play now." I played while the girls be reading stuff. The play never got mounted, but he remembered me for this other play. So, this other play at ETA was called *The*

Lifting. I played this blind character that played guitar, and I never left the stage.

I never had an acting class or anything like that. Now, keep in mind I prayed to act, right? So, I went out and auditioned. I saw all these actors that can act, man. Then I guess ego kicked in, and I said, “Man, I don’t want to come in and get smoked.” So, I looked over my lines right quick, and I guess I knocked it out of the park because... I don’t think that I was as good as anybody else. I think I was probably middle stream. There were a lot of guys that were better than me, but I played guitar. But, in the interim, I got good, because he told me, “It’s not going to be a lot of lines.” That was on a Monday. Wednesday, he called me and told me I had the part.

When I got the part, and I got the script, I called my Lisa Jeffrey. I said, “Lisa, how do you study lines? What do you do?” And she said, “Well, you got to read the story, know what it says, and, if it’s written well, it kind of makes sense.” Man, we rehearsed for six weeks. That was probably the scariest time in my life. I did well, and I ended up getting a *Jeff* nomination for it and a *Black Theatre Alliance* nomination, so it turned out well. So, the acting bug bit me.

Fast forwarding to the spring of ’98, I went and saw a play, and I said, “Man, I could do that.” I said, “People are just writing stories about what they know.” So, I drove... I had a bad Cougar. I had a black Cougar XR7. It had, like, a soft half top. I had black tinted windows, black interior, Vogue tires—

Sharpe: Everyone loves their car, don’t they?

Jones: ...and man I was something. So, I pulled up next to the Checkerboard. It was, like, probably 4:00 or so. You know, people would be down there, and they would be playing cards. I didn’t even get out the car. I said, “Man, a lot of people that I knew are dead.” It was like 1998. Now, looking into the future, my brother did not know it at the time, that my brother would be dead in a year, at the end of October, 1999. Well, at that time, my cousin Lefty Dizz had passed away. It seemed like these guys were dying, like, once a year. In 1990 or so, Theresa, that owned Theresa’s Lounge, she passed. Junior Wells, who called me his godson, he died in the middle ‘90s. I can’t remember who died first, him or Dizz. I’m going to go back and look it up, but I think that Junior passed before Dizz or something. I’m not sure. My main man and one of my mentors, Willie Dixon, died in ‘92. So, it was like, as I was growing and coming into manhood and coming into musicianship manhood, my mentors are dying a year, a year, a year.

So, now I’d seen this play at the Goodman Theatre that was about the black guys in the Titanic or something, you know. No, they were in jail. They were in jail, and they had made a reference to the Titanic or something like that. I said, “Well, hell, I can do that.” So, I sat in my black Cougar, in front of

the Checkerboard, and I said, “You know, somebody needs to hear this story.” It’s kind of like *Mother of Necessity*, where we be.

So, I went home, and I looked in my book, *I Was There When the Blues Was Red Hot*, and I took my book apart. I made my book the story of what I saw growing up, Theresa’s Lounge, the Checkerboard, you know, even the character, Theresa, is in the play, my brother, Foree, Lefty Dizz. There’s a character that’s a combination of Junior Wells and couple of other guys, you know. And it tells the story. It addresses the concern of race that you spoke of. It addresses the concerns of the inter-racial relationship taboo, in the *Blues*.

It was received very, very well, and it told the story. A cousin of mine was murdered in the back of Theresa’s Lounge, around 1974. My cousin, Flicker, who was the son of my mother’s sister that I spoke of in Mississippi. Playing too much with his best friend and bullying cost him his life. So, there’s even a murder mystery in the play. It was dynamite. But that’s my life, man. That’s my life.

Sharpe: Now, before we give up completely on your grandparents and parents in Mississippi, I have one more question. Did they ever get exposed to any of the great musicians—

Jones: Oh, definitely, definitely.

Sharpe: ...who were there. Did they talk about seeing them and—

Jones: My grandfather, George Dean McNairy, was friends with Howlin’ Wolf. I don’t know if Howlin’ Wolf was born in Aberdeen or if he was born in Prairie, Mississippi; they’re right next to each other. But, Aberdeen claims him, and my grandfather was from Aberdeen.

See, Aberdeen was considered to be the city, compared to Prayer...Prairie, but they would call it Prayer, Mississippi. My mother’s brother, Uncle George, who was—I don’t know if Uncle George was older than...I’m saying L-u-c-k, like Ducky Luck, but sometimes it sounds like somebody saying, “Ain’t luck.” Her birth name was Elizabeth. Aunt Luck is the oldest; Uncle George is next; my mother is next, and then Uncle Earl is the one after them.

So, my Uncle George married my Aunt Rose, and Aunt Rose’s people were from Prairie, Mississippi. They called it Prayer. So, Prayer was like the country. It was like the people in Aberdeen looked down, almost, on... Well, I say “looked down,” but for somebody from Prayer, Mississippi to marry somebody from Aberdeen, it was a step up. (laugh) No less important or anything like thing that, and our family is still tight, full of Aberdeen and Prairie, Mississippi folks.

So, yeah, Howlin' Wolf and my grandfather were tight, and it wasn't because Howlin' Wolf was Howlin' Wolf. It was because, you know, if you lived somewhere, where else could you go? You know, as black folk... For example, when my mother and father, when they lived in Chicago, they lived on Lake Park. Most blacks that lived on the south side of Chicago, lived in the area called Bronzeville. That was pretty much no wider than from State Street to Cottage Grove, maybe. Then, certain parts, maybe, stretched over to the lake, maybe, okay? And from 22nd Street to, probably, 63rd, maybe, you know, stretching it a little, okay? So, if you've got 22nd to, let's say, to 63rd, 43 blocks, eight, sixteen, twenty-four, thirty... wait, let's see, 22nd, 32nd, 42nd, 52nd, 62nd, just say forty blocks, divided by eight. So, five miles long and, maybe, two miles wide is the rectangle shaped box that the blacks lived in.

So, now, just keep in mind, in that same city, in the 1940s and 50s and early 60s, you had, you know... Muhammad Ali lived in Chicago; you had Joe Lewis; you had Sam Cooke; you had Two Gun Pete, who was an infamous police officer; you had Doctor LaRouche, you know, the different black doctors. You had all of them. So, where are they going to live? They had to live next to each other. My mother and them, the building they lived in—which was probably a kitchenette—Sam Cooke lived in the same building that they lived in. He's even got a song named *Ernestine* that was inspired by the name of my oldest sister, Ernestine, because he thought she was such an adorable little girl or whatever. But, I'm sure the song was probably about a woman. It sounds braggadocios, but that's just like my students. If one of my students turns out to be a famous rock star, maybe like, "Man, you knew him?" Well, he had to go to school somewhere, so it's no big deal. But, yes, that's in most of our black families. You know, our stars are not isolated. It's not like they are on an island, and then they show up on the *Dick Clark Show* or *Soul Train*, and the only people they know are famous people.

So, to answer your question, it was all throughout. The insurance man, the Negro League baseball players, they all... the Harlem Globe Trotters that were from Chicago and not Harlem, where they going live? You know, the ones on the south side, and I'm sure then there are many great stories of folks that lived on the west side. There are a lot of famous people who, you know... We didn't have access to this entire city. Even in the late '70s, as a high school student, we would go places... You don't want to cry, "race" when you're black, and it seems like people are picking on you. But, when you have lived a life, where almost every step of your life...

In my situation, as a black male from the south side of Chicago, you are auditioning. The way you look, you're auditioning. If you go into the store, maybe the detective was following everybody, but if he follows you, it's because you've been conditioned that way. Sometimes, it's just like... You look at this case, you know, with Trayvon [Martin] and stuff. I wasn't there holding the light, but that type of thing happens. Maybe he attacked the man,

and the man was defending himself. But, more than likely, if the guy hadn't followed the little boy, he would be alright.

I've had that happen to me. A block from my house, I had a 1992 Cadillac Coup de Ville that I just got rid of in October. Beautifully kept car, tinted windows, permit to have my tinted windows, the stuff, all the paperwork, almost twenty year old car. Obviously, it was paid for. It's only worth a couple grand, right? Now in my neighborhood, regular black neighborhood. On my street...Everybody owns the house on my street, no better, no worse than anybody else's neighborhood. Coming home from work from Columbia, get off work, class over at 9:20. I'm talking—

Sharpe: When was this now?

Jones: This was probably a year ago, definitely within two years ago. So, when I come to my house, I cut off of a main street and cut under the viaduct. I've got this police radar. I hate for them to trail me. I'm paranoid, and most of my friends are police officers. I had two police officer buddies to fall in the line of duty, Eric Lee, Billy Penn, two dear friends of mine. One of my friends, Billy Rapier, was a teacher at the academy. Most of the police officers that are under forty years old, he taught them. He trained them.

I cut up under the viaducts, and when I cut up under the viaduct, I was going south. I made a left turn, and I was coming under the viaduct, going west. As soon as I turned under the viaduct, the police was going north on the street that I could see, up under the viaduct. So, as I was turning in, I could see the front of his car. So, just say, by the time I counted to two, his car had disappeared, of course, because he was turning, up under the same viaduct, going east. I'm going west, under the viaduct, parallel. He's going west. By the time he gets to the end of the viaduct, I have made a right, to go down the street, to go back south on the other street. He makes a U-turn and comes up, under the viaduct, at a high rate of speed.

I'm just driving about twenty miles an hour; I've got a Cadillac; I'm a block from home. I've never committed a crime in my life. I probably haven't even thrown a punch in my life, you know. I'm no better or no worse than anybody else, but I go out of my way to stay off the police radar. So, by the time I turn the corner, by the time I probably could have counted to three, lights were flashing, and he was in behind me.

Now, keep in mind, I was like Mother Theresa that day; I had just left school, okay? So, white police officer, all black neighborhood, 1992 Cadillac in 2010 or 2011, a twenty year old car, okay? Now, this is what he told me. He had the bright light on, and the street that we were on was dimly lit. I turn on all the lights of my car, turn the windows down, put my hands on the steering wheel. Got my ID and stuff where I can see them. Car is pristine clean. I don't smoke; I don't drink, so I didn't have to worry about putting

reefer out and all this kind of stuff, nothing, okay? Macintosh, \$2,000 computer, in my trunk, credentials, everything showing that I just got off work.

So, he gets out the car. I'm looking in the mirror, because these guys can take your life, or they can take your freedom, which is probably worse than taking your life, for something you didn't do. So, I look in the mirror. The light is blinding me, and I see him come around, like the silhouette breaking the light. He's got his nine millimeter out and his flashlight, pointed at me, Fernando Jones, a forty something year old non-criminal, in a twenty year old, clean car. It wasn't hopped up on rims, I didn't have neon glowing from the back. My tags were not expired. My license, nothing was expired.

He told me...I said, "Officer what did I do?" Staying calm, knowing that physically I couldn't beat him. I'm not a violent type person anyway, so I wouldn't even know how to get out the car and wrestle him to the ground and hold him until the police come. So, what can you do? You've got to just be cool. And I said, "Officer, what did I do?" He said, "Be quiet." And then, he came around with a nine millimeter.

I don't know if you've ever had a gun pointed at you, and you didn't start it; it wasn't deserved, you know. I point a gun at you, and I drop mine. I look, and you got yours. I go, "Okay, it's fair. I quit." But, somebody that's licensed to do whatever it is to you, and the police station is right around the corner from my house. So, what do you do? You start thinking, in a split second, where—you feel guilty—where was I? Where did I just come from? Who did I just talk to? What was the last phone call? Okay, I was at work. Who can verify? Oh, wow, if they take me to jail, the chairman of the department is going to find out, and I'm going to look like a bad guy. You think all this, as me, as a black guy. [You've] Got to be guilty, because why would they stop you? You wore that hat cocked; you did something. You played the blues; you did something that just finally caught up to you.

His reasoning was, somebody stole a car in the neighborhood, okay? A Cadillac Coupe de Ville is rare car, okay? That's two doors. How many twenty-year old rare, blue, Spring Addition—and it wasn't a regular Coupe de Ville it was a Spring Edition—how many rare, blue, Spring Edition... Which car came out of Detroit, and it probably went straight to the west coast, okay? How many 1992 Spring Edition, Cadillac Coupe de Villes, with tinted windows, in the same neighborhood, could exist, even if the neighborhood was a mile by a mile? And most neighborhoods might be what he can see, the neighborhood. How many identical cars are stole that are twenty years old? So, that was a fishing experiment. Then he saw...Then, his thing for letting me go, "Oh, okay I see the keys in your car." That means that I didn't steal the car.

I couldn't see his badge, but I called my buddies at the police station to let them know that they had a bad cop. And unfortunate for me, I couldn't see the number on the car. I couldn't see the license plate, because I was blinded. But it was a white police officer, you know, thirty-five to thirty-eight years old, perfect condition, vest, muscles, gun, mace, flashlight, black neighborhood. He could have killed me. Dark street, I got a hat on, so I'm a criminal, you know; I'm a gangster. Just got off from Columbia, teaching a group of kids, the only blues program in the country, and I'm treated like a criminal.

Those are things that are part of my American experience that we face that's a constant reminder of how important the blues is as a culture and, as well as a music, to document these things. Just like Hip Hop, you know. We in the Midwest was having the same type of run-ins with the police. Not just because... Some people deserve to have the police to come, you know, chase them down the street and knock them in the head. I'm scared of criminals too, black, white, Asian, Hispanic, whatever, because I'm not a bad guy. I hope police knock every bad guy in the head that does something to somebody, because I've been victimized in my life. But, when those guys, Too Short—well, not Too Short so much—but Eazy E and Ice Cube, you know, they were documenting police brutality. And those of us that weren't being chased by the police, we just thought that it was entertainment. But the young brothers in New York understood what they were talking about.

Later, as a grown man, I understand what they were talking about, because, you know, it's like the Steely Dan song and the Kid Charlemagne song. When he's talking, he said, "Did you realize you're Italian in their eyes?" It's meaning, in this particular scenario, you're nothing. It's like me. Do you realize, no matter how much I achieve, by the wrong set of eyes, I'm black first, you know, and maybe black criminal, not man, definitely not educated man.

Those are things that you go with. You learn to embrace them, and you do everything you can to, not necessarily, not so much try to destroy that stereotype, but try to open the door, so that other kids that may not have the tools that you have to be able to fight it and to defend, you know, and to be able to defend that lack of protective coloration that you have. B. B. King's song, when he says, "Everybody wants to know why I sing the blues," you know, tells a story. It tells a story.

Sharpe: Can we go back for a minute to your childhood? You were born in Chicago?

Jones: Born in Chicago, Cook County Hospital. I was born five months premature on February 7th. I don't when I came home, but I was three pounds, five ounces. I don't know if that was my birth weight or that's the weight that I was when they allowed me to leave the hospital. They told my parents not to even give me a name because...that I wouldn't make it. My mother, who ran a cleaners

in Skokie, every day came by the hospital to see me, every day, when nobody else would, every day. That's where I'm from.

Sharpe: And you lived right in Chicago, as a kid?

Jones: Um hum. I grew up at 55 East 60th Street, the street over from Betsy Ross Grammar School. Now there's a beautiful play lot there. I always said, "Man, I want to be rich enough to be able to go there and build a house, where the apartments that we grew up in."

The apartments that we grew up in were really interesting, because they were a product of white flight. And white flight, for those you may not be familiar, is like during the late '60s, when there's a lot of turmoil, with the assassination of President Kennedy and Malcom X's fall and Doctor Martin Luther King's fall, you know. Black folks reacted certain ways, burning things, looting and so on and so forth. Then, whites started moving to the suburbs. As a result, they left a lot of properties that sometimes were in disrepair or were repaired nicely, but they didn't want to live around us.

In the apartment that we lived in we had—now, you know, the fear of the mind here—imagine looking at one of those old b-rolled, black and white films, where you see little black kids on a beautiful day, playing by the fire hydrant, little black girls with Vaselined faces, skipping rope and everything is magical. Everything is so peaceful. Then you go in the hallway, and you have marble staircases.

Sharpe: This was your apartment?

Jones: Right. We had marble staircases, all the way through the building, marble staircases, you know, marble. They didn't build that for blacks from Mississippi. Draper and Kramer were the landlords. I don't think that Draper and Kramer had our building at the time, but it had my play cousins' building that was right across the alley. They used to have little blue signs, Draper and Kramer. It was all through Hyde Park and throughout, because Hyde Park ran into our little park of town. I guess ours' was called Washington Park or something. They had marble staircases, man. So, that was really interesting, and you'd go through the apartment and, you know, lead paint generation.

But my mother and father kept the apartment...my mother, primarily, kept the apartment looking good, looking clean. My mother would even mop the hallway and stuff. That wasn't her job, but she was just that type of woman. Then you go to the backyard, and they had coal, that the coal man, he would drop coal in the backyard, and then, you know, the handyman from the building he would shovel it into the furnace or the boiler, whatever it's called. The results of that, you'd have, like, these particles in the backyard. So, you go from an Italian marble staircase to the backyard, where it is a grassless, a hundred yard plot of land that has different fragments of broken glass, in the

backyard. That's where we played baseball, and that's where we played football, and that's where we played red rover, red rover send so and so over. No one ever, to my recollection or in my presence, ever got cut by any of the glass.

Music was always around. For the bigger boys, like my brother, Greg, they had a band. I was like everybody else, wanting to be an athlete, but always had guitar and wanted to be a musician, because I knew it was just something magical about music. So, it all comes back around, you know, to the music, some kind of way, in my lifestyle. I talked earlier about, when I was saying, Greg would take me places. Foree would take me down to...and his nickname was Ninny. So, Ninny would take me down to, like, Ninny jar, not like a dope Ninny, but he would take me down to—

Sharpe: Now, he was the one that was twenty years older than you?

Jones: Yeah, yeah. He took be down to Theresa's, and that was, "Hey, I ought to take my baby brother down." I would love it. Now, I tell you, he would be killing me, man, you know, as a big brother in the band. But when we were on stage he say, "Mama's baby boy!" You could even hear...He has that magical moment, in a song that I wrote for him that's on file here at the Center, called *On Top* that I wrote for him. So, when he's singing the song, and then, when it's time for my solo, he say, "Mama's baby boy!" There was just so much, so much pride and so much love, you know, with him on that.

But he took me down to Theresa's Lounge, and he sat me in the booth, and Theresa would sit me in the booth, because I was a kid. I sit in the back, with my little glasses on, and watch what was happening. I'd watch the sharp player looking guys, dressed with the big hats and the shoes and the loud color clothes. I watched the foxy chicks, man. I watched the guys with the pretty guitars, and I'd listen to that music, man. And I'd say, "Man, when I get home, I'm pulling my guitar out." I tell people that don't understand, something that people do understand, with all due respect to my Italian brothers and sisters. You know, you see, like, the mob movies, and it's family oriented and "family dominated."

That's how, you know, Theresa's Lounge was for me. It was like being part of...It was a family. And a family is different from a "gang." A gang, you got to get beat up to get into it. But a family, you're in it. There's no audition. You can't get in it; you're in it. You're born into it, you know. That was my indoctrination, into the blues. And like I say, I'm sure that they had no idea that they were grooming me to be me. When I wrote my book, my brother, he was so proud. He carried it around because I'm him, you see.

Sharpe: So, how many brothers and sisters did you have in your home?

Jones: I have two sisters and three brothers.

Sharpe: And you said before that—

Jones: And my nephew plays—my sister, Ernestine, who I told you the Sam Cooke connection—my nephew, Chip, is a year younger than I am, and we've been playing together since we were kids. So, it's like having a brother/nephew/best friend, you know. And his grandfather, which is Herman Ratliff, Senior, which is my brother-in-law Herman's father, played with Howlin' Wolf, another connection, independent of my grandfather's knowing of him because he came up in Arkansas. Mr. Ratliff came up in Earl, Arkansas, which is a little off the beaten path, when you cross the bridge going from Memphis to Arkansas. Earl... If I'm not mistaken, probably within twenty minutes or so, you're right by Earl. So, when you're from Earl, you go to Memphis. That's just like us just going from 95th Street, coming downtown to party.

But Mr. Racliff and Mrs. Racliff, they had so many children until he didn't want to go on the road and leave his family, because he had seen white folks take advantage of black women. Even though he may not have been able to physically stop that, or maybe he could have been, he knew, had he not been there... Not so much... It wasn't the whole thing of adultery, you know, because people are going to do what they want to do. It was the whole thing of rape and the power of... You know, you're living on somebody's plantation or whatever, share crop piece of land. It's not share cropped anymore, but the good old boys still have those ideals. So, they come by. Your wife has got, you know, six or seven kids, stair steps, and Mr. Charlie come by. Charlie Bennehard was one of the plantations that was next to where my brother-in-law was born, which is the plantation that James Cotton comes from. So you see, all this stuff ties in, but that's just the way it was.

I'm sure, just like my nephew's grandfather, Mr. Ratliff, has that story, there are probably a hundred other guys that have those same stories, because people like B. B. King and Howlin' Wolf and those guys, they would travel through the towns, and they would get pick up bands. You know, if I'm playing with you today, there was no Internet; there was no television, for the most part, for most of these people to be able to look and see what was going on, because they couldn't afford it. If you go into a town, you know, people feel, well, hell, I got a record out. Anybody can play drums. "You a drummer boy?" "Yeah," you know, "Let's go on the road." It wasn't like, if you couldn't go on the road as a guitar player to back-up, Howlin' Wolf, Howlin' Wolf's band would die. Obviously, it didn't.

That's just the way that it was, because back then, black folks were really all that black folks had. They were all they had. So, they depended upon each other. It was a fraternity, you know, because there was a lack of proper education. There was a lack of other resources. So, they did the best they could. They knew that they had to depend on each other. And that brings up another point, a lot of older blacks that I've talked to in my life like Gerri

Oliver, who would probably be ninety-five years old if, in fact, she's still alive.

Gerri Oliver was the owner of Gerri's Palm Tavern on 47th Street that owned before her by Mr. Jim Knight who was called—(Problems with mike)

Okay, we're picking back up? Jim Knight was the first owner of the Palm Tavern, and according to Mama Gerri, after prohibition, he was the first club to have a liquor license. So, Mama Gerri was telling me, coming up, right on 47th Street, which was the downtown for the blacks, because it was almost like a self-governed strip that went east and west. She said that segregation, in one situation, was bad, because it kept people separated. But she and many others have said that segregation, in one way, was good because blacks had everything that they needed within the community, kind of like our Chinese brothers and sisters, here in Chicago in Chinatown. I think they said that the dollar that's spent in the Chinese community, over in what we affectionately call Chinatown, passes twenty hands before it leaves the community or something like that. Well, that's how it was when blacks lived in Bronzeville.

It's de facto segregation now, where we live in different pockets, because we want to or because we're prejudice or because we don't have education or whatever. There was a power that we/they had when segregation was happening. And they said, when desegregation came, then, of course, it took the money out the black community, because it allowed you to not have to shop on 47th Street.

You could down to Marshall Fields, and I'm sure people at Marshall Fields would always say that you could always have come down there, if you had some money. But the reality, most of the people that were going to Marshall Fields, that were black, were probably servant type people that were picking up something... They were walking with the lady that they were with, to help carry her bags or to help assist her in some way. Proof of that, in the '70s, when we were little, you go to Marshall Fields, with a pocket full of money, and your parents are hardworking from Mississippi, just glad to go downtown to get a green bag, with the Marshall Field logo on it, because you have arrived. The detective follows you around the store, and the guy that's not the same color as you, is stealing all the ties in the store, because the guy's watching you.

Sharpe: You think these factors you were talking about, the kind of the cohesiveness of the black community, helped maybe both preserve and nurture the specifically black musical?

Jones: Well, yeah, I think it did, because we were always able to find refuge in the music. Even as an adult... I'm thinking now, I went to New York. I had a girlfriend in New York City, midtown Manhattan, and I went to a store. And you know, just a store, a general store, I guess you'd call it. You know how

those stores are in New York. They're long and not that wide. But this store here might have had three little aisles in it. And they were probably stacked, maybe five and half feet high, with product or something. The store, I mean the square footage—I'm not good at square footage, but the store probably... Dry wall is four by eight, so I imagine it would be four, eight, twelve, sixteen. It was probably about sixteen feet wide and twenty-eight to thirty-six feet long. Now this is a bedroom, okay. It's a large bedroom. So, I'm in the store three hours, and every aisle I went to, I looked over and saw the guy. So the guy he was going... Now, I know, maybe the guy was ripped off, so it was like we were playing Pong. So, when I went to aisle... For those that are listening, Pong was just like the little video game that you plug into your TV, and it was tennis. The little ball would come back, and you would have a paddle. That's kind of... And I was the ball. So, every time I went; he went. I was pissed off, man, you know.

So what I did was I got a whole bunch of stuff. I got about \$50 or \$60 worth of stuff. I went up to the counter. He rang it up, and I pulled out all my money. So, I'd had some money. I put my money back in my pocket, and then I walked out the store, so that I could teach him a lesson. I taught him a lesson, that I was not a thief. And I taught him a lesson, that this is \$50 worth of stuff that could have been bought. I showed you I had the money. Even though I probably just went in there just to buy just \$10 worth of stuff. But he saw that I had [money], you know what I'm saying? I was not dressed particularly bad wear. I didn't look like a profile of what they would profile. I probably didn't even have my hat on, just a slim, black dude in New York, with his old lady, going to the store in New York. You know, it's like, I'm probably the least fearful looking person that has ever walked in New York City, and he's following me, watching me. You know, he's behind the counter, following me, behind his own counter in the store.

So, those things, man, either you jump off a bridge, or you will find solace in your music and write about it and find a way to laugh at it. But it never lets you forget. So the good thing is that, as long as they never let you forget, they'll always be a song, some kind of a way. It may not necessarily have to be a horrible song or a bad song, but it's always there. Like you're talking about race, and race has definitely has something to do with it. You know, if you're a black guy, and you go somewhere, and if you talk well, they say you're articulate.

I've never heard somebody say, "Mitt Romney is so articulate." He is, but I've never heard them say it, or "Barack Obama is articulate." If that's the King's English that's how people say... If that's the standard, there is no adjective that goes with it, if that's how it's supposed to be, you understand. But there's always some excuse for blacks qualifying. We're always reminded, you know. One of the ways that we can combat it is through... Free speech, of course, sounds so cliché, but you know, music is part of that, part of that free speech.

In music, you can be Superman, from our perspective. You can be wealthy, even when you're not, in this perspective. You can be good looking; you can be tall; you can be bulletproof, to the point where you are not discriminated against, whatever. You know what I'm saying? You can be toothless and have the world's most beautiful smile, at the same time, in your music. You can be disfigured and good looking, like Denzel Washington, you know, or Tom Sellek, in music. So, it's a way for us that we can reinvent ourselves. It's a world.

Sharpe: Where did you go to school?

Jones: De La Salle High School, St. Anselm's Elementary School, University of Illinois at Chicago and National Louis University.

Sharpe: Did you study music at any of those?

Jones: Nope.

Sharpe: What did you study?

Jones: Hey look, I'm like an old blue's man now. It's all natural! It's natural, brother; it's all natural.

Sharpe: (laughter)

Jones: At De LaSalle, I took a fond interest in graphic design, so I learned how to... In addition to the other subjects, you know, they had, like, the little break out stuff, where you can do... We had an auto shop; we had a wood shop. I was scared of cutting my fingers off, so I didn't do woodshop. And I could draw, so I looked into the graphic design component there. At the University of Illinois at Chicago, fast forwarding, a degree in communication design. I was at art and architecture department and minor in black studies. In National Louis, my whole education component stuff, you know.

But music, man, was just something that... it had always been there. And then, I just... I always wanted to let people know that I never stopped playing. It's something that I'm proud of. It's just like growing up in the Bronx and being a New York Yankees fan. You say, "Hey, I was born here, I'm a Yankee's fan," and they never let you forget. As a guitar player and a blues guy, I never left the blues. You know, I can funk; I can play rock and roll; I could even play some stuff for hip hop people. But I'm a blues guy. And I started, and that's all I know. I've always... Even though I got my first guitar at six, I would play my brother's stuff, when they would leave stuff. It was just like a treasure chest, man. Look, when my brother Greg... Now keep in mind, the south side of Chicago, you know, no fancy apartments. It was just a living room; it was a dining room that we had... it was a dining room/bedroom, and then there was one—were there two bedrooms? Maybe it was two; I'll have to ask my sisters. Maybe it was two bedrooms. I know it

was one, but my mind shows, by the bathroom, there might have been...because we moved from that apartment when I was about in sixth grade. But, anyway, and a kitchen, so a small apartment. But what my brother would do, they would have what they would call rehearsals. They wouldn't call them practice, even everything just sounded so official. So, they would rehearse.

Sharpe: How much older was Greg?

Jones: Greg's about eight years older than me. Greg played the Wurlitzer organ and the Hammond b3. So, they didn't say, "practice," they rehearsed. They had rehearsals. At Betsy Ross, which was in back of us, a public school, they had a social center which was...I guess they had games and music and stuff like that, where the kids wouldn't have to be on the street. So, anyway, when they would practice...and they boys, and they were chasing girls and were dabbling in marijuana or whatever they were dabbling in, you know. They wouldn't be in the house all day. They'd practice a couple hours, and little Fernando would be all eyes looking, you know.

Since there was a mother and father in the house, a man in the house, you know, people aren't going to break in when, you know, there's a guy in the house. That's like a presence. That's like a lion. So, they would leave the equipment sitting right there, or they would move in his room, so my mother came home, she wouldn't be fussing. But his organ was right there in the living room.

That's something that I wish that I would have kept up, because I was able to play the organ a little bit, because he used to play the stuff off the early Santana records, because, keeping this in a historical perspective, Greg, he played bass drums, guitar and organ. But the organ was his main thing. And in the late '60s, early '70s, if you didn't have a keyboard in your band, you didn't have a band. In the mid '70s to late '70s, if you didn't have horns in your band, you didn't have a band. And in the '80s, if you didn't have a synthesizer in your band, you didn't have a band. I would watch how they would set the stuff up. They would leave, and I'd get that big brother speech, you know, whether I was being cursed at or whatever, not to bother it. I was going to bother it anyway. But, especially since he told me not to, you know what I did.

Sharpe: (laughter)

Jones: I'd be playing. Then, my Uncle Jackson didn't want them to catch me or kill me. So, fast forward, two years later, he bought me my own guitar, because, I guess, older people can see stuff. I think he saw that I really was serious. So, he took me to Goldblatts, right there on 47th and Ashland, and I got a little old, not old, but it was a Sunburst Teisco guitar. It was probably made out of plywood, and little shoebox amplifier. Man, I was a rock star when I got there.

You couldn't tell me nothing. You couldn't tell me nothing. I used to play with my thumb. I probably, you know, sounded like a scratchy needle or something, but I was like a little ant, moving a rubber tree plant. I thought I was happening, you know. And so my thoughts finally caught up with my ability to do it.

Sharpe: So, how did your brothers learn to play?

Jones: My brother, Greg, learned how to play. He took lessons over at Lyon & Healy. That's how he learned to play the organ. I don't know how he learned how to play the guitar. I believe he may have been self-taught, because he was kind of unorthodox. I think a keyboard playing musician is probably the most brilliant of all the instrumentalists, because the fact that they can split their brain, you know, theoretically, in two parts, you know, have the left hand doing one thing, even though you're doing the same thing with your guitar. But it's different. I think that his understanding of the scale and the notes matching... From many of the people that I know that are guitar and keyboard players... If I knew a hundred musicians... Well, let's be realistic.

Just say, of maybe fifteen people that I know and have known in my life, that are guitar players and keyboard players and are pretty good, of that fifteen, I would say, easily, ten, eleven of them were keyboard players first and made the transition to guitar and made that easier. And I would say, the other four that were guitar players turned keyboard players, may not necessarily been that successful as the keyboard players, that were keyboard/guitar players. I think there's a brilliance in that. In going back in time, like I'm Wolfgang Amadeus, you know, and this follows a musician too, right? Who was the father, son? There was a Bach's father, maybe... I think it was Bach. Bach was the one that composed a piece when he was about four something. I forgot one of them.

Sharpe: Mozart, did too.

Jones: Mozart! Well, who had a Johann Sebastian Bach? Wait that's Bach. People at home [addressing the reader], it's been a long life, and sometimes I get my people mixed up. That's why this research is important. You do the math. But, anyway, I think that's why people that master the keyboard at young ages, they do great at math. It stimulates the brain and the whole bit, because it brings out a brilliance.

Now, like I say, cause I used to hunt and pick out those Santana songs and the Booker T & the MG's songs, *When Johnny Comes Marching In*. (sings a melody) I used to play (sings a melody) all that and all that little Santana stuff, you know, *The Black Magic Woman*. I played all that, but I had a weak left hand. But I could play the melody and play those parts with my right hand. Now I can still hunt and peck on the keyboard, but I'm not as familiar with the keyboard as I think that I should be, could be or need to be.

That's one thing that I really wish that I could master or just be a little bit better at.

Sharpe: You mentioned the graphic arts. What were your other interests, when you were young?

Jones: Like every other little American boy, baseball, then basketball, but I was never one of those kids that was like, "I'm going to the NBA" or "I want to go play professional baseball." It was just something to do. It was the America pastime, something that we did. We emulated our heroes on TV, and we had a good time.

Girls, you know, as a little boy, I was always trying to figure stuff out. My eye doctor always said I was going to be an engineer, because I'd always almost tear up stuff when I went to his office, "Well, how's this made. How's that..." Just a creative... You know, interested in anything that I can create something out of nothing.

I was a baseball card collector. I was an American boy. I was a baseball card collector; I was a candy eater, you know. We went to the circus. But music was always consistent. Alright, you know, drawing was always consistent, drawing super heroes, creating my own little super heroes, with little names and stuff. Trying to draw portraits, experimenting with color, and then I found a relationship.

It had gotten to the point, if I would draw or paint, where it would be almost musical, because it is a composition. But, in my head it would be, physically, I see the colors, but I hear music, when I paint. So, if I put paint a wrong way, it almost like a composition that's a wrong note. It's like you're writing a pretty good song, where you're trying to make it a great song. I've got an impressionistic piece, here on my phone, on my iPhone that I'll share with you. I'll show you, and you can tell me if you can make out, you know, these people. Here, you can just flip. Then, you can get a chance to see the breadth and the depth of... Can you share with the viewers? A hundred years from now, the audio viewers, can you tell them what you see?

[Jones shows Sharpe his I phone that has pictures of his art pieces]

Sharpe: No, I can't really describe it.

Jones: Okay, move your finger, then scrub it the other way. You'll see another piece. Did it go to another picture?

Sharpe: So, you still keep this up?

Jones: Yeah, those are new; those are new. Those are pieces that are being done to be used as fundraising items for the Blues Camp.

Sharpe: Maybe, when we do a video, we can get some of these on there.

Jones: Sure you can; sure you can. And here's another one of my pieces. Now this is a piece that I show. The pieces that he's looking at, America and our friends abroad, he saw a... Could you identify some of those characters that you saw? Do you know what you saw?

Sharpe: I cannot.

Jones: Okay. One of them was Ray Charles and Mick Jagger, Marilyn Monroe. Here's a face that I'm going to show him, so that he can see my detail, because the pieces that he's looking at, America, they're stylized faces, not necessarily "portraits," but a line that I'm going to call, like, *Rock Heads* or something like that. Where it'd be like faces of famous, you know, rock and movie star folks. I think the last one of the series of this one here will be Miles Davis, because... (hiccup) I hiccup, but that's cool; that's who I am.

Sharpe: (chuckles)

Jones: They said this one piece looks like Miles Davis, so I'm going to try to draw Miles. Hopefully it'll come out alright.

I'll say this, see, I've always been curious about art and music and how to be better. My cousin Lefty Dizz used to always say he was trying to find that missing chord. And I think that's how my life is, and the missing chord could be that great song, because I feel that the greatest songs have always yet to be written. So, I still search for there, still search through art. It's almost a spiritual or a religious, you know, connection between the music and the art world, because it brings a form of peace to me.

It also gives me an opportunity to feel like Superman, you know, because when you singing that way... When you've got your guitar in your hand, for me, when I got my Telecaster in my hand and my Blues DeVille lamp cranked, it's just like riding a motorcycle, man. I am super bad, and there's no other feeling, you know, in the world like that.

A lot of musicians feel that way. You know, you'd hear Michael Jackson say, he used to say that he felt more comfortable on stage than he did in real life. For people that are non-musicians... You know, you can love Michael all you want to. It's really hard to understand, because there's so much wonderful stuff happening in real life. There are parks and flowers and things like that. But, when you are on stage, and it's about you or it's about you supporting another person—

Sharpe: It's something special.

Jones: The jokes you tell... You could tell a joke on stage, and everybody will laugh. That same joke, you can tell to the same people, when the light is not on you,

and it's like, who is that guy with the hat on, you know? It's an amazing feeling. It is a high, without drugs. Some neurologist should do a study on somebody when they're playing music or when playing tennis or basketball or something and compare the brains or the euphoria or whatever, compare that to, you know, people using psychedelic drugs. I bet it would be in that same ballpark, because there's something. Of course, it may not sustain as long as the chemical dependent components, I just mentioned, but it's nothing like it. It's like being able to fly.

Sharpe: Well, you answered one of the later questions I had for you, which is, how do you feel when you're performing?

Jones: Man, that's how I feel. I feel, when I play, you know, I think I'm just a regular looking guy. I came up during the time when, you know, if you were lighter, it worked a little bit to your advantage, so I didn't grow up being called cute and all that kind of stuff. I don't really have a complex, but I'm comfortable with who I am. But, when I'm on stage, I feel cute. I feel handsome. I feel good-looking. You know what I mean? That's how it is. I feel invincible, and most of my colleagues would feel the same way. If you don't feel that way, I feel that you haven't locked in. When you see Buddy Guy play or something, and he gets to a point, it's like an out of body experience. It's almost something like you can't control. That's something that happens to you as a musician, not every time that you play, because some musicians are pretentious. Some musicians are just doing moves and doing things, just to get a reaction or something like that or, even worse, just to get a paycheck.

Why I've never played for money. I get paid to play and to do things. Like now, the money that I get, it goes straight to my foundation. Why? How come I don't play for "money?" Because I started off as a kid. I started off playing because I saw my brothers playing. I started off playing because I wanted to play, because I liked to play. I didn't start off playing like "Man, I need a second income" or "Man, I got to get chicks" or "Man, this is a really good to put my way through college." There's nothing wrong with any of those things, but that's not my formative education when it comes to playing. I really wish that I could barter. I really wish that I could play somewhere and say, "Hey, man, look, instead of paying me \$1,000, just give me a computer; give me a thousand dollar computer. I play here, man, look just paint my car" or whatever.

Sharpe: Can we go back to something you said when you were talking about drawing and looking at colors and hearing music? Could you talk about that a little more?

Jones: Yeah, it's almost symphonic. It comes back to the word, composition. You're being a creator, you know. I'm not going to be blasphemous, and say it's like being like the creator, whoever your creator is that you believe in. But it's the one time and space in your life, where you run it. It's going to be what you

say it is. And see, I don't have children. If I had children and were able to see the birth of a child, maybe I'd be able to say, "Aw, man, that was the most beautiful thing that I'd ever seen." But I don't have that experience, so for me to be able to look at a canvas, and it's blank, to look at a sheet of paper, and it's blank, and I say, "Okay, I want to do something on Jimi Hendrix. Oh, man, I don't have a piece of paper. Let me see if it's on here [referring to his cell phone]. I think they might have... I think I took them off here.

Sharpe: On your phone?

Jones: Yeah, on my other phone. I have two iPhones, my listening public, [addressing the reader] because one of them had to be updated. So, some stuff I'm trying to show Mr. Sharpe is not on here, so you'll have to watch the video. When they do the post production here, when the little bell rings, then you'll have to go to whatever little station that is—

Sharpe: Check it out.

Jones: ...and watch what we are talking about, yeah.

Sharpe: But, you seem to be saying that, when you at visual type art...

Jones: Um, hum.

Sharpe: That you hear music.

Jones: Right.

Sharpe: Now what specifically about—

Jones: Right. I hear a melody, and it could be a rocking melody, you know, or it could be a really pretty melody... If I'm drawing something that's pretty, like an impressionist piece, I hear really pretty. It's almost like I hear flowers. Whatever flowers sound like are the notes that I hear. When I'm playing, when I have that out of body experience... You know, when you set up, you're doing your song, it's not pretentious, but there is a certain amount of rote memory. Okay, this song here has this word first, this second, this third, this fourth, this fifth. Okay, I got a solo here, you know. Somewhere before the end of the song, if you do it right, at some parts of your show there should be some place that you get out of your body, like you're able to look down on your body on the operating table or something like that, where it's just like you lose the "pretentiousness" or the rote memory part of it, and you just go for it. If I hit this note, and it's wrong; it's just wrong. But I don't care, because I'm experimenting. I'm painting.

So, when I'm playing, it's painting. This melody, this stroke goes here; this goes there. Awe, man, that color's not bad; it's bad. Let me erase it by painting some white paint over the paint some more or scraping it off. Is it a

painting composition? Is it an illustration composition? Is the composition that I'm doing on my computer, whatever it is, these colors, because colors balance, you know. There's a balance, just like you're trying to balance shape in a graphic design piece. You know, you're dealing with the negative space and the positive space. If you have an eight and a half by eleven piece of paper, and then you put a black dot, down in the far right hand corner. Since we write left to right, it looks like it has stopped and is comfortable there. You put it in the middle, you get a different effect. You put it at the top certain ways, it looks like it's supposed to follow with the rest of the little dots. But one dot at the bottom, it looks like it's supposed to be there. So, it's just a matter of perception and how you're going to lay this composition out.

Now, you start this composition of music in your head that is a painting. Is it for you? Do you understand it? Okay, you understand it. Now, make it so everybody else can understand it, because they have to consume it, not you. That's a whole other trip, and that takes you on a whole other... Then you come back. What that does, to make them to understand that composition, where you went off, is to do what? Come back to something that is familiar. Come back to where you left from. That's when you tie it back in.

Example, just say if you go see a band, and they're like a jam band. They start off, whether it's *Phish* or something like that, they start off with the melody of a song that you know, and then they go off. Ten minutes, *Grateful Dead*, and they go off. It's like "Gawd, dog, no two shows are the same." And it becomes an experience. Then it comes back to (sings some notes), you know? You know.

Sharpe: It almost sounds like your visual arts stuff and your music are kind interactive, almost in a sense.

Jones: They are; they are. And then, in my head, when I'm watching it with my eyes closed, man, it's just playing a video game, with no form.

Sharpe: Interesting.

Jones: You know, it's the world, you know. I might be nuts, man... Not crazy.

Sharpe: Alright.

Jones: You keep going man. How far are you in your interview? Okay, all right.

Sharpe: But, we're going around. We're covering topics.

Jones: I gotcha; I gotcha.

Sharpe: ...just a different way, which is all good.

Jones: You can take your shoes off, man. You got at least two hours to play with. [addresses the reader] He's clean shaven, America. I'm going to talk to him until he gets some stubble, you know.

Sharpe: I only shaved two hours ago, so we have a ways to go.

Jones: Yeah, I'm going to accelerate the process, you know.

Sharpe: Alright. What was the earliest song you remember hearing?

Jones: Man, that is so hard to tell you, because music was always around. You know, of course, there were songs in nursery school that I remember. But, of course, there were Jimmy Reed songs that I heard, you know. *Wang Dang Doodle* was one that was popular that I heard as a child, whenever it came out. See, I grew up listening to the radio. I grew up listening to WVON, which was just like... That would probably be equivalent MTV for me, you know, forty years ago. So, whatever was on there I listen to, some blues, some rhythm and blues. Then I listened to WLS, which would play, you know, rock and roll. Then I had my brother, Foree, when he come by; his stuff was all blues. My mother's stuff was blues and soul. My brother, Greg's, stuff was blues and rock and roll.

Sharpe: What was the first song you really liked a lot?

Jones: Man, I couldn't tell you, because if I say one, then I will contradict myself, because it was just all day. But I'll do everything I can to think back. That would be really challenging. Maybe if you could form that question in another way, or if you could ask me another question to get the answer that you're looking for. But that would be difficult, because, you know, normally those type of stories... You know, just like I watch Buddy Guy. He came on TV last night on *Chicago Tonight*, and he talked about the first song that he learned how to play. Then, he also talked in his documentary, about the first song, I think, that he heard or the first guitar player that he saw, you know, that played electric, was *Guitar Slim*.

You know, the farther back in time it is, it's easier to do when those things are readily available. If Buddy Guy had grown up in a situation, when Gibson or when Leo Fender and them guys started putting out guitars and then they just gave away two thousand guitars, and it's like, "Oh man, a guitar player!" And at the end of the day, you saw seventeen guitar players. You wouldn't remember number three from number seven, you know. So, it's the same thing.

It's all this stuff that was going on, because music was always played. When my mother cleaned up on Saturday, music was being played. During that time it be like around 11:00 or 12:00, and at the same time, I'm watching *Soul Train*. Before I watched *Soul Train*, I was watching *American*

Bandstand. The night before, I watched the *Midnight Special* at midnight, after that, I watched *Don Kirshner's Rock...*

Sharpe: *Midnight*. It was the *Midnight Show* or something like that, wasn't it?

Jones: Yeah, but it was called *Don Kirshner's* something; it had a name. That's where I first saw *Kiss*, and that blew my mind. *Don Kirshner's Rock Concert* or something. While we talk, I'm going to look it up on here. [checks his smart phone] You just keep talking. I'm just going to look it up, because I want to be enlightened when I talk to these scholars that may not even be born yet.

Sharpe: Now you've talked about this some, but what do you think was the thing that inspired you at an earliest age? Was it your brothers, to do the music, or your parents?

Jones: Oh, definitely, my brothers, definitely, because I loved my brothers, and I still love them, you know, even though Foree's deceased. But I still love them, because they made me. I learned everything from, you know, coming up with a father in the house and coming up with older brothers and coming up with uncles, you have to... They modeled manhood. I know *everything* is an ambiguous word, but I'll use it in this situation. But I learned everything from them.

Sharpe: Beyond music, but music as well?

Jones: Yeah music. You know, I learned how to drive with my brothers. I remember one time all four of us were in the car. When you have... Four is not a large number to have brothers, because you have some people that have... My buddy, Charlie Gator, he's got probably about nine brothers and right about four or five sisters. But it's rare, when the age group is so wide as mine, to have four brothers in one location at one time, when they have nothing in common but music. So, my brother, Marvin, he had a Bonneville and this... Was I in high school? The Bonneville that he had, that was in... That must have been around 1980, 1981. It was black; it was a coupe, if I'm not mistaken—yeah, it was a coup—and it had beige or tan, corduroy seats. It was like the hot, you know, the hot car.

So, they would let me drive, and I was driving. I was in the front. I think Marvin was in the passenger seat, Foree and Greg were in the back seat, and I was happy. I was in the car with three of my heroes. So, now I'm just learning how to drive. I think I had my license, so I was driving. And when I was driving, my thing was, I would lean to the left, because the left hand side of the car is where you are, because it took me a long time to get down to make sure, to try to keep your foot in the center of the expressway, and I still do. Now if I'm center, I almost freak out. You know, I look out and look at the line over there and I look at the mirror and look at the line on my right

hand side, and so I drifted. We're driving down like a side street, and I sideswiped a car. It was like "skreeeeek," but it didn't take any paint off either one, but it was like a three or four second kiss. Man, then we got a couple blocks away. So they said, "Just keep going."

So, they protected me from something that I did that was an accident. We went a couple of blocks down and looked out to make sure that everything was cool. So, they protected as big brothers, and they protected me in a way that my brothers said, "Oh, man, that's alright. Hell, when I was in Nam, I learned how to drive on Uncle Sam." And he said, "We tapped jeeps and stuff all the time." So that made me feel good. A car, a young man in a car, and you going to almost take the paint job off the side of your brother's car, and he said, "Ain't no thing."

Sharpe: Nice.

Jones: People would rather for you to slap their mother and believe you didn't do it than to do something to their car. Ah, man, he didn't slap Mom. Man, you don't mean he slapped it. Did he make a sound or did he just tap? No, he couldn't. But the car, man, you know, you'll get hurt. So, those are the type of memories that were part of growing up that had nothing to do with music. But that was brotherhood.

Sharpe: You may have covered this, talking about the places you went, but what was your first gig or live show that you actually saw?

Jones: Theresa's Lounge, that was the first live show. You know, seeing it... It was probably Junior Wells. My mind has always told me when I first went to Theresa's—It may not have been the first time. It could have been the tenth time, but I was a little kid—and then my brother, he told Junior, he'd say, "Hey man, you know who this is?" You know, like they were bragging on his little brother. He said, "Yeah, I know that little peanut head." And he took his finger (made some sounds) and thumped me on my little, bald head and stuff. So, I remember that. But the first paid concert that I went to see was *Cameo* opened up for the *Jackson Five* at the amp... You know, I always will say this word wrong, because it sounds like wrong the way that it is pronounced. Is it amphitheater? And that sounds so wrong, because we used to say "amplatheater." But, when people say "amphitheater," it's like they're missing something, you know. So, it was the amphitheater. [addresses the reader] So, once again, my listening world, you choose which one you want to use.

Sharpe: (laughter)

Jones: So, I saw that show, and that was something that was interesting. I think that was... My nephew, Chip, picked that show, because he was a *Jackson Five* fan. I was not necessarily a *Jackson Five* fan so much. It was only because the band was led by singing versus featured an instrument, you know. Of course,

Michael Jackson was brilliant, and his brothers were brilliant, but my attraction, you know, was the instruments. Tito, he played different guitars at different times, but he had a white Telecaster guitar he played. I spent half the night looking at that and the other half of the night looking Germaine's p-bass [precision bass], you know. Probably somebody might even have been playing it behind the curtain, far as I know. But that was my amusement.

And then when *Cameo* in... Back then it was about twenty people in *Cameo*. It's like three main members, the last twenty years. They put a band together. But they had on some shiny, gold outfits and stuff. It was an experience, but it didn't keep my attention as well, because I was in love with the guitar, you know. Had it been a rock band or had it been the *Isley Brothers* with Ernie Isley...

Man, could you imagine, my first concert been seeing Ernie Isley and Ernie Isley tend the guitar? Man, I would have been nuts! You know what? I'm going to make a note to myself. For the last six months, I was saying that I've got to try to reach out to Ernie Isley, because I think that Ernie Isley is one of the greatest guitar players to ever live, and I think that he has never got the credit that he has deserved. He was taught by Jimi Hendrix, himself. And quiet as it's kept, I think Ernie is a better guitar player than Jimi Hendrix.

Sharpe: That's saying something.

Jones: Yeah. But you can't beat a ghost, right?

Sharpe: Right. What about the first concert or live show you saw that was blues, do you remember that?

Jones: Well, you know, the stuff down at Theresa's... I can't even think about it, but we paid to go see a blues concert, you know, Theresa's down in 1968. What was the whole question? Was it the first blues concert?

Sharpe: Yes.

Jones: Yeah, I think that's what it would have been. And then, fast forwarding to my undergrad days at the University of Illinois at Chicago, I put on the school's first blues concert. That had Junior Wells, Buddy Guy, my brother, Foree, Magic Slim and the Teardrops, Muddy Waters, Junior; Phil Guy.

Sharpe: Did you get to play in that?

Jones: Yeah, in our band we played. We had two stages set up, so we played in between, you know, in between the set up. I've had a wonderful life, man, you know.

Sharpe: Yeah. Was that well received that concert?

Jones: Oh man, it was smoking. It was a snowy day, and we had... Probably half the house was full. It was February 11th, 1985. But we had a ball. Koko Taylor was on the show, too, all documented.

Sharpe: Got a video of that?

Jones: I don't. You know, that was like four years before everybody had a video camera. My mom passed in—When did she pass?—2001, so it seemed like the day after she passed away, everybody had a video camera. So, you're talking ten, fifteen years, '85, '95. You're talking fifteen years before—'85, '95—Yeah, you're talking about fifteen years before then. Now, did video cameras exist? Of course they did. But they were so big and clumsy, you had to be special. Now everybody's a photographer, even me, with my I phone (laughing).

Sharpe: But you were playing—

Jones: There are a lot of pictures. There are a lot of pictures and stuff, though.

Sharpe: But you were playing, as you said, all along. So, you playing in college too?

Jones: Oh yeah, yeah. I had a buddy in college named Tom Swietlik. I write about him in the book. I don't know if it's in this version, but I know it was in the first version. Wonderful Polish kid, and he was telling me, he said, "Man, I'll do anything to meet Buddy Guy." And I was like, "Man, are you nuts?" I said "Man, you could just go to 43rd Street and see Buddy. What are you talking about, if you could meet him?" It was like he was Frank Sinatra or somebody. I was almost offended, you know. I was like, "What do you mean?" I said, "It's not like he's the Pope." You know, because I grew up knowing these guys, respectfully and honorably and lovingly. I know their kids, and they probably know more about me than I know, and I probably know more about them than they know. (chuckles)

Now, keep in mind, in 1985 Buddy Guy didn't have a record deal. He didn't become the Buddy Guy that you guys know now, until 1990, when he put the record out, the *Damn Right I Got the Blues* album. It took off, and he's been riding high ever since. But Buddy Guy, back then in 1985, was the Buddy Guy that had got swindled out of his club on 43rd Street and he was like a nomad, because he didn't have his anchor. That was his base. No record deal, black, fifty years old, you don't get record deals at fifty years old.

Back then, going back to 1985, you don't get major record deals at fifty years old, and you definitely don't have an illustrious career, like Buddy Guy's had from fifty to seventy-five. That doesn't happen. Even though, you know, he was famous before, but most people that are ninety years old, that are hot, have been hot since they were thirty, you know. There're no new, old virgins, you know.

So, keep in mind, the concert was then, but it was no less important. What Tom Swietlik knew that I didn't know, was the back line, that a lot of the white recording artists—that I knew of and that he knew—were fans of Buddy Guy's. See, I had no idea. I had no idea that the *Rolling Stones* revered Buddy Guy, because, when you know somebody, you claim them as yours, you know, and you're really selfish. It's like, "That's my Koko Taylor. That's my Junior Wells," you know, "I know them. You don't know them. You can't know them."

For me, to have that concert, it was monumental, because it was at a pivotal time in all of our careers. I used to see, like Junior, who I used to call Godfather, and he called me his Godson, because I would always try to push songs to him. I would try to push songs on Buddy Guy. I tried to push songs on Junior Wells. Later in life, when I met Lonnie Brooks, I tried to push songs on him. Anybody that I met and I liked, I would try to beg them to do songs. Most of them wouldn't, because I was nobody. Now, people started to do my songs, so now I'm brilliant, now. I would say, "Well, hey, Godfather, you know, I got a song." And he would he say, "Well, hey man, look, I'm going out of town. I'm going to New York." And, you know, this was before digital calendars.

You just had to write stuff down and remember it. It'd be like Monday, and I'd say, "When you coming back?" He'd say, "Well, hey man, I'll be back in three weeks." You know, there was no e-mail. There were no cell phones. It wasn't like you could... You call them; you call them at home. If they're not at home, you can't talk to them. They're not going to be calling you from the hotel in Hawaii, having a conversation with you, you know. So, he said "Well, hey man, look I'm going to be doing some commercials and things that." And it's like, "How are you doing commercials, man, you know, I know you."

You know, you only think that stars are people that you will never meet. That's how I felt, and I imagine a lot of us feel that way. Case in point, I was a big fan of David Letterman, you know, even back when he came on in the afternoon. I think he started off on Channel 5, if I'm not mistaken, then went to CBS or something or whatever. And then, of course, it went night time. When Steve Jordan was his drummer, then Anton Fig came, that's how far I go back to it.

So, when it was on at night, I'm watching it, and they say, "Ladies and gentlemen, tonight sitting in with the band..." you know the emcee, "...sitting in with Paul and the boys or whatever, Junior Wells." I'm like, there must be two Junior Wells, because I know they ain't got my man on there! And then, you know, they cut; the show comes open; you see Junior Wells playing with the band, with David Letterman's band. I'm like, "Wow!" Then a couple of months later, you look and see Junior and Buddy. Then a couple months later, you see Buddy on there by himself. It's like, "Wow, I know them. How do

they have..." It may be the same thing, as if you were to ask Michael Jordan's mother, "How's it feel to be Michael Jordan's mother?" She probably said, "Feels no different than being Larry's mother or Michelle's mother or whoever. That just my boy. If I need him to take out the garbage, he's got to take out the garbage." That's how it was. It's like it was so amazing.

So, I grew up, as a late teen to a young man, watching my heroes make an indelible impression on the world. Even in my class down at Columbia, you know, one of my students, Nick Skilnik, who was about to get into a master's program. He came out a couple of years ago, and he's going to be working with me, doing Blues Camp. He's like, "Mr. Jones, tell me some stories, man. Tell me some stories!" And you know, of course, I can only tell him nice stories. And I said, "When you graduate, man, when you graduate, I'll tell you some stores, man, you know." By the time he graduated, I had hooked him up with a situation, down at Buddy Guy's. We got him a little job, and then we got him a little band job with a guy. Now he's able to tell me stories. So, I didn't have to tell my stories. That's a good feeling, because I feel like now, I'm the old man.

Now I'm them, you know. I can see myself in my students, in the way that they look at me. And I can see, from the perspective of the people like Buddy Guy, Jr., Junior Wells, my brother, Lefty Dizz, Miss Koko Taylor. I could see that they really did love me and did care about me, because I'm them now. You know what I mean? I can see my students, and I can see them looking at me, and I know the advice that I give them is loving advice. So, if I'm giving them advice and caring advice about them, then that means... And Dixon, Willie Dixon and all those guys, when they were giving me advice... Not that I ever doubted it, but, you know.

You read newspapers and you hear people, and you hear people like, "Yeah, well that was my mentor" or something like that. You say, "Well, hell, he wasn't there when I was on the same... But, you know, people make up stories, when people pass away. Then it's always like, "Did Dixon really love me, or was he just wasting time?" He used to call me young fella, you know, and maybe he called fifty people young fella. And I called him the old man. So, you know, everybody must have had a nickname for him.

The thing that he liked about me is, by him being a great song writer, is that I didn't want anything from him, because everybody that came around Willie Dixon... He had turned into Picasso when he was older, after the *Led Zeppelin* suit went down. To just have a Willie Dixon song was almost like an instant hit. Willie Dixon, even if it was the worst song ever written, [if it] had his name on, it would be a hit. I didn't want anything from him, but to love him and to listen and to talk. That's why he respected me and that's why he liked me. And that's how I ended up getting hooked up with BMI and publishing and, you know, learning about copyrights and things like that. So, I do the same thing to my students. It's like I get a chance to live in two worlds.

I get a chance to be the mentor to these guys, but I still get a chance to be the little baby or the little boy to these ghosts. And I say that respectfully and affectionately.

Koko Taylor...I started at Columbia in 2005, in the fall. Every semester up until the time she passed away, a couple of years ago. She came to my class at least once, at least once every semester. Sometimes she came three or four times a semester. She come to two classes and come to a concert, all documented, and there is footage of that. There's some footage, even on my web site. You can surf the link that says *My Blues Tube*. You can click that one, and you can see one of my little girls that just graduated, named Morgan Hare. She just graduated last year, but she was singing *Wang Dang Doodle*. And she says, "We got Miss Koko Taylor in the house." She steps off the stage, and Miss Koko comes up and grabs the microphone. Most musicians always play the role of, "Naw, I don't want to sing" or something. But when it gets to you, you gotta take it, because we don't ever want to look like, okay, well, we're playing for free and not getting paid and all of this jive, you know." But Miss Koko pretty much commandeered the microphone and sang a verse. The crowd went nuts. So, those experiences are priceless, you know; they're priceless. That's my America.

Sharpe: (laughter) Let's stop here.

Jones: Okay.

(Sharpe readjusts the recording equipment.)

Jones: You got that black on, like you work for the CIA. (laughter)

Sharpe: This is the stop here.

Jones: (playing guitar) Let me see...When I came home last night. Okay, yeah, that's happening. Okay, when I came home last night. (begins to sing) *When I came home last night. Didn't have no food on my dish. I was hungry, and my old lady wouldn't get me none of her fish. And I was hungry. Sing it back with me, Bob. Hungry, and I was hungry. Bob, but I got her back. You know what? Hey Bob, check this out. (Singing) When I came home the other night, my old lady couldn't get no relief. I had a whole half of a cow; I wouldn't give her none of my beef. And she was hungry. Beef, the other brown meat. (laughter)*

Sharpe: We had a little performance there.

Jones: Yeah.

Sharpe: Along with some Good and Plentys [candy].

Jones: And make sure, if this leaks out into the recording world and then becomes a famous hit, that my publisher is *BluefunkJazzroll Music, BMI*. You never

know. It may be a commercial in 2032, and the people that break in and steal the archive or steal my shoes, they might be well meaning people. So, we just want them to help us out.

Sharpe: What do think it will be a commercial for?

Jones: Beef. (laughter) It'll be for a commercial that shows that there's really no cross-contamination between beef and fish.

Sharpe: Well, let me get back to a few of my questions here.

Jones: I should have said Viagra Two. (laughter)

Sharpe: We talked about your first gig, kind of, but what would you say your first gig was?

Jones: Playing in the living room on 60th Street, because that's one of the things that we did, you know, in the culture. Not to be confused with race, because culture is learned. So, within the black race, on the south side of town, the culture...or maybe the culture with just regular people that entertain guests when your guests come by. If you got a kid that can crack jokes, they let you have three or four minutes, before they make you get on out the room, or if you come back and play something, "Boy, come on out here. Play us all..." (in a child's voice) "I don't wanna play, Mama..." You want to play all the time, and you get it. But I was like, (child's voice) "Hey, when your company coming, Mama? Let me get a turn," you know. So, that's where it all started. That's where it all started.

My nephew, Chip, and I, we'd watch the awards shows, and then we would take a record and trace it on some construction paper. We would cut it out, and then we'd put like little labels on them. We'd just write, you know, like "Record of the Year" or something like that. Then, we'd give to each other, like they were trading cards, you know. So, we were trying to brace for the industry.

Sharpe: Early preparation.

Jones: Early preparation, yeah.

Sharpe: What about a more regular gig? Maybe less important, but...(laughter)

Jones: I'm thinking about like past...have to be somewhere like, maybe, around college. I'm trying to think. Of course, we played talent shows, but all that stuff is kind of like a blur. Well, I guess, I don't know, because I entered college in '82, and I'm sure I was doing stuff, doing little talent shows. But, I can remember being a show show, that February 11th, '85 piece. You know, then I can fast forward up to—and that's missing years—like around...like different marks in your life, when you're okay. So, in 1990, my book came

out. Then I started getting a whole bunch of gigs that way. But then, before that... What was happening between 1985 and 1989? Playing private parties. I started teaching in 1988. So, I'd be playing the different teacher functions and different things like that, people's house parties. So they just all mix in. I wish I did have that moment... You know, if I started playing at fourteen years old or fifteen years old, a lot of those things... Even if I was accelerated to get to the point where I am at now, I wouldn't be able to remember, you know, the first time I played; who inspired me the most, because, at that late in life—even though fourteen is young, compared to me at four—that's late.

Most kids, even now... Like, when I see kids that are coming into Blues Camp, they started playing at ten years old. You know, eleven year old kids have been playing for three years. So, it's looking like, okay, seven, ten is the starting age. When you start as a teenager, which is closer to the age that you, obviously, are now, because that's closer to your age than when you are a little kid.

You know, it's hard to remember, because they all blend together. Then, you got to look back and say, "Okay, in 1985, I did that." But when I came in the school... Sterling Plump was one of my professors, so I remember doing a show in his class. Well, that was the spring of 1983. And in high school, we did some stuff. But, you know, you've been driven around by your mother and father, so how does that compare? Was that a gig, or was that an appearance? What was that? Or, you know, did the festival that you put on in '85 at *Circle*, is that a show? Or is it a show in 1990, when you played at *Wise Fools*. You know what I'm saying?

Sharpe: Well, in 1985, whom did you play with then?

Jones: My nephew, my nephew, Chip Radcliffe. We had a drummer named Andre Cotton, and there was a guy that was in the band, but like sitting in, but in the band, named Eddie Butler, because my band has always been like a trio. And at this piece here, that my brother played to show, and he used professional musicians to back him up, which they put together a rhythm section for the guys that were from 43rd, you know, from the *Checkerboard*, to be the house band, to back them up. You know, back him. Phil Guy and Muddy Waters, Junior, that band backed them up. Andre Cotton was from 43rd. Andre was probably about eight or nine years older than me, because... In 1985, how old would I have been, if I was eighteen in 1982?

Sharpe: Twenty-one, twenty-two?

Jones: So, I was twenty-one years old, okay. Yeah, I just turned twenty-one then, because my birthday is February 7th, so I just turned twenty-one.

I've got pictures in here too that I was going to drop off today. So, Andre Cotton was probably thirty, with a full beard and a fifty-year-old girl

friend. Once again, I was a boy, playing with a man. Here they are, right here (locates pictures). I was going to give this photo thing to you guys. I might keep the photo of Koko Taylor. Yeah, here it is. (laughter) That's the little makeshift, (laughter) little, raggedy flyer that we had for it. This is the show. My mother made me a cape, and she made Chip a cape. So, what we did when we came out, we had our guitar, and I was shy, so I was singing the song with my eyes closed. I couldn't sing the words fast enough to get to my guitar. So I had my guitar around my back, over my shoulder, up under the cape. And when I got to the part, I'd point to the cape and pulled the guitar out. And that was cold blooded.

Sharpe: (laughter)

Jones: That was cold blooded. So, this was our little side stage. If you were watching the stage, this is pretty much how it'd been. We would have been over here, and they would have been over there, on the right, on the same show. This is Eddie Butler that I was talking about. Eddie was amazing. Eddie also was about ten years older, and he had probably a fifty-year-old girlfriend. So they were like just ten years older than me, but they were men and had been men for twenty years! These guys were men at ten years old. I wasn't a man until I was thirty-five. (laughter) Koko Taylor. (identifying a photo)

Sharpe: We should be able to get some of the pictures on the website, with the interview too.

Jones: Yeah, yeah, yeah. (continues identifying photos) And this is Phil Guy, at the concert. My nephew, Chip, with his cape, over there on the left hand side, Muddy Waters, Junior.

Sharpe: How was your performance received?

Jones: Oh, they loved it, man. They probably loved it because we were young, you know. We probably could have been better, but...Naw, we were good, because Eddie was a superior guitar player, and Chip was holding down the bass line. I might have been the weakest cat in the band, you know. And I was on top of my stuff, so it was cool. It was cool.

(more photos) That's my brother, Foree, down there; that's Chip. These are some of the guys from 43rd. I forgot. I think that's Little Al; I forgot his name. Another one of Muddy Junior, me and Chip fooling around. This must have been when we were...I used one of these pictures for my book.

Now, this is before everybody had their own iPhone and their own camera. We had a camera. I had a photography class, an undergrad, so it must have been, maybe, about the summer of '86 or so. You put it up on a little stand, and you set the timer. This is in my back yard. We were just trying to be stars, man. We were just trying to be stars. What's this thing here? Lucky

Lopez, okay, this was a show with some different guys, yeah, yeah. This is a girl in my neighborhood named Cheryl that, if there was a WNBA at the time, she would have went. She was like the player of the year or something. I didn't mean to bring that.

Sharpe: So, how would you describe your style, at that point in your life?

Jones: It was definitely a rock and blues, not blues rock, because blues rock is pretty much just rock and roll with some elements of blues in it, but it was blues and it was rocking. It definitely wasn't your father's Oldsmobile. It definitely not Jimmy Reed, and it was definitely not, you know, Muddy Waters. As I've gotten older, I become rootsie, more earthy, not playing as fast, not playing as many notes, but just playing, you know, like grooving experience. But that comes like... That's a maturation process. A hot shot player, everything you see in every other young guitar player, you know.

But the thing that made me different, was that I was a song writer. That's where my stock came from. Once again, and then, being an active participant in the blues and being in the "family," but also always trying to do something to assure that people would understand and appreciate and respect it. For example, out of a conversation with Sugar Blue, blah, blah, blah, my book came. So, that's 1990, still playing in the band, blah, blah, blah, had an opportunity to go to Europe and all that stuff. Next big thing that I can think of between now and then, in '95 I started getting ready to put out a CD.

People were just starting to put out their own CDs, because it's like it had been a stigma. If you put out your own record, you're nothing. I was on the forefront of being a record deal, this guy putting his own record out in the blues, you know. That was something that people didn't do, because it was taboo. Also, in 1990, jumping back, my buddy, David Carlson, we did a documentary, same title as the book, same title as the play... music always still playing, doing these little concerts and this type jive.

Jumping to 1998, I write my play. That takes me from 1998 to 2001, because it was like, "Man, I love to act, but I'm not going to give up my music thing. What can I do so that I can act a fool and tell a story and play music?" So, every Friday, Saturday night was like I had a gig, at the Palm Tavern. I get a chance to be the blind man that cracks mannish jokes, get a chance to change and dress up and be the super bad character. And then, you know, get a chance to play the blues and get my fix, you know.

Then, fast forwarding from 2000, fast forwarding 2005, you know, get appointed to a position to teach the blues at Columbia. So, it's like, I guess I came here, but—

Sharpe: How did that come about?

Jones: ...I was recruited. My profile was raised to the point, with me being an educator first of all, teacher, educator, and through my Blues Kids of America program and working with kids and working with adults. It showed me that people are watching you, inventing you, even when you don't know it. And you get a call, you know, you get a call one day, "Hey, man, we got this happening." Before you even say whether you're interested or not, "Can I talk to you?" So, you come down. I mean, I know that there's probably no one more qualified than me can do it, you know. But it's like, "Me?" You fall into it, and then you look up, and you run into wonderful people, like you, who are documenting your life. Then you look up and say, "Man, I've lived a wonderful life." I don't have children, known or unknown or otherwise, you know. So, if people pop up, if I get hit by a truck, you know, it's not true.

It's like, so what do you do with your stuff? Your newspaper articles, you know, you keep them at home. One day, in the nineties, I had friend named Susan Oehler that was at the Indiana University, studying under the noted ethno-musicologist, Portia Moseby. She came by the house, and I pulled out all my little news clippings and stuff like that, because her focus was on blues and something else.

My friend, Caleb Dube, when he was working on his doctorate out of Northwestern, his focus was pretty blues and economics. He used the analogy to his thesis was like the food chain. You know, why does this particular artist get paid \$50 a night, and why does this artist get paid \$10,000, and why does this rock artist get \$50,000. So, he come by the house. I whip all this stuff. They said, "Well, Fernando, you got a lot of stuff." Whip it out on the pool table and you look at it, and then, every couple of years, somebody's working on a doctorate. They'll call me.

The last one, Amanda Huskinson, that's at Nottingham University in Nottingham, England. I just looked her up again last week, so she's still in the processing of hers. And hers is blues, like blues education and blues and kids or youth or something like that.

It's like, if something were to happen to me, my wife, you know, God bless her, "This stuff is just junk." She wouldn't be wrong for putting it in the garbage, you know. It's only so much to keep, and then she'd have to move on with her life. I'm nobody. I mean, it's not like she's married to Elvis Presley, where everything I've touched was worth something. So, it would be unfair to her, you know, to keep all this junk. But me, being an academic, I know that this junk is worth something, because people need to have something that they can research.

Blues is at a disadvantage, because we don't have that academic support. For example, like with jazz, Duke Ellington, all those guys. I'm sure they were playing to sophisticated audiences. They were visiting universities, and they were getting honorary degrees and was all worthy of that. It's

because they are more literate, you know. They read music. They can hold conversations, no better, no worse than blues' guys. But, when you look at the blues' guys, we're almost extinct. One thing that helps that extinction... You know, you have like smooth jazz, which has taken jazz to a whole another level. Some people say that it's not jazz and stuff, but it still carries the name jazz. So, at worst, it's still being promoted. They ain't no smooth blues. So, when you think of blues, it's just these old guys playing twelve bar blues. It works to our disadvantage, because that's why there are no record companies' labels to play it, because the stereotype is that it all sounds the same, you understand? Because we are fearful, if we change, somebody won't like us, or the record company won't let me do this. I wanted to. I want to play with the wah, wah pedal, but the record company told me... So we deal with all that.

The last frontier that can be at the forefront of the situation is, how do we document the blues, and how do we set up a system where people that are still... These guys that I know, that are getting PHDs, are brilliant people. And these little kids that are at Saint Ignatius, that are in high school, are brilliant little kids. So, there should be some place to do deposit their documentation. Once again, you know, a lot of stuff comes through me, and collecting all this stuff... It needs to be somewhere, where it can be, for lack of a better word, organized or synthesized, where it makes sense. And then doing that, putting my stuff together, my artifacts together, for the Center for Black Music Research, as well as I put some stuff together for the Smithsonian, I got a chance to look back over my life. I said, "Man, I've done a lot in a short period of time."

When you're able to purge and get rid all this stuff, it's like a hard drive. You open it up, so now you can get more... You know what I mean? You can have the next ten years, because, with the stuff that I just given to the Center for Black Music Research, if this stuff accidentally caught on fire, it would be worthless, and my house would burn for two days. So you've got to learn how to purge, you know. You have to network, or you'll be in the world by yourself. And this work that I have, could benefit so many other people, past my numbered days to live or whatever. Hopefully we get a chance to participate in this, while we're all still alive and still healthy.

When I lost my brother, I said, "Man, people can..." I've been to fifty funerals. But when I lost him, I said, "Man, I just talked to him on that Sunday, and he died on that Monday." Not murdered, [his] heart just stopped... with his clothes on. When I lost my mother, I said, "Man, people can die." I lost my father, I said, "Man..." So hey, I know. It'd be nice if God would say "Alright you all, the joke is over. Alright, you're going to live forever... as you are." And then the afterlife comes to the real life or whatever, but reality is, I have to leave something. I have to invest in the future, and I have to invest in the unborn. I have to leave something, I have to leave some tracks for my students, because my students, since I don't have children, my students are my children.

Sharpe: You mentioned that you were recruited. How do you think it came about that Columbia decided to do the first blues program?

Jones: Oh well, it's part of a bigger program called Contemporary Urban and Popular Music Program. The chair of my department, Richard Dunscomb, is so brilliant, so wise and so beautiful, so supportive and so wonderful to me, that he's smart enough... You know, he has a classical and a jazz background. He's smart enough to know that... When you think of Chicago, what do you think of, when it comes to terms of music? So, he was brilliant, because had he not done it, it wouldn't have been missed, probably. But the fact that he did do it showed just how brilliant he is. I'll tell you something that was funny. A couple of months before that, Jim Gandre, who's over at Roosevelt—I think he's... I don't know if he's the dean of the music department now or the chair of the music department—but they were going to do something similar, and they recruited me. Nothing ever came of it. It was like, maybe they told... I don't know.

But when you raise your profile, man, you know, it's like Santa Claus, man. People are watching. You know, they say, "so you better be good for goodness sake," and you don't know. I mean, there are people that are—I'm not, you know, being ego maniacal—but there are people watching me right now that want see Blues Camp fail, that I don't even know exist, that are waiting for it to fail, two years from now, five years from now, saying, "Yeah man, I told you it wasn't going to be nothing." There may be ten people waiting.

I'm poor on Facebook. There was a girl named Cheryl Battle that went to undergrad with me, and I saw her a couple of years ago, because she's cousins with one of the girls that was in my class. She came by, and I said, "Cheryl, you still look the same." And she came by the class, and she disappeared. You know, she had to go and pick up her son. I was like, "Man, I didn't get a number on Cheryl, because, you know, you run into old classmates and stuff like that, even if you just want to call them one time and say, "You remember this professor?" as such and never talk about them again. You just want to get that out. She never contacted me. Last night, I'm fooling around on Facebook and stuff, trying to, you know, send out the requests or whatever you call them for my camp, so people can see that it's coming. I see I got a message from her in January. I was like, I was just on there yesterday. So, I'm really bad with even knowing how to figure out this Facebook situation. Her message to me was, "Fernando, my little boy is trying to figure out if he wants to play piano or if he wants to play guitar. You're the first one—you're the only one I thought about. Can you give me some direction?"

So, you're laying tracks, and people are watching you, even when you don't know that they're watching you, because this girl got a lot of attention in college. She was like a year older than me, and, you know, when you're in college, just like in high school, sometimes it's still that I'm a year older than

you. But now, somebody ten years older than you still in your age group. But in college and high school, it's like their above you, and you're beneath them. You know what I mean? So, like I was saying, they are people that are watching, man, that'll probably say, "Hey man, hey Fernando, I've been trying to get in touch with you for five years. I didn't have funding to do such and such." Here's an opportunity for you to go to the White House. Here's an opportunity for you to represent the United States at the Olympic Games on black music or American music.

But the thing that I learned from a guy named Jack Brown, and Jack Brown's daughter... I liked his daughter. This was twenty something years ago, back about 1990, when my book came out. I liked his daughter, and I mean we were cool, but she didn't like me like I liked her. I was too slow, you know. I was too slow for her. I'm saying that respectfully. So, I would go by the house, and I would talk to him and talk to his wife. I was put in the situation to like his daughter, but the goal was, God had it for me to meet him. And he was crazy about me. Mr. Brown told me, he said, "Fernando, when opportunity meets preparation, you got to be ready." He passed away a couple of years ago. He used to always be pulling for me. If he'd see me on TV, he would call me. A month or two ago, "Hey, man, I saw you da da da..." So, that's how you live your life.

Just because you don't get you ... You know, everybody else is getting a big gig at the festivals now, and you're feelings are hurt. There might be something better for you, and then maybe it's not. Maybe your road is, you know, whatever it is, working with kids or just playing in a funky little old club or something like that. But you have to be comfortable in your own sphere. And, you know, that's me. I'm having a ball and I'm amazing myself. Man, to look back on the stuff that I've accomplished in a relatively small life span, and saying that for a kid that almost didn't live is... And looking through it, I got a chance to meet myself. I got a chance to see that I have been consistent, because you can make your mouth say whatever it is, even when it's not true. You know, you can say, "Yeah, I've been playing the guitar every day since I was four years old and never stopped." You really, you didn't play from '82 to '87, and then you stopped '93 to '96. I've been consistent.

Then, when you look back over your life, you say "Yeah, I've been consistent, and in the meantime, I've done some good work, and I've inspired some people, just as I have been inspired." Last night, inspired by one of my students, Alex Smith, who was in the Blues Ensemble last semester. I call him one of my sons. He plays with Michael Coleman. You have an elite group of students that you become a parent to. Some students are just passing through, but some students are just like... When you're in school, some students think that you're nutty and that you're incompetent and stuff, and then some students think that you're brilliant, and they wish that you were their father or godfather. So, they called me Pops. He'd say, "Pops, man, I'm playing tonight

at Buddy's." And so, last night I got finished with the instruction at about 6:00.

I got two file cabinets in an office that we share, down at the school. One drawer is just like a junk drawer, and the drawer was just so disorganized. I saw one of my colleagues, he opened up his drawer, and it was so neat. And I say "Man, I'm going to go through this." So, I spent from 6:00 to almost 10:00 last night, organizing my stuff, printing stuff for Blues Camp, so that it's organized. I saw him before that. He said, "Hey, man, I'm playing down at Buddy's." So when I saw him, it might have been about 4:00, and I say, "Man, I mean, I'm not going to hang around downtown from 6:00 to 10:00 to go to Buddy Guy's, you know. I'd love to see him, but I ain't going to..." "But since I stayed, and I did that work..."

So, I went and saw him. [I] Even got a good parking space, right in front. And when I got on stage, I was really impressed, because he's a guitar player in my ensemble, a fantastic guitar player. Well, Michael Coleman, he's playing bass. If they have another bass player, he'll play guitar. And he was handling it. Man, no better feeling in the world for me to see my student playing the blues and holding down the fort and knowing his role and playing his position. That's the pay.

Sharpe: Let's talk a little about what seems to be one of the loves of your life, your Blues for Kids Camp.

Jones: The Blues Camp is dynamite, because it gives a lot of the kids that love the blues an opportunity to be with, like I say on the flyer, "with like-minded others." So many of these little kids are adorable, and if their parents have the resources, they will take them to see a high profile blues artist, and they will ask, can the kid play a tune during the show? Sometimes, the high profile artist will say, "Okay," and sometimes it's just not possible to do. So, where does that kid go? If he gets a chance to play on stage with whoever is hot, and he goes back to his community, or she goes back to their community, even when they talk about it on Monday morning, to the students and their classmates, the classmates can't understand, because it's not "popular" the music way, popular art, so it means nothing. Can you imagine you being in love with an idea, something that you did, and you can't share with anybody? "Man, I just played with..." "Who is that? [I] never heard of..."

So, I created this world where kids can be with kids that they understand each other. They understand that they say a blues guy's name, they can have a conversation about it. It's like a virtual trading card, player cards, you know. "Oh man, did you hear about this song here by Freddie King?" "Yeah, but did you hear this about Freddie King?" What about Koko Taylor?" "What about Etta James?" That's what that has produced. Social networking has been wonderful. Even though I'm not good on Facebook, my students all across the country are on Facebook. They have their little blues kids pages,

and they are networking with each other. It's showing me that it really was a good idea. I thought it was a good idea to start off, and I thought it would be—

Sharpe: Where did you get the idea?

Jones: I was one of the guys that was going on the road. People would come up and sit their children in with me. One kid in particular, Alicia Vanchuck, she's probably a senior in high school now, if not a freshman in college. A couple of years ago, she came out to the camp. But I knew her. How did I meet her? I was playing in Idlewild, Michigan. about three years ago, four years ago, and a little girl—already discriminated against because she's a girl—playing in school—Everybody else was playing classical music or whatever the teacher put in front of them—but she liked blues. Little white girl, liking blues in rural Michigan, okay? So, where is she going to go?



Then I ran into some more kids. It's like, I already had a program called *Blues Kids of America*, which is a program that the purpose of that is a multicultural, interdisciplinary arts and education music program. With that, I would go out and go into the schools. The trade name, and I would use loosely—it would fall under what they would call *Blues in the Schools*—but I came up with my own curriculum because *Blues in the Schools* is so broad. You're a blues guy and you go and you play a song, okay, that's *Blues in the Schools*. But if you got a full curriculum, and yours is still *Blues in the Schools*, and this guys was nothing, how do they identify or distinguish what yours is? So, I created my own model. But that model was, I would go out and work with kids. Say, I would work with twenty kids. Six want to be there; the other fourteen, you find out that you're babysitting. That was founded around 1990.

From that experience, me going on the road, kids wanting to be able to play and just giving them an opportunity, because there has to be a farm team. There has to be a farm in order to keep... I say this in one of my little speeches, and I think you've got it. I think that they have it here at the Center for Black Music Research, my speech, when I received an award, the Keeping Blues Alive Award. I said, you know, "Every type of entertainment or sports as entertainment, but entertainment entity, most things have a feeder system. The medical profession, you go to med school, and you do your internships

and stuff, and then you do take your boards, then you become a doctor. There's a feeder process. You study biology in high school. You start dissecting stuff, and then you go on through.

There's a feeder system for the baseball league. You start playing in little league, play in high school, get drafted out at eighteen years old; you go to the farm team in Arizona or Florida, and then you come on up into the big leagues, because that keeps the professional team healthy. You know, you just don't go to school and you graduate and say, "Okay, we're going to start a professional hockey league. We're all of twenty-two years old, but we don't have anything to come from, but we all can play. You know, there has to be a feeder system. I felt the way, in order to keep the blues healthy, there has to be a feeder system. All of us guys that are in our forties, fifties, sixties and seventies, we've pretty much done what we going to do. You know, we're going get some good perks here and there, but we've pretty much done what we're going to do. If we're playing in clubs six nights a week, twenty years from now, we're going to be playing clubs six nights a week. If we're playing clubs and doing lectures, so on and so forth, you know. If you're at the top of the game, like B.B. and Buddy, you're doing those things and films. That's what you're going to be doing.

But to give a good chance for the future, to have a portfolio, you've got to bring them up as children. You've got to groom them. "Hey man, look, you're playing the blues; you're playing the song by Joe Blow." "Well, who's Joe Blow?" "Joe Blow was born in Little Rock, Arkansas." "How far is Little Rock, Arkansas from where you are now?" "Well, according to Google, it's 725 miles or something." So you get the math component. You're raising student musicians. You're raising scholars, because there will come a time when we going to have to stand before, you know, Muddy Waters and Son House and Koko Taylor and all those great people that have gone before us.

And they're going say, "Hey man, what did you do?" You're going to have to be able to produce. You're going to say "Hey, look..." "We left you this; what did you do?" "Fernando, what did you do?" "We wanted to go to school, but we couldn't, either because our parents weren't educated, or we couldn't, because we were black, or we couldn't, because we were black and lived in the era that there was no school. But we made this great music. We're no less than other human beings, but with that, what we didn't have, we made this, and we left this to you.

Koko Taylor would come to my class. She gave me a career, just by Koko Taylor coming to my classroom. I'm sure it looks good in the department. Not paid her to come into the classroom, so she came as a job. [She] Came all the way from Country Club Hills, down here, about a forty minute drive, because she loved what I was doing and loved what these kids were doing. So I owe her, her memory. I owe my brother, who didn't make it across the finish line. Lefty Dizz, Junior Wells, Willie Dixon, those are people

took time out of my life, unselfish, as sandwiches would be. Broke bread, you know, broke bread, come by your house; you go by their house.

I owe these little kids. I owe them an environment where they can study the blues, and it can be safe. I owe them an environment where—and they're going to pay their dues, as they get older, but I owe them—My little girls, I owe them that, hey, you can be a little girl, and you can do music, and you don't have to get naked in order to get a record contract or to do something that you'll be ashamed of to get a movie contract, because the music industry was founded on the back of Mamie Smith, a woman, a blues woman, okay. If it would have got established one day, but the fact is, she was the one. Do you understand what I'm saying?

So, if you don't tell them that, they don't know. They don't have a sense of self-worth. When I tell my big girls in Columbia, when I tell them about that, they're like, "Wow, I didn't know that, wow. I was about to get on this diet, you know, so I can be a certain size, so I can..." But, if you don't tell them, they don't know. So that's why the education component is so important. It's also important to let the blues kids know they don't have to be ninety years old to be relevant. You can be ten years and be amazing and important and current, you know.

Sharpe: How did you develop the content for the program?

Jones: Be specific on what particular part of the content are you speaking of, the academic rigor, or are you talking about, what?

Sharpe: The playing.

Jones: The content of the playing. Basically, what I do, I have a pretty general idea of a repertoire that I would like to teach. It's pretty much based off, either some stack stuff or some chess stuff, and my music, as a song writer, artists that I know. But, after we have the auditions, we assess the skill set of the students. We publically target intermediate and advanced, but some beginner kids come in. So, we assess. For example, for the beginner or entry level players, give them some Bo Diddley type stuff, where it's not too intricate, but it still sounds cool. (*Jones does some music sounds vocally.*) You know, it's real simple, but it's effective. More advanced people, they can do some Robert Craig compositions or some of my compositions where, it's like, okay you can't be on auto-pilot. It's not just tour by blues. It's got some structure; it's got some form to it.

Sharpe: What are the long-term plans for the program?

Jones: Well, I would love to raise the profile of this program to the point where it could be a showcase for America, where we would be invited to the Olympic Games, like they have the open... They call them nuptials? I know nuptials are with marriage, but what do they call them with the sports?

Sharpe: Opening ceremonies, I think.

Jones: Opening ceremonies, where they could represent America, playing the blues. It would be nice to be invited to the White House to meet the president, whoever the president is and whatever four-year block that there is a president, Republican or Democrat or Independent, because there's no greater symbol of America than, you know, the president or the White House. To be an ambassador or to have these kids to be able to go around the world to spread good will, but to still be able to keep the camp.

An immediate goal that I can control is to have...I have a camp in Huston-Tillotson University and also one at the Fender Center in Corona, Chicago, and I'm in talks to establish one in Las Vegas next year. Mississippi was supposed to happen this year, but I haven't got an email in about two weeks, so maybe I'll email them today. The immediate goal would be to have the kids from the camps be able to provide five or ten scholarships, or maybe five or four, for each of the camps. And then, have a kid that goes through the Chicago district or other kids, you know. Say four kids from Chicago, they get to go to the other camps. Four kids from Austin, they get to go to... Four kids from California, you know. So they make a circuit, so then they have a tour. Then they'll have a nice, safe summer, where they're playing music, you know.

Sharpe: You've talked about the education of the kids. What about opportunities to play, once kids get to a certain level, at a young age? How can they get opportunities to play in venues that, say, aren't bars or aren't appropriate for a kid to play in? And are there such things?

Jones: Yeah, that's a great answer, because when things don't exist, it's easy to discriminate, you know. Like you're right, a kid can't play in a bar, unless the bar has a food license and the parents are with them. But it's like, "If you build it, they will come" type of thing. Like, for example, the kids in California are playing so much that they're doing non-traditional things, like Lucas Oil. The people who own Lucas Oil have the group of kids out there playing somewhere, and they got all the money in the world. It's like a party or something. It's a non-traditional situation, but they're still playing. Once again, "If you build it, they come."

If ten parents called and say, "Hey look, Fernando Jones has the Bob Sharpe Club." And they say, "Well, this is a high end steakhouse." You can get random calls and say, "Well, hey, I got a ten year old daughter that plays piano. I thought you were a Blues Club" or something like that. Then you're going to say, "Well, man, if they keep calling..." Maybe you'll say, "Look, we do have a room over there, where we just stack glasses." You know, the room might be forty by forty or something. And they say, "Well, maybe we could make it a café, an offshoot, a place for these kids to play, and we sell ice cream or soda or something with just pop," you know, something that you

don't have to take away from your regular staff. Then, because if there's a need for something... You know what I mean?

Then, if they do this right, the records companies will come to them; the Walt Disney people will come to them, and the whole bit, you know, because there's still something magical about being a kid.

Sharpe: And some have talent at a young age.

Jones: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

Sharpe: What about young kids learning through jamming with older musicians and stuff? Do you see that as something viable today or something that could happen?

Jones: Yeah, I see that as being viable, but I also see it as being counter-productive in some ways, because part of the learning process is listening. That's as important as playing. If I'm playing on stage with somebody, whether they are older or more sophisticated or younger, I could say, "Yeah I'm learning from them." But in reality, I'm trying to keep up, or I'm trying to wipe them out; I'm trying to make them keep up with me. So, when those three elements come in, you not really learning. You're trying to prove; it's a proving ground.

But when you are in an instructional environment, where it's like, "Hey man, we going to do this here. Now listen to what he's playing. He's not playing one, two, three; he's playing one, two, three and half, you know, listen." "Oh, yeah, he's doing one, two, three and half; that's what he's doing." So, I think that that's much more important and much more valuable, because once again, that's why classical music and jazz particularly have gotten us beat in blues, because, you know, it's notated, and therefore, somebody can tell you how it's supposed to go. They could show you, and if you can read, you can follow it.

But with blues coming out of an oral tradition, you know, sometimes, since it's an oral tradition type situation, people devalue the instructional or academic or the musicality of this folk music. And then it just becomes like, "Oh, you can do anything with the blues" or you can do"... "Oh, I don't have to listen. He's playing one, two, three, but I'm playing one, two, three and half, because I don't know what I'm playing, and he don't know what he's playing." But when you strip it down and you have the instruction, somebody can listen. Because, like I tell my students, my big students, at Columbia, I tell them—and I'm not knocking technology, because I got an iPhone, iPad, iMac, two desktop Macs at home. I love technology, but they're from a situation that, if they hear a song, they can go to YouTube, and they play it. They just try to learn it right away.

When I came up, there was no YouTube. You had to go buy the record, and you had to pick the needle up and keep bringing it back, because

you knew the first four, eight bars of the song, the last four, eight bars of the song are as important as the middle. Just like flying a plane. They say, the most important part of the plane's flight is the fifteen minutes to take off and the fifteen minutes to land. They say, if they can take off successfully in fifteen minutes, all they got to do is drive, because he ain't going to hit nothing. (laughter) "Now, okay, quite playing; we got to land this sucker. You've got fifteen minutes."

That's the same thing with music and the instructional process, where I have to get through to them. You have to listen. You didn't write this song, so you don't know what it's got. You just heard this song. This song is fifty years old. I only heard it six times, and you've heard it none, and you're going try to play it soon, out the box. Listen, give reverence to the music. Listen, play it right, because one day you're gonna write a song, and you would like for someone to interpret that song the way that you did, not their interpretation of your song. If you say, "I went to bed last night." That's different than from saying, "I went to bed when it was dark," because it could be dark at 12:00 in the afternoon. But to you, it's dark at night, you know. But that's not what they wrote. They said, night, because they specifically wanted it to be between the timeframe, 8:00 to midnight. The song has a timeframe, okay, so that's why it's important. And you can only get that through you having credible instruction.

Sharpe: How do you try and teach students to listen?

Jones: Real literal, that's what they do. We listen to the song. I rewind; I'll have it on YouTube. I'll grab that little cursor back and let them listen to it. "Don't play, listen. Now what did you hear? Okay. Okay, you're the bass player; you're the guitar player; you're the pianist; you are this harmonica player; okay, listen again. Alright, last time I wanted you to listen. Okay, now I want all of you all, play your parts with your mouth, even if you're not in key. I just want to know that you know where to come in, that you're listening. Now, play it on your guitar." It's like, "Wow, I never had to do that before. Well, I can't sing."

"I need to know you know what's happening, because, if we're not going to play the song the way that it's supposed to be played... Now we can speed it up or slow it down, but if we're going to arrange a whole other song, you've defeated the purpose of learning this song, because you've penned another song, and it ain't this one."

Sharpe: Is this a hard thing, you think, to teach?

Jones: No, I don't think it's hard. You just have to get the trust of your students that... You have to make them understand that they can trust you and that you're not jealous of them, because they're younger. You set that tone right in the beginning. You show them that you can play, and you show them that you

can listen, because it's not about you outplaying your students, but you need to be able to demonstrate you know what you're talking about, so they can say, "Okay, so Jones, oh hey, oh man."

There are some teachers in the world that teach subjects that they may be brilliant in teaching it, but they don't have the practical experience. That's not bad, you know, because you don't have to be seven feet tall to coach a basketball player and tell them how to dunk, or you just know the mathematics or the physics of it. You don't even have to know how to play. If you're a good manager of people, you can be a good basketball coach.

But with music, I mean, if you want to be a musician, where you can play with other musicians (laughter), you know, where you're a joy to be around, and people don't mind calling you as the first the call or as the last call that I know I can depend on, then you got to listen, because it's not about you. It's about that composition, and it's about your part.

Sharpe: Do you see any prospect for additional college level blues education like you're doing here?

Jones: Ask me the first part again, please.

Sharpe: Do you see any opportunities or do you think there's prospect for additional blues education at the college level?

Jones: Well, I mean... That's an interesting question, but my first mind would be, definitely there should be, you know, where it's straight blues. There are number of courses, where they may have a history course or a sociology course, [where] they may touch on the blues, its cultural or something like that. But it's not a full concentration, you know, like we have here. I mean, I would applaud it, because competition is good for business, and it would, you know, make the kids compete to have two programs to choose from. But right now, we're like the main ingredient in the collegiate music world, of it, and we're proud to be so. And I'm proud to be the guy on the front line, you know, to do it.

But, sure, that would be beautiful, because, like I said, the only thing that can keep... Who am I to say that the blues will never die or will or won't. But one thing that I do know that, you know, you got Pilates; you can be a vegan and watch your diet and stuff like that. You have to do the same thing with the music. It's got to be healthy; it's got to be healthy. And the way to make it healthy... It's just like what the mayor in Chicago, you know, has done, where they've extended, they have like a mandate—

Sharpe: Extended school date.

Jones: ...extended school date. "I know last year didn't exist, but this year it's going to exist, and this is the way it's going to be," blah, blah, blah, because this is

the way it's going to be. Same thing for the blues. And I'm not saying whether I agree or disagree with that, but I'm saying, for the blues, the way that it's got to be, like I said before, the older guys, us guys forty and over, we've done pretty much what we going to do, because we're set in a pattern, okay? In order for this to be what it needs to be... I had a cousin that used to say, "It's open season on new ideas." It's got to be some fresh blood that comes in through this process, and they have to be educated, educated meaning they have to know what they're talking about. It would be nice if they were "college graduates," but I mean, you know, you can't make somebody go to college, and you can't diminish somebody's intellect to whether they went to college or whether they went to high school or not.

But, when I say educated, I mean that the kids know what they're playing. They know why they're playing. They know fifty important blues people, guys that just like playing guitar. And the guitar guys, they need to know fifty important blues women. [Do] you understand? They need to know where they came from. What is it about the geography or the topography of the south and the north? What is that all about? Why do all the people I like come from Mississippi? Why are all the soul people I like come from Memphis and Arkansas? Then they can get into, they can read, because once you start reading, man, you discover the truth. Then they see how, "Oh, this is how I can put my life into it, yeah." Then they can also realize, "Man, it is important what I'm doing. I'm a kid, but I'm important. I'm somebody."

And that's the thing, because, guess what, all of us now that are fifty and forty, one day we were a kid. Just think if there were fifty other Fernando Jones in the world, in America, or at least three other people with the profile of mine in Chicago? If three people with the profile that I have, we would have a museum; we'd probably have a blues and rock and roll performing arts school, because they would say, "Hey, when I was four years old, I started doing such and such and such." Well, these kids will be able to say, "When I was seven years old, I studied the blues at a college." Can you imagine how powerful that is? Now they're thinking college, because, when they go back into the community with their kids, when they go back to school in September, they say, "What did you do this summer?" "I went to college." Then they'll say, blues camp, and that's cool. But they went to college; they went to school.

So, that gives it a credibility, versus just setting some guitars out and we're playing in a gym or something like that. And the parents are proud, proud that these kids could come. I didn't go on a college campus until I went to college. Can you imagine, even if I'm on the same course that I am now, could you imagine how much more enlightened, how more brilliant or illustrious my career would be, had I studied art or music or basketball?

When I was in elementary school, I got a chance to go down to Marquette University and run around on the basketball court or be in grammar

school and go on a field trip and just stay at the art institute for a week and learn. You know, in grammar school, I'm using crayons, colored pencils and markers. Maybe I knew about water colors. Then they say, "Well, this paint is called gouache; this is called acrylic, oil paint. "Oh, I heard of oil. What is gouache? What is acrylic?" "These are the different brushes you use." Now I go away, and I study that. Then I come back. I get exposed to brushes, technique, texture, shape, contrast, things I never knew. And I bring that back to my little crayon, marker and pencil set, how I'll be able to blow my mind and enhance what I was doing.

So now, I'll put it back on my kids. They get a chance to come and be with other little kids. Little girls get to see other little girls doing positive things, not being fast. Other little boys get to see other little boys doing other things, not be in gangs. Kids get a chance to see that people are people. They're, at that age, with the kids under twelve, I sit and watch them. I mean, it sounds clique man; they don't even see color. The first year, I sat back, and I watched. You can watch the videos, and you can just see how they get along. There was none of that culture of "I'm brown; you're dark brown; you're suntan; you're olive complexion." Well, we're going to hang together. There was not even like, "You're a boy and I'm a girl."

One of my little guys, Ray Goren, that was ten at the time, he was hanging with the sixteen year olds, because his playing ability was on that level. Well, you know, he's a kid. So, when it was time to run around and play kids' stuff, he'd play with the ten year old and twelve year old kids, but musically, he was eighteen, seventeen years old. He was seventeen years ahead of himself. Now, once again, where else can they get that? And to know that they can look forward to it every day for five days.

The same little kid, Ray Goren, at the end of the camp... Everything had went so well, and we had a little cumulating activity in the concert hall, and everything was so cool, and somebody came up. They said, "Mr. Jones, Ray is crying." So, oh God, it's only one Ray, and I say... First of all, I've got to protect the school. His father's here. I've got to squash whatever's happened, so his father doesn't get angry, because all it takes is one parent. And I say, we done waited all the way until the last hour of camp for it to be blown. So I keep my cool, and I walk over to see why he's crying. His father's got his hand around him like this here. I didn't see any pushing or anything like that. And I'm like, "Did somebody push him, or did the older kid tell him, 'You just a kid' or something, or 'You can't play?'"

So, I play it off, because I got to protect the school, got to protect the program. I got to protect this little boy, and I got to protect whoever he's mad at. Then I said, "What's wrong?" And he said "No, he's going to be alright." I'm like, oh man, did somebody punch him, and he didn't get a punch in, and his dad is maybe going to get another punch in? Then, I've got to be cool, because everybody is watching me. I'm the blues guy, the black guy with the

hat on at blues camp, with all these kids from all around the country. I found out a couple minutes later that he was crying because it was over. It had nothing to do with violence or kids bothering each other. He was crying because he knew, when he went home, who could he play with? Who would understand? Who understands a ten year old kid that is eighteen as a musician and eight as a little boy? Only person understanding is another little six year old at sixteen, you know. So they got something in common.

Matter of fact, this year what I'm going to do is, I'm going to have a social for them. I'm going to have a sock hop, where it has nothing to do with blues. It'll be like Wednesday, maybe the last half hour, Wednesday, where we'll play whatever the little clean versions of the popular songs that are out, Ludacris or whomever and let them just be kids and run around and giggle and stuff like that, maybe make some frappe and some cake and keep them going, because we have to nurture them, and we've got to love them. And if I'm unjustly put into an old folks' home, I'm sure the word will get out, and they'll come and get me out.

Sharpe: (laughter) A place for you at least, right?

Jones: Wouldn't that be something, man? I mean, I'm staying at the Little Blues Kids' House. I'm an old man, and they come and taking turns getting me, like I'm grandpa. I stay with this one for a month; I stay with that one for a month. That would be funny.

Sharpe: Let's spend our last half hour—

Jones: Okay.

Sharpe: (laughter)...talking about—

Jones: Hopefully this last half hour...because I'm self-conscious about my voice. I'm always wishing my voice was real low, so this half, I'm going to sound real masculine.

Sharpe: You're running low on your water too. (laughter)

Jones: Aw, it's cool. Man, this is a three hour water.

Sharpe: Yeah.

Jones: Yeah, it's all good. This is a prop, man.

Sharpe: Let's talk a little about the status of the blues today and the vitality of it and what you're thoughts are on that.

Jones: Okay, the status of the blues, it's going through a resurgence. At about every five, six, years it does that. Back in the '90s, there was resurgence, when they

revisited either the fiftieth year release of Robert Johnson's music or Robert Johnson's death or whatever it was. Every time it's somebody's centennial, you know, it makes a big deal. It rides a wave, then it drops off. But I think that one thing to help the status of the blues in America stay healthy goes back to those kids.

Nobody loves to play more than me, nobody. Nobody loves to play in clubs; nobody loves to play on stage at festivals; nobody more than me, because I love to play. I love to be on the stage, so we'll get that out of the way. But, the thing that will make it, where the blues is popular all the time, twenty-four, seven, is that it's got to come through these kids, because, while we're having these peaks of every five years—"Oh, fifty years ago this year, Little Walter made this song"—Well, those things they don't come [often]. It's not like every year we have something happening where it's worthy, because when you look at the icons, all of us and all of them are older. There are no sex symbols. You know what I mean? If I had some money or the resources, I would take one of my blues kids, if I had the resources... But I would probably shy away from it, because, when you deal with kids, you deal with parents, and if it doesn't go right, you look like you tried to milk the kids.

But there's a market for a young, sixteen-year-old, good looking boy to sing the blues. He doesn't have to sing songs about "my woman;" he can sing "my girlfriend." It could be age appropriate. He would make a killing. A good looking boy—no matter his origin of ethnicity is—a good looking, young man could get the same market that Justin Bieber has. Oh, and don't let him play guitar or harmonic or something like that. He doesn't necessarily have to play it all the way through the song, but just to play it a little bit. Then he can take it off, and he can walk, and he can be cute to the girls. Then, he can spin around and do a split or something and come back up and sing a song and then fall down and just be real agile and stuff like that, you know, and clown with the girls. There is a market for a sixteen-year-old... I don't know if they call them sex symbols, but a teen idol. That's what would get the blues all the way. And then, of course, all the people over thirty would be jealous. But that's what is needed. Make no mistake.

Sharpe: So, is the ground fertile for that happening?

Jones: Sure it is. Sure it is. We just have to ring the bell loud enough to let the kids... like my little Blues Kids, they're starting to do that. They're starting to put out records, and they're starting to do those things. And there's a market. Like, for example, if there's one kid, there's no market. It's just a kid in a world full of old men. But, if there are ten kids, there's a market, because, if I bring kid A to Chicago, and he brings in 2,000 people, now I say, "Well, wow, 2,000 people will come," because promoters don't care what you sound like. I'm going to explain that.

Promoters care how many tickets you can sell. A club does not care what you sound like, because most people don't care for the music today. Hey, man look, I like the blues. I learned to like the blues, but I've got a blues club, and when I had a jazz club I sold two bottles wine, a fifth of Courvoisier, and six beers. I've got a blues club, I sold 200 bottles of beer last night and five bottles of Jack Daniels. So when you look at the economics, it's like well, hey, if you're in Chicago and you got a blues bar, don't run out of beer, no matter who you get. As long as they're not bad enough to run the people out of the place, they don't care, because they're watching the cash register. If a club owner wants to see you, he ain't going to get off on you, watching you in his club, because he's running his business. He's got to watch the bar; he's got to watch the cash register; he's got to watch the waitresses from stealing, you know. He's got to make sure the people will come back again and things like that.

Sharpe: Do you think there are any great innovators in the blues today?

Jones: Me, I put me in that category. I think Keb Mo is an innovator. Corey Harris has done like some marriages, like some African-based music, like from Mali, and his own thing. The thing I hate about mentioning people, because when you mention one, you missed ten that were right there up under your head. But those are people that I think that are innovators. I'm sure there's more, and, of course, I don't know everybody. I can only speak for myself, and I put myself down as an innovator, because from a lack of ability to be a great singer, I had to create my own world.

In order to create my own world, as a performer, I had to write songs that were not written. And in order to compete, I had to make arrangements that didn't exist, because I'm not a cover band; I don't sound like anybody else. And to be successful in enough to be able to have a career, an adult career, doing all your own stuff, you've got to be innovative. You've got to be cutting edge. I learned this from watching great artists, not just blues people, but great artists, great entertainers, Prince, Michael Jackson, Bruce Springsteen. Those guys can perform—well, you know, not Mike—but those guys will perform two, three hours, and you feel like you've just been there fifteen minutes, because they engage the audience.

So, you sit back, and you say, "Well, what is it about them,—other than them being super stars, and making a lot of money—versus a guy in a club that you can watch for a half hour. Of course, there are some guys in a club, you can watch them all night. But most musicians are playing a repertoire, and they don't care if you like it or not. It's like, "Okay, we started at eight, and we get off at one. Man I can't wait to get that \$75."

The innovator type people are the ones that's like, "Hey, I got a show tonight at eight, and it's over at one. They're going to have fun, and I'm going to have fun. We're going to have fun." So, how do we have fun? If it's a

proscenium type of a situation, you're in the audience, and I'm on stage and playing and stuff. If you laugh, you may not even be laughing at me, but I don't want to look down at the wrong woman and be self-conscious, "Oh, I'm ugly today. Are they're laughing at me because I can't sing well?" or whatever?

But, if I bring you into my world, now it's on. We got to party, because I'm going watch you dance, and that's going to entertain me. And you're going to watch me do my thing or whatever. So now, a three minute song is a ten minute song, like Bruce Springsteen. Everybody is engaged. As long as the audience is engaged, you can play, and then you're having fun. Then it becomes an experience.

Another cool thing that I saw in my life, I saw a group down in Columbia, South Carolina, and the name of the group was called the Collard People. Not like colored, but collard, like collard greens. It was a jam band type of a band, a piece of love type band. It seemed like they played one song for the hour, for the set. And what they did, they had a dude, and he was cooking. He had a pot, and he cooked some greens, and they would be playing. They're cooking while they're playing. Then they'd pass them around, and people eat them. And I say, "Man."

Now, can you imagine when I get to the position where I'm important enough or the venue allows, while I'm playing, I could put on a pot of mustard and turnip greens and some smoked turkey butts, then let them cook for two or three hours or whatever, if I don't have them precooked, have some catfish, playing and somebody on stage. It's all part of the show. We playing, and in the background is a kitchen, and you've got somebody cooking, just like a regular kitchen. And they cooking some catfish or some perch or some chicken wings or something, something that people can consume. And that smell is going out into audience, and you're playing. You're creating that whole blues environment. How could they not love you? How could they not love that experience?

As a player, you go from, "I want to play and show everybody how good I am." Then you go to "Man, I hope you think I'm good." And then you get to the point where it's like, "Well, hey man, I want you all to entertain me as well." Then you get to the point where it's like, "Hey, this is going to be an experience for us." That's the track that I've been on, since about '97, '98, when I got going back to that whole acting thing, because then, I got a chance to see, this is how I can bring all this stuff together, because I liked to do what we call, act a fool, to signify and crack jokes. And friends that I talked to on the phone, they say, "Man, you missed your calling." I'm not a comedian, but I'm funny. I just can't stand up and do a comedic routine, but I'm funny. I guess what I could be considered, a comedic actor, but I'm also a serious, gun slinging guitar player. You know what I'm saying?

So, how do you marry the two, without going insane? Well, you create this world, where you can be this person here; you can be this here. You can incorporate your artistic background. You incorporate your paintings, your colors, your whole bit, you know. I'm not the only person that's an artist or like a Renaissance man type person, because you got John Cougar, who I love dearly and have never met. John Cougar is a fantastic painter. You got Tony Bennett, fantastic painter; Miles Davis, fantastic painter; Billy Dee Williams, you know. So, I mean, there are a lot us. I'm not the only one. It may be rare in the blues, but that's why I'm sharing my life, so that, if it is not rare, other people can come forward and say, "Hey man, it's okay," because one thing about blues, guys, we're traditionally so macho. You know, we got to eat, sleep and drink the blues; otherwise, we're not blues men. We can't do anything but the blues. And that's crazy.

Sharpe: What about past innovators? Who would you point to there?

Jones: Oh, well, Muddy Waters was an innovator, because he electrified the blues when he came here. Les Paul was an innovator; he electrified the guitar, amplified the guitar. Little Walter amplified the harmonica, the first guy on record or whatever to do that. There've been tons of them. I'm sure the first blues or jazz woman to go from wearing a gown to wearing something that's form fitting or what would be considered sexual or sexy, would have been innovative, Josephine Baker. I mean, you know, the list goes on and on and on. And like most innovators, when they did that stuff, people look at them and think that they're crazy. There are people that think that I'm out of my mind. "Man, you got a blues camp house." But what they're really saying is, "How come I didn't do it?" or "How come I didn't think of it?" you know?

You have to be careful of that and can't get caught up in it, because the devil or whomever was always telling you—when you doing something right—He's always trying to get you off track, and it's always going to be somebody... You could save a hundred lives and somebody, you know, will have something bad to say about you. "Well, you did that so you could get on TV." Well, hell the building was burning, you know, and you ran in and saved somebody. You were happy that you walking down the street, and you saw the flames jumping out the building and people screaming. The same person would have sat back and toasted marshmallows, while everybody else dies, you know.

You just have to, like what I said before, be comfortable in your sphere. When opportunity meets preparation, you got to be ready. And going back to the comfortable being in your own sphere thing, you got to be comfortable with who you are, and you have to be courageous. It's not like you're trying to look for something to be... When you trying, don't say, "Okay, let me see what I can create that no one else has." Then I think that you're in for a fall, because then it's kind of pretentious. But, I think, when you do what you're supposed to do, it works. Like Dizzy Gillespie, you know,

somebody tripped over his horn, and they bent the horn, but he had to play. He couldn't go to Sam Ashe Guitar Center and get him another trumpet, so he made that work. That brought attention to him. He was already a great trumpet player, but the fact that his horn was bent and looked crazy brought more attention to the fact that how great of a trumpet player he was. If Dizzy Gillespie had played a regular instrument, a regular trumpet, a trumpet that was not bent, and had not puffed his cheeks out, same guy, it would not have been a big deal.

But it's what you do and what's different about you that makes you great or gives you an opportunity to be in an area to be great. For example, if everybody puts a record out, ten people put a record out, and nine of the people, they went to Julliard, and they're perfect pitch and the whole bit, and everything was done by David Foster, and you got one person that can't sing a lick, and it sounds like they made just some stuff in some garbage can. That dude is the genius. He's the innovator, because he found out a way how to get into the category with those other nine folks. Now, note for note, he can't compete with them, but he's the innovator.

So now the other people that went to the school and studied and are doing the pieces, are they innovators? No, they're doing what they're supposed to. Do you see what I'm saying? Now this other person, had they got into and they used that raggedy voice that they used to try to get in here with these people that were trained, then they would be considered poor and not qualified to even be in the room with them. But the fact that they do something on their own, that's innovation.

Jack White and the White Stripes, I mean, you know, his voice, compared to Mick Jagger's, Mick Jagger sounds like Frank Sinatra. But Jack White, from the White Stripes, he's brilliant. And from him doing that stuff, he went on to produce some stuff from the girl, *The Coal Miner's Daughter*, and to produce some other stuff, because he's great, because he's himself. But he and the White Stripes are playing all that crazy type stuff, and I know he knows chords and stuff, but when you look at the list of guitar players that everybody would say could play, okay, Clapton, everybody would say can play, Hendrix everybody say can play, George St. Mitts everybody could say play. Now, if they can play, and you put him in a room with them, what is it that he's doing? It can't be considered playing. You understand what I'm saying? But the fact that he has done his own thing, now you can say, "Heck, yah, he's playing." And that's the guy in the room that I want to be.

I want to be the guy that's in the room that say, "Hey, I don't know how you got here, but hey, he deserve it." Not so much, I did it my way, but it's like, you're just being yourself, and that's when innovation comes. Muddy Waters wasn't trying to innovate. He said, "I'm in Chicago...I was in the cotton fields, and now I'm in Chicago. And it's noisy and people are talking when I'm playing. I've got to be heard." Not that I hope that I got to take part

of this microphone out of my guitar and make a guitar pickup out of it, you know.

Les Paul created the four track recorder, probably not just so much because he wanted the Beatles to be able to do a *Rubber Soul* or the *White Album*, whichever one they did using a four track thing. You say, “Hey man, you know, there should be some type of a way for me to be able to play back what I just recorded. Let me check this out.” I’m sure he wasn’t trying to say “Well, yeah, when die brother, they going to say I invented the four track recorder and everybody going to know I’m the daddy! So, anytime you’re talking about digital recording, they got to come back to me.” No, he’s just doing what had to be done. It had to be done.

Sharpe: You mentioned Robert Johnson several times. What do you think he did that was unique or innovative?

Jones: I think the thing that Robert Johnson did that was the most brilliant thing and the most innovative thing that could have ever happened—and it’s going to sound cold—was that he passed at twenty-seven years old. I think the fact that he died early, and I think that the fact that there was so much mystery around his death. I think the fact that probably 80% of his life, with exception of the 100% of the actual recording taking place, you know, but out of 100% of people actually knowing about him, [there] is probably only 20% of it that could be proven. Probably eighty-five of that 20% was in the studio.
(laughter)

So, it’s like, “Yeah, I knew Robert Johnson. Yeah, Robert Johnson was my grandfather.” I mean, he didn’t have any kids of his own, no natural kids. So, there are heirs, but there’s not a blood line. So, if that’s not true, how do you know, if your mother... However, just say whichever, what number with the grandmothers was going out with Abraham Lincoln, and she was kicking it with him. And the kids that came after Abraham Lincoln, if they weren’t his bloodline, how do they know the stories behind him, because, if they weren’t his kids that he had Martha [Mary Todd Lincoln], as his wife, Martha was his wife, right? Yeah, you all got to know your history. Wasn’t that her name?

Sharpe: No it wasn’t Martha. That was Washington.

Jones: That was Washington, okay, whatever—Mary, what was his wife’s name? Mary, Mary, and his son was Todd or something—

Sharpe: Mary Todd Lincoln, yeah.

Jones: Yeah, I know now. I went to school, man.

Sharpe: (laughter)

Jones: Oh, I was saying, so people, they could write their own history. “Yeah, well Abraham Lincoln, man, you know, right before he got shot, dog, he came by and held me up in the air, and I remember it just like it yesterday.” You’re telling that story for three hundred years, you know, but there was no Facebook. You can’t prove it. That’s why the documentation is so important.

So, going back to Robert Johnson, I think that’s why his story was a mystical one. Was he poisoned? Was he not? Did he exist? If you listen to the sound recordings that were all recorded, I believe they were recorded in Dallas or in Austin in a bank or something, an old bank that they had a room that they put up some recording stuff. It sounds like it’s two different voices, you know, if you listen to the stuff. Was it the same guy? [singing], *I got a car...* He sings in that voice, and then in some of the other songs, it sounds like it’s a totally different person. I mean, it could be the same guy, but it’s not the same fervor. The guy that recorded him, the recordings ended up going to Columbia Records, but there’s no real—where are the notes? Allen Lomax didn’t get to him.

Sharpe: Tried.

Jones: He tried and was still looking for him and didn’t he had died, right? As a result, we knew Robert Johnson through Honey Boy Edwards. (laughter) Honey Boy had a lot of stories on Robert Johnson, and he seemed to be the only one.

Sharpe: So, you don’t think his music itself was anything innovative?

Jones: No, because his style came from like Charlie Patton. So, I mean, it became popular, but that was a style. That’s just like saying, you got Katy Perry, and Katy Perry’s hot, and there’s about three other little girls that have songs that is probably the same producer, with the same type music, the same song structure, the same keyboard patches, all identical songs. But it sounds like Katy Perry type songs. So, for me to say that he was an innovator, I’d to say that these girls that sound like Katy Perry are innovators. It’s easy to, when somebody is considered a star, to say, “Oh, yeah, yeah.” But, he played the guitar, and he sounded like his teachers. He died tragically and that was the whole...

If I go out here now, after this interview, and I get shot in the head by a drive-by shooting, and my hat just drifts down Michigan Avenue, and they say, “Well, he had a hat on.” By 8:00 tonight, the hat has blown all the way—been blown and had been ran over and ends up right at Sixtieth and Michigan, right at the corner of where I grew up, people would read all kind of stuff into that. Well, hell, the hat just got kicked and drawn, and the little boy wore it for two blocks and threw it down. His momma say, “Get that hat outta here.” And so, it ended up on Sixtieth Street. I would be great, because I’d be like, you

know, everything I did would be great, because I'm gone. I hope it's important now, but tragedy makes stuff happen.

Had Jimmy Hendricks [lived], he would be seventy years old today. Just think of the ups and downs he would have gone through, from twenty-seven years old to seventy years old. He might have been divorced six times. He might have gotten arrested four times, a DUI, dead, beat grandfather, he wouldn't be the Jimi Hendrix that he is now. They've even got the old Elvis, young Elvis. You got people that either love the old Elvis, or they love the young Elvis. They don't even look at him as being the same guy. What can you do?

But no, I don't think that Robert Johnson was an innovator, when you look at the math and the science of what people sounded like and the way that they were playing. He died when his contemporaries and mentors, like Son House and all those guys were playing. Booker White came up later. Like I say, Charlie Patton...If you listen to Charlie Patton, it sounds just like him, you know. That was the plan, because that was the style. You know, it's just like saying somebody that's playing with somebody that played the twelve bar blues, a basic twelve bar blues song.

What's innovative about that, unless he's put an auto tune on it or something? But just seventy bands in Chicago playing the twelve bar blues, and you're going to say one guy is an innovator, and the song's...Everybody's got the same lyrics, or they wrote the song, but it's part of this guy's song and part of that guy's song. What is innovative about that? And what is thievery? What is innovation? What is just being a good student? I think he was a good student and a good product. I'm not lambasting Robert Johnson, because I'm talking about him. He's not talking about me. So, obviously, he did something that was brilliant, but part of that brilliance was death. "Oh, he died so young." Look at all the other twenty-something year olds. "Sam Cooke, oh man, when he was on the verge of doing something." But everybody that has died, unless they have a terminal illness that they're dying for two years, everybody that dies has something to do tomorrow, everybody. "Man, he was going to take me to the ballgame." "Man, he was going to ride..."

But they make it, for us as musicians, like it was going to be so magnificent. "You know, man, Jim Morrison, he died at twenty-seven, man. That was going to be the last time he got high, when he was in Paris, man!" Well, hey he got high, and he died. If he had lived tomorrow, he probably would have got high again. And, had Robert Johnson lived another day, he probably would have wrote another song that sounded like Charlie Patton. Had Fernando lived another day, he probably would have did another blues camp. So, it would have been like blues camp to blues camp. What would be innovative about that? And like somebody say, "Okay, I got two years and three hours to live. Oh, yeah, I'm going to wind down in a year, so when I die everything is done and all my creative stuff is dead, and we can say, "Yep

man, this was the end of your life,” like the false retirement of Jay Z, you know.

Sharpe: That is probably where we should stop.

Interview ended.