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“MR. FURRY’S BLUES”:  
THE LIFE, MUSIC, AND LEGACY OF FURRY LEWIS

by

Jamison Tyler Fritts

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Musicology

The University of Memphis

December 2016

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This dissertation is dedicated to my mother.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I offer my sincerest gratitude to my mentor and committee chair, Dr. David Evans. His unrivaled understanding of American musical traditions and unwavering dedication to my learning has made my time at the University of Memphis more special than I ever imagined. Because of his continued teaching, guidance, and encouragement, even beyond his retirement, I have written a dissertation that I am proud of.

I also offer my deepest thanks to Dr. Kenneth Kreitner and Dr. Janet Page, both of whom have guided my learning and remained ever vigilant in their encouragements (the latter of which means more than I can ever truly express). Their dedication to the craft of teaching, mentorship, and to musicology has inspired me to be better.

I thank the rest of my committee, Dr. Stanley Hyland and Dr. Jeremy Tubbs. With a deep understanding of complex and often nuanced anthropological theories and practices, Dr. Hyland has shaped the way I think about the world around me, not just the musics that I study. Dr. Tubbs has been remarkably generous with encouragements and advice. He has also provided me with a model of success.

If not for Anna Neal, the head librarian for the Music Library at the University of Memphis's Rudi E. Scheidt School of Music (retired, 2016), I would have surely taken several more years to finish my dissertation. Along with Dr. Evans, Dr. Kreitner, and Dr. Page, Ms. Neil gave me the opportunity to serve as the Music Library's Graduate Assistant. She, somewhat miraculously, put up with me for six years (2010 to 2016), all the while providing me with experience, access to resources, and much needed financial assistance via a steady paycheck.

The love and support of family and friends are why I am here. First and foremost, I want to thank Emma for going on this journey with me. She has been an inextinguishable light. The

willingness of my parents (Sheila and Michael Campbell and Jere and Kim Fritts) to lend intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and financial support has given me more than I can ever express and certainly more than I can ever repay. And, a heartfelt “thank you” to my friends and colleagues E. J. Stokes, Steven DiBlasi, Francisco Lara, Jeremy Grall, Joel Roberts, and John Hausmann for their willingness to proofread, brainstorm ideas, and remind me that I can, in fact, finish this degree. Each of you has made me a better person, as well as a better scholar.

Of course, this dissertation would not have been possible without all those who so freely shared with me their stories, memories, and experiences of Furry Lewis. While there are far too many to name, and especially too many to extend the thanks that are rightly owed, I do want to single out a few: Zeke Johnson, Judy Peiser, Jimmy Crosthwait, Elmo Lee Thomas, Don Nix, Linzie Bulter, Mary Lindsay Dickinson, Jim Chappell, Misty Lavender, the late Samuel Charters, George Mitchell, Jeff Todd Titon, Dick Waterman, Fred Hay, the late Steve LaVere, Arne Brogger, Karl Gert Zur Heide, Robert Gordon, and Stefan Wirz. I am truly honored to call each of these people friends and colleagues. To all the others whom I have neglected to mention, I am truly sorry. I hope this oversight is not taken as my devaluing your help.

## ABSTRACT

Fritts, J. Tyler, PhD. The University of Memphis. December, 2016. “‘Mr. Furry’s Blues’: The Life, Music, and Legacy of Furry Lewis.” Major Professor: David H. Evans, PhD.

This dissertation provides in-depth critical analysis of Memphis blues musician Furry Lewis’s (1899-1981) life, music, and legacy. I rely on archival research, ethnographic fieldwork, and musical and technical analysis to answer a few key questions: 1) Who was Furry Lewis?; 2) Why does his music sound the way it does?; and 3) What impact does he have on current Memphis musicians?

Drawing on Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s literary critique of the African and Afro-Diasporic legend of Esu-Elegbara, I explore the relationship between Lewis’s known biography and the complex web of myths that surround him. I then examine the ways in which this rich mythos affects Lewis’s reception history and legacy. I catalogue and analyze Lewis’s entire known repertory as a way of identifying the relationship between its contents and his musical and cultural context. I transcribe, catalogue, and analyze his lyrics according to the theories of formulaic folk construction developed by Albert Lord, Milman Parry, and David Evans as a means of understanding Lewis’s compositional processes. This analysis is then used to compare and contrast Lewis’s music with local and regional styles. I analyze Lewis’s music by examining his learning processes, the instruments he used, the physical movements of his playing, his technique, and his approach to and understanding of musical tradition. Through many interviews and personal observations, I trace Lewis’s musical and personal influences from Memphis’s alternative rock movement in the 1960s through the current resurgence of interest in the city’s musical history.

The evidence presented in this dissertation shows that Lewis is a complex figure. His life-story is blurred by both incomplete records and mythology. His music is surprisingly

complicated as idiosyncrasies push it just beyond local and regional traditions. His legacy is uncommonly rich, as he has had a greater and longer lasting influence on Memphis's alternative rock musicians than on its blues and folk musicians. Though he was never Memphis's greatest musician or its most popular, he is certainly one of the most interesting.



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## CHAPTER 1

### THE STUDY OF FURRY LEWIS

#### Preface

This dissertation is a musical, historical, and ethnographic study of Furry Lewis, an African American folk and blues musician who lived most of his life in Memphis, Tennessee.<sup>1</sup> During his more than forty years as a professional musician, Lewis shared the stage with many of Memphis's most important blues musicians (John Estes, Jim Jackson, Hammie Nixon, Will Shade, Booker White, and Joe Willie Wilkins) and rockers (Don Nix, Jim Dickinson, Sid Selvidge, Lee Baker, and Jimmy Crosthwait).<sup>2</sup> He played in one of the area's first jug bands, was among the first Memphis blues musicians to record (1927-1929), performed in New York and Los Angeles, was featured at a music festival in Norway, and was an opening act for The Rolling Stones on two occasions. Lewis also made appearances on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson, in a nationally televised concert hosted by Leon Russell, and in a film starring Burt Reynolds. His life was the subject of an article in *Playboy* magazine and a song by Joni Mitchell. Since his death (1981), he has been inducted in both the Blues Hall of Fame and Memphis Music Hall of Fame. He is unquestionably one of Memphis's most important folk blues musicians, yet relatively little has been written about him and his music.

The purpose of this study is to provide Lewis the attention he deserves. In the following pages I explore Lewis's life, music, and legacy in the context of Memphis's musical communities, both past and present. To do so, I analyze his biography, mythology, repertoire,

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<sup>1</sup> "Furry" is typically thought to be a nickname, although this has not been proven. As Lewis was not issued a birth certificate, the origin of his name is likely to remain unclear. For more information on Lewis's name, see Chapter 4; and David Evans, "From Bumble Bee Slim to Black Boy Shine: Nicknames of Blues Singers," in *Ramblin' On My Mind: New Perspectives on the Blues*, edited by David Evans (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 179-221.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis had two professional careers: ca. 1910 to ca. 1930 and 1959 to 1981. For more information see Chapter 2.

compositional processes, performance style, and impact on Memphis music. All conclusions presented herein are supported by musicological analyses, historical research, and ethnographic interviews.

This dissertation is significant for several reasons: 1) This is the first full-length study devoted entirely to Lewis and his music; 2) It contributes to theories and methods commonly used in the study of a single musician's life history; 3) It contributes to theories and methods used for the study of blues compositional processes as they relate to improvisation, musical idiosyncrasies, folk traditions, and local and regional styles; 4) It challenges, corrects, and/or reexamines widely held notions about Lewis's life and musicianship; and 5) It is timely, as many of the people closest to Lewis have either died or are beginning to experience fading memories.<sup>3</sup>

### **Introduction**

Studies of the blues rarely discuss Furry Lewis as thoroughly as they do other early twentieth-century folk blues musicians from Memphis and the surrounding areas, such as Sleepy John Estes, Mississippi John Hurt, and Robert Johnson. This may be due to there being relatively few "covers" of his songs (except for "Casey Jones") or because he did not travel much. It may also be because he had few published interviews. This neglect may also be related to Lewis's humor, which tended to make him a "joke," or to his mythology, which obscures the truth and complicates research but falls short of transforming him into a folk icon in the same way that Faustian stories add to the allure of Robert Johnson and Tommy Johnson.

Nonetheless, blues aficionados and scholars tend to agree that Lewis is among the best and most interesting folk blues musicians of his time and place. At the foundation of Lewis's appeal is an uncommon handling of the blues and folk traditions. As described by David Evans:

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<sup>3</sup> Three important contacts (Samuel Charters, Steve LaVere, and Sid Selvidge) died since I began research. Delaying this study would only have increased the odds of losing valuable information.

There is an element of humor and irony in his blues, laced with a good deal of proverbial wisdom and philosophy about life. These qualities help make his blues more accessible to audiences from a social and cultural range broader than his own, even when his lyrics touch upon the deeper subjects of the blues, such as death, violence, imprisonment, and the state of the singer's soul. They also stood Lewis in good stead for the last two decades of his long life, in which he became the living embodiment of the blues tradition for thousands of young, mostly white, followers of blues and folk music.<sup>4</sup>

Lewis, like Elvis Presley, can be said to be all things to all people.<sup>5</sup> Depending on the angle from which one chooses to view him, he either fits the mold of the stereotypical bluesman or he is understood as a tradition-bending outlier. He was the itinerant musician who traveled across the South as a hobo, but he was also the professional concertizing musician at the forefront of Memphis's Blues Revival. He was the poor African-American busking for money as part of a jug band, and he was the movie star who earned \$500 in one night by performing as the opening act for the Rolling Stones. He was the country boy from the Mississippi Delta, and he as the product of a large city. He was the gregarious comedian, and he was the chronically depressed old man who suffered from severe alcoholism. All are equally true. On the most basic level, this is why Lewis is interesting.

### **Brief Biography**

Walter Furry Lewis was born in Greenwood, Mississippi, on March 6, 1899, though the year has been listed in scholarly forums as anywhere from 1893 to 1909.<sup>6</sup> In 1902, he and his immediate family relocated to Memphis. Lewis's mother, Victoria Lewis, is listed in the 1900

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<sup>4</sup> David Evans, "Furry Lewis," in John Cowley and Paul Oliver, eds., *The New Blackwell Guide to Recorded Blues* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 83.

<sup>5</sup> Depending on perspective, Presley can be seen as a rebellious youth, as a teen idol, as a rock and roll innovator, as a military man, as a "mama's boy," as a religious person, as an aging icon, as a drug addict, etc.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis's birth year has been debated since his re-discovery in 1959. For more information see Chapter 2 and Appendix A: Timeline of Significant Events (Historical and Otherwise) in Furry Lewis's Life.



United States Census as living with her parents in Greenville, Mississippi and she is listed in the 1902 Polk City Directory for Memphis as living at 164 Brinkley Avenue.<sup>7</sup>

It was in Memphis that Lewis developed an interest in the guitar. Although he was unable to afford his own instrument, he was not dissuaded from learning to play—Lewis built a “guitar” from a cigar box, nails, and wire from a screen door.<sup>8</sup> In an interview in 1967 with Jack Hurley and Harry Godwin, Lewis added: “Of course, I wasn’t playing nothing, but that’s just the way I got a start. And I love it. That’s really it.”<sup>9</sup>

According to Lewis, his most significant early musical mentor was W. C. Handy, whom he claimed to have played with during the first couple decades of the twentieth century—Handy left Memphis in 1918. In addition to shaping his musical career, Handy supposedly gave Lewis his first real guitar. While the particulars of the relationship between Lewis and Handy can (and will) be debated, Handy’s presence in Lewis’s narrative is undeniably significant.<sup>10</sup> Though they are not nearly as well remembered as Handy, Lewis also credited men he identified as Blind Joe, Little Birdie, Charlie Jackson, James Manus, Willie Pope, Guy Schoofers, and Landis Walton for sparking his interest in music.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Blues researchers have contested the date of the move for years. For more information see Chapter 2.

<sup>8</sup> Bengt Olsson, *Memphis Blues and Jug Bands* (London: Studio Vista, 1970), 74-5; Furry Lewis, interview by Harry Godwin and Jack Hurley, Memphis, TN, February 7, 1967, Memphis State Oral History Project, University Libraries Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>9</sup> Furry Lewis, interviewed by Godwin and Hurley, 1967.

<sup>10</sup> It is possible that Lewis exaggerated his connection to Handy for self-aggrandizing purposes. However, Lewis appeared to express a genuine gratitude for Handy’s involvement in his early musical development. Handy was an accomplished guitarist himself. For more information on Lewis’s relationship to Handy, see Chapter 2.

<sup>11</sup> Fred Hay, ed., *Goin’ Back to Sweet Memphis: Conversations with the Blues* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2001), 84; Furry Lewis, interview by Godwin and Hurley, Feb. 7, 1967; Olsson, *Memphis Blues and Jug Bands*, 76. For more information see Chapter 5.

In 1916 Lewis was involved in a nearly fatal train accident that resulted in the amputation of his left leg at the knee. After a lengthy hospital stay, he was fitted with a wooden prosthetic.<sup>12</sup> While Lewis often joked about his handicap, the loss of a leg created substantial problems, both personally and professionally.

Between 1916 and 1918 Lewis met Jim Jackson, a blues and folk musician known in and around Memphis. Not long after, Lewis joined Jackson as a member of Dr. Willie Lewis's Medicine Show.<sup>13</sup> In addition to giving him a wage, the medicine show offered Lewis an opportunity to polish his musical skills, develop as a showman, and practice his comedic timing. As part of his routine, Lewis told jokes, performed as a solo act, and played guitar in a jug band with Jackson, Will Shade, and possibly Gus Cannon.<sup>14</sup>

In 1927 Lewis was "discovered" by renowned A&R man, Jack Kapp—Kapp was not in Memphis, so Lewis had either to be in Chicago to be "discovered" or Kapp had to hear of Lewis from a local Memphis Vocalion representative. At Kapp's request, Lewis recorded in Chicago for the Vocalion label. In 1928, after only two recording sessions, Vocalion decided not to renew his contract. Despite the setback, Lewis's first career as a recording artist was not over. Soon after his release from Vocalion, Ralph Peer (another renowned A&R man) signed him to the Victor label and recorded him in Memphis. Fearing they had lost a promising act to their rival,

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<sup>12</sup> Many people who knew Lewis have often commented on the ease with which he walked. Footage of Lewis walking supports this claim as his physical handicap is mostly undetectable.

<sup>13</sup> The Dr. Willie Lewis of the Dr. Lewis Medicine Show is of no relation to Furry Lewis. The Dr. Lewis Medicine Show promoted an alternative medicine known as "Jack Rabbit Salve." Jim Jackson was roughly ten years older than Lewis. For more information on Lewis's time in the medicine show see William Barlow, *"Looking Up At Down": The Emergence of Blues Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 220; Samuel B. Charters, *The Country Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1959), 103; and Olsson, *Memphis Blues and Jug Bands*, 76. According to Sheldon Harris, Lewis joined the medicine show ca. 1906-1908. See Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who's Who: A Biographical Dictionary of Blues Singers*, (New York: Arlington House Publishers, 1979), 326.

<sup>14</sup> Charters, *The Country Blues*, 103; and Paul Oliver, *Savannah Syncopators: African Retentions in the Blues* (London: Studio Vista, 1970), 63. I have not yet found an interview with Cannon where he mentions playing in a medicine show with Lewis.

Vocalion arranged a second recording session in Memphis with Lewis in 1929. This recording session took place at the Peabody Hotel during September of 1929.

With the onset of the Great Depression and America's eventual involvement in World War II, recording opportunities began to disappear. Lewis was left with two options: relocate to Chicago or New York to be close to the recording studios, or find work outside of the recording industry. Lewis chose the latter, accepting a position as a street sweeper for the City of Memphis. He remained in this position for four decades. Some people in Memphis still tell stories of seeing Lewis in the early 1960s walking behind a trash cart as he made his way through the area around Beale Street. Due to the relative stability afforded by his job with the City in combination with his restricted mobility, Lewis stopped performing publically altogether.

Lewis's professional musical life was not over, though. In 1959 he was "rediscovered" by blues researcher Samuel Charters, who was in Memphis conducting research for his forthcoming book *The Country Blues*.<sup>15</sup> While speaking with jug band musician Will Shade, Charters casually mentioned that he would have enjoyed the opportunity to speak with Lewis. To Charters's surprise, Shade's wife, Jennie Mae, declared that Lewis was working as a street sweeper in downtown Memphis. After contacting the City government, Charters was able to arrange a meeting with Lewis. The music and interview session that followed resulted in the 1959 Folkways release of Lewis's eponymous album. This album proved to be the catalyst for Lewis's second career as a professional musician.

During the 1960s Lewis was a central figure of the Memphis Blues Revival. He performed regularly throughout the decade, and he hosted blues scholars and aficionados at his

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<sup>15</sup> Samuel B Charters, *Walking a Blues Road: A Selection of Blues Writings 1956-2004*. (New York: Marion Boyars, 2004), 57-8.

home on many occasions. Lewis also reestablished himself as a recording artist, releasing four albums of newly recorded material.<sup>16</sup>

The 1970s were Lewis's most prolific decade. In 1970 he was featured in an article for *Playboy Magazine*.<sup>17</sup> In 1971 he traveled to Los Angeles to perform in a televised music special hosted by Leon Russell. In 1972 he joined Don Nix's Alabama State Troupers Road Show.<sup>18</sup> In 1973 he became a key member of the traveling show The Memphis Blues Caravan.<sup>19</sup> In 1974 he appeared on television on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson. In 1975 he made his film debut in *W. W. and the Dixie Dance Kings*, starring Burt Reynolds, and he made his only trip abroad when he performed at the Molde Jazz Festival in Norway.<sup>20</sup> On two occasions (1975 and 1978), he performed as the opening act for The Rolling Stones's Fourth of July concert in Memphis.

Despite worsening health, Lewis continued to host blues researchers and enthusiasts at his home.<sup>21</sup> He also performed on occasion, though he required assistance (physical and musical) from younger friends.<sup>22</sup> In exchange for their support, Lewis passed down his musical traditions.

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<sup>16</sup> Lewis's music also appears on four blues compilations published during the 1960s.

<sup>17</sup> Stanley Booth, "Furry's Blues," in *Playboy*, 17 no. 4, 100-2, 104, 114, 193-4.

<sup>18</sup> The spelling of "Troupers" is an intentional play on words. The Alabama State Troupers were comprised equally of studio musicians from Muscle Shoals, Alabama, and Memphis's Stax Records.

<sup>19</sup> The Memphis Blues Caravan featured twelve Memphis-area country blues musicians, including Booker White and Sleepy John Estes

<sup>20</sup> For the concert at the Molde Jazz Festival, Lewis, along with Big Sam Clark and Dave "Snaker" Ray, was billed as one of the "Memphis Blues Stars." Ray, however, was from Minneapolis. The event was coordinated by blues promoter Arne Brogger. Arne Brogger, e-mail message to author, July 2, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Evidence of Lewis's deteriorating health can be found in the many pictures from the late 1970s and early 1980s. These pictures show Lewis playing guitar or talking to friends as he lay in his bed. During this time, Lewis lived in a small, two-room apartment on Mosby Avenue in Memphis. His bed was situated in the corner of the living room. To complicate matters, Lewis suffered from financial problems. To supplement his income, he adopted the practice of keeping his guitar "in hock" at a pawnshop in downtown Memphis; if someone wanted him to perform, he or she had to redeem his guitar. The pawnshop Lewis used was Capital Loans Pawnshop, located at 774 Poplar Avenue in downtown Memphis. Lewis had an agreement with the pawnbroker that allowed him to pawn his guitar

After enduring severe burns from an apartment fire on August 14, 1981, Lewis suffered a myocardial infarction on September 9. Five days later, on September 14, he died in his room at the City of Memphis Hospital. Funeral services were a somber yet celebratory occasion with two hundred of Lewis's family and friends gathering to pay their final respects.<sup>23</sup> Following the services, Lewis was interred at Hollywood Cemetery just south of downtown Memphis.<sup>24</sup>

Interest in Lewis and his music has increased since his death. Many of his albums have been re-released on CD and for digital download, and his recordings appear on various blues compilations. Musicians, both young and old, perform their renditions of Lewis's music in local coffee houses. He is also featured in the front-page article of the January 26, 2014, issue of Memphis's *Commercial Appeal* and appears as the subject of an essay by Steve Selvidge published in the March 6-12, 2014, issue of the *Memphis Flyer*.<sup>25</sup> Lewis was inducted into the

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without fear of it being sold. When he was done playing, he would pawn it once more. This was a way for him to make extra money. For more information, see Chapter 2.

<sup>22</sup> Lee Baker was Lewis's primary backing musician. Lewis affectionately referred to Baker as "Lee Bailey." Jimmy Crosthwait told me that Lewis used "Bailey" to remind Baker that Lewis was still the star of the show; the joke is that Baker was not important enough for Lewis to commit his name to memory. There does not seem to have been a connection between Lewis's nickname for Baker and the famous lawyer F. Lee Bailey.

<sup>23</sup> Memphis musicians Lee Baker, Linzie Butler, Jim Dickinson, and Sid Selvidge honored their friend and mentor with renditions of "The Old Rugged Cross" and "When the Saints Go Marching In." See William Thomas, "Friends bid farewell to Lewis with songs blues player lived by," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, September 17, 1981, and Mary Lindsay Dickinson, interview by author, Coldwater, MS, December 12, 2013. Rufus Thomas and historian and blues researcher Harry Godwin, among several others, delivered impromptu eulogies. See Jim Balentine, "Furry would have liked his bluesman's farewell," *Memphis Press Scimitar*, September 17, 1981.

<sup>24</sup> Lewis's grave did not receive a tombstone until 1983. According to the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, "A one-ton granite tombstone, bought with nickels and dimes collected in Memphis bars and clubs over the past several months, was set into place at Hollywood Cemetery where the legendary guitar player was buried following his death of a heart attack." See William Thomas, "Legend of Furry acquires marker," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, July 16, 1983.

<sup>25</sup> Steve Selvidge is the son of Sid Selvidge. In the essay, Selvidge reflects on Lewis's legacy. He also discusses his own experiences as a child frequently in Lewis's company. In these reflections, Selvidge tells how he nearly accidentally shot Lewis with Lewis's handgun. See Steve Selvidge, "Furry and Sid: On growing up among legends," *Memphis Flyer*, March 6-12, 2014.

Blues Foundation's Blues Hall of Fame in 2012 and into the Memphis Music Hall of Fame in 2014.

### Literature Review

Samuel Charters was the first to write about Lewis. In his watershed work *The Country Blues* (1959), Charters comments on Lewis's musical style and provides a few details of Lewis's early career as a traveling musician and recording artist.<sup>26</sup> In *Sweet as the Showers of Rain*, Charters devotes an entire chapter to Lewis, though the commentary on Lewis's music is primarily poetic descriptions and surface-level. In reflecting on Lewis's musical style, Charters states: "The songs Furry sang were distinctly personal, while still, in many way [*sic*], characteristic of the blues in Memphis. He's almost an archetypal figure in the development of the blues in the city, even though it was the street bands, rather than solo blues artists, who were the most obvious along Beale Street."<sup>27</sup> Similarly, in *The Bluesmen*, Charters says:

All of the blues Furry did were interesting, and everything was a skillful example of setting an accompaniment to a melody, but the three ballads ["Kassie Jones," "Billy Lyons and Stack O'Lee," and "John Henry"] were especially his own . . . It is this sudden, quiet summing up of a song that makes his ballads stay in the memory. He's been able to find the essence of the songs, the feeling of quiet melancholy that threads through them, tying the details of the story into a broader, deeper, more human narrative. The gentle sadness is part of the wistful, almost tentative quality of his singing, and he emphasized it with the guitar accompaniments.<sup>28</sup>

Despite a lack of musicological rigor, Charters's observations are nonetheless valuable. If for no other reason, Charters's discussion of Lewis in *Sweet As The Showers of Rain*, in particular, is important as it accounts for a significant portion of Lewis's word-count in early blues texts.

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<sup>26</sup> The information presented in the book is taken from Charters's personal interviews with Lewis, but some of it is incorrect (for example, the citing of March 3, 1900, as Lewis's date of birth).

<sup>27</sup> Samuel B. Charters, *Sweet as the Showers of Rain: The Bluesman, Volume II*, 2nd ed., (New York: Oak Publications, 1991), 49-64.

<sup>28</sup> Samuel B. Charters, *The Bluesmen* (New York: Oak Publishers, 1967), 52.

Bengt Olsson's *Memphis Blues and Jug Bands* (1970) is perhaps the most important of the early sources on Lewis—it even served as a source for Charters's *Sweet as the Showers of Rain* (1977).<sup>29</sup> While Olsson's chapter on Lewis is rather short—about four pages of text—the information in it is unparalleled by any source at the time and by few published since. Composed largely of direct quotations from Lewis, *Memphis Blues and Jug Bands* provides readers with almost all of the known details of Lewis's childhood and early music career, including Lewis's relationship with such early blues titans as Texas Alexander, Gus Cannon, Jim Jackson, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Memphis Minnie, Piano Red, Bessie Smith, and Mamie Smith, as well as with lesser known musicians, such as Buddy Doyle, Keghouse, and Cream Cheese. The chapter also addresses Lewis's approach to composition and offers insight into his life and career during the late 1960s. Although not credited, the chapter was written by David Evans and all information presented therein is taken from Evans's 1969 interview with Lewis.<sup>30</sup>

In *Early Downhome Blues* (1977), Jeff Todd Titon provides a brief musicological discussion of Lewis's music.<sup>31</sup> Much of this focuses on Lewis's use of lyric formulas and the subject matter of his lyrics. Titon also provides a transcription of Lewis's 1928 recording of "Mistreatin' Mama," and he discusses Lewis's occasional use of an "unorthodox left-hand 'over the top' position" on the guitar.<sup>32</sup> To support his musical analyses, quotations from Lewis are included.

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<sup>29</sup> Olsson, *Memphis Blues and Jug Bands*, 73-8.

<sup>30</sup> Furry Lewis interview by David Evans, Memphis, TN, 1969, D. K. Wilgus Collection, UCLA Ethnomusicology Archive.

<sup>31</sup> Jeff Todd Titon, *Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977).

<sup>32</sup> Titon, *Early Downhome Blues*, 130-2.

Lewis is one of the ninety-four blues musicians included in Andrew M. Cohen's study of the physical aspects of guitar playing among folk blues guitarists ("The Hands of Blues Guitarists").<sup>33</sup> In identifying and cataloguing the positions and movements of the right hand, Cohen notes various local, regional, and temporal styles of blues performance. Cohen's database is essential for comparative research into the music-making processes of the blues.

Newspapers and magazines are important sources for information on Lewis. In Memphis newspapers alone, nearly fifty articles on Lewis have been published since his rediscovery in the late 1950s. The majority of the articles appear in the *Memphis Press Scimitar* and the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*. *Memphis Flyer* and *Memphis Tri-State Defender*, a historically African American newspaper in Memphis, also ran articles on Lewis. Articles on Lewis appear in *Chicago Sun Times* and *Palo Alto Peninsula Times Tribune*, as well. Nearly thirty of the articles on Lewis were published during the last three years of his life.

In addition to various articles in blues magazines, Lewis is featured in an article in *Playboy Magazine* from 1970. Here, Stanley Booth, in his characteristic purple prose, describes an "average" day in Lewis's life.<sup>34</sup> Such articles rarely present verifiable biographical information or offer critical discussion of Lewis's music, but the anecdotes and insightful quotations excerpted from interviews with Lewis do provide important context.

The liner notes accompanying Lewis's albums frequently depict Lewis during the last few decades of his life. On occasion, the notes include engagement with Lewis's music, but more typically, they offer only cursory biographical information and/or details of a particular

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<sup>33</sup> Andrew M. Cohen, "The Hands of Blues Guitarists," in *Ramblin' On My Mind: New Perspectives on the Blues*, edited by David Evans (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 152-78.

<sup>34</sup> Booth, "Furry's Blues," 100-2, 104, 114, 193-4.



recording session. As a musician or a music historian close to Lewis frequently authors the notes, the information contained within them is typically reliable.

Lewis is frequently mentioned in scholarly texts on the folk blues, though he is rarely given detailed treatment.<sup>35</sup> When he is more fully treated, the conversation tends to focus on either stereotypical and mythologized versions of his life or on banal aspects of his playing.<sup>36</sup> This minimizes Lewis's significance and reduces him to a blues cliché, ultimately undermining his musical and cultural significance.

### **Methods and Theories**

Throughout this dissertation, I draw from methods and theories of ethnomusicology, musicology, anthropology, history, and folklore to establish a clear and accurate understanding of Lewis's life, music, and legacy. In this section, I address these methods and theories, their application, and associated difficulties as each pertain to the three principle components of my work: ethnographic fieldwork, archival research, and musicological analysis.

#### **Ethnographic Fieldwork**

Ethnographic interviews and participant-observation are foundational to my research.<sup>37</sup> Between 2013 and the completion of this dissertation in the fall of 2016 I interviewed many of

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<sup>35</sup> See, for example: Barlow, "Looking Up At Down"; David Evans, *Big Road Blues: Tradition and Creativity in the Folk Blues* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Hay, ed., *Goin' Back to Sweet Memphis*; Paul Oliver, *The Story of the Blues* 2nd ed., (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997); Robert Springer, ed. *Nobody Knows Where the Blues Come From: Lyrics and History* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2006); and David Evans, ed., *Ramblin' On My Mind: New Perspectives on the Blues* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

<sup>36</sup> Stanley Booth, *Rhythm Oil: A Journey Through the Music of the American South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991); and Bruce Cook, *Listen to the Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995).

<sup>37</sup> As a guide to ethnographic research, I rely heavily on the following texts: Bruce Jackson, *Fieldwork* (Urbana and Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1964); Helen Myers, ed., *Ethnomusicology: An Introduction* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992); Bruno Nettl, *Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1964); Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-One Issues and Concepts* 2nd ed., (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005); and Kay Kaufman Shelemay, ed., *The Garland Library of*

the people who knew Lewis, saw him perform live, or who have been impacted in some way by his legacy. This includes musicians, historians, researchers, producers, business owners, and blues fans. Most of the people with whom I spoke are from Memphis and most remain active in the city's music scene in one way or another. Although many of Lewis's closest friends and colleagues are no longer living (Gus Cannon, Booker White, Lee Baker, Jim Dickinson, and Sid Selvidge), I found there was no shortage of people excited to share their stories and impressions of Lewis.<sup>38</sup> By the end of my research, I had spoken with several dozen people, including musicians, historians, researchers, producers, and blues fans, all with ties to Lewis. Most notable among the musicians are Linzie Butler, Jimmy Crosthwait, David Evans, Vince Johnson, Zeke Johnson, Don Nix, Elmo Lee Thomas, and Brad Webb. Other notable people include Samuel Charters, Mary Lindsay Dickinson (wife of late musician and producer Jim Dickinson and mother of rock musicians Cody and Luther Dickinson of the North Mississippi Allstars), George Mitchell, Judy Peiser (founder of the Center for Southern Folklore), Jeff Todd Titon, and Dick Waterman.

Some of my interviews were more formal. For these, I documented the interview session with a Zoom H4n portable audio recorder featuring two onboard stereo condenser microphones that record a 24-bit/96-kHz linear PCM WAV file.<sup>39</sup> To supplement audio recordings, photographs were made with the iPhone 4S's or iPhone 6's onboard 8-megapixel still-photography camera. Hand written notes supplemented audio and visual recordings. Most interactions were in the form of informal conversations. During these conversations, notes were

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*Readings in Ethnomusicology: A Core Collection of Important Ethnomusicological Articles in Seven Volumes* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990).

<sup>38</sup> Selvidge died a month after I attempted to contact him.

<sup>39</sup> As a backup for the Zoom H4n, I used a 2012 MacBook Pro and Apple's Garageband software.

jotted down with paper and pen if possible and detailed accounts of the experience were written soon after.

I also regularly attend blues concerts in and around Memphis. These events have been essential to my understanding of Lewis's continued significance. Moreover, regular concert attendance allows me to nurture friendships established during the interview process.

I even tried, though admittedly without much success, to learn to play Lewis's style of slide guitar.<sup>40</sup> My efforts mostly consisted of attempts to recreate Lewis's sounds by imitating his physical movements. I also attempted to memorize and later reenact the movements of the guitarists I saw perform Lewis's material live. Zeke Johnson, a Memphis folk musician who regularly played alongside Lewis for two years during the late 1970s, even served as my tutor. Johnson more importantly proved an important reference for explaining some of Lewis's more uncommon techniques.

My fieldwork was a rewarding and enlightening experience, though it was not free of frustration. As is to be expected, unreturned correspondence and the routine stress of organizing interview sessions occasionally slowed progress. I also struggled at times to locate recordings and official documents. More problematic is the fact that I was not able to speak to Lewis directly. The most difficult aspect of my research, though, concerned separating the truth from exaggerations, myths, and inaccurate memories.

Fortunately, I did not encounter the sorts of racial difficulties faced by some white blues scholars before me. Rarely did I become uncomfortable while visiting a predominantly African American club that features live blues—I visited such clubs (such as, Wild Bill's) in hopes of meeting people who saw Lewis perform. In all instances of initial unease, tensions quickly

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<sup>40</sup>I have played mandolin for several years. My previous experiences with the guitar have been limited to providing harmonic support through the use of a handful of chords.

dissipated and the evening ended happily; my sincere interest in the music played a role in my acceptance. While Memphis still struggles with issues of race, the cultural milieu is much less problematic in the second decade of the twenty-first century than it was in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.

### **Archival Research**

To reconstruct Lewis's biography, I rely in part on archival research conducted with the help of the Special Collections department at the University of Memphis Libraries, the Memphis Public Libraries, and various historians and historical societies in Illinois, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee. Government records, such as military enlistment forms and census data, were accessed through membership in the online genealogical database Ancestry.com. Housing and employment records were found during a search of Memphis city directories. I was also given access to items held in the personal archives of David Evans, Jeff Todd Titon, and Steve LaVere.

Quickly, I found that Lewis's story is an entanglement of facts and myths. To separate one from the other, I compared newspaper articles, government forms, and other official documents with personal accounts. To analyze Lewis's story, I employed hermeneutical approaches used by Henry Lewis Gates, Jr. in his analysis of the fabled Esu-Elegbara.<sup>41</sup> I also borrow from Pierre Bourdieu's and Malcolm Gladwell's writings on community building, cultural capital, and coolness to contextualize and synthesize Lewis's legacy.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*, Twenty-Fifth-Anniversary Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988/2014).

<sup>42</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction," in R. Brown (ed.), *Knowledge, Education and Cultural Change: Papers in the Sociology of Education* (London: Tavistock, 1973): 71-112; Malcolm Gladwell, "The Cool Hunt," *The New Yorker*, March 17, 1997, 78-94.

## Analysis

Lyric transcriptions are an essential part of my analyses. In writing the words Lewis sang, I use spellings and grammar that reflect his likely intent. In doing so, I hope to avoid placing undue emphasis on lexicological confusion and differences in dialect—for instance, Lewis confuses “collusion” and “collision” and pronounces “murder” as “mur-duh,” though I always write the words as “collision” and “murder.”<sup>43</sup> But, I also take care to not unduly deemphasize speech patterns. Correcting Lewis’s grammar is not my goal; for example, “threwed” is not changed to “threw.” I also preserve common vernacular contractions, such as “gonna” (“going to,” “em” (“them”), and “clare” (“declare”).

After transcription, I analyze Lewis’s lyric formulas according to the theories and methods of Milman Parry, Albert Lord, and David Evans.<sup>44</sup> Next, lyrics and lyric formulas are compared across various versions of songs (for example, the lyrics for “Kassie Jones” (Vi 21664) are compared to the lyrics for “Kassie Jones” (ASP LP 1), which are in turn compared to the lyrics of “Kassie Jones” (SDR 190; ALLP 265)).

The process of transcribing lyrics was comparatively free of problems, although some of the recordings suffered fidelity issues caused by faulty recording equipment, aging and damaged

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<sup>43</sup> The use of phonetic spelling has unavoidable racist connotations, though blues texts are, on the whole, less problematic than others.

<sup>44</sup> For the formation and propagation of local and regional styles, I build on the work of David Evans. See Evans, *Big Road Blues*, 1982. For the spontaneous formulaic construction of lyrics and melodies, I build on the work of Milman Parry, Albert Lord, and David Evans. See Milman Parry, “Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making, I: Homer and Homeric Style,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 41, vol. 80, 1930; Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); David Evans, “Formulaic Composition in the Blues: A View from the Field,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 120, no. 478 (Fall 2007): 486; and Evans, *Big Road Blues*, 1982. Traditional musical analyses (such as that concerning harmonic progressions, rhythms, rhyme scheme, etc.) are conducted in accordance with theories and methods championed by Charles Seeger, Mantle Hood, Alan P. Merriam, Helen Myers, Bruno Nettl, Kay Kaufmann Shelemay, and others. See Charles Seeger, “Prescriptive and Descriptive Music-Writing,” *The Musical Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (1958): 184-95; Mantle Hood, *The Ethnomusicologist* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1971); Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1964); Myers, ed., *Ethnomusicology*; Nettl, *Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology*; Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology*; and Shelemay, ed., *The Garland Library of Readings in Ethnomusicology*.

records, poor microphone placement, and/or muddled pronunciation. Furthermore, Lewis's frequent use of idiomatic expressions ("she's on my Daniel," "natural born eastman," "shake it like Chaney did," etc.) presented occasional difficulties. As needed, I relied on the etymological research of Stephen Calt, Michael Taft, and Robert Springer to identify specific words and phrases.<sup>45</sup>

I usually refer directly to recordings of Lewis's music, though I do use musical transcriptions as an aid to analysis.<sup>46</sup> In many instances, I present only excerpts of a piece, which vary in length depending on analytic objectives.

Similar to my handling of Lewis's lyrics, transcriptions of Lewis's music are presented as they were likely intended, not as they were played. For example, Lewis may think the sixth string of his guitar is tuned to D though it may sound a half step flat (C-sharp). I use the actual sounding notes to occasionally draw conclusions about Lewis's musicianship, but it is the intended notes that are, for the most part, more important, as they reveal insights into Lewis's musical tradition.<sup>47</sup>

Musical transcription is not my personal strength. To combat some of my shortcomings, the computer programs *Transcribe!* and *Audacity* were used to slow tempos and to isolate and loop sections of audio recordings. Videos posted on YouTube.com of Lewis's live performances provided confirmation of techniques, tunings, and chord shapes. I also consulted musicians who learned directly from Lewis. While I was able to confidently produce outlines of rhythmic,

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<sup>45</sup> Stephen Calt, *Barrelhouse Words: A Blues Dialect Dictionary* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009); Michael Taft, *Talkin' to Myself: Blues Lyrics, 1921-1942*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005); and Robert Springer, "On the Electronic Trail of Blues Formulas," in *Nobody Knows Where the Blues Come From: Lyrics and History*, edited by Robert Springer (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2006): 164-86.

<sup>46</sup> I do not use transcriptions to create a database of all of Lewis's performances.

<sup>47</sup> I find a prescriptive approach to transcription to be more helpful than a descriptive one, at least in this instance. For more information on prescriptive and descriptive transcription, see Seeger, "Prescriptive and Descriptive Music-Writing," 184-95; and Nettl, *Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology*, 99-111.

melodic, and harmonic structures, my struggles to create accurate and detailed transcriptions ultimately led to my seeking outside help. As such, I selected the pieces and/or passages to be transcribed and provided information regarding their intended function within my analysis, but my friend and colleague Joel Roberts created the transcriptions.

### **Organization**

This dissertation is organized into six chapters with a list of selected references, a complete discography, and appendices.

Chapter 1 (The Study of Furry Lewis) explains the purpose and the significance of the dissertation and my interest in researching Lewis and includes a brief biographical sketch of Lewis and details of literature relevant to Lewis, problems associated with the study, methodologies and theories used, and the dissertation's organization.

Each of the next five chapters critically engages with a specific aspect of Lewis's story (the relationship between his biography and mythology; repertoire; lyric composition; musical style; and legacy). Taken as a whole, these chapters create a holistic portrait of Lewis, his music, and his legacy. While each chapter can be read as a study independent of the others, the organization of chapters is intended to provide a logical arc along which Lewis and his music can be explored.

In Chapter 2 (The Story of Furry Lewis) I provide the reader with two versions of Lewis's life. The first is a biographical, historical, and social reconstruction of Lewis's life based on the best surviving factual information. That is, what really happened. The second is an examination of Lewis's mythos based on various tall-tales, exaggerations, and misrememberings. In other words, what Lewis and his friends suggest happened. The historical reconstruction expands Lewis's known biography and challenges widely held misconceptions about his life (his

having been born in 1893, his personal relationship with W. C. Handy, etc.) while the examination of mythos provides a historiographic understanding of Lewis and his music.

The purpose of Chapter 3 (Furry Lewis's Repertoire) is to understand the relationship between the contents of Lewis's repertoire and the social, historical, and musical contexts that encouraged changes in repertoire to occur; I am not attempting to create a complete list of songs Lewis knew. Instead, I compile and compare the contents of set lists and recording sessions throughout Lewis's life. This chapter also struggles with Lewis's characterization as either a "bluesman" or a "songster," a debate led by Paul Oliver.<sup>48</sup>

Chapter 4 (Furry Lewis's Lyrics) provides analyses of Lewis's lyrics. While some attention is given to lyrical content (the words themselves and their meaning), the chapter focuses most on the processes Lewis used to spontaneously compose the words of his blues. At the foundation of this study are theories and methods concerning the use of traditional and original lyric formulas that are built on those set forth by folklorists and literary scholars Milman Parry and Albert Lord and by ethnomusicologist David Evans. Throughout the chapter, Lewis's lyric formulas are identified, catalogued, and compared across time. The objective of this chapter is to uncover Lewis's changing personal approach to the tradition of blues lyric composition, not to identify subject matter, form, rhythmic scheme, cadence, poetic meter, dialect, etc. Though blues lyrics are at the center of the study, Lewis's compositional processes for lyrics of genres other than blues are also discussed.

Chapter 5 (Furry Lewis's Music) is an in-depth examination of Lewis's music. First, I identify and discuss the instruments Lewis owned. I then consider his processes for learning to play music. Next, I analyze and describe the corporeal aspects (right hand positions, wrist

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<sup>48</sup> Paul Oliver, *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 22.



movement, etc.) of his playing. I then analyze his guitar tunings and the effect each tuning had on his music. This is followed by examination of his specific guitar and vocal styles. As needed, I use transcriptions to bolster my arguments.

Concluding the dissertation is Chapter 6 (Furry Lewis in Summary). Lewis's enduring legacy is the focus of the first part of the chapter. I revisit my fieldwork with Lewis's friends, blues researchers, and contemporary local musicians as a way of gauging Lewis's continued significance for Memphis music. The bulk of the information presented here is taken from interviews with local musicians. The second part of the chapter contains a summation of the dissertation's findings. I also return to the purpose of the dissertation as a means of measuring the project's success. Final comments on Lewis's life, music, and legacy are made as a means of completing the dissertation's narrative arc. Lastly, I offer potential avenues for future research into Lewis's life, music, and legacy.

A bibliography of selected sources and a set of appendices relevant to the study are included at the end of the dissertation. Appendix A contains a complete discography of Lewis's published recordings, and Appendix B contains a selected discography of Lewis's unpublished recordings. A timeline of significant events in Lewis's life is found in Appendix C. The timeline illustrates chronological discrepancies in Lewis's mythology and is intended as a companion to Chapter 2, Section 2. Appendix D includes the full transcription of Lewis's appearance on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson. Appendix E contains a selection of historical documents, promotional items, and other items relevant to Lewis.

### **Conclusion**

I was fascinated with Lewis from the moment I was introduced to his music in the spring of 2012. Since that time, my appreciation and admiration for him has grown with each step I

have taken toward understanding his life, music, and legacy.<sup>49</sup> I have spent the past few years collecting, analyzing, and listening to his music. I know his songs by heart, but I am still frequently amazed at surprises Lewis hides just beneath the surface. At times, his music still makes me laugh out loud, but it can also still stir within me a deep sadness. This is, I think, the mark of a truly gifted performer.

Although I did not have the opportunity to meet him—he died four years before I was born—my research has allowed me to feel connected to Lewis and his story. By forming relationships (both personal and professional) with many people who were close to Lewis, I feel, rightly or wrongly, as if I too know him. I have heard many stories of Lewis's high jinks, some on numerous occasions. I have sat with people as they laughed and as they cried while remembering an old friend. I have gotten to know many sides of Lewis and I have come to understand that he was much more than a musician; he was a friend, a mentor, and a complicated person who fought personal demons while wearing a wide grin.

It is my hope that this dissertation honors Furry Lewis's memory.

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<sup>49</sup> I was introduced to Lewis's music during a course lecture on the early blues of Memphis given by my advisor, Dr. David Evans.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE STORY OF FURRY LEWIS

#### Preface

This chapter explores two distinct and separate, yet connected, versions of Furry Lewis's life. The first is a retelling of his life as it happened, or at least as the extant facts suggests that it happened. The second is an examination of his mythos, or his life as he and popular memory tell us it happened.<sup>1</sup>

Before a juxtaposition of reality and myth can take place, each side must first be made fully visible. To reconstruct the factual retelling, I closely examine census data, city directories, property and housing data, employer records, and newspaper articles. When these sources fall short, information is deduced from an understanding of the musical tradition and socio-cultural context within which Lewis existed. While a certain amount of speculation is necessary, historical accuracy is my foremost concern.

The basis for the second version of Lewis's life lies in interviews conducted with Lewis and his friends. Here, I am interested in the fantastical stories about Lewis and his music. But more importantly, I am concerned with the interplay between myths and the historical record.

The line that separates Lewis's myth from his factual biography is difficult to see, even for those who were closest to him. Perhaps more troublesome is that this line is nothing more than a distraction. To understand the "real truth" of Lewis, there must be a juxtaposition of reality and myth, not a divide. To achieve this juxtaposition, I present each myth in its most

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<sup>1</sup> By calling attention to historically inaccurate information, I am not accusing Lewis or anyone else of lying. Lewis did exercise poetic license to fill in certain parts of his biography that he did not remember or did not know, and at times he exploited the gullibility of his audience for his own benefit, but to call these exaggerations and fabrications "lies" is unfair. Here, I make a difference between the more common use of the word "lies" and the word "lying" in African American folk speech.

popular form before offering possible historically-viable explanations of the myth's origin—this is intended to show how Lewis's myths arise from actual events. I also lean on the hermeneutical approach used by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in his analysis of the mythology of Esu-Elegbara (or "Legba," a West African deity whose mythology was transplanted in the New World) as a framing device for understanding Lewis's story as the overlapping of history and mythology.<sup>2</sup>

In his analysis of myths surrounding Esu-Elegbara, Gates states: "The text . . . is not fixed in any determinate sense; in one sense, it consists of the dynamic and indeterminate relationship between truth on one hand and understanding on the other . . . The relationship between truth and understanding yields our sense of meaning."<sup>3</sup> Like Esu-Elegbara, Lewis exhibits a compound morphology, though in Lewis's case, this morphology is formed between the poles of reality and myth. To understand Lewis, he must be equally and simultaneously viewed as a historical figure and a mythological character.

Admittedly, a perfect parallel is not found between Lewis and Esu-Elegbara. A primary difference is that Lewis directly contributed to his narrative in an effort to shape his own legacy. The myths of Esu-Elegbara are also decidedly religious in nature, whereas those involving Lewis are wholly secular. However, I do not think either of these discourages the use of Gates's reading of the Esu-Elegbara myths as a framing device for Lewis's biography—or from being applied to any bluesman (or person) whose story is affected dramatically by both myth and reality.

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<sup>2</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*, Twenty-Fifth-Anniversary Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988/2014). My approach is also similar to the one Patricia R. Schroeder employs in her study of Robert Johnson's biography. See Patricia R. Schroeder, *Robert Johnson: Mythmaking and Contemporary American Culture* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey*, 29.

## Life History

Lewis was most likely born on March 6, 1899, at his family's home in Greenwood, Leflore County, Mississippi.<sup>4</sup> His mother, Victoria Jackson, was a young widow with two other small children. Lewis did not know his father, and the man's identity has been lost to time.<sup>5</sup> As is perhaps expected, Lewis's family was very poor.

Lewis lived with his mother, two sisters (Winnie and Littie), two cousins (Charley and Calvin), a maternal aunt (Bettie), a maternal uncle (John), and maternal grandparents (John and Winnie).<sup>6</sup> His mother worked as a laundress to help support the large family, but much of the

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<sup>4</sup> Lewis was not issued a certificate of live birth. Clinton Bagley, a historian in the Archives and Records Services Division of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, told me in a telephone conversation on February 2, 2015, that the state of Mississippi did not mandate application for a certificate of live birth until November 1912. While a birth year was required for Lewis to access Social Security benefits, either a temporary record and/or a school record would have sufficed. As such, Lewis never needed to apply for a delayed certificate of birth. Lewis reportedly accessed Social Security and Medicaid benefits through a school record uncovered by Jerry Finberg; this record lists Lewis's date of birth as March 6, 1893. See Samuel Charters, *Sweet as the Showers of Rain: The Bluesmen, Volume II* (New York: Oak Publications, 1977), 50-1. Institutionalized racism and classism potentially affected the accuracy of any records regarding Lewis's birth year. The U. S. Census data from 1900, 1910, and 1930 all list Lewis's birth year as 1899. A birth of year of 1899 is further supported by evidence suggesting that one of Lewis's older sisters, not Lewis himself, was born in 1893. Additionally, U. S. Census data from 1900 and 1910 list Lewis's mother, Victoria Johnson, as having been between 14 and 16 years of age in 1893; as it is undisputed that Lewis had two older sisters, for him to have been born in 1893 Victoria must have been between 8 and 10 years old when she gave birth to her first child. This scenario is impossible.

<sup>5</sup> The 1900 United States Federal Census lists his mother as widowed, suggesting that his father died shortly before his birth. In an interview with Harry Godwin and Jack Hurley in 1967, Lewis confirms that he never met his father. See Furry Lewis, interview by Harry Godwin and Jack Hurley, Memphis, TN, February 7, 1967, Memphis State Oral History Project, University Libraries Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>6</sup> The 1900 United States federal census for Leflore County, Mississippi, lists Victoria's occupation as "washer." Also according to the 1900 United States federal census data, Victoria was born in 1879 in Greenwood, Mississippi. See U. S. Census of Population, 1900, Population Schedule, Leflore County, MS, Greenwood City, p. 163, Victoria Lewis and Walter Jackson. The Tennessee Deaths and Burials Index, 1874-1955 indicates that Victoria was born on May 25, 1883, and died in Memphis on September 25, 1938. At the time of her death, Victoria was working as a cook. See Tennessee Deaths and Burials, 1874-1955, Index, Family Search. Salt Lake City, UT, 2009, 2010. According to the 1900 United States federal census: Littie was born in 1898; Winnie was born in 1894; Calvin was born in 1898; Charley was born in 1882 but is listed as being 8 years old; John, Jr. was born in 1886; Bettie was born in 1882; Victoria was born in 1879; Winnie (Lewis's grandmother) was born in 1850; and John, Sr. was born in 1840. The parents of Calvin and Charley are unclear as they are listed only as grandsons of John, Sr. All members of the Jackson/Lewis household are listed as having been born in Mississippi except for John, Sr. who is listed as having been born in Kentucky. See U. S. Census of Population, 1900, Population Schedule, Greenwood, Leflore County, MS. John, Sr. and Winnie are listed as having been married in 1860 although the accuracy of this date is questionable as Winnie, if born in 1850, was married when she was ten years old. Littie is alternatively

household's financial responsibilities fell on Lewis's grandfather, who worked as a railroad porter.<sup>7</sup>

Considering the socio-cultural environment of Greenwood at the turn of the twentieth century, it is likely that Victoria was in the employment of white families. It is also safely assumed that Lewis's grandfather worked for the Yazoo and Mississippi Valley Railroad Company, as the Y&MV operated the only rail station in Greenwood. Taking the assumptions one step farther, the Lewis/Jackson household was likely located in Greenwood's Baptist Town neighborhood as both the Y&MV station (located at 1886 at 506 Carrollton Avenue in downtown Greenwood) and the homes of upper class white families employing African American women as domestic workers were adjacent to this historically black neighborhood.<sup>8</sup>

In 1902 Victoria and her three children left Greenwood for Memphis. Stanley Booth reports that Lewis said his mother, upon moving to Memphis, shared a home with her sister on Brinkley Avenue (now Decatur Avenue) though he did not recall the year.<sup>9</sup> The 1902 Polk City Directory of Memphis confirms this, as it lists Victoria Lewis with a residence of 164 Brinkley Avenue—Victoria does not appear in the 1901 city directory.<sup>10</sup>

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spelled "Lettie." See U. S. Census of Population, 1910, Population Schedule, Shelby County, TN, Memphis City, p. 4801, dwelling 953, family 12, Lettie Jackson, and Walter Jackson.

<sup>7</sup> Winnie's (Lewis's grandmother) occupation is listed in the 1900 census as "home-keeper." She most likely did not receive financial compensation for this. The occupations of John and Winnie Jackson are taken from the 1900 United States federal census. Bettie's profession is also given as "washer." John, Jr.'s occupation is given as day laborer. See U. S. Census of Population, 1900, Population Schedule, Greenwood, Leflore County, MS.

<sup>8</sup> Baptist Town was founded in the 1800s in response to Greenwood's rapidly growing cotton industry; it remains one of Greenwood's oldest African American neighborhoods. Baptist Town is significant to blues history, as David "Honeyboy" Edwards identified it as the last residence of Robert Johnson, who died in Greenwood in 1938. Today, Baptist Town continues to suffer from abject poverty; in contrast, Grand Boulevard, which runs through the middle of Greenwood, is lined by antebellum and colonial-style mansions.

<sup>9</sup> Stanley Booth, "Furry's Blues," *Playboy* 17, no. 4 (April 1970): 104.

<sup>10</sup> Part of Brinkley crossed Mosby Avenue, where Lewis later lived. This intersection is within a block or two of other homes Lewis is known to have occupied. The 1901 Polk City Directory for Memphis does list a Victoria Lewis living at 1240 Union Avenue—this woman does not appear in the 1900 Polk Directory. The location

While the motivations for the move are unknown, it may be that a troubled personal or home life, perhaps in correlation with issues involving Lewis's father, served as the catalyst. Or, perhaps the family left in search of a "better life," one with promise of financial gain and a lesser degree of personal and institutional racism—although Memphians struggled with racism (both institutional and overt), many young African American families in the Mississippi Delta saw Memphis, with its larger African American community, as a potential haven.

By 1910 Lewis was living with his mother, two sisters, and a boarder just east of downtown proper at 953 Peach Avenue.<sup>11</sup> It was here that his interest in music began to

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of Union Avenue makes this doubtful to be a match for Lewis's mother. Booth's article also quotes Lewis as saying he recently "found out" he was born in 1893 and that he moved to Memphis when he was six years old; the year of the move, according to this timeline, is 1899. See Booth, "Furry's Blues," 104. In an interview from 1967, Lewis told Dick Allan and Jack Hurley that he came to Memphis when he was "twelve or thirteen" years old. See Furry Lewis, interview by Dick Allan and Harry Godwin, Memphis, TN, May 4, 1967, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA. I believe Lewis is correct that he and his mother came to Memphis in 1900 but is incorrect about his year of birth. In a 1967 interview with Harry Godwin and Jack Hurley, Lewis said he moved to Memphis along with his mother and father when he was six years old. In an article in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, William Thomas claims that Lewis came to Memphis with his mother and his two sisters, Winnie and Lettie. See William Thomas, "Furry to be buried today in rites befitting a bluesman," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, September 16, 1981. According to Sheldon Harris, Lewis came to Memphis ca. 1900 and left Memphis to join the medicine show ca. 1906-1908. See Sheldon Harris, *Blues Who's Who: A Biographical Dictionary of Blues Singers* (New York: Arlington House Publishers, 1979), 326. The 1910 U. S. Census lists Lewis as living at 953 Peach Avenue with his mother and his two sisters, Winnie and Lettie.

<sup>11</sup> The boarder was a thirty-four-year-old man by the name of Wilkinson Henry. When he lived with the Lewis household, Henry was employed as a driver. Neither Lewis nor Lettie were employed at the time. See U. S. Census of Population, 1910, Population Schedule, Memphis, Shelby County, TN. All the homes on Peach Avenue, including the one occupied by Lewis's family, were demolished in the building of Interstate 40. Although Victoria had married Ephiam Coleman—the 1910 United States federal census lists Victoria as "Victoria Coleman"—Coleman's absence from the census suggests that he had died before 1910. See U. S. Census of Population, 1910, Population Schedule, Memphis, Shelby County, TN. According to Victoria's death certificate, she married Coleman on May 25 of an unspecified year. Her death certificate also lists her as widowed. See Tennessee Death Records, 1908-1958, Victoria Jackson. In 1910 Victoria was working once again as a laundress, Winnie was employed as a cook for a private family, and Lewis was attending school. The 1940 United States federal census states that Lewis completed a total of four grades. See U. S. Census of Population, 1940, Population Schedule, Memphis City, p. 18A. Booth reports that Lewis said he attended the Carnes Avenue School located "a few blocks" from Lewis's home. See Booth, "Furry's Blues," 104. At some point, Victoria was employed as cook for a white family in Memphis; in an interview with the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, Beaula Mae Fritz, the daughter of Victoria's sister, recalled: "I remember her coming home in the evening with a pan of leftovers from the table. That's what they ate." See Thomas, "Furry to be buried today in rites befitting a bluesman."

develop.<sup>12</sup> According to Lewis, he was inspired by the fiddlers and guitarists “that would just come around to serenade” and play music for cakewalking.<sup>13</sup>

Likely with guitar in hand, Lewis left Memphis at some point during the 1910s. In 1916 he was traveling through southern Illinois when a train accident resulted in the amputation of his left leg at the knee.<sup>14</sup> In an interview from 1967 Lewis remembered the events surrounding his injury with clarity. According to Lewis, the accident occurred on a twenty-mile stretch of track between Du Quoin and Carbondale.<sup>15</sup> As the train entered into a turn, he slipped while attempting to step from one freight car to another. The misstep resulted in his left foot becoming entangled in the coupling mechanism connecting the cars. Lewis says a brakeman held on to him to keep him from falling underneath the train, an action that almost certainly saved his life.<sup>16</sup> As the train pulled into the station in Carbondale, Lewis recalled that a crowbar was needed to free

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<sup>12</sup> Lewis told Godwin and Hurley that he began playing guitar sometime between 1900 and 1902. See Furry Lewis, interviewed by Godwin and Hurley, February 7, 1967. Lewis told Allan and Hurley that he began playing guitar when he was around ten or eleven years old. See Furry Lewis, interviewed by Allan and Hurley, May 4, 1967. Lewis told Evans that he began playing guitar in either 1907 or 1908. See Furry Lewis, interviewed by Evans, February 2, 1979, personal archives. On several occasions, Lewis said that he did not begin playing guitar until he came to Memphis. Lewis told Allan and Hurley, “I never did take that up until I came to town here.” See Furry Lewis, interviewed by Allan and Hurley, May 4, 1967. For more information on Lewis’s learning process and early musical influences, see Chapter 5.

<sup>13</sup> Furry Lewis, interviewed by Allan and Hurley, May 4, 1967.

<sup>14</sup> In an interview from 1967, Lewis tells Allan and Hurley that he lost his leg in 1917. See Furry Lewis, interview by Allan and Hurley, May 4, 1967.

<sup>15</sup> While there are no official documents or newspaper articles addressing the accident that resulted in the amputation of Lewis’s left leg, I am confident in the accuracy of Lewis’s statements as I believe the events surrounding the loss of his leg were traumatic to the point that they remained fixed in his memory. Furthermore, records kept in the Jackson County (IL) Historical Society, the Carbondale Public Library, the Morris Library Special Collections at Southern Illinois University, and those from the Illinois Central Railroad all support Lewis’s claims; they verify that train accidents of this nature were a regular occurrence on the twenty-mile-long Illinois Central line that ran between Du Quoin and Carbondale, IL. Additionally, Lewis’s World War I draft card from 1918 indicates that he was not fit for service as he had his “left leg off,” thus proving the injury occurred before 1918. To hear Lewis discuss the accident, see Furry Lewis, interview by Godwin and Hurley, Feb. 7, 1967. Information pertaining to the events surrounding the accident can also be found in Booth’s article published in *Playboy* magazine. See Booth, “Furry’s Blues,” 1970.

<sup>16</sup> It is not known at what point on the journey between Du Quoin and Carbondale Lewis fell. See Furry Lewis, interview by Godwin and Hurley, Feb. 7, 1967.



him from the coupling mechanism. He was rushed to the hospital where he spent several months recovering from the ordeal.<sup>17</sup> Upon his release from the hospital, and after being fitted with a cumbersome metal prosthesis, Lewis returned to Memphis.

Some time after the accident but before 1918 Lewis met Jim Jackson, a Memphis-based folk and blues guitarist who toured the South as a member of a medicine show.<sup>18</sup> Jackson was, it appears, Lewis's most significant early musical influence. While Jackson's guitar playing and vocal style influenced Lewis's—at least to a degree—it was Jackson's diverse repertoire (which included blues, ballads, ragtime, and novelty songs) that had the greatest impact on Lewis.<sup>19</sup> Jackson is also the one who convinced Lewis to join a medicine show.<sup>20</sup> And, while touring, Jackson likely contributed to Lewis's development as an entertainer.

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<sup>17</sup> According to Lewis, he was hospitalized at the I. C. (Illinois Central) Rail Hospital in Carbondale, IL. Lewis recalled the hospital being located across from an ice cream factory. See Furry Lewis, interview by Godwin and Hurley, Feb. 7, 1967; and Booth, "Furry's Blues," 1970. I have yet to find a hospital that matches Lewis's description. The primary health care provider in Carbondale, IL, in 1916 was the Holden Hospital, which opened the same year. As the month of Lewis's accident is unknown, it is possible that he lost his leg before the opening of Holden Hospital. Holden Hospital's policy on treating African Americans at this time is unknown, as patient records are only available from 1925 onward. Holden Hospital closed in 1965. According to the Morris Library Special Collections at Southern Illinois University, "In 1912, Carrie Holden gave her home in Litchfield, Illinois to the Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Church in Southern Illinois to establish a hospital. This came to be The Holden Hospital Corporation of Carbondale, officially opening in 1916 as a non-profit institution for the purpose of healing and care of the sick and needy by the Methodist Church of Southern Illinois. A training school for nurses was established shortly thereafter, and operated until 1936." See Holden Hospital records, 1913-1965. <http://archives.lib.siu.edu/index.php?p=collections/findingaid&id=2247&q=holden+hospital&rootcontentid=36216#id36216>, accessed September 30, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Jackson was born in Hernando, Mississippi. He died in 1937.

<sup>19</sup> Jackson's impact on Lewis's repertoire can be seen directly with Lewis's recording of "Going to Kansas City," Jackson's most commercially successful recording—the song was originally titled "Jim Jackson's Kansas City Blues." Lewis first recorded "Going to Kansas City" in 1961. Jackson's version was recorded in October of 1927 in Chicago by Mayo Williams and was released as Vocalion 114. Lewis's version was first released as Bluesville BvLP 1037. Both Lewis and Jackson recorded in Chicago in October of 1927 and may have been at the studio at the same time. This is likely when and where Lewis learned the song. For more on Lewis's repertoire, see Chapter 3.

<sup>20</sup> William Barlow, *"Looking Up At Down": The Emergence of Blues Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 220; Samuel Charters, *The Country Blues* (New York: Da Capo, 1959/1975), 103; and Bengt Olsson, *Memphis Blues and Jug Bands* (London: Studio Vista, 1970), 76.

Little information about Lewis's time in the medicine show survives. From various interviews given throughout his second career, it appears that Lewis worked alongside Jackson, Will Shade, and possibly Gus Cannon in an effort to sell Dr. Willie Lewis's Jack Rabbit Salve, a miracle elixir that promised to cure everything from rheumatoid arthritis to minor aches and pains.<sup>21</sup> In an interview from 1967, Lewis says he "traveled through Mississippi, Arkansas, and Missouri" in an attempt to sell the concoction.<sup>22</sup> According to Margaret McKee and Fred Chisenhall, the members of Dr. Willie Lewis's medicine show traveled in Model T Fords, used a flatbed truck as a stage, and dressed up in "everything funny . . . something like a clown."<sup>23</sup> According to Lewis, "We work blackface comedian you know. Just take lamp black, some grease, put it all over your face, like in those vaudeville shows."<sup>24</sup>

Following his one- or two-year stint with the medicine show Lewis returned to Memphis, where he likely continued to busk and to accept the occasional gig. In 1918 he was supplementing any income he received from playing music by working as a dray driver for the

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<sup>21</sup> Dr. Willie Lewis was of no familial relation to Furry Lewis. Lewis spoke of his time in the medicine show on numerous occasions, and there are few discrepancies between stories. See Charters, *The Country Blues*, 103; Paul Oliver, *The Story of the Blues* 2nd ed., (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997), 63; Olsson, *Memphis Blues and Jug Bands*, 75-6; Furry Lewis, interview by Godwin and Hurley, February 7, 1967. One significant discrepancy is found in the name of the doctor who ran the medicine show. Lewis told Allan and Hurley that there were two young doctors named "Richard Lewis" and "Dr. Fuller." See Furry Lewis, interviewed by Allan and Hurley, May 4, 1967. In an interview with Fred Hay, Steve and Linda LaVere, and Bob Eagle in 1972, Lewis said the doctor was a "Dr. Miller," while McKee and Chisenhall quote Lewis referring to the doctor as "Dr. Benson." Fred Hay, ed., *Goin' Back to Sweet Memphis: Conversations with the Blues* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2001), 84; Margaret McKee and Fred Chisenhall, *Beale, Black & Blue* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 106. Lewis also told Allan and Hurley that the medicine was sold out of a van for two bottles for \$1. See Furry Lewis, interviewed by Allan and Hurley, May 4, 1967. Lewis did not include Gus Cannon among those on the medicine show—he identified himself, Jim Jackson, a fiddler named "Little Bob," and a buck dancer named "Willie Polk." See Furry Lewis, interviewed by Allan and Hurley, May 4, 1967. Lewis's repertoire and his musical and performance styles show direct influences of medicine shows. In addition to regularly providing him with an audience, the medicine show's trips through the South introduced Lewis to musicians of many different ages, styles, and abilities. Lewis almost certainly took advantage of such opportunities to augment his repertoire and to develop his technique.

<sup>22</sup> Furry Lewis, interviewed by Allan and Hurley, May 4, 1967.

<sup>23</sup> McKee and Chisenhall, *Beale Black and Blue*, 106.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

Economy Coal Company.<sup>25</sup> By the early 1920s Lewis was working in the kitchens of the Idlewild and the Verne Swain riverboats, which docked along the banks of the Mississippi River in downtown Memphis.<sup>26</sup> Although the Idlewild featured a thirty-three by ninety-six foot maple dance floor on her second deck and employed a four- or five-member orchestra continuously from 1915 to 1926, Lewis never claimed to have performed on the riverboat.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Walter Lewis, World War I Draft Card, 1918. A dray is a low, horse- or mule-drawn flatbed wagon that does not have sides.

<sup>26</sup> Lewis worked first on the Idlewild and then on the Verne Swain. According to Lewis, he also worked on the whiskey train for Jim Kinnane, a prominent bootlegger who had a business at Winchester Avenue and Front Street in the Red Light District of Memphis—a whiskey train was a group of men who transported whiskey barrels from riverboats to bars. The connections he established through this work may have resulted in Lewis’s securing a position on the riverboats. Lewis referred to the Verne Swain as either the “Viney Twain” or “Verney Twain”—the recording quality and the microphone placement make it difficult to discern Lewis’s words. Lewis said the “Viney Twain” (or “Verney Twain”) was “the littlest boat on the river.” See Furry Lewis, interview by Godwin and Hurley, February 7, 1967. The Verne Swain was a comparatively small packet with a hull measuring 131.2 feet long, 28.5 feet wide, and was 4.4 feet deep; by comparison, the Idlewild’s hull was 157.5 feet long by 36 feet wide and was 5 feet deep. There is no record of Lewis’s employment on either boat, but Lewis must have been aboard the Idlewild between 1922 and 1928. Built in 1914 as a ferryboat, the Idlewild transported freight, livestock, and produce between Memphis and Wyanoke and Mound City, AR, and thus did not have/need a kitchen (or cookhouse, as it would have been called on the river). In 1922 improvements to roads and a growing trucking industry resulted in the Idlewild transporting freight as far south as Greenville, Mississippi and as far north as Cairo, Illinois. As river towns were a considerable distance apart, a cookhouse was deemed necessary and subsequently installed in the Idlewild. In 1928 the Idlewild was sold to the New St. Louis and Calhoun Packet Corp. of Hardin, Illinois, and relocated to St. Louis; the boat did not return to Memphis. The Idlewild later became the Avalon and is now known as the Belle of Louisville; it is currently docked on the banks of the Ohio River in Louisville, Kentucky. The Verne Swain was named after a riverman from St. Croix River in MN whose first name was alternately pronounced “Vern” and “Vernie.” It operated out of Memphis from 1922 or 1923 until 1924 transporting freight, passengers, and the U. S. mail between Memphis and Rosedale, Mississippi. The 153 miles between Memphis and Rosedale necessitated the operation of a cookhouse. See personal correspondence with the author and David Tschiggfrie, August 27, 2014. Tschiggfrie is a riverboat historian and editor of “Sons and Daughters Reflector,” the publication of the Sons and Daughters of Pioneer Rivermen organization.

<sup>27</sup> In his youth, Bob Miller led musical groups aboard the Idlewild. Miller was known as a musical prodigy, as the proprietor of Bob Miller Music Publishing, as the composer of the “African Opera Series” of blues songs, and as the person who introduced the piano to commercial country music. In *Steamboatin’ Days: Folk Songs of the River Packet Era*, the work that most thoroughly documents Mississippi riverboat repertoire, Mary Wheeler identifies work songs, songs of boats, soundings, spirituals, songs of meditation, love songs, dance songs, and songs of lawlessness as having been performed aboard riverboats operating on the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. Wheeler did her research around Paducah, KY. See Mary Wheeler, *Steamboatin’ Days: Folk Songs of the River Packet Era*, (Louisiana State University Press, 1944). More conventionally, the songs identified by Wheeler fall into the categories of ballads, work songs, spirituals, hollers, and proto-blues.



Figure 1: The Idlewild Docked at Memphis, ca. 1920  
Photograph printed with permission from Sons and Daughters of Pioneer Rivermen



Figure 2: The Idlewild Bandstand, 1931  
Photograph printed with permission from Sons and Daughters of Pioneer Rivermen



Figure 3: The Verne Swain Docked at Memphis, ca. 1923-1924  
Photograph printed with permission from Sons and Daughters of Pioneer Rivermen

Lewis's career in commercial music began in the spring of 1927 when Jack Kapp, the head of the race records division for the Brunswick-Balke-Collender Company, scheduled him to record in Chicago for the Vocalion label. Vocalion established its race records division the year before, and Lewis was part of a group of Southern musicians expected to bring it success similar to that enjoyed by Victor and Columbia.<sup>28</sup> On April 20 Lewis entered the recording studio (set

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<sup>28</sup> Columbia acquired Okeh as a subsidiary in October 1926. Brunswick was a subsidiary of Brunswick-Balke-Collender. Victor built its race records division in part on the success of The Memphis Jug Band. See Robert M. W. Dixon and John Godrich, *Recording the Blues* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970), 41-2. According to Dixon and Godrich: "Victor hired Ralph Peer, who had been largely responsible for building up Okeh's fine race and hillbilly catalogues. Peer realized that Victor was several years too late to be able to get a substantial share of the classic blues market and decided to concentrate his efforts on the country blues field. In February 1927 Peer set out with the Victor field unit, calling first at Atlanta where he recorded thirty titles by white hillbilly performers and four selections by country blues singer Julius Daniels. After six days in Atlanta the unit moved on to Memphis where, between 24th February and 1st March, they recorded thirty titles by black jazz bands, preachers, guitar evangelists and blues singers [as well as hillbilly and pop songs by white musicians]. Peer had visited Memphis

up in the Brunswick Building in Chicago) for the first time.<sup>29</sup> This session produced the only songs (“Everybody’s Blues,” “Mr. Furry’s Blues,” and “Sweet Papa Moan”) on which Lewis does not play the guitar—Lewis’s vocals are supported by Landers Waller on guitar and Charles Johnson on mandolin.<sup>30</sup>

Lewis returned to Chicago six months later to record seven more songs for Vocalion.<sup>31</sup> The records’s sales must have disappointed Kapp and Vocalion as Lewis’s contract was not renewed in 1928.

Lewis’s first career as a recording artist did not end with the rejection from Vocalion. According to Samuel Charters: “The Victor distributor in Memphis, O. K. Houck, was able to sell records of the medicine-show singers, and he asked Ralph Peer to record as many of them as he could . . . If the distributor would agree to take five thousand copies of the record, just about enough to cover Victor’s costs, the company would record almost anybody.”<sup>32</sup> On August 28, 1928 Peer arranged for Lewis to meet with Charley Williamson, Victor’s talent scout in Memphis and the leader of the pit orchestra at the Palace Theater on Beale Street. Lewis

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ahead of the field unit and—on the recommendation of Charlie Williamson, black bandleader and talent scout—auditioned the Memphis Jug Band, a group consisting of a kazoo-player, a jug-blower and two guitarists, one of whom alternated on the harmonica. Peer thought the group had market potential and they were the first artists recorded, on the morning of Thursday, 24th February, in the temporary studio set up in the McCall Building.” See Dixon and Godrich, *Recording the Blues*, 43.

<sup>29</sup> The songs recorded were: “Everybody’s Blues, takes 1 and 2” (Vo 1111); “Mr. Furry’s Blues, take 1” (Vo 1115); “Sweet Papa Moan” (Vo 1116); “Rock Island Blues” (Vo 1111); “Jelly Roll” (Vo 1115); and “The Panic’s On” (Vo unissued).

<sup>30</sup> Robert M. W. Dixon, John Godrich, and Howard Rye, *Blues and Gospel Records 1890-1943*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 539. The session also features an unidentified man speaking.

<sup>31</sup> The songs recorded on this session are “Good Looking Girl Blues” (Vo 1132); “Why Don’t You Come Home Blues” (Vo 1134); “Falling Down Blues” (Vo 1133); “Big Chief Blues” (Vo 1133); “Billy Lyons and Stack O’Lee” (Vo 1132, Br 80092); “Mean Old Bedbug Blues” (Vo 1134); and “Casey Jones” (Vo unissued).

<sup>32</sup> Charters, *The Country Blues*, 103.

recorded ten songs, some of which he had already recorded and released on the Vocalion label. This session took place in Memphis.<sup>33</sup>

Despite their decision to pass on him the previous year, Lewis recorded once more for Vocalion. The session occurred on September 22, 1929 in a makeshift studio in a suite at the Peabody Hotel in Memphis.<sup>34</sup> Lewis's next opportunity to record would not come for nearly three decades.

Lewis's absence from the recording studio had more to do with the events following the stock market crash of Black Tuesday and with America's eventual entrance into World War II than it did with his musical abilities. According to Dixon and Godrich: "The Depression, with the massive unemployment it brought, had a shattering effect on the pockets of black record buyers. Race records probably accounted for only about one percent of total industry sales in 1931, as against around five percent four years earlier."<sup>35</sup> Brunswick-Balke-Collender's race records line endured better than its competitors thanks in large part to the duos Tampa Red and Leroy Carr and Memphis Minnie and Kansas Joe. However, the dire economic times and the later redirecting of shellac to the war effort—shellac was a main component in the production of

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<sup>33</sup> The following songs were recorded during Lewis's Victor session: "Furry's Blues" (Vi V38519); "I Will Turn Your Money Green, tk. 1" (Vi unissued, LVA3032, Yazoo 1050, DOCD5004); "I Will Turn Your Money Green, tk. 2" (Vi 38506); "Mistreatin' Mama" (Vi V38519); "Dry Land Blues" (Vi 23345); "Cannon-Ball Blues" (Vi 23345); "Kassie Jones, pt. 1 and 2" (Vi 21664); "Judge Harsh Blues, tk. 1" (Vi unissued; Yazoo L1050, DOCD504); and "Judge Harsh Blues, tk. 2" (Vi V38506).

<sup>34</sup> During this session, Lewis produced four tracks: "John Henry, Pt. 1" (Vo 1474); "John Henry, Pt. 2" (Vo 1474); Black Gypsy Blues (Vo 1547); and "Creeper's Blues" (Vo 1574). Lewis was able to record for Vocalion as he was not under contract with Victor. According to Dixon and Godrich: "It is difficult to know whether it was by luck or guile that the Vocalion field unit arrived in Memphis—in mid-September 1929—just about a week before Victor was due. The Memphis Jug Band and Cannon's Jug Stompers were under contract to Victor, and Vocalion could not use them; but they did manage to snatch a number of worthwhile performers from under Victor's nose, including blues singer Robert Wilkins (whom Victor had recorded the previous autumn) and Speckled Red, whose raucous piano number 'The Dirty Dozens' became one of Brunswick-Balke-Collender's most successful releases." See Dixon and Godrich, *Recording the Blues*, 43.

<sup>35</sup> Dixon and Godrich, *Recording the Blues*, 64.



records—resulted in many recording blues musicians falling by the wayside.<sup>36</sup> Of course, there were blues musicians who recorded in the 1930s—some even prolifically—but the blues they played was driving and urbane. This was a sharp contrast to Lewis’s outdated, quiet folk blues.

Unable to support himself solely through music, Lewis accepted a position as a street sweeper for the City of Memphis sometime around 1930. His daily routine now consisted of collecting garbage as he walked the streets around Beale and Linden in downtown Memphis.<sup>37</sup> Remembering this period in his life, Lewis said: “I did have a little job with the City and I stuck with that. I had been working with them off and on, when there wasn’t any place to play. They didn’t even have no trucks at that time. Just had mules to pull the garbage cart. Didn’t have no incinerator; used to take the garbage down to the end of High Street, across the railroad tracks, and burn it.”<sup>38</sup>

By 1930 Lewis was living with his mother and niece, Alberta Glover, in a home on North Pauline Street; rent for the home was \$10 a month.<sup>39</sup> Following Victoria’s death on September

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<sup>36</sup> Dixon and Godrich, *Recording the Blues*, 70-4. “At the end of 1930 the record companies were anything but sitting at the top of the world. Columbia, for instance, had pressed an average of 11,000 copies of each new blues and gospel record in 1927; in the latter half of 1928 the figure was down to 7,000, and by the end of 1929 it had fallen to 5,000. By May 1930—in the wake of the Stock Market crash—the company was pressing an average of 2,000, and that figure was halved by the end of the year. As 1931 dawned, race records were selling about a tenth as well as they had four years previously. And the situation continued steadily to worsen. 350 or 400 copies were pressed of each of the last twenty-two discs in the Columbia 14000-D series, issued between May and October 1932, and Columbia—still pricing the records at 75 cents—couldn’t even sell this small number; all twenty-two were still in catalogue in November 1934.” See Dixon and Godrich, *Recording the Blues*, 64.

<sup>37</sup> The 1930 Census lists Lewis’s occupation as “Laborer.” See U. S. Census of Population, 1930, Population Schedule, Memphis, Shelby County, TN, Memphis City, p. 211, Walter Lewis. According to Charters, Lewis began working for the City of Memphis Sanitation Department in 1923. Charters also believes this was the same year that Lewis quit touring with the medicine show. See Charters, *Sweet as the Showers of Rain*, 49. According to the 1923 Polk City Directory for Memphis, Lewis was working in a repair shop. In *Walking A Blues Road*, Charters states that Lewis left the medicine show and began working for the Department of Sanitation “at about the time he was doing his recordings for Vocalion and Victor.” See Samuel Charters, *Walking a Blues Road: A Selection of Blues Writings 1956-2004* (New York: Marion Boyars, 2004), 63.

<sup>38</sup> Booth, “Furry’s Blues,” 114. According to Samuel Charters, Lewis’s duties also included chopping weeds, cutting grass, and raking leaves. See Charters, *Walking a Blues Road*, 57.

22, 1938, Lewis began renting a home at 315 North Dunlap Street for \$4 a month. The home on North Dunlap Street was only a few doors down from his childhood home on Peach Avenue and within a few blocks of his former home on North Pauline Street.<sup>40</sup> While Lewis was still likely playing the occasional gig for money, the United States Federal Census of 1940 reports that most of his income at the time came from the sale of wood.<sup>41</sup>

After 1940 Lewis disappears from the historical record; the only clue to his actions and whereabouts is a photograph from 1956 that potentially shows Lewis among the congregation of Memphis pastor Rev. Benjamin Hooks.<sup>42</sup> There is no biographical information for Lewis until 1959. The most likely scenario is that he continued to sweep the streets of downtown Memphis and occasionally play music for money. Although he may not have been living in total obscurity, his reputation and fame dwindled significantly.

In February 1959 Samuel Charters “re-discovered” Lewis while conducting research in Memphis for his book *The Country Blues*.<sup>43</sup> Recalling an interview with Will Shade at Shade’s home, Charters writes:

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<sup>39</sup> Victoria was employed as a domestic worker for a private family. See U. S. Census of Population, 1930, Population Schedule, Memphis, Shelby County, TN, Memphis City.

<sup>40</sup> U. S. Census of Population, 1940, Population Schedule, Memphis, Shelby County, TN.

<sup>41</sup> Lewis may have been on a temporary hiatus from his job as a street sweeper. He spoke of such leaves in an interview with Stanley Booth in 1970. See Booth, “Furry’s Blues,” 114. It is clear from later interviews that Lewis did not consider himself to be a professional musician in 1940.

<sup>42</sup> The photograph is part of the Hooks Brothers Photography and the Hooks School of Photography collection housed at the Charles W. Capps, Jr. Archives and Museum at Delta State University. Blues researcher Steve LaVere discovered the image and alleged that one of the men pictured was Lewis. LaVere was the collection’s curator and he held all rights to the images. LaVere died in 2015.

<sup>43</sup> *The Country Blues* is the first book-length study of the folk blues. Despite the significance of *The Country Blues*, Charters is not solely responsible for reigniting wide interest in Lewis. While Charters is certainly responsible for locating Lewis, it was Harry Smith’s famous six-album *Anthology of American Folk Music* (FP 251; FP 252; FP253) released in 1952 that brought Lewis to the attention of many young, white, non-Memphians who later became devoted blues fans, scholars, documentarians, and collectors. Smith, an experimental artist, compiled the music from his personal collection of 78 rpm records. All tracks were previously released between 1927 and 1932. Lewis’s “Kassie Jones, Pts 1-2” (Vi 21664) from 1928 appears as the tenth track on Side B of Volume 1:

Will and I were sitting in his room, passing the bright winter afternoon talking about the blues and the older blues singers. I looked out of the window, over the roofs toward Beale Street, and said to him, thinking out loud as much as anything else, “I certainly would like to have heard some of those old singers, Jim Jackson, Furry Lewis, John Estes, Frank Stokes . . . “Will leaned out of his chair and called to his wife, Jennie Mae, who was working in the kitchen. “Jennie Mae, when was the last time you saw that fellow they call ‘Furry’?” Jennie Mae thought for a moment before responding, “Furry Lewis, you mean? I saw him last week.”<sup>44</sup>

Jennie Mae knew that Lewis worked for the City and Charters quickly telephoned the Memphis City Personnel Office in an attempt to locate him.

Lewis was living with a woman named Stella, whom he often introduced as his wife—there are no marriage or divorce documents pertaining to this relation nor do any exist concerning Lewis’s later “marriage” to a woman named Versie.<sup>45</sup> In describing his first meeting with Lewis, Charters says, “He and his wife Stella had had a little difficulty, and Furry had moved into a furnished room in a run-down neighborhood on the north side of town . . . He no longer had a guitar and hadn’t played much in twenty years, but when I asked him if he could still sing and play he straightened and said, ‘I’m better now than I ever was.’”<sup>46</sup> The following day Charters rented an Epiphone guitar from a pawnshop on Beale Street and brought it to

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Ballads. Smithsonian Folkways re-released the collection on CD in 1997 (SFW 40090). In the 1940s, Lewis’s recording of “Billy Lyons and Stack O’Lee” was reissued under the title “Stackerlee” on Brunswick 80092 as part of a 78 rpm album set, Brunswick album B-1024; the album was compiled by John A. Lomax and aimed at the audience for “folk music.” For more information on Lomax, see Nolan Porterfield, *Last Cavalier: The Life and Times of John A. Lomax, 1867-1948*, (Urbana and Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

<sup>44</sup> Charters, *Walking a Blues Road*, 57-58.

<sup>45</sup> Versie is present for Lewis’s interviews with Harry Godwin and Jack Hurley (February 7, 1967) and Allan and Hurley (May 4, 1967). In the Godwin and Hurley interview, Lewis identifies Versie as his wife. In the Allan and Hurley interview, Versie identifies herself as Lewis wife. See Furry Lewis, interview by Godwin and Hurley, February 7, 1967; and Furry Lewis, interview by Allan and Hurley, May 4, 1967. When Evans interviewed Lewis in 1969, he was living alone in an apartment located at the corner of Fourth Street and Beale Street. See personal correspondence with author and David Evans, October 13, 2016.

<sup>46</sup> Charters, *Walking a Blues Road*, 57-58. Despite whatever Lewis may have told Charters about his playing habits over the past two decades, Charters’s field recordings show Lewis’s style and understanding of the blues tradition had advanced since he recorded in the late 1920s. This will be explored more thoroughly in Section 2 of this chapter.

Lewis. According to Charters, Lewis strummed the guitar to make sure it was in tune and then asked, “What do you like to hear?” Surprised, Charters requested “John Henry.” Charters adds:

Without a moment’s hesitation Furry reached in his pocket for his pocket knife, put it between the third and fourth fingers of his left hand to slide along the strings, and sang “John Henry” almost the way he had recorded it thirty years before. His fingers weren’t as fast as they had been, but there was a new emotional subtlety and assurance to his singing. At fifty-eight years old he was still as exciting as he had been when he recorded for Vocalion and Victor.<sup>47</sup>

This chance encounter with Charters sparked Lewis’s second career as a professional musician. However, Lewis remained employed as a street sweeper for the City of Memphis into the mid-1960s, sometime close to when he began receiving Social Security benefits.<sup>48</sup>

In 1960 parts of Charters’s field recordings were repurposed and released on Folkways as an album simply titled *Furry Lewis*.<sup>49</sup> In 1961 Kenneth Goldstein, director of the Prestige Bluesville series, requested Charters record two more albums with Lewis; Charters immediately arranged for a two-day session to take place at the new Sam Phillips Recording Service with Scotty Moore (Elvis Presley’s guitarist during Presley’s Sun years) as the engineer.<sup>50</sup> In 1962

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<sup>47</sup> Charters, *Walking a Blues Road*, 59. Lewis was sixty-one years old at the time, not fifty-eight as Charters states. Charters goes on to add: “When he [Lewis] finished he leaned back, looked at me, and asked, ‘How was that?’ He knew how it was. He was just making conversation.” When Charters returned, “He [Lewis] still didn’t have a guitar, but he had spent most of the afternoon sawing the neck off a Royal Crown Cola bottle to use as a slide on his little finger.” See Charters, *Walking a Blues Road*, 59. When Charters saw Lewis later in 1959, Lewis had reunited with his wife and the two were living in an “ornate room in a tree-shaded frame house on Leath Street.” See Charters, *Walking a Blues Road*, 59. While Charters does not specify on what part of Leath Street Lewis lived, Zeke Johnson told me it was located in the same neighborhood as Lewis’s previous residences; this is where Johnson first met Lewis and first received instruction on how to play Lewis’s version of “Casey Jones.” For more information, see Chapter 5.

<sup>48</sup> Lewis tells Allan and Godwin in an interview from May 4, 1967 that he had yet to receive his “first check.” I assume Lewis is referring to his Social Security benefits. See Furry Lewis, interviewed by Allan and Hurley, May 4, 2015.

<sup>49</sup> A few tracks were recorded in February 1959. The rest of the album was recorded in October 1959. See Charters, *Walking a Blues Road*, 57.

<sup>50</sup> Charters recalls the session during which Bluesville BvLP 1036 was recorded: “He [Lewis] was able to take one day off work, but the second afternoon [of recording] he had to come after he’d finished sweeping the streets. There was more money for him after the sessions, but it was still the chance to be a musician again that

Lewis made his film debut in Charters's documentary, *The Blues*.<sup>51</sup> In the spring of 1963 Lewis had his first major performance outside of Memphis when he, along with Gus Cannon and Willie Borum, appeared at the Friends of Old Time Music concert held at New York University.<sup>52</sup> Aside from this event, Lewis seems to have been overlooked in all the "re-discovery" activity in 1962-1964.

By the mid-1960s Lewis was performing regularly at the local coffee houses for the young white, intelligentsia responsible for fueling Memphis's Folk Blues Revival.<sup>53</sup> It was at these shows that he met four particularly significant young, white musicians: Sid Selvidge, Jim Dickinson, Lee Baker, and Jimmy Crosthwait.<sup>54</sup> In his memoir "The Search for Blind Lemon," Dickinson describes seeing Lewis perform at the Oso:

He [Lewis] sang everything: old blues, stuff older than blues, minstrel medicine show tunes . . . He sang Jimmy Rogers, "All along the water tank . . . waiting for a train," and after an abstract bottle neck solo, he yodeled. He sang church hymns and "St. Louis Blues" with no recognizable Handy lyric. He closed his last (of three!) sets with "Let Me Call You Sweetheart," where in the melody both vocal

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meant the most to him." See Charters, *Walking a Blues Road*, 57. Charters mistakenly refers to the new Sam Phillips Recording Service (located on Madison Avenue) as "Sun Studio" (located on Union Avenue at Marshall Avenue).

<sup>51</sup> According to Charters, the documentary *The Blues* "was conceived, mostly because of Furry and the flashing pattern of his fingers as he picked 'John Henry.' It seemed that film was the only way to capture what he was doing." See Charters, *Sweet as the Showers of Rain*, 57.

<sup>52</sup> According to Charters, Lewis, Cannon, and Borum rode a Greyhound bus from Memphis to New York for the concert. They took with them a chicken and cake "that Willie's wife had packed for them." Charters continues: "Furry and Gus did an old comedy routine while the three of them did a jug band act." See Samuel B. Charters, *The Bluesmen* (New York: Oak Publishers, 1967), 41.

<sup>53</sup> Lewis was far from the only elderly blues musician playing local coffee houses—Gus Cannon, Fred McDowell, Robert Wilkins and Booker White are among those that played coffee houses on a regular basis. At these shows, patrons were afforded unprecedented access to the blues musicians. Lewis's appearances at The Oso and The Bitter Lemon are still well remembered. Charlie Brown owned the Oso and John McIntire owned The Bitter Lemon. The Oso was located on Highland Street and The Bitter Lemon was located on Poplar Avenue. The Oso opened before The Bitter Lemon and after the close of The Cottage, another coffee house owned by Brown.

<sup>54</sup> Aside from their impact as solo musicians and artists, Selvidge, Dickinson, Baker, and Crosthwait are the founders of the highly influential Memphis-based alternative rock band Mudboy & the Neutrons. Selvidge's son, Steve, is the front man for the band Big Ass Truck and Dickinson's sons, Cody and Luther, are the founding members of The North Mississippi All-Stars. All had their own personal relationship with Lewis. For more on the relationship between Lewis and Selvidge, Dickinson, Baker, and Crosthwait, see Chapter 6.

and bottleneck went to a full four-chord change. Each time Furry held the one and looked at his guitar as if it was missing the chord change all on its own. You couldn't tell whether it was part of the act or not. He told stories between the songs and recited poems not unlike George Beard . . . <sup>55</sup>

Lewis was brought to the attention of a broad national audience when an interview with Stanley Booth was published in *Playboy* magazine in 1970.<sup>56</sup> In the article, Booth writes of Lewis's life, daily struggles, character, and understanding of music in illuminating detail. In describing the main room of Lewis's two-room apartment, Booth states:

The room held a sizable amount of old, worn furniture: the bed, a studio couch, three stuffed chairs, a chifforobe [*sic*] and a dresser. Beside the bed, there was a table made from a small wooden crate . . . The brown-spotted wallpaper was covered with decorations: Over the bed were a few sprigs of artificial holly, an American flag, hanging with the stripes vertical and the stars at the bottom left, three brightly colored picture postcards and an ink sketch of Furry. On the wall behind the couch, there was a child's crayon drawing in which Jesus, dressed in handsome red-and-blue robes, held out his arms to an enormous white rabbit.<sup>57</sup>

Booth goes on to describe Lewis's daily routine:

Shortly after two o'clock each weekday morning, he [Lewis] gets out of bed, straps on his artificial leg, dresses and makes a fresh pot of coffee, which he drinks while reading *Memphis Press-Scimitar*. The newspaper arrives in the afternoon, but Furry does not open it until morning. Versie is still asleep and the paper is company for him as he sits in the kitchen under the harsh light of the ceiling bulb, drinking the hot, sweet coffee. He does not eat breakfast: when the coffee is gone, he leaves for work.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Jim Dickinson, "The Search for Blind Lemon," *Oxford American: A Magazine of the South* 83 (Winter 2013), <http://www.oxfordamerican.org/magazine/item/555-the-search-for-blind-lemon> (accessed March 28, 2016). A book-length version of "The Search for Blind Lemon" is set for publication in 2017.

<sup>56</sup> In a 1969 interview with David Evans, Lewis says he performed in New Orleans at Preservation Hall the year before. Preservation Hall has no record of a Lewis performance though it may be that Lewis sat in with the band one evening. See Furry Lewis, interviewed by David Evans, 1969. In personal correspondence to me, Evans speculates that Harry Godwin may have taken Lewis to Preservation Hall.

<sup>57</sup> Booth, "Furry's Blues," 102.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

Booth continues: “Behind Bertha’s Beauty Nook, under a large, pale-leafed elm, there are 12 garbage cans and two carts. Furry lifts one of the cans onto a cart, rolls the cart out into the street and, taking the wide broom from its slot, begins to sweep the gutter . . . When he has swept back to Vance [Avenue], Furry leaves the trash in a pile at the corner and pushes the cart, with its empty can, to Beale Street.”<sup>59</sup>

Lewis’s day did not end when his shift for the City was over. On this occasion—and on many others like it—he went from work to the Bitter Lemon to play a set. According to Booth: “He begun [*sic*] to play a slow, sad blues, one that none of us had ever heard . . . The room, which had been filled with noise, was now quiet . . . When, after nearly an hour, Furry left the stage, the applause was considerably more than polite.”<sup>60</sup>

Booth’s article presents Lewis in a fashion that runs contrary to the popular image of the poor, downtrodden, black bluesman. Instead, he depicts Lewis as a man living a relatively comfortably, though not necessarily “easy,” life. Despite his daily challenges, both physical and financial, Lewis comes off as stoic in the face of adversity. Booth’s portrait of him shows a man who takes pride in a job well done. More importantly, Lewis is painted as sincerely appreciative of any attention from fans. As surmised from the article, the performance at the Bitter Lemon was the highlight of Lewis’s day, even though he likely earned little for his playing.

That same year (1970), Lewis performed in Los Angeles as part of “Leon Russell and Friends,” a nationally televised music special. In addition to Russell, the show featured Don Nix, another of Lewis’s young white musician friends—Nix was an original member The Mar-Keys, the first house band at Stax Records.

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<sup>59</sup> Booth, “Furry’s Blues,” 114.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

Nix, who was already in Los Angeles, had the idea to invite Lewis to the filming, but he had no way of contacting Lewis as Lewis did not have a telephone. So Nix asked Jim Chappell, a Memphis-based photographer, to go to Lewis's apartment at the corner of Fourth Street and Beale Street to present him with the proposition—Lewis had been living there since at least 1968. According to Chappell, Lewis was not immediately impressed by the notion.<sup>61</sup> California was a long way from Memphis and he did not know any of the musicians aside from Nix. Lewis did not know exactly what to expect, either. But eventually he agreed, Nix sent plane tickets for Chappell and Lewis, and the two made the trip out West.<sup>62</sup> Upon their arrival in California, Lewis and Chappell stayed in the pool house of English record producer Denny Cordell.

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<sup>61</sup> Nix told me in 2014 that he flew back to Memphis to personally ask Lewis to be a part of the special. Nix also said that he accompanied Lewis to Los Angeles. Nix's story can be found in his biography, *Memphis Man: Living High, Laying Low*. See Don Nix, *Memphis Man: Living High, Laying Low* (Metro-Jackson, MS: Sartoris Literary Group, 1997, 2015), 150-2. Photographs by Chappell suggest he was the one to accompany Lewis.

<sup>62</sup> In his introduction to the film, Russell says the event was originally intended to be a commercial for a used car lot though it quickly turned into a concert. Russell also says that the show was unscripted and unrehearsed. This is evident in the video footage. The show was filmed at Homewood Session, Vine Street Theatre, Hollywood, CA and was originally broadcast on December 5, 1970 on US TV, KCET Los Angeles. According to Nix, this was the studio where the Dating Game was filmed. According to Chappell, Lewis was paid "the normal flat rate" provided by the television company. Nix says Lewis was given a check for \$1,500.00.



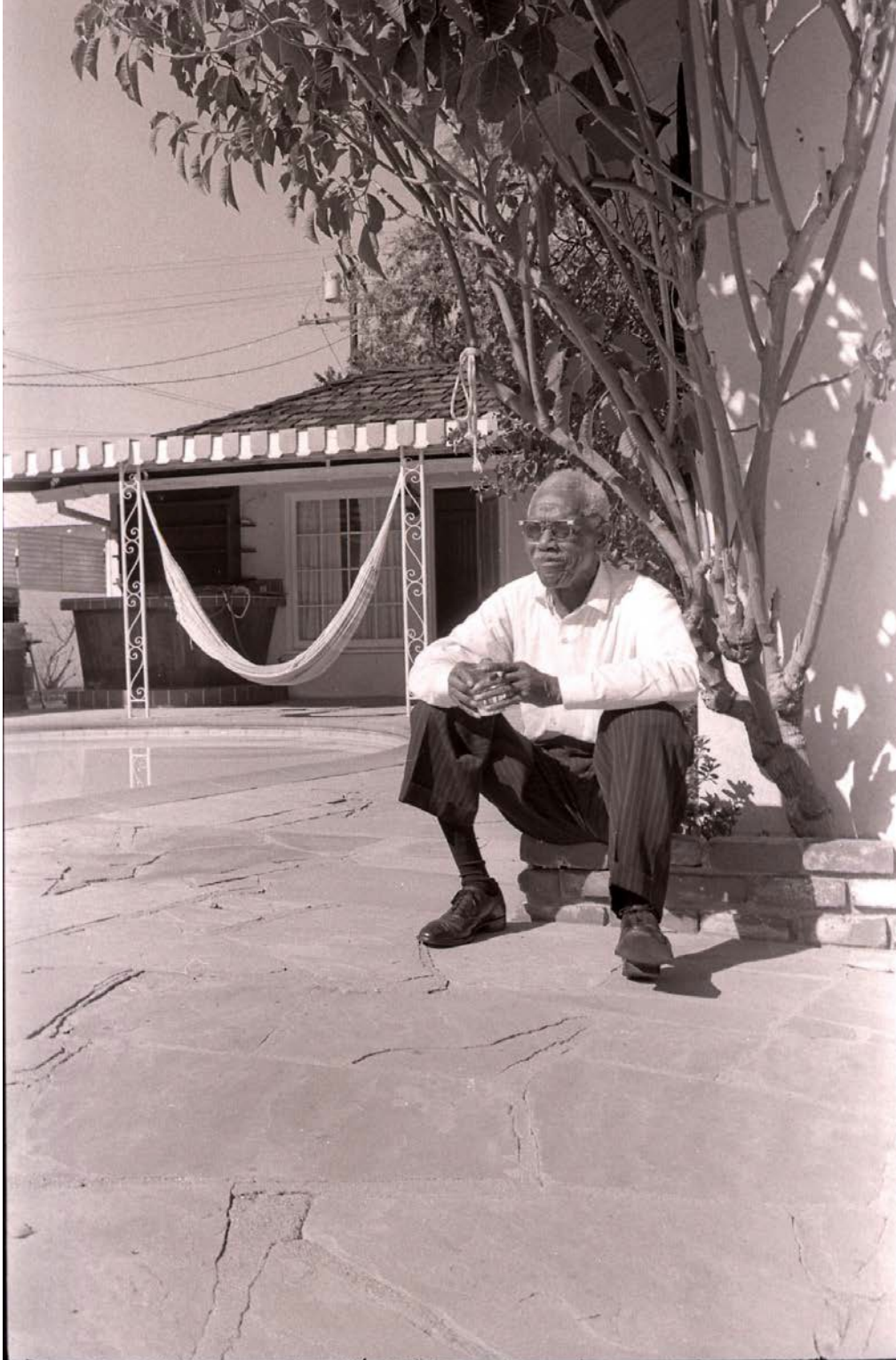


Figure 4: Furry Lewis at the Home of Denny Cordell, Hollywood, CA, 1970  
Photograph by Jim Chappell, permission from photographer

For the show, Russell sat in the middle of the soundstage behind his grand piano with the rest of the band positioned around him. There was a formal audience, and the backstage area was full of friends and family. On many occasions Sweet Emily can be seen standing on the side of the stage preparing a pie and dancing (sometimes enthusiastically and sometimes seductively) with a rolling pin in hand.<sup>63</sup> Lewis, dressed in a black pinstripe suit, a pressed white dress shirt, and thick black-frame glasses, watched the chaos unfold from a rocking chair alongside the stage. He can frequently be seen smoking a cigarette or holding an infant.

Although Russell was the center of attention, Lewis was undoubtedly the guest of honor. When Lewis performed, the party atmosphere subsided and everyone politely took a seat. Whether the people in attendance knew Lewis or not—and it is likely that most did not—they treated him with reverence. Further proof of Lewis’s distinguished position is that both Russell and Nix dedicate a song to him: Russell dedicates “Come On In My Kitchen” to Lewis and Nix dedicates “Amos Burke” to Lewis. In doing so, Nix says: “This song is supposed to be to Furry. You know, it is about him.”

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<sup>63</sup> “Sweet” Emily Smith was the inspiration for Russell’s song “Sweet Emily.” In the introduction of the rebroadcast, Emily is identified as Russell’s secretary.



Figure 5: Furry Lewis Performing at “Leon Russell and Friends,” Hollywood, CA, 1970  
Also pictured, Sweet Emily Smith (middle chair) and Don Nix (chair on the right)  
Photograph by Jim Chappell, permission from photographer

The televised portion of the show includes Lewis performing three of his more celebrated songs: “Good Morning Judge,” “John Henry,” and “Furry’s Blues.” According to Nix, Lewis also improvised a blues about “wanting to go home.” For three of the four songs (“Good Morning Judge,” “John Henry,” and the improvised blues), Lewis performed alone. For “Furry’s Blues,” Lewis’s vocals are accompanied by the full band with Russell on piano.<sup>64</sup>

In August of 1971 Lewis performed on the other side of the country at the legendary Café au Go Go in Greenwich Village, New York. A recording of the show is the only known documentation of the trip, but the album offers clues that suggest a good deal about Lewis’s live

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<sup>64</sup> On “Furry’s Blues,” Lewis changes the words from “Anybody ever ask you which way Furry go / Tell them Grand Central Station is the only place I know” to “Anybody ever ask you which way Furry go / Tell them Los Angeles Airport is the only place I know.”

performances during the early 1970s.<sup>65</sup> The set list consisted of standard fare for a Lewis show as he moves seamlessly between blues, ballads, gospel, country, traditional songs, stories, and jokes.<sup>66</sup> There is an applause break after each song, but these are not the uproarious ovations described by Booth in 1970. Instead, the audience gave Lewis reverential applause befitting his status as an elder blues statesman. Despite the unfamiliar nature of the city and the audience, Lewis was no less comfortable than when playing for friends in his own living room.

On Nix's request Lewis joined the Alabama State Troupers Road Show in 1972; the road show was a traveling musical act organized by Nix, funded by Elektra Records, and starring both Nix and Jeanie Greene.<sup>67</sup> Nix conceived of the tour as a promotional tool for both his and Greene's upcoming albums, but the broader intention was for the show to serve as an experiment in unifying and celebrating the music of Memphis and Muscle Shoals, Alabama.<sup>68</sup> Aside from Nix's personal connections to both places, half of the members of the band, the Mt. Zion Band and Choir, were Memphians while the other half were from Muscle Shoals. According to Nix:

Elektra had left it to me as far as picking a backing band and I went to work getting together some of the best players in Memphis and Muscle Shoals. From Memphis I asked my friend Ken Woodley to play keyboards, and Tarp Tarrant (who had played thirteen years with Jerry Lee Lewis) to play drums. From Muscle Shoals I got Clayton Ivey on keyboards, Bob Wray on bass, and Wayne Perkins

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<sup>65</sup> Ward Schaffer accompanies Lewis on both guitar and vocals for the songs included on the B-side. Lewis refers to Schaffer as "Brother Ward Schaffus."

<sup>66</sup> *Furry Lewis Live at the Gaslight at the Au Go Go* (Ampex A10140) contains the only recorded example of Lewis playing a song called "Dog Got the Measles (and Cat got the Whooping Cough)."

<sup>67</sup> Greene was a backup vocalist for Elvis Presley and was friends with both Nix and Russell. She was born in Corinth, Mississippi.

<sup>68</sup> In addition to his Memphis roots, Nix frequently worked at the Muscle Shoals Recording Studio in Muscle Shoals, AL. The combination of Memphis and Muscle Shoals musicians resulted in a loose, gritty, and boisterous sort of Southern Rock music that draws strongly from blues, soul, gospel, and rock and roll. The music is not immediately identifiable with either Memphis or Muscle Shoals but is something different; it is wholly Southern. The sound is also a significant departure from Lewis's traditional music. Perhaps because of this, Lewis was given his own set to end the concert. In addition to the aesthetic function, Lewis's encore allowed him to fill the role of the headliner while being honored as a respected elder musician and culture-bearer.

and Tippy Armstrong on guitars. I also added a second drummer, Fred Prouty, who was the staff drummer at Rick Hall's Studio. For background vocals, there was Brenda Patterson from Memphis as well as a singing group called The Minutes. It was a hell of a band.<sup>69</sup>

The original lineup also included guitarist Lonnie Mack, though Mack was only briefly with the group. Nix recalls the events following Mack's resignation: "I called Elektra and told them what had happened. They asked if there was anyone I could think of to take Lonnie's place. 'Of course. Furry Lewis,' I said, without even knowing I was saying it. Although they had never heard of Furry, they agreed to let me take him on the road, something I will always be grateful for."<sup>70</sup>

The State Troupers had only one tour; it consisted of a six-day romp through Louisiana ending in New Orleans and a performance at the Santa Monica (CA) Civic Auditorium. Later that year, selected recordings from the Santa Monica show were released (Elektra ELK 62 010). Though not included on its original release, the album's digital re-issue contains six of Lewis's songs as bonus tracks.<sup>71</sup>

Lewis joined The Memphis Blues Caravan, another road show, the following year (1973). Organized by blues enthusiasts, historians, and promoters Arne Brogger and Steve LaVere, the purpose of the Caravan was to showcase the "living legends" of Memphis country blues on a single stage. According to Brogger: "The birth of the Memphis Blues Caravan

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<sup>69</sup> Don Nix, *Road Stories and Recipes* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997), 131-2.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>71</sup> The bonus tracks are: "Furry's Blues," "Baby Make Me Stay/The Gypsy Told Me," "Right Hand Road," "Careless Love," "Battle Hymn of the Republic," and "When I Lay My Burden Down." From these recordings it is evident that Lewis was affected by the energy of the rock concert. Although Lewis was a seasoned performer and was certainly never in danger of being described as "dull," his music here is markedly looser, louder, and more energetic than usual. At the emotional height of his performance, his singing turns to shouting and his guitar playing deteriorates into him vigorously slapping the strings against the fret board. Uncontrolled laughter and excited cheers from the audience are heard throughout the recording, at times overpowering Lewis.

occurred late one night in Steve LaVere's music store in Memphis. LaVere and I had become acquainted through some dates I had booked for Furry Lewis. I had arranged these dates after finding LaVere's number in the Billboard performance publication as the contact for personal appearances for Furry."<sup>72</sup> Brogger said he and LaVere believed people needed "to see the guys who invented this uniquely American art form."

Brogger continued: "Steve had made contact with virtually every blues musician of consequence in Memphis . . . It was decided that we would try to put the whole crew who lived in Memphis on the road. It had never been done before. Personal appearances by local blues musicians had been, for the most part, solo date affairs. While most of the musicians knew each other, they had never toured or performed together as a group."<sup>73</sup> The Caravan not only gave its members an opportunity to perform together, but it also gave them a chance to make money and to feel appreciated. The Caravan's core musicians were Lewis, Booker White, John Estes, Memphis Ma Rainey (Lily Mae Glover), Hammie Nixon, Memphis Piano Red, Joe Willie Wilkins, Houston Stackhouse, and a backing band.<sup>74</sup>

In each of the Caravan's six years of existence (1973-1978), its members performed between twenty and thirty shows across the United States, most of which occurred on college or

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<sup>72</sup> Arne Brogger, "The Memphis Blues Caravan," <http://thebluehighway.com/blues/mbc.html>, accessed February 7, 2015. In a phone interview from October 30, 2014, Brogger described his meeting Lewis. He stated: "It all started . . . I was working for a small agency in Minneapolis and I picked up a copy of the Billboard Magazine booking guide that listed various artists and what not and I see 'Furry Lewis, Memphis, Tennessee.' In the late 50s early 60s when these guys were coming out of the woodwork, I was listening to them. I call it and it is Steve LaVere. I introduce myself and ask if Furry is available for personal appearances. He says, yes he certainly is. We were booking colleges—I had the upper Midwest as part of my territory. I hung up the phone and started evangelizing for Furry Lewis . . . We flew Furry out and he stayed at my house. I picked him up at the airport. He was carrying a guitar with the sun and the moon and the stars on one side and 'Furry Lewis' written on the other." According to Brogger, the most Lewis made for one show during this first trip to Minneapolis was around \$500.

<sup>73</sup> Brogger, "The Memphis Blues Caravan."

<sup>74</sup> Memphis Ma Rainey became a core member of the Caravan in its second or third year. Sam Chatmon, Harmonica Frank Floyd, Mose Vinson, and Madame Van Zula Hunt were featured on occasion. Memphis Piano Red is John Williams; he is not Willie Perryman, who was also known as "Piano Red" as well as "Dr. Feelgood."

university campuses and all of which followed a set program.<sup>75</sup> According to Brogger, “The ‘opener’ for the Caravan was always Piano Red. He took great pleasure in his constant reminders to the rest of the group that it was *he* who had the hardest job of the lot. He also suggested that any enthusiastic response that the rest of the Caravan might receive was due largely to the warm carpet that his performance spread for them. He was, more often than not, at least partly correct. Bukka White followed next, then Furry Lewis. No one wanted to follow Furry.”<sup>76</sup> Brogger continues: “After Furry’s set we generally had an intermission and then opened back up with Sleepy John Estes and Hammy [*sic*] Nixon. They were followed, in many instances, by Ma Rainey (Lilly [*sic*] Mae Glover) backed by Joe Willie’s band. Joe Willie and Stackhouse joined the band next and at the end of their set, went into ‘The Saints’ and were joined on stage by everyone in the Caravan.”<sup>77</sup>

When not performing with the Caravan, Lewis frequently shared the stage with a younger, often white, musician.<sup>78</sup> This musician “seconded” Lewis on acoustic guitar and frequently served as Lewis’s manager and personal assistant for the evening—this musician was

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<sup>75</sup> According to Brogger, it was not uncommon for performances to be separated by hundreds of miles but the musicians frequently traveled by bus unless a special (and higher paying) performance allowed for air travel. See Arne Brogger, “Rolling Through the Night,” The Silver Eagle Blog, entry posted October 6, 2009, <http://thesilvereagle.blogspot.com/2009/10/rolling-through-night.html> (accessed February 7, 2015).

<sup>76</sup> Arne Brogger, “A Day In The Life,” The Silver Eagle Blog, entry posted October 14, 2009, <http://thesilvereagle.blogspot.com/2009/10/day-in-life.html> (accessed February 7, 2015). Brogger told me during a telephone interview in 2014 that Lewis would occasionally come out from the wings of the stage and buck dance while someone else was performing. Because Lewis could “pop up” anywhere, someone had to be on “Furry patrol.” If someone was on stage, he wanted to be on stage. Brogger added, “He [Lewis] was quite the entertainer.”

<sup>77</sup> Brogger, “A Day In The Life,” The Silver Eagle Blog, <http://thesilvereagle.blogspot.com/2009/10/day-in-life.html>, accessed February 7, 2015.

<sup>78</sup> Linzie Butler was the exception to this, as he is an African American. Butler is a harmonica player and vocalist. He was Lewis’s first choice of harmonica players. In 1974 Lewis augmented his semi-frequent performances at The Oso and The Bitter Lemon with Tuesday night performances at Peanut’s Bar. From July to December of 1974 these weekly events were organized by Peanut’s then-manger/part-owner Zeke Johnson; Johnson was yet another young, white, blues musician and enthusiast who quickly became enamored of Lewis. When performing at Peanut’s, Lewis occasionally invited Johnson on stage with him. Johnson soon became one of Lewis’s regular second guitarists. Johnson played with Lewis for roughly two years. For more information on Lewis’s protégés, see Chapter 6.

often the one responsible for booking the gig, for getting Lewis to and from the event, for collecting Lewis's pay, and for helping him on and off the stage.<sup>79</sup> Eventually, the second guitarist became a necessity rather than a convenience. By the mid-1970s Lewis's health had declined to the point that the young musician needed to shoulder many of the musical responsibilities. As a consequence, Lewis's shows became more of an opportunity for the audience to be near a blues "legend" than anything else. Still, there seem to have been few complaints.

Of the five or six musicians to second Lewis, it was Lee Baker, Jr., who most regularly filled the role. Baker was more than Lewis's guitarist, though; he was Lewis's protégé and close friend. In 1969 the two recorded an album together, *Take Your Time* (Adelphi/Genes GCD 9911)—Baker provided rhythmic and harmonic support for Lewis's playing.

Baker was with Lewis when he performed on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson on July 11, 1974. Lewis was clearly nervous as he walked out on stage and sat down next to Carson—he walked slowly, spoke quietly with his head down, and provided short answers to Carson's questions. But not long into the interview, Lewis relaxed and his instincts took over. He gained favor with the audience by telling jokes and by showcasing his gregarious disposition and sharp wit. The full transcript of the interview between Lewis and Carson is found in Appendix D.<sup>80</sup>

Following the interview, Lewis and Baker played "Furry Lewis's Blues," a piece Lewis told the audience that he "made up." Though Lewis and Baker were very comfortable playing

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<sup>79</sup> Zeke Johnson, Linzie Butler, Jimmy Crosthwait, and Don Nix have all suggested that the second musician was responsible for supplying Lewis with a pint of Ten High Whiskey and/or Falstaff beer.

<sup>80</sup> The Carson Entertainment Group loaned me the footage of Lewis's appearance on *The Tonight Show* Starring Johnny Carson for the strict purposes of research pertaining to this dissertation on Furry Lewis. Lewis was originally scheduled to appear on the episode the day before. Lewis was a guest along with McLean Stevenson, Ashley Montagu, and Suzanne Pleshette.



with another, they were out of sync, both rhythmically and harmonically, at the start of the blues. While Lewis may have been nervous to perform on television, the real issue was that Baker was not sitting next to him. According to Mary Lindsay Dickinson, Don Nix, and Jimmy Crosthwait, the producers of *The Tonight Show* thought Lewis should perform alone, but after Lewis pressed them, a compromise was reached and Baker was allowed to perform off camera—the producers probably thought it was less “authentic” to show Lewis playing with a young white man.<sup>81</sup> Recognizing the disjointed start, Lewis began accented the downbeat with a sharp downward stroke of his thumb. Baker, finding the groove, was then able to secure his part. Once the two were comfortably in step with one another, Lewis increased the tempo and began incorporating tricks (such as, strumming with both hands in alternation of one another and rotating his left wrist to use an overhand grip on the fret board). The audience responded to Lewis’s antics with cheers.

A year after his performance on *The Tonight Show*, Lewis made his major motion picture debut with a small role in *W. W. and the Dixie Dance Kings*. The film revolves around the anti-hero W. W. (played by Burt Reynolds), a smooth-talking thief and con artist who becomes entangled in the affairs of a country and western band trying to make their way onto the Grand Ole Opry stage.<sup>82</sup> According to Lewis:

I’m Uncle Furry in the movie and I’m sitting on the porch of my house in Nashville. [The character played by] Jerry Reed comes up to me with his guitar, I was supposed to have raised him in the movie, you know, and I say to him, “Boy, where you been? Is you intendin’ to go back into the music business or you gonna

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<sup>81</sup> Dickinson, Nix, and Crosthwait, believed that Lewis, as a sign of friendship, would have declined to appear on the show had Baker not been allowed to perform.

<sup>82</sup> Lewis filmed *W. W. and the Dixie Dance Kings* before he appeared on *The Tonight Show*, but the film was not released until after his interview with Johnny Carson aired. According to an article published in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, it was Lewis’s role in the film that led to his appearing on *The Tonight Show*. See Thomas Fox, “Bluesman picks tunes for country comedy,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 23, 1974. Lewis also appeared in the 1981 film *This is Elvis*. Lewis is credited as “bluesman.”

bank rob all your days?” Then we sit down and play music and crack jokes and different things. I play “Furry Lewis Blues,” “The St. Louis Blues,” and “Casey Jones.”<sup>83</sup>

According to *Rolling Stone* magazine, “Having Furry play such a father figure surrounded by a bunch of white kids is one of Hollywood’s better pieces of typecasting. That’s about the way he’s been living since being rediscovered sweeping the streets of Memphis during the Sixties folk and blues boom.”<sup>84</sup> Lewis appears in a handful of scenes and his music underscores a few others. Although Baker did not appear in the film, he was on set with Lewis.

Lewis was selected for the role after Memphis record producer Knox Phillips recommended him to Thomas Rickman, the film’s screenwriter. The *Memphis Commercial Appeal* states: “. . . three names [of blues musicians] were mentioned [for the role],” said Avildsen, the director. “But Furry came in and read, and I said, ‘Why go any further—this is it.’” The article continues: “The character Furry plays was originally called Uncle Boaz, but after Furry was picked, it was decided to use his own name because, as Avildsen put it, ‘How can you improve on a name like ‘Furry’?’”<sup>85</sup> According to Lewis, it was Burt Reynolds who was responsible for his being in the film.<sup>86</sup> Of Lewis, Reynolds said: “The best thing you can say about an actor is that you can never catch him acting. And that’s the way he is.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Punch Shaw “Uncle Furry tells of his movie debut,” *Memphis Press Scimitar*, January 31, 1975. In a pivotal scene near the film’s climax, Uncle Furry overhears W. W. murmuring about needing to wash his prized black and gold Oldsmobile. Lewis’s character proceeds to lead the others in an improvised song called “Dirty Car Blues.”

<sup>84</sup> Walter Dawson, “Act Naturally: Furry Lewis & Big Burt,” *Rolling Stone*, August 29, 1974, 22.

<sup>85</sup> Walter Dawson, “Furry was a natural bluesman,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 27, 1974.

<sup>86</sup> Shaw “Uncle Furry Tells of His Movie Debut.” Knox also secured Lewis an appearance on a Mac Davis television special alongside George Carlin, Tom Jones, Dolly Parton, and Donna Summer—the special was televised on NBC on April 26, 1977 at 9pm. See Staff writer, “Furry Lewis on NBC,” *Memphis Press Scimitar*, April 13, 1977.

<sup>87</sup> Dawson, “Furry was a natural bluesman.”

Reynolds was genuinely a fan of Lewis's. In an interview with the *Memphis Press Scimitar*, he said: Lewis "needed this movie like a hole in the head. He was doing us a favor, and I think a lot of people on the other side of the camera didn't realize that and it made me very angry . . . Furry is a legend . . . I thought he should have been treated like John Barrymore, and I did everything to see that he was treated that way."<sup>88</sup> Of his co-star, Lewis says, Reynolds is "a fine fella. All the folks I worked with was fine folks, but Burt Reynolds, he's real nice. He sings real fine, too."<sup>89</sup>

When asked how he enjoyed the experience of acting in a movie, Lewis replied, "I liked it fine, except for one thing—you had to do one thing so many times. You gotta be perfect." Lewis also expressed interest in appearing in other films.<sup>90</sup> The roughly \$8,000 he made for his performance probably had something to do with this.<sup>91</sup>

In June 1975 Lewis traveled to Norway for the annual Molde Jazz Festival where he, along with Big Sam Clark and Dave "Snaker" Ray, performed as a special showcase billed as the "Memphis Blues Stars."<sup>92</sup> As with many of Lewis's performances outside of Memphis, Brogger secured the gig and coordinated travel arrangements. According to Brogger, the three musicians flew from Memphis to Washington D. C. where they met with Harold Ford, Sr., the first African American congressman from Memphis. Each of the three then gave an informal performance at Blues Alley "for a hat pass" before boarding a plane at John F. Kennedy International Airport

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<sup>88</sup> Edwin Howard, "Furry Lewis: The legend and the man," *Memphis Press Scimitar*, September 15, 1981.

<sup>89</sup> Shaw, "Uncle Furry tells of his movie debut."

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> William Thomas, "Furry Lewis is still picking his way along –with just a little help from his friends," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, August 16, 1976.

<sup>92</sup> Snaker Ray is from Minneapolis. In a telephone interview from 2014, Brogger told me that the festival coincided with the "midnight sun."

bound for Norway. Lewis, who did not enjoy air travel, told David Evans in a 1979 interview that he had no interest in going overseas again.<sup>93</sup> He never did.

On July 4, 1975, Lewis performed as the final of four opening acts for The Rolling Stones, who were in Memphis for their “Tour of the Americas ‘75” tour. According to a concert review in the August 14, 1975, issue of *Rolling Stone*:

... a crowd, which eventually numbered 51,500, began filing into Memphis Memorial Stadium. At 2:00 p.m. the Charlie Daniels Band opened the concert on schedule. Then, around the middle of the afternoon, New Orleans’s Meters performed an energetic soul set, but the crowd was only marginally interested. The J. Geils Band fared somewhat better, but not with local musicians. “What made these guys think they could pull off a second-rate black-face act in Memphis?” one wondered. The crowd was impatient for the Stones, but the Stones asked that Furry Lewis perform—for the kind of money the other musicians were getting.<sup>94</sup>

The article continues:

“Hello everybody,” Furry told the 51,500. “You know, I was out on the street one day and I was so-o-o hungry. I was walkin’ and walkin’ and then spied some ladies sittin’ on a porch and I said, please gimme somethin’ to eat. One of them ladies looked at me and said, ‘Come on back in the house an’ I’ll raise my dress a little while.’” Several thousand people roared as Furry tore into “Let Me Call You Sweetheart,” his favorite number of late. He followed it with a blues that included the traditional lines, “Baby, the way you treat me/Make me a rolling stone.” By the time Furry finished, the audience had been waiting for six hours in 90° heat.<sup>95</sup>

Reflecting on the event the following August, Lewis said: “Well, I was one of the first to go on and there was 51,000 people there. Think of that—51,000 people and one black picker. So I picked my guitar and they gave me a standing ovation. I didn’t play but two numbers, but I got

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<sup>93</sup> Furry Lewis, interviewed by Evans, 1979. In a telephone interview in 2014, Brogger said: “He told me that flying across the great water wasn’t at the top of his list but that he didn’t let his whole weight down the whole time so he made it ok.”

<sup>94</sup> Robert Palmer, “Stones Visit Memphis: Tour Rolls on Through a Spirited Stop in Memphis Before a Drug Bust Sideshow in Texas,” *Rolling Stone*, August 14, 1975. Memphis Memorial Stadium is now the Liberty Bowl.

<sup>95</sup> Palmer, “Stones Visit Memphis.”

\$500 one night and \$525 the next night.”<sup>96</sup> Lewis’s performance pleased the Rolling Stones as well as the audience. Three years later, when the Stones returned to Memphis for their June 28, 1978, tour stop, they asked him to reprise his role as an opening act. Lewis gladly obliged.

By the time Lewis’s annual birthday celebration occurred in March of 1977, he was one of the last living members of his generation—Booker White had died only a few days before and Sleepy John Estes died in June. As such, a considerable proportion of the roughly two hundred fifty people who joined Lewis at the High Cotton bar in Memphis’s Midtown neighborhood that evening were nearly a half century his junior.<sup>97</sup> According to an article published in the *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, Lewis addressed the crowd by saying “I hope you enjoy me like I enjoy ya’ll.”<sup>98</sup> He then encouraged “everybody to have some cake.”<sup>99</sup> The photograph published along with the article shows a frail Lewis surrounded by young white men as he blows out a comically oversized candle.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Thomas, “Furry Lewis is still picking his way.” The “next night” to which Lewis refers is most likely the night of June 28, 1978, on which Lewis yet again performed as an opening act for the Rolling Stones. It is commonly said that the Rolling Stones also gave Lewis an electric guitar. Lewis does not mention this in any of his interviews.

<sup>97</sup> The earliest reports of Lewis’s birthday celebration are found in two newspaper articles from 1973. See Fred Chisenhall, “Furry in fine fettle for birthday party,” *Memphis Press Scimitar*, March 7, 1973; and Thomas BeVier, “Furry flaunts health, happiness at 80,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 7, 1973. In 1973, Lewis’s party occurred at a home located at 444 E. Carolina Street in Memphis. Along with Lewis, Little Laura Dukes and Piano Red provided the entertainment. See BeVier, “Furry flaunts health, happiness at 80.”

<sup>98</sup> Robert Wilson, “Furry Lewis 84 and still going,” *Memphis Press Scimitar*, March 7, 1977.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Lewis’s annual birthday event has not been regularly held since his death, though Zeke Johnson, in cooperation with the Center for Southern Folklore in downtown Memphis, revived the tradition in 2014.



Figure 6: Furry Lewis's Annual Birthday Celebration, 1977  
Originally printed in Robert Wilson's article, "Furry Lewis 84 and still going" in  
*Memphis Press Scimitar*, March 7, 1977

By 1978 Lewis's health had worsened significantly. No longer able to maintain his busy performance schedule, he found himself struggling financially—Lewis did perform occasionally, most notably in 1979, 1980, and 1981 when David Evans booked him and Baker to play the Memphis in May music festival. To supplement his Social Security benefits, he began pawning his guitar at the Capital Loans Pawnshop at 774 Poplar Avenue, 0.2 miles from Lewis's home at 811 Mosby Avenue. So, when someone wanted Lewis to play, he or she had to redeem Lewis's guitar from the pawnshop. Afterward, Lewis pawned the guitar again. In exchange for the continued business, the broker agreed to not sell the guitar to anyone without Lewis's permission.

By 1980, visits from researchers and out-of-town fans had all but ceased. Without regular gigs and without someone to buy back his guitar, the \$12.50 per month loan fee was more than Lewis could manage.<sup>101</sup> The possibility of losing his guitar (a Martin electric) and amplifier soon became a real.<sup>102</sup> When asked about the situation, Lewis said: "I shouldn't have done it, but I got in a tight fix and needed the money. Now, all I'm doing is lying here and worrying about it. I feel as sick as if I had the flu . . . I didn't know I'd miss it so much . . . The other times I had gigs to play but lately I ain't played much. I can't remember the last job. I know one thing. If I

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<sup>101</sup> United Press International, "Blues singer fears for pawned guitar," *Chicago Sun Times*, February 17, 1980. The same *Chicago Sun Times* article reports that Lewis pawned his guitar for \$250, while two Memphis newspapers report that he pawned it for \$210. See William Thomas, "Furry's singing the blues—solo," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, February 14, 1980; and Staff writer, "Good day lightens Furry's blues," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, February 15, 1980.

<sup>102</sup> This Martin electric is the same one Lewis used at the Molde Jazz Festival and for the Rolling Stones concert. See Thomas, "Furry's singing the blues." According to Selvidge, "I remember when he bought that guitar . . . He'd broken the neck or something on his Epiphone, which was the guitar he'd always used. We took him to Strings and Things and while he was looking around he picked up this Martin. I don't remember if he ran into it or it ran into him. But he liked it so much he decided to take it home and try it. He later bought it; paid for it himself. It added a new dimension to his career because it was getting hard for him to play the acoustical guitar loud enough and sustain it." See Thomas, "Furry to be buried today in rites befitting a bluesman."

ever get my guitar back, I sure won't hock it no damn more, I betcha."<sup>103</sup> Before the story ran in the *Chicago Sun Times*, T. Y. Yonken, a 27 year-old disc jockey on WZXR-FM (Rock 103), and two of his friends had already redeemed Lewis's guitar for him.

Lewis's birthday party in March of 1980 was designed to celebrate his life as well as to raise money that he badly needed. On March 7 approximately four hundred people attended a two-night party held at the P. O. E. T.'s Music Hall at 1819 Madison Avenue in Memphis. Between \$3,000 and \$3,500 was raised, and Lewis was given a new guitar and amplifier by one local music store and a \$100 gift card by another.<sup>104</sup> According to Tom Owens of WZXR, the money was enough that Lewis would receive \$103 every two weeks for the rest of the year.<sup>105</sup> Owens adds: "When that's gone it will be time to do it again for his [next] birthday."<sup>106</sup>

Lewis's health declined steadily throughout 1980 and 1981. To make matters worse, on August 14, 1981, the curtains in the living room/bedroom of Lewis's apartment at 811 Mosby Avenue caught fire.<sup>107</sup> According to the local newspapers, the Memphis fire department responded to a call at 813 Mosby Avenue at 11:24 p. m.; at 2:59 a. m. the next morning, Lewis was admitted to the City of Memphis Hospital for burns on his back, hands, and shoulders.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Thomas, "Furry's singing the blues."

<sup>104</sup> Bernice Stengle, "Lewis plays for others in celebrating birthday," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 6, 1980; and Staff writer, No title, *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 8, 1980.

<sup>105</sup> For Lewis to receive \$103 per week for a year, the event needed to raise \$5,356. This is considerably more than the \$3,000-\$3,500 estimated by the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*.

<sup>106</sup> Staff writer, No title, *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 8, 1980.

<sup>107</sup> Lewis's friends have suggested to me that the fire was started either by a space heater, a lit cigarette, or a faulty air conditioner.

<sup>108</sup> Staff writer, "Furry Lewis' condition listed as satisfactory," *Memphis Press Scimitar*, August 15, 1981; Staff writer, "Furry hospitalized after Thursday fire," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, August 15, 1981; and Staff writer, "Furry Lewis resting after apartment fire," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, August 16, 1981. One local newspaper reported that Lewis described his burns as "not too bad." See Staff writer, "Furry Lewis resting after apartment fire," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, August 16, 1981.



The following Wednesday he suffered cardiac arrest. The medical staff at City of Memphis Hospital was able to restart his heart, and he was transferred to the intensive care unit where he was placed on a respirator.<sup>109</sup> His condition worsened—from “satisfactory” to “poor” to “critical”—and Lewis died a month later, on September 14, 1981.

Even in death, Lewis’s wit and charm remained a comfort to his friends and family. When interviewed by the *Memphis Press Scimitar* following the announcement of his passing, Alberta Cooper, Lewis’s niece and closest living relative at the time, said that he once told her: “You die when you can’t help it.”<sup>110</sup>

Visitation was held from 1:00 until 2:45 on September 16, 1981, at J. C. Oates and Sons Funeral Home, located at the corner of Auction Avenue (now A. W. Willis Avenue) and Seventh Street in Memphis. The funeral followed at three o’clock.<sup>111</sup> Rev. James Rainey, associate pastor of Greater Middle Baptist Church, presided over the ceremonies—Lewis had allegedly once served as usher at Rev. Rainey’s church. According to an article in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, Lewis was dressed in a gray suit with the stem of a red rose placed through his jacket’s buttonhole and he was lying in a silver gray “Perfection” casket that had been purchased by his friends.<sup>112</sup> Approximately eighty chairs were placed in the sanctuary for the service, though the local newspapers reported that close to two hundred people were in attendance.<sup>113</sup> Also according to the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, the mourners included “black and white, rich and

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<sup>109</sup> Staff writer, “Furry Lewis suffers heart stoppage,” *Memphis Press Scimitar*, September 11, 1981; and Staff writer, “‘Furry’ Lewis remains in critical condition,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, September 12, 1981.

<sup>110</sup> Staff writer, “Services for Furry Lewis,” *Memphis Press Scimitar*, September 15, 1981.

<sup>111</sup> Thomas, “Furry to be buried today in rites befitting a bluesman.”

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> William Thomas, “Friends bid farewell to Lewis,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, September 17, 1981.

poor, young and old, musical and nonmusical, wearing everything from pearls to tennis shoes.”<sup>114</sup> Among the musicians in attendance were Hammie Nixon and Rufus Thomas, as well as Dickinson, Selvidge, Baker, and Butler.<sup>115</sup>

In fitting fashion, Lewis’s funeral was a musical one. As his friends and fans proceeded past a wall of floral arrangements toward the casket, Lewis’s album *The Fabulous Furry Lewis* (Southland SLP-3) played on a loop over the chapel’s loudspeakers.<sup>116</sup> During the service, Baker played bottleneck guitar. At the end of the service, Baker, Selvidge, Dickinson, and Butler formed a circle behind the casket and performed “Old Rugged Cross,” “When the Saints Go Marching In,” and “When I Lay My Burden Down.” When I asked Mary Lindsay Dickinson about the service in 2013, she said: “It was fabulous. What can you say?”

But not all who attended felt the services provided Lewis with a suitable send-off. As reported by the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, Vic Conwill, a longtime Memphis-based musician, took the microphone and said: “Nobody knows the hard times. Everybody’s got it too easy now. Things are too good, too cool. But the poor musician who lies here never had it good and that’s why he sang his song. It was hard, really hard and that’s what he sang about. But nobody listened because nobody knew how bad he had it—and they didn’t give a damn. When Furry Lewis got down, nobody cared till right now. Look at all these people, big deal, and you

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<sup>114</sup> Thomas, “Friends bid farewell to Lewis.”

<sup>115</sup> Rufus Thomas told the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*: “Furry’s music became a part of me from our first encounter.” See Thomas, “Friends bid farewell to Lewis.”

<sup>116</sup> Thomas, “Friends bid farewell to Furry Lewis.” One of the floral arrangements was in the shape of a large guitar.

can take that to the bank.”<sup>117</sup> Conwill closed by saying, “If you’re here to make a buck off of Furry Lewis’s death, then you can hit the front door.”<sup>118</sup>

Lewis’s body was escorted by motorcade to Hollywood Cemetery south of downtown where it was to be interred. Only a footstone marked his grave. As Social Security recipients were no longer eligible for a \$250 death benefit to be paid directly to the funeral home (beginning in September 1, 1981) and only \$250 was available from a life insurance policy, there was no money for a tombstone. \$240 was raised through the sale of posters at the Schiltz Music Festival and through small donations from friends and local musicians to pay the rest of the funeral home’s expenses.<sup>119</sup>

A year after his death, the Memphis and Shelby County Music Commission collected several hundred dollars to purchase and install a small granite headstone; the headstone read “Walter ‘Furry’ Lewis, Bluesman, March 7, 1893-Sept. 14, 1981.”<sup>120</sup> In July of 1983 a larger granite headstone replaced the smaller marker; this marker reads “Walter ‘Furry’ Lewis Mar. 6, 1893 Sept. 14, 1981” and the words “When I Lay My Burden Down” are inscribed below Lewis’s dates and above an etching of an acoustic guitar. The larger tombstone was purchased with funds donated to the Furry Lewis Memorial Foundation, Inc., an organization formed for the sole purpose of providing Lewis’s grave with a suitable marker.<sup>121</sup> Hollywood Cemetery has

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<sup>117</sup> Thomas, “Friends bid farewell to Furry Lewis.”

<sup>118</sup> Jim Balentine, “Furry would have liked his bluesman’s farewell,” *Memphis Press Scimitar*, September 17, 1981. Though Conwill’s point was valid, some of Lewis’s friends in attendance begrudge him for having raised the issue at such a sensitive time.

<sup>119</sup> Thomas, “Furry to be buried today in rites befitting a bluesman.”

<sup>120</sup> Staff writer, “Furry Lewis fans plan fund drive,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 19, 1982.

<sup>121</sup> Members of the Furry Lewis Memorial Foundation, Inc., included Selvidge, Baker, Dickinson, Prince Gabe, Melvin Lee, Fred Ford, Wanakee Williamson, Harry Godwin, Cassandra Taylor, Knox Phillips, and Irvin Salky. See Staff writer, “Furry Lewis fans plan fund drive”; and William Thomas, “Legend of Furry acquires marker,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, July 16, 1983.

since fallen into mild disarray and Lewis's headstone is tilting forward and sliding sideways on its base.<sup>122</sup> Lewis's footstone is also badly chipped and is partially obstructed by tall grass.



Figure 7: Furry Lewis Headstone, Hollywood Cemetery, Memphis, TN  
Photograph by Tyler Fritts

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<sup>122</sup> The Mount Zion Memorial Fund and T. DeWayne Moore, the program's executive director, successfully secured and straightened Lewis's headstone on June 25, 2016. This happened in tandem with the Mount Zion Memorial Fund placing a marker on the grave of Frank Stokes, who is also buried in Hollywood Cemetery.

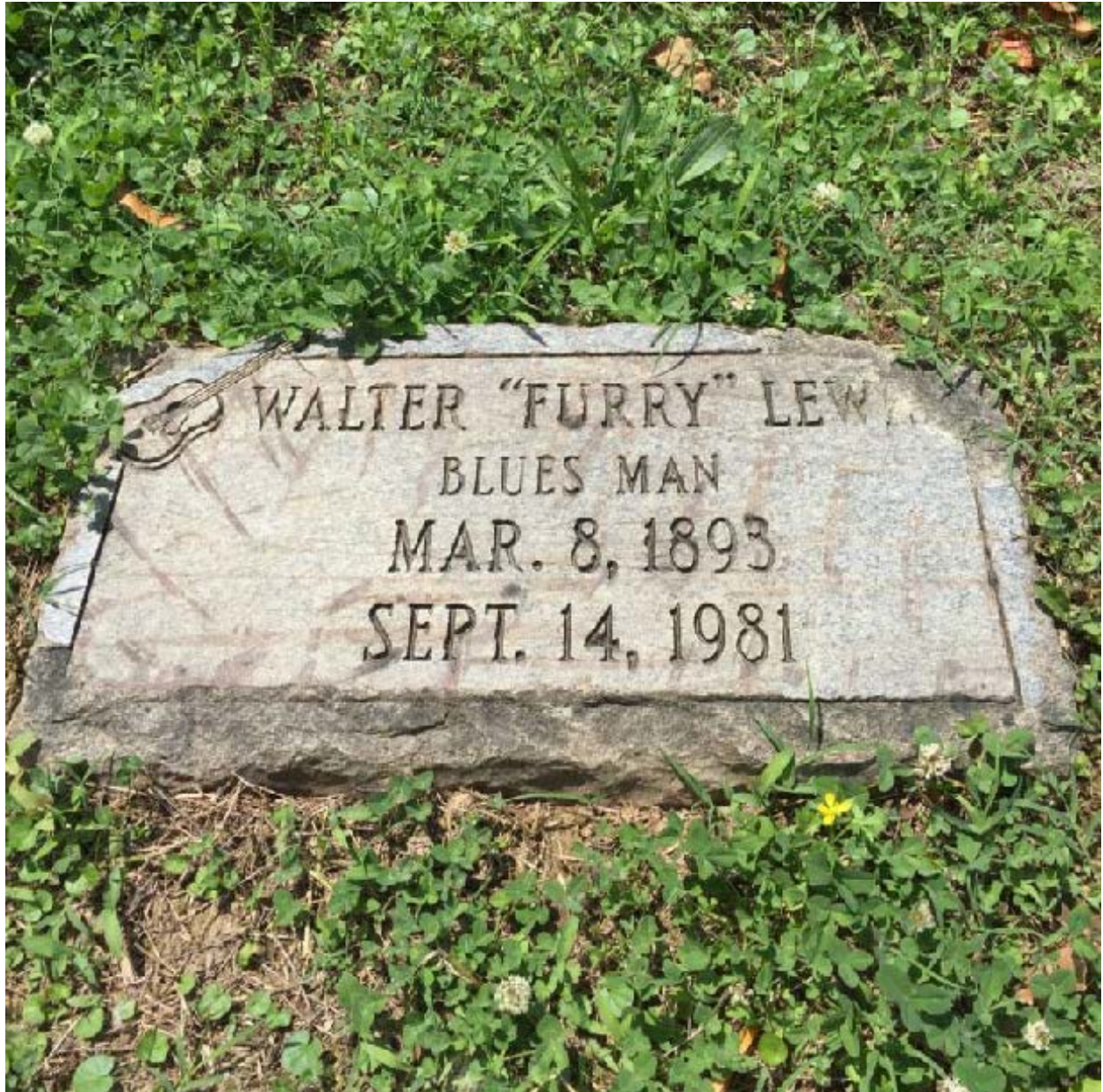


Figure 8: Furry Lewis Footstone, Hollywood Cemetery, Memphis, TN  
Photograph by Tyler Fritts

### **The Mythological Lewis**

According to Lewis himself, he was born on a few different dates in several different years. His gravesite even perpetuates a multi-natal myth. On his headstone, his birthday is

inscribed as March 6, but March 8 is inscribed on his footstone.<sup>123</sup> Both are in disagreement with the date of March 7, which appeared on the small headstone that was placed on his gravesite in 1982.

More dramatic are the differences in Lewis's supposed birth years. Throughout his second career, Lewis claimed to have been born in 1894, 1895, 1896, 1898, 1899, and either 1908 or 1909.<sup>124</sup> The U. S. Census gives Lewis's birth year as 1899, while his World War I Draft card gives a birth year of 1898. According to his social security file, he was born in 1895.<sup>125</sup> Yet, Lewis often quoted 1893 during later interviews. Samuel Charters wrote, Lewis "thought for many years that he was born in 1900, and he stayed on his job until he thought he'd gotten to retirement age. But one of the young blues enthusiasts who was taking guitar lessons from Furry, Jerry Finberg, went through old school records to help Furry get Medicaid and found that he'd been born seven years earlier, on March 6, 1893. Occasionally Furry himself will forget and give other dates."<sup>126</sup>

While it is possible that he confused, forgot, or never knew his birth year, Lewis was aware of the advantages old age could bring.<sup>127</sup> For a blues musician during Memphis's Blues Revival, a musician's age was directly connected with his or her historical significance, which was in turn linked with his or her earning potential. By appearing older, Lewis was able to claim

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<sup>123</sup> March 6 is the date Lewis most commonly used.

<sup>124</sup> See Appendix C: A Timeline of Significant Events (Historical and Otherwise) in Furry Lewis's Life. According to Charters: "Occasionally Furry himself will forget and give other dates" See Charters, *Sweet as the Showers of Rain*, 50-1.

<sup>125</sup> Bob Eagle and Eric LeBlanc, *Blues: A Regional Experience* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2013), 187, 447.

<sup>126</sup> Charters, *Sweet as the Showers of Rain*, 50-1.

<sup>127</sup> As stated in the autobiography of Big Bill Broonzy: "This changing of age was not uncommon amongst Southern Negroes of his time, for military, social, prestige or several other reasons . . ." See William Broonzy and Yannick Bruynoghe, *Big Bill Blues* (New York: Oak Publications, 1964), 10.

more historically significant links to a bygone and romanticized era of blues, thus improving his marketability; while a birth year of 1899 would mean Lewis was able to see Handy perform on Beale Street and play alongside innovators such as Jim Jackson and Frank Stokes, a birth year of 1893 would mean he was old enough to perform with Handy and innovate alongside Jackson and Stokes.

Whether he was born in 1893 or 1899, Lewis was one of the few blues musicians to be born before 1900 and live into the 1980s. Of those who failed to outlive him, Lewis once joked: “All the boys in the (W. C. Handy’s) band must’ve lived clean lives because they’re all dead now. And I’m still here.”<sup>128</sup> Expressing a widely-held sentiment among Lewis’s friends, Edwin Howard, the Amusements Editor for the *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, wrote in Lewis’s obituary: “. . . age is relative, and Furry surely had lived at least 88 hard years, even if he did it in a mere 81.”<sup>129</sup>

Though not directly tied to a myth, the collection of coins on Lewis’s tombstone engenders confusion. While there are a few traditions that involve leaving a coin on a friend’s headstone, none seem to align with Lewis.<sup>130</sup> The coins most likely represent either “buying a drink” for Lewis or are simply a sign of respect, but enough uncertainty surrounds the coins that

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<sup>128</sup> Staff writer, “Furry Lewis on NBC,” *Memphis Press Scimitar*, April 13, 1977.

<sup>129</sup> Howard, “Furry Lewis: The legend and the man.”

<sup>130</sup> Observing ancient Jewish traditions, a person will recite the Kaddish and leave a small trinket such as stone or coin on the gravesite of a loved one. In accordance with Greek mythology, coins may also be left in recognition of the money required by Charon, the ferryman of Hades, to ferry souls across the River Styx. As Lewis did not serve in the military (much less die in battle), was not Jewish, and had no particular affinity for or affiliation with Greek mythology, none of these motivations seem likely. The Kaddish, or Qaddish, is a hymn of praise to God found in the Jewish prayer service. In the United States military tradition: a nickel indicates the visitor and the deceased completed basic training together, a dime indicates the two soldiers served alongside one another, and a quarter indicates the visiting soldier was present when the deceased soldier was killed. This is a long-standing tradition among soldiers though the practice was popularized in United States during America’s involvement in the Vietnam War. Perhaps, these coins are meant to represent “tips.” It is also possibly that the coins have no meaning at all, but visitors feel compelled to leave them simply because some coins are already there.

their presence feeds Lewis’s general mythos.<sup>131</sup> A photograph of the coins on Lewis’s headstone is found below.<sup>132</sup>



Figure 9: Coins on Furry Lewis Headstone, Hollywood Cemetery, Memphis, TN  
Photograph by Tyler Fritts

Myths surrounding Lewis’s unusual name are as significant and complicated as those concerning his birthday. When asked about the origins of “Furry,” Lewis often responded vaguely and dismissively. Echoing what Lewis told Johnny Carson, Sid Selvidge wrote that

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<sup>131</sup> Some of my southern African American colleagues recall their parents and grandparents leaving coins on tombstones, though the reason for doing so seems to be lost. While this may well be an African American burial tradition that stems from antebellum America or perhaps Africa, Lewis’s is the only tombstone (at least in the general area of Hollywood Cemetery where he lays) that is adorned by coins.

<sup>132</sup> The photograph also shows a red strip near the center of the top of the headstone and a few red dots on the left side of the top of the headstone. The origin and any meaning or significance of the coloration is unknown.



Lewis's childhood friends were the first to call him "Furry."<sup>133</sup> Adding to this, a journalist from the *Chicago Sun-Times* wrote that Lewis ". . . got his nickname when he refused, at age 7, to get a haircut."<sup>134</sup> The writer for the *Chicago Sun-Times* does not provide a source for this information, but outside of the haircut scenario Lewis was not unusually hairy.

Lewis rarely addressed his name during interviews, though it was a frequent topic of his lyrics. In addition to placing himself—or a character named "Furry" that may be viewed as a sort of extension of himself—in his songs, Lewis often sang, "My first name's 'Furry,' my second name ain't never been told." Although the typical poetics of blues lyrics—fractured and obstructed narrative, ambiguity, contradiction, double meanings, etc.—obscure any blatant message, one wonders if Lewis was perhaps suggesting that he too was uncertain of his name's origin.

The most plausible explanation for his nickname is that "Furry" is not a nickname at all (at least not in the strictest sense) but rather a mispronunciation of a given name. David Evans suggests the possibility that Lewis was named in honor of someone (such as a Walter "Feary;" "Ferry;" "Furey;" "Fury;" or "Ferree") but the honoree's name was corrupted to "Furry."<sup>135</sup> While no such potential "Furrier" et al. appears in historical record in Mississippi during the second half of the nineteenth century, the potential for the existence of such a namesake is still

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<sup>133</sup> Sid Selvidge, *Heroes of the Blues: The Very Best of Furry Lewis*, Shout! Factory CD DK 30248, CD liner notes, 2003.

<sup>134</sup> Staff writer, "Blues guitar great Walter 'Furry' Lewis dies at 88," *Chicago Sun Times*, September 15, 1981.

<sup>135</sup> David Evans, "From Bumble Bee Slim to Black Boy Shine: Nicknames of Blues Singers," in *Ramblin' On My Mind: New Perspectives on the Blues*, edited by David Evans (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 184. The case of Booker White is an example of this phenomenon as White was named in honor of Booker T. Washington but was frequently billed (especially later in life), as "Bukka White"—he was billed as "Washington White" on his first records (1930). According to Zeke Johnson, a close friend and protégé of White's, White took pride in the name "Booker T. Washington White" and was not fond of being called "Bukka."

reasonably high.<sup>136</sup> Lewis seems to support this claim, albeit indirectly, by telling interviewers that his proper name is “Walter Furry Lewis.”<sup>137</sup>

Regardless of its origins, the name “Furry” provided Lewis with an enviable degree of uniqueness. While there undoubtedly were many “Bills” who were “Big,” many “Sams” who played washboard, many “Sonny Boys,” many musical Reverends, and many musicians who were “Slim” or “Blind” or so tall they were compared to a “Pinetop,” there was only one “Furry.” As Lewis told Mark Seal of *Rolling Stone*, your name “is proper only to you,” and for Lewis, his name remains an important part of his mythos.<sup>138</sup> Lewis even emblazoned his guitar cases with large, white letters spelling out the words “Furry Lewis.”<sup>139</sup>

There are myths concerning Lewis’s musical abilities, as well. Charters, in remembering his first meeting with Lewis, said Lewis “no longer had a guitar and hadn’t played much in twenty years, but when I asked him if he could still sing and play he straightened and said, ‘I’m better now than I ever was.’”<sup>140</sup> Charters goes on to praise Lewis’s ability to effortlessly recall and perform material on demand, material that, as Charters appears to have believed, Lewis had not played or perhaps even thought about in decades. In Charters’s telling of this encounter, Lewis is painted as having possessed preternatural musical abilities—not only had he maintained his skills but, improved them without practice. The recordings from that first meeting tell a

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<sup>136</sup> For instance, the historical record could be incomplete or the namesake may have been of minimal social/historical significance.

<sup>137</sup> Furry Lewis, interviewed by Allan and Hurley, May 4, 1967.

<sup>138</sup> Mark Seal, “Furry Lewis is Furious at Joni,” *Rolling Stone*, February 24, 1977.

<sup>139</sup> For more information on Lewis’s guitar cases, including his habit of labeling them with his name, see Chapter 5.

<sup>140</sup> Charters, *Walking A Blues Road*, 59.

different story.<sup>141</sup> Lewis did not simply improvise or play from rote; he combined poetic and musical lines in a way that showcased an advanced understanding of blues composition and tradition.

Lewis frequently encouraged myths about his relationship with W. C. Handy. Though he was fond of telling researchers (and any one else willing to listen) that he played on Beale Street in a band with Handy, he rarely provided details. A significant exception came in 1967 when he told Godwin and Hurley that he “always” played with Handy’s “number one” band.<sup>142</sup> Lewis added that he “absolutely did” play “Mr. Crump Don’t ‘Low” (later, “The Memphis Blues”) on Beale Street as part of an event for E. H. Crump’s mayoral campaign—Godwin and Hurley surmise that Lewis was referring to Crump’s 1909 campaign.<sup>143</sup>

The musical differences between Lewis and Handy make this claim highly unlikely. Handy’s bands were made up of highly trained professional musicians, not ten-year-old boys just learning to play.<sup>144</sup> Even if Lewis were in his mid-teens in 1909 (as suggested by a birth year of 1893), his whimsically improvised folk music would certainly have clashed with Handy’s pre-composed and staunchly professional music.<sup>145</sup> While Lewis may have performed “Mr. Crump

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<sup>141</sup> Folkways FA 3823. Lewis’s maturation is most evident on the recording of “Pearlee Blues.” Here, Lewis’s slide playing is loose and active, becoming a voice unto itself. This is a stark contrast from Lewis’s tighter use of the slide as a melodic accent in his early recordings.

<sup>142</sup> Lewis adds that Handy had three bands at this time. Lewis also says that Handy only played trumpet, which is why a guitarist was needed—Handy did play cornet and guitar, as well. See Furry Lewis, interviewed by Godwin and Hurley, March 18, 1967.

<sup>143</sup> Furry Lewis, interviewed by Godwin and Hurley, March 18, 1967.

<sup>144</sup> The names, instruments, and histories of the musicians in Handy’s band at this time are discussed in some detail in his autobiography. See W. C. Handy, *Father of the Blues: An Autobiography* (New York: Da Capo, 1969). See also personnel listings in G. P. Hamilton, *The Bright Side of Memphis: A Compendium of Information Concerning the Colored People of Memphis, Tennessee, Showing Their Achievements In Business, Industrial and Professional Life and Including Articles of General Interest On The Race* (Memphis: Self published, 1908).

<sup>145</sup> In contemplating the idea of Lewis playing alongside Handy, Sid Selvidge appropriately quipped, “Could you imagine?!” See Beale Street Caravan, “Bukka White, Furry Lewis, and Sleepy John Estes,” <http://bealestreetcaravan.com/artists/bukka-white-furry-lewis-and-sleepy-john-estes> (accessed February 4, 2015).

Don't 'Low" on Beale Street in 1909, he surely did not do so as a member of Handy's band. Still, there is room for believability: In 1917 and 1918 the six bands Handy managed had all lost members to the World War I draft, a reality that forced Handy to dip into a lower talent pool that could have included an eighteen- or nineteen-year-old Lewis.

Lewis adds to his Handy myth by saying that Handy gave him his first real guitar.<sup>146</sup>

While Handy may have occasionally supplied members of his bands with instruments, he was not in the habit of giving away instruments, even to promising young amateurs. On *Furry Lewis Live at the Gaslight at the Au Go Go* (Ampex A10140), Ward Schaffer, the event emcee, told the audience that Handy gave Lewis a guitar in exchange for the song "The Atlanta Blues." Schaffer also said "The Atlanta Blues" was the first song Lewis ever wrote and that Handy changed the name of the song to "Pallet On Your Floor." Lewis likely told this to Schaffer and Schaffer repeated it without question. Handy's version of "The Atlanta Blues" is based on the melody of "Make Me A Pallet On Your Floor" (not the other way around), and was first published in 1923 while he was living in New York City. A traditional version of "Make Me A Pallet On Your Floor" was part of Lewis's repertoire and it is possible, though unlikely, that Handy heard Lewis play it and was reminded of first hearing and orchestrating it in 1903 in Clarksdale, Mississippi.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> In an interview from 1967 Lewis told Allan and Hurley that he played and socialized with Handy at the notorious Pee Wee's Saloon, located on Beale Street in downtown Memphis. Lewis said of such places: "All the roadhouses had trouble sometimes, but not all the time . . . it never amount to much, though." See Furry Lewis, interviewed by Allan and Hurley, May 4, 1967. In the same interview, Lewis says that he was never a member of a music-oriented club. He may not have considered a "club" the same as the somewhat-informal musician's union that gathered and socialized in the upstairs of Pee Wee's Saloon; "membership" in the "union" was necessary to secure a gig with a Handy-sponsored band. See Furry Lewis, interviewed by Allan and Hurley, May 4, 1967.

<sup>147</sup> Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 78.

A more imaginative component of Lewis's mythos is his claim of being the first person to make a "guitar" out of a cigar box. In February of 1967, Lewis told Godwin and Hurley: "When I first started, I had a cigar box. Just like that one. I take and cut a little hole in the top of the cigar box and take a little piece of board, just about like that, and nail it on there and take four nails and put it in the end of it just like a guitar and take screen wire and tune it. Of course, I weren't doing no playing 'cause I just rapping on it. Called it make myself my own guitar."<sup>148</sup> When asked how he learned to do this, Lewis said: "Well I brought that up . . . I started that . . . I really did. That's for real."<sup>149</sup> Two years later, Lewis told the same story to Evans: "I made my own guitar once. I taken two cigar boxes and cut a hole round in one and taken the cigar box and taken a piece off of that and make my guitar neck and tack it on there with a little tack. Then I take screen wire and I bent little nails in there just to tune it."<sup>150</sup> Although Lewis told Godwin and Hurley he was living in Greenwood, when he made his "guitar," he told Evans he was living in Memphis.

During the same interview with Godwin and Hurley, Lewis continued the trend of myth making by claiming to be the first person to play guitar with the use of a metal slide (as opposed to a knife blade or bottleneck). "I invent this," Lewis said, holding his slide up for Godwin and Hurley to see. "I used to play with a bottleneck. I used to break a bottle . . . and took the neck and play with that. But I discovered something that was better than that. It's my own make-up. It's like a . . . [conduit] pipe. I just took a hacksaw and saw this off to that length . . . We used to lay our guitars down and take a pocketknife [and play] like that . . . But now I got a little better than

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<sup>148</sup> Furry Lewis, interview by Godwin and Hurley, February 7, 1967.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Furry Lewis, interviewed by Evans, 1979. Lewis gives an almost identical description to Allan and Hurley. See Furry Lewis, interviewed by Allan and Hurley, May 4, 1967.

that.”<sup>151</sup> Lewis adds that he had been playing with a metal slide for “forty something years.”

When Lewis first played for Charters, he used a pocketknife as a slide.<sup>152</sup>

Photographs taken during his second career show that Lewis did frequently use a metal slide, but Nix remembers one instance in particular when Lewis made a slide from the neck of a glass beer bottle. When Wayne Perkins, a guitarist on the Alabama State Troupers Road Show, lost his bottleneck slide before the show at the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium, Nix asked Lewis if Perkins could use his. According to Nix, Lewis did not have one but offered to make one. Nix remembers that Lewis filled a cap from a jar with lighter fluid and coiled a shoestring in the cap. Once the shoestring was inundated, Lewis wrapped the shoestring around the base of the neck of a beer bottle and set the string alight. When the flames subsided, Lewis grabbed the bottle by the neck and tapped it gently against a table. Nix says that the neck cleanly broke away from the rest of the bottle.<sup>153</sup> Lewis handed the new slide to Perkins and said, “There you go.” Nix adds: “There are a lot of stories that he [Lewis] invented bottleneck guitar. I don’t know if it’s true. Of course, if you’d ask him, he’d agree with you: ‘Yeah I did.’”

Lewis would even have us believe he mentored a young Elvis Presley. Lewis told Evans: “Now there’s that Elvis Presley. I used to tune his guitar for him. He was living right over here in Hurt Village, right there by Poplar and High. I used to tune Elvis Presley’s guitar.”<sup>154</sup> Lewis went on to tell Evans that Presley visited him often but the visits became less regular as Presley’s fame grew. While this scenario is unlikely, Presley did live in Lauderdale Courts, a government-

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<sup>151</sup> Furry Lewis, interview by Godwin and Hurley, February 7, 1967.

<sup>152</sup> Charters, *Walking a Blues Road*, 59.

<sup>153</sup> I tried to make a bottleneck slide by following the steps remembered by Nix. The shoestring burned aggressively and the bottle heated up substantially. The neck, however, did not loosen. This experiment is not conclusive, as the materials used for the shoestrings and the thickness of beer bottles have changed since 1972. Nix may have misremembered or forgotten a critical step, as well.

<sup>154</sup> Furry Lewis, interviewed by Evans, 1979.

subsidized housing complex located in the Hurt Village neighborhood of uptown Memphis, and Hurt Village is in easy walking distance from Lewis's home on North Dunlap Street. It does not appear that Scotty Moore was aware of any relationship between Presley and Lewis when Moore served as the sound engineer for Bluesville BvLP 1036.<sup>155</sup>

Lewis's alcohol consumption is another notorious part of his mythos. Of his own drinking, Lewis once told the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*: "I quit drinking . . . when swallowing came in style."<sup>156</sup> The *Memphis Commercial Appeal* pointed out that Lewis was sipping Ten High bourbon whiskey when he said this.<sup>157</sup> In 1967 Lewis told Allan and Hurley that he "stayed well" by "drinking too much whiskey."<sup>158</sup> Lewis commented on his drinking in the lyrics of his songs. In "Shake 'Em On Down," he sang: "I don't drink no wine, whiskey, neither gin / If you see me sober, make me drunk again."<sup>159</sup> Lewis occasionally borrowed the line "If the river was whiskey and I was a duck / I'd dive to the bottom and never come back up," as well.

According to several of his close friends, Lewis could not, or perhaps would not perform without a pint of Ten High and a can (or more) of Falstaff beer.<sup>160</sup> Crosthwait told me that

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<sup>155</sup> Moore apparently stopped the session several times to ask Lewis to explain his playing. See Charters, *Sweet As the Showers of Rain*, 57. Moore does not mention Lewis in his memoir. See Scotty Moore with James L. Dickerson, *That's Alright, Elvis: The Untold Story of Elvis's First Guitarist and Manager* (New York: Sartoris Literary Group, 1997). For more information on Lewis's tunings, see Chapter 5.

<sup>156</sup> Walter Dawson, "Legacy of bluesman Furry Lewis lives," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, September 15, 1981.

<sup>157</sup> Lewis tells Allan and Hurley in 1967: "I don't fool with nothing myself but beer. I drink a little beer. I'm crazy about beer. I never care so much for whiskey, now." See Furry Lewis, interviewed by Allan and Hurley, May 4, 1967.

<sup>158</sup> Furry Lewis, interviewed by Allan and Hurley, May 4, 1967.

<sup>159</sup> This line appears in "Shake 'Em On Down" on *Shake 'Em On Down* (Bluesville BvLP 1036).

<sup>160</sup> Zeke Johnson recalls having frequently purchased Lewis Lem Motlow Tennessee whiskey and Stag beer. Misty Lavender, an acquaintance of Lewis's during the last decade of his life, recalls that he often drank Colt 45 malt liquor.

someone was always in charge of getting Lewis whiskey before a gig. He said: “The thing about procuring whiskey for Furry, it was almost like part of a tradition. It almost makes you think that that fake leg of his was hollow. It was a cork leg, and it did absorb!” Recalling Lewis’s recording session for the Beale Street Saturday Night benefit album (Orpheum O-101), Crosthwait told me Lewis would not record without bourbon. As the session happened on a Sunday evening, all liquor stores were closed. Eventually, Crosthwait convinced a local bar owner to sell him a fifth, but the owner insisted that he had to sell it at the total price per shot. Crosthwait says: “So the price for a fifth of bourbon was around thirty bucks. I bought it and we got it to Furry that day and it was a great recording. I felt like it was a job that I accomplished.”<sup>161</sup>

Whether Lewis’s drinking was encouraged, overlooked, or simply tolerated, none who knew him disagree that he drank heavily. Nix recalls that Lewis requested he sneak a bottle of whiskey into the hospital following the apartment fire that ultimately led to his death. Chappell remembers that Lewis, during the trip to California for the “Leon Russell and Friends” television special, was uncharacteristically irritable when sober, even early in the morning.

For Lewis, alcohol was a way to escape his troubles. But drinking was also an important social activity among friends—musicians, and especially blues musicians, consume alcohol as a regular part of bonding. Complicating matters, many of the young people that visited Lewis at his apartment were often aware that Lewis enjoyed alcohol and would bring whiskey with them as a gift.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Accounting for inflation, \$30 in 1979, when Beale Street Saturday Night was recorded, is equivalent to roughly \$100 in 2016.

<sup>162</sup> Crosthwait and Johnson have ridiculed this behavior as an act akin to “pouring whiskey down an old man’s throat to get him to play guitar.” Dickinson called these people “blues Nazis.” For those I have interviewed, Lewis getting alcohol from friends was, for whatever reason, considered different than being paid with alcohol to play for strangers.



In contrast to the darkness of Lewis's alcohol dependency are the many stories of his gregarious and ever-pleasant demeanor. According to many who knew him, not even his dependence on a heavy, uncomfortable prosthesis could dampen his mood. Lewis joked about his artificial leg, especially when getting on and off a stage. According to his friends, when Lewis was encouraged to use his "good leg," he would insist his left leg was his "good leg" because it was much more expensive than his real leg.

Butler tells a similar story. He was visiting Lewis at his home when Lewis began playing "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean." As the song progressed, Lewis became increasingly distraught. When the song ended, Lewis grabbed a knife and began telling Butler that he was depressed. Lewis then said: "Sometimes I feel like giving up!" After lifting the knife high in the air, he stabbed it deep into his artificial leg. Butler, unaware that Lewis wore a prosthesis, began to panic. According to Butler, Lewis saw the panic on his face and started "laughing his ass off."

Lewis attempted to make the best of the situation but it seems that he occasionally resented his handicap. Lewis's first prosthetic was made of heavy metal and Chappell remembers Lewis instructing him to pick up the artificial leg in order to "feel my [Lewis's] burden."

Adding to myths concerning his character, Lewis is remembered as unshakably loyal.<sup>163</sup> In recalling his appearance on *The Tonight Show*, Nix, Crosthwait, Butler, Mary Lindsay Dickinson, and others remember Lewis's frustration with Carson and the show's producers for not allowing Baker to appear on stage with him. All would like to believe that Lewis would have gladly walked away from the show had the producers not been willing to reach a compromise.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> I use "myth" in this instance in reference to the story's function. I do not doubt that Lewis was aggressively loyal.

<sup>164</sup> When this story is told by Lewis's friends, it almost always ends the same way: At some point during the performance, Lewis casually remarks "Poor old Lee Bailey" in reference to his friend being sequestered off stage. As can be seen from the transcript found in Appendix B, this comment was never made. Lewis always referred to Baker as "Bailey." Friends of both Lewis and Baker have suggested that Lewis did this purposefully,

Although Lewis did not threaten to walk away from any other gigs as significant as an appearance on *The Tonight Show*, this was his typical reaction when asked to go on stage alone. While it is possible that Lewis felt insecure about his ability to perform by himself, it is significant that such stories are told to specifically highlight Lewis's loyalty to his friends.

### **Conclusion**

We know a fair amount about Lewis's biography. He was born in March of 1899 in the Mississippi Delta. His mother brought him to Memphis in 1902, and the city became his life-long home. Lewis seems to have enjoyed traveling across the United States as he spent much of his life doing so, but he never lived outside a small area in downtown Memphis—he lived for a time in an apartment at the corner of Fourth Street and Beale Street, but the rest of his known residences are within a few blocks of one another.

Lewis always had at least one job, but he never truly escaped poverty. As a young man, he hauled whiskey for prominent Memphis business owner Jim Kinnane, he worked in the kitchen of two Mississippi riverboats (the Idlewild and the Verne Swain), he was a dray driver for the Economy Coal Company, and he was a wood salesman. In the early 1930s he became a street sweeper for the City of Memphis, a job from which he eventually retired.

He never had children, but Lewis was involved in at least two serious romantic relationships. Though we cannot know for certain, financial issues and Lewis's alcoholism almost certainly impacted the relationships.

He developed a love for music around 1910 when jug bands and folk blues filled Memphis's African American neighborhoods. Not long after teaching himself to play the guitar by watching others, he set out to see the country. He came back to Memphis in 1916 when a train

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either as a friendly gibe or as a way to subtly remind Baker that he was not the star of the show. From almost all accounts, Baker not only understood his role as sideman, but gladly performed it to the best of his ability.

accident in Illinois resulted in the emergency amputation of his left leg at the knee. After a year or two at home, wanderlust got the better of him and Lewis joined Dr. Willie Lewis's Medicine Show, where he traveled the South playing music and telling jokes in an effort to sell Jack Rabbit Salve. While on the show, Lewis performed alongside Jim Jackson, Will Shade, and possibly Gus Cannon, three of Memphis's most significant early folk blues musicians.

Lewis was "discovered" by Jack Kapp in 1927, which resulted in his recording in Chicago's Brunswick Building for Vocalion. By the time Lewis's recording career ended in September of 1929, he had recorded on four separate occasions. Two of these sessions took place in Chicago (both for Vocalion), and two occurred in makeshift studios in Memphis (one for Victor and one for Vocalion).

After three decades of obscurity Lewis was "re-discovered" by Sam Charters in 1959. The interview session between the two led to Lewis's appearance in Charters's watershed work *The Country Blues* and a self-titled album published by Folkways (Folkways FA 3823). From here, Lewis's life was anything but ordinary.

In 1963 Lewis traveled to New York City with Gus Cannon and Willie Borum, where the three performed as a jug band during the Friends of Old Time Music concert at New York University. After re-establishing his reputation by playing local coffee shops, an article about his life appeared in *Playboy* magazine in 1970. Shortly after the article's release, he traveled to Los Angeles to take part in the televised rock concert "Leon Russell and Friends." In August of 1971 he returned to New York to play a show at the legendary Café Au Go Go in Greenwich Village; the show was recorded and a record was produced (Ampex A10140). In 1972 he played shows in New Orleans and Los Angeles as the featured member of Don Nix's traveling rock show, The Alabama State Troupers. In 1974 he made guest appearances on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny

Carson and in the feature film *W. W. and the Dixie Dance Kings* starring Burt Reynolds. Lewis was once again brought to the attention of rock fans when he opened for The Rolling Stones in 1975 and in 1978. From 1973 to 1978 he traveled the country playing shows on college campuses with Booker White, John Estes, Memphis Ma Rainey, Hammie Nixon, Memphis Piano Red, Joe Willie Wilkins, and Houston Stackhouse as The Memphis Blues Caravan, a road show designed to promote the living members of Memphis's first generation of blues musicians.

By the time of Lewis's death in September of 1981 he was an integral part of Memphis's blues and rock scenes. He had outlived many of his contemporaries and he struggled to make a living on the other side of the Blues Revival, but his (mostly younger white) friends refused to let him fall back into obscurity. Though he was gone, his young musician friends refused to let his memory die.

This is only half of Lewis's story. The other is a rich mythos created from fantastical stories and unverifiable circumstances. Its events are even more interesting than the ones Lewis actually experienced. Though history disagrees with the particulars, Lewis's mythos is equally responsible for shaping his memory.

From the legends he and others have told, Lewis is seen as timeless. Having been born in 1893, he is old enough to have performed on Beale Street alongside W. C. Handy. A birth year of 1909, on the other hand, makes him much closer in age to Elvis Presley (b. 1935). By associating himself with the two men who are inarguably the most significant people in Memphis's music history—and who, interestingly, could not have been any more different in personality and musical style than Lewis—Lewis becomes part of this illustrious pantheon.

Legends and stories also provide Lewis with a unique identity. Although his given name was "Walter," he never used it. Instead, he proudly referred to himself as "Furry," but he does

not seem to want us to know why. We can assume that “Furry” is either a nickname or a corrupted pronunciation of a given name, but these are just assumptions, at least for now. The mystery of “Furry” was, and continues to be, attractive for scholars and fans. Lewis used “Furry” as a mask behind which he could hide his pain. “Furry” was larger than life. He was gregarious, happy, and always performing. By contrast, his unmasked side struggled with severe alcoholism, chronic physical pain, a lack of finances, and relationship problems.

And, Lewis’s mythos suggests he is in possession of super-human abilities. According to Charters, Lewis was capable of improving his musicianship without practice. As exemplified by stories of his having created the cigar-box guitar and the use of a metal slide, Lewis would have us believe his ability to innovate was unrivaled. Later in life, Lewis was even able to convince audiences that his out-of-control theatrics, like fretting with his elbow and strumming the strings with his slide, were not antics but virtuosic displays of a master technician.

Viewing Lewis solely from only one perspective (whole reality or whole myth) is detrimental. As in “The Two Friends,” a widely known Yoruba myth about Esu-Elegbara, understanding disintegrates when one insists that a single meaning, viewed from a single perspective, is the (only) correct approach. In the story of “The Two Friends,” Esu-Elegbara wears a hat, one side white and one side black, and rides horseback between two friends working on separate sides of a field. One friend insists that Esu-Elegbara’s hat is black while the other passionately argues it is white. The disagreement directly contributes to the end of their friendship.<sup>165</sup>

As Gates states in his discussion of “The Two Friends:” “Neither. . . is correct . . . but neither is, strictly speaking, wrong either.”<sup>166</sup> Likewise, Lewis, or at least the idea of Lewis, is

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<sup>165</sup> For Gates’s retelling and critique of the story, see Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 39-41.

neither fully mythological nor fully historical, but both, simultaneously. One must also consider that for Lewis, his history was *his* and he, I contend, rightfully exercised agency in adjusting his story as he saw fit. Of “Big” Bill Broonzy, Studs Terkel once said: “Bill spoke the truth, *his* truth. Always.”<sup>167</sup> I believe the same is true for Lewis.

The myths and the realities of Lewis have everything to do with each other, but also have absolutely nothing to do with each other. To believe only the unverifiable is to see Lewis as a mythological creature living outside the boundaries of time, place, and physical limitation. But outright dismissal of the unsubstantiated removes a vital piece of Lewis’s character and historiography. As is true with both Casey Jones and Stack O’Lee, whom Lewis sang about, Lewis was a real person but his story has been manipulated to such a degree that reality and fantasy exist as part of the same whole. Without one, the other falls short.

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<sup>166</sup> Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 40.

<sup>167</sup> Broonzy and Bruynoghe, *Big Bill Blues*, 13.

## CHAPTER 3

### Furry Lewis's Repertoire

This chapter is most effective when read in tandem with the discographies of Lewis's work (Appendices A and B) and the timeline of Lewis's life events (Appendix C). All are found at the end this dissertation.

#### Preface

Like any active performer with a long career, Furry Lewis had his own repertoire, large and varied as a whole, and more or less fluid at any given time, yet always characterized by a few prominent or favorite songs. Over the years, his repertoire shifted subtly but noticeably as his own tastes and those of his audience changed and as his abilities as a guitar technician rose and fell with age. For analytic purposes, it is useful to divide this repertoire into genres—not always an easy task, as we shall see—and overlay those onto phases of Lewis's career. By exploring his repertoire from both angles (musical and chronological), the relationships between its contents and contexts are brought into focus.

Before proceeding to the study at hand, it is necessary to identify potential pitfalls. First, and most significant, is the definition of "repertoire." We must keep in mind that repertoire is not a cumulative assemblage of material but a fluid and adaptive collection. As stated by David Evans: repertoire "is rarely a collection of distinct songs that a person has stored in his head and can recall upon request at any time. Instead, his real repertoire is the body of songs that he performs at any one occasion or period of time. The nature of this repertoire and how it is

performed are determined by the type of audience that is present, the occasion, and the preferences and orientations of the singer himself.”<sup>1</sup>

Only slightly less important is the problem of attribution. Like all folk blues musicians, Lewis borrowed freely (and often unconsciously) from others. So, how do we determine if a song should be credited to him or to someone else? More importantly, when does this distinction matter? The answers to these questions lie in understanding the processes at work.

Following traditional practices, Lewis spontaneously created a song by weaving together individual parts (melodic and lyric) that were borrowed, improvised, or that existed independently within the broader tradition. According to David Evans: Blues musicians

Create blues spontaneously by drawing from a repertoire of traditional lyric formulas and musical elements that they used in different combinations on different occasions, or create substantially different versions for the “same” blues song on different occasions or even one after another at the same session . . . Many blues singers construct their own formulaic systems, repertoires of formulas so to speak, and these consist almost entirely of whole lines and especially whole stanzas (rhymed couplets often in AAB form). These line and stanza formulas are also the units that blues singers learn and borrow from one another.<sup>2</sup>

The “art” of creation can therefore be said to exist in the combination of elements, not solely in the invention of material. So, a musician within the folk blues tradition is likely to view a song as his or her “own” if the combination of elements is original, regardless of whether or not the individual elements are unique to him or her. In this way, a song created in the folk blues style

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<sup>1</sup> David Evans, *Big Road Blues: Tradition and Creativity in the Folk Blues* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 106. Evans is speaking specifically of African American folk musicians who are often classified as “bluesmen”—Lewis’s designation as a “bluesman” is addressed later in this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> David Evans, “Formulaic Composition in the Blues: A View from the Field,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 120, no. 478 (Fall 2007), 490. For more information on blues formulas and Lewis’s use of this tradition, see Chapter 4.



functions as an abstraction rather than a well-defined object.<sup>3</sup> For these reasons, I credit all songs to Lewis except for those performed more or less word for word and note for note as an earlier recorded version by another musician. Similarly, I attribute individual elements (lyrical and melodic) to their earliest known source. Of course, simply being the first person to perform a phrase or melody on record does not necessarily mean one is the originator of the phrase or melody.

Lastly, this repertoire study is doomed to remain incomplete. We can only know for certain that a piece was included in Lewis's repertoire if he recorded it, as he may have claimed to "know" a piece that he did not perform. But, there are almost certainly pieces he routinely played but never recorded. Thankfully, speculation and deduction grounded in historical precedent make it possible to present arguments for the inclusion of some unverifiable pieces.

### **Genres**

To discuss Lewis's repertoire in a meaningful way there must be a consensus on terms and their definitions. While attempts to precisely define a genre prove to be (mostly) exercises in futility, I do my best to construct a definition for each applicable genre in hopes of providing a common vantage point from which Lewis's repertoire can be viewed. Again, I do so while realizing that none of my definitions will satisfy everyone in all cases.

To begin, a "blues" or "folk blues"—I use the two somewhat interchangeably—is a song that is part of a living tradition of transmission, learning, composition, and recomposition.<sup>4</sup> It is

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<sup>3</sup> In blues, as in other American traditional musics, songs are divided into "song families," wherein members of a "family" share distinguishing features (lyrical and/or musical) but show (mostly) superficial differences.

<sup>4</sup> All of Lewis's blues qualify as "folk blues." The term "folk blues" is equivalent in most respects to what Samuel Charters calls "country blues" and Jeff Todd Titon calls "early downhome blues." Other popular terms for this genre are "traditional blues" and the more problematic "Delta blues." For more information regarding the terms, see Samuel B. Charters, *The Country Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1959); Evans, *Big Road Blues*; and Jeff

sung with instrumental accompaniment, typically performed by a guitar, piano, or harmonica, or a combination of these and/or other instruments. The accompanying instrument takes on the role of a second “voice,” one that works in conversation with the vocal line. A blues is also identified by its heavy use of syncopation. Melodically, a blues makes use of “blue” or “bent” notes (especially the third, seventh, and occasionally the fifth scale degrees) and a “blues” scale containing these notes. Figures based on the scale are used to create the backbone of a melody. These melodies tend to begin at a high pitch level and fall gradually. Harmonically, a blues is based around the tonic (I), subdominant (IV), and dominant (V) chords, though some blues, especially the older and more rural blues, contain only one or two chords; in either instance, these “chords” are often incomplete or are merely “suggested” by a single note. When the chord is fully formed, the addition of the seventh scale degree is common. The text of a blues, which is improvised and/or constructed piecemeal from existing lyrics (formulas), expresses ambiguity and uncertainty through a first-person perspective. Generally, these lyrics present a secular outlook that confronts life’s problems. Lyrics for blues are also typically found in some variation of iambic pentameter. Emotionally, blues tend to express a buildup and subsequent release of tension in both music and lyrics. Formally, a blues exhibits a bipartite, asymmetrical structure (typically but not always AAB) that features an extended rhyming couplet and stanzas mostly commonly twelve measures long.

A ballad, at its most basic, is a narrative folksong that recounts famous events or persons.<sup>5</sup> In ballads from the African American tradition—with which this chapter is concerned

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Todd Titon, *Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977). For specifics concerning the folk processes as they relate to folk blues, see Evans, *Big Road Blues*.

<sup>5</sup> African American ballads are closely related to Anglo-American ballads, although the differences between the two traditions are significant, especially concerning narrative structure.

exclusively—the focus is often placed on a “bad man” (or occasionally a “bad woman”) who acts outside the law and/or accepted society. Similar to the blues, African American ballads are frequently sung to instrumental accompaniment, feature ambiguity, and build tension; ballads often achieve ambiguity and tension through a fractured chronology.<sup>6</sup> Formally, ballads often use an AB + refrain structure wherein the A and B phrases feature a rhyming couplet.

Church songs must be appropriate for performance in a church or as part of a church function. As such, they must be sacred. Several sub-genres of church songs exist, including gospels, spirituals, hymns, “sung” sermons, and shouts. While each sub-genre has its own set of musical characteristics, it is the thematic content, not the musical parameters, that is most important (at least for our current purposes). For some African American folk and blues musicians, such as Robert Wilkins, a secular blues can be made into a religious song merely by changing the lyrics to fit a religious theme.

Traditional folk music is separated from popular music by both musical and contextual parameters. To qualify as “traditional” the majority of the song’s parts (lyrical and melodic units) must exist in the oral tradition. These songs are found in a variety of forms and are rarely performed exactly the same way twice. Typically, these are songs that have an archaic style and/or structure. Traditional songs also tend to be particular to a specific culture group. Most frequently, traditional songs are performed informally for a small group of friends or family.

Popular songs, on the other hand, are songs designed for immediate and widespread consumption. Unlike traditional music (both blues and non-blues), popular songs are meant to be short-lived, with new “hits” replacing the old ones on a regular basis. Musically, popular songs can express a wide range of characteristics but are almost always feature formal repetition

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<sup>6</sup> Anglo-American ballads typically present a narrative in a journalistic manner and follow a natural chronological progression. African American ballads break the narrative into chronologically disjointed “snapshots” of action.

(typically through the use of verse-chorus form) and they tend to make use of simple melodic and harmonic structures. Lyrics for popular songs are generally topical or address universal themes, most commonly love. It is possible for a popular song to become so widespread and well remembered that it becomes “traditional.”<sup>7</sup>

A ragtime piece is a multi-part dance tune. Ragtime pieces are also notable for their heavy use of syncopation, harmonic complexity, and ornaments and embellishments associated with or adopted from the piano. Rags are a form of popular music although they are frequently inspired by folk music. They take their multi-part structure from classical music. Rags usually exist in printed form, as well. While Lewis did not perform “authentic” ragtime, he did perform ragtime pieces realized in his idiosyncratic style.

For the purposes of this chapter, “parlor” or “chamber” music refer to formally composed and notated tunes originally intended for performances in the home by amateur musicians. This music is founded in the classical music of Europe and it sometimes incorporates quotations from large-scale classical works, specifically eighteenth century symphonies and operas. Also like symphonies and operas of the eighteenth century, parlor music frequently exhibits a move away from and eventual return to the tonic tonality—typically, tonic to dominant to tonic.<sup>8</sup> Parlor music can be identified by a melody that moves independently of the harmony, as well.<sup>9</sup> Early parlor music was in possession of what Peter Van der Merwe calls a “flowing andante” in common time, while triplet rhythms and “throbbing triplets” produced by quick tempos were

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<sup>7</sup> Pete Seeger’s “If I Had A Hammer” (SFW 40096) is an example of a song that started as a “popular” song and transitioned into a “traditional” song.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Van der Merwe, *Origins of the Popular Style: The Antecedents of Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1989/1992), 224.

<sup>9</sup> Van der Merwe states: “The old libel about popular composers using the outworn cast-offs of their musical betters comes closest to the truth with harmony . . . Late nineteenth-century parlour harmony therefore tends to run very much to hard-worked clichés . . . In a way, parlour harmony is a purer and more innocent version of Romantic harmony.” See Van der Merwe, *Origins of the Popular Style*, 243.

also popular.<sup>10</sup> During the early twentieth century, parlor music came to be defined by its unique combination of “squareness of layout” and repetitiveness of detail, especially non-sequential rhythmic patterns.<sup>11</sup> Lewis does not perform parlor music in the strictest sense, but he does perform some folk music that originates from parlor music.

Stories and jokes are obvious enough that their characteristics do not require full address, while toasts, specifically those performed by African Americans, are less common. Typically, toasts are long poetic recitations intended to present a story or situation, not as salutes to a specific person or thing.<sup>12</sup> According to Evans, “such recitations have long been a standard part of men’s gatherings, which usually involve drinking, among both whites and blacks.”<sup>13</sup> Toasts can be told with or without the ceremonial clinking of glasses.

The Dirty Dozens is a recitation that differs from toasts in both purpose and function.<sup>14</sup> Essentially, the Dozens, as it is commonly abbreviated, is an insult game usually played by two friends: one friend directs an obscene and derogatory phrase at the other before the second friend reciprocates with his own insulting phrase.<sup>15</sup> Oftentimes the phrases are improvised, but some may already exist as part of the Dirty Dozens tradition. While the recitations are offensive and potentially hurtful (at least if they are done properly), they are meant in jest. Most commonly,

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<sup>10</sup> Van der Merwe, *Origins of the Popular Style*, 267.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>12</sup> David Evans, “The Toast in Context,” *Journal of American Folklore* 90, no. 356 (April-June 1977), 130.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Sung examples of the Dirty Dozens do exist. The most notable examples are Speckled Red’s “The Dirty Dozen No. 1” (Brunswick 80020) and “The Dirty Dozen No. 2” (Brunswick B-1003).

<sup>15</sup> For an extensive examination of the Dirty Dozens, see Elijah Wald, *The Dozens: A History of Rap’s Mama* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

insults are directed toward the family members of the other player, especially toward his mother and sister.<sup>16</sup>

For a piece to qualify as an example of any particular genre it must contain a majority of the characteristics associated with that genre. For instance, “Furry’s Blues” is a blues because it features rhyming couplets in AAB, dialogue between the guitar and voice, blue notes, ambiguous lyrics that exist as part of the blues tradition, simple harmonies, etc. By establishing sets of characteristics, as I have done here, personal biases and interpretations can be limited. But characteristic sets do not make an exact science of dividing a repertoire into genres. While I stand by my judgments, I also recognize that reasonable arguments in favor of different readings are possible.

Further complicating matters, certain songs straddle genre boundaries. For instance, one song may begin as a ballad before transitioning to a blues—this is seen most typically with “Casey Jones.” As Lewis aged, he developed the habit of moving ballads closer to blues in both style and function. For example, he would preserve key moments of the narrative while simultaneously obscuring the plot and the role of the hero (or “bad man”)—again, “Casey Jones” is a prime example.<sup>17</sup> In these instances, I tend to speak of a song as a hybridization.

Issues of genre identification are somewhat tangential to the problem at hand. While precision is important, it is not the end goal. Although the following analyses make use of percentages and statistics, it is more important to know why blues constitute the bulk of Lewis’s repertoire from 1967 to 1969 than it is to know the exact percentage of Lewis’s repertory that is made up of blues at this time.

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<sup>16</sup> The playing of the Dirty Dozens is traditionally a male-only activity.

<sup>17</sup> For more on Lewis’s transitioning of a ballad in to a blues, see Chapter 4.

Lewis is best known for his blues (and particularly for “Furry’s Blues” and “Judge Boushay Blues”), although he also performed African American ballads (most notably, “Casey Jones” and “John Henry”), church songs (“Glory Hallelujah” and “God Be With Us Until We Meet Again”), ragtime pieces (“Furry’s Rag” and “Take Your Time Rag”), songs and tunes inspired by nineteenth century parlor music (“Bugle Waltz” and “Spanish Flang Dang”), popular songs (“Let Me Call You Sweetheart”), and traditional non-blues songs (“Turkey In The Straw”). Additionally, he performed non-musical material such as music-based games such as the Dirty Dozens, jokes, stories, and toasts.

### **Periods**

Lewis’s life contained two overarching periods: his first professional career, which ended around 1929, and his second professional career, which began in 1959. The repertoire of Lewis’s second career is further divided into three sub-periods: early second career; mid-second career; and late second career. These periods are determined by output and life events, though I recognize that reasonable minds can divide Lewis’s career differently.

During his first career (ca. 1910-1929), Lewis was a young musician surrounded by both innovation and tradition. He traveled throughout the South (and occasionally into the North) in search of adventure and opportunity, and he played alongside musicians of varying calibers and backgrounds. While he was exposed to a great deal of material, he could not have learned it all. Instead, he added to his repertoire by selecting pieces that served a purpose, such as: to entertain himself and his friends; to entertain a crowd at a medicine show; to provide music for dancing and other social events; or to satisfy the desires of record companies.

During his early second career (1959-1964), Lewis’s repertoire was that of a mature musician bound by the expectations of white blues researchers and record producers. In his mid-

second career (1965-1969), he achieved a heightened degree of artistic agency thanks in part to his growing reputation as a living link to the older blues tradition. With a newfound freedom to record the stories and songs he chose—as opposed to fulfilling requests made of him—he demonstrated an ability to read and respond to expectations of audiences, researchers, and record producers. During his late second career (1970-Lewis’s death in 1981) Lewis was seen as both a local legend and an elder statesman of a dying tradition. At this point, he gained the agency to record whatever material he wanted. While he remained cognizant of his audience’s needs, he was also aware that his life was coming to an end. As a consequence, the material he chose to perform served dual functions: to entertain; and to cement a legacy.<sup>18</sup>

## **Analysis**

### **First professional career (ca. 1910-1929)**

Of the fourteen songs that Lewis recorded for Vocalion in 1927, eleven are blues (“Mr. Furry’s Blues,” “Sweet Papa Moan,” “Rock Island Blues,” “Jelly Roll,” “Good Looking Girl Blues,” “Why Don’t You Come Home Blues,” “Falling Down Blues,” “Big Chief Blues,” “Mean Old Bedbug Blues,” and two versions of “Everybody’s Blues.”).<sup>19</sup> Of the two that are not blues, only the ballad “Billy Lyons And Stack O’Lee” was ever released—the other was a recording of the ballad “Casey Jones.” A song called “The Panic’s On” was also recorded but never released; it may have been a blues, but this cannot be determined without hearing the master recording, which most likely no longer exists.

We can assume the unreleased version of Lewis’s “Casey Jones” is similar to the one released by Victor in 1928.<sup>20</sup> Although Lewis only ever made this one recording of “The Panic’s

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<sup>18</sup> It is irrelevant whether or not Lewis intended to use his repertoire as a means of impacting his legacy.

<sup>19</sup> “Why Don’t You Come Home Blues” is later variously titled “Pearlee,” “Paer Lee,” or “Sara Lee.”



On,” we can make a few inferences regarding its lyrical content. As the song appears to have been in his repertoire for only a short time, it may have been a popular song about the quickly worsening economic situation facing Americans at the end of the 1920s. The expression “the panic’s on” has been in use since 1893 in reference to times of crisis, and Lewis’s song was recorded two years prior to the infamous “Black Tuesday” stock market crash.<sup>21</sup> Three years after Lewis recorded his version, a popular song of the same name appeared in the Columbia Records race catalogue. This “The Panic’s On” was recorded by black musician Hezekiah Jenkins and was intended as biting social commentary on the Great Depression.<sup>22</sup> If these two songs are the same, it is almost a certainty that Lewis was not its author, as the lyrics, theme, chord progression, and melody are unlike anything attributable to Lewis.

In August of 1928 Lewis recorded eight songs on ten masters for the Victor Company. Like his earlier recordings for Vocalion, this session consisted mostly of blues (“Furry’s Blues,” two versions of “I Will Turn Your Money Green,” “Mistreatin’ Mama,” Dry Land Blues,” “Cannon-Ball Blues,” and two versions of “Judge Harsh Blues”).<sup>23</sup> The remaining two sides contain parts one and two of the ballad “Casey Jones,” spelled here “Kassie Jones.”<sup>24</sup>

Lewis recorded four sides in the final session of his first career. These are “Black Gypsy Blues,” “Creper’s Blues,” and parts one and two of the African American ballad “John Henry (The Steel Driving Man).” While Lewis’s “John Henry,” like his “Casey Jones,” moves away

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<sup>20</sup> “Casey Jones” was a staple of Lewis’s repertoire during his second career.

<sup>21</sup> Guido van Rijn, *Roosevelt’s Blues: African American Blues and Gospel Songs for F.D.R.* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 27.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Oliver notes the possible connection between the two songs in *Songsters and Saints*. See Paul Oliver, *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records* (Cambridge, U. K.: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 270.

<sup>23</sup> The lyrics of “Judge Harsh Blues” identify a local judge’s role in perpetuating institutionalized inequality

<sup>24</sup> The variation in spelling may have been for copyright purposes or to distinguish Lewis’s version of the narrative from the typical narrative.

from the more traditional narrative of the hero in question—the competition between John Henry and the steel-driving machine is not featured in Lewis’s version—it is recognizable as the well-known ballad. Yet, the differences in the narrative of Lewis’s “John Henry” and the more traditional versions of “John Henry” make Lewis’s version appear original to him.

Any further discussion of Lewis’s repertoire as it existed during his first professional music career is based in speculation. It is almost guaranteed that Lewis’s repertoire was larger than the two genres of songs he recorded, but we are left to guess at the specifics. We know that Lewis’s contemporaries (Jim Jackson, Gus Cannon, Frank Stokes, Sam Chatmon, and even more “typical” bluesmen such as Son House and Charley Patton) played rags, religious songs, and parlor songs, and told jokes, toasts, and stories, so it is reasonable to assume that Lewis did, too. Moreover, Lewis performed in all these genres during his second professional career, and it seems unlikely that older songs simply appeared in his repertory without his having some previous experience with them.

### **Second Professional Career (1959-1981)**

#### Early Second Career (1959-1964)

The next time Lewis performed in front of recording equipment (1959), he was being interviewed by Samuel Charters. During this session, he performed six blues (“You Can Leave Baby,” “Longing Blues,” “I Will Turn Your Money Green,” “Pearlee Blues,” “Judge Boushay Blues,” and “East St. Louis Blues”), half of which appear on his records from the 1920s.<sup>25</sup> Two ballads (“John Henry” and “Casey Jones”) also reappeared. In addition to the musical components, Lewis told two stories: one regarding his early recording career, and one that describes his time with the medicine show. Charters specifically requested all songs and stories.

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<sup>25</sup> “Judge Boushay Blues” is an updated version of “Judge Harsh Blues.”

From 1961 to 1964 Lewis took part in five more recording sessions. Four of these sessions occurred “in the field” (most likely at Lewis’s home) with the other taking place in a studio. All sessions produced commercial records.<sup>26</sup> Throughout each of the five sessions, Lewis was asked to perform many of the same songs that he recorded in 1927, 1928, and 1929. Of the forty pieces he recorded, about one third are new versions of songs on recordings from his first career.<sup>27</sup>

It was good business practice for a record company to have Lewis re-record the repertoire from his youth. This was, after all, the music that Lewis’s audience expected to hear and was willing to purchase. Similarly, it makes sense that a field researcher would ask Lewis to perform these songs as the researcher’s knowledge of Lewis’s repertoire was founded in these older recordings.

The material recorded between 1961 and 1964 showcases the breadth of Lewis’s repertory. In addition to his previously documented repertoire, Lewis recorded church songs (“Glory, Hallelujah” and two versions of “When I Lay My Burden Down”), a traditional non-blues song (“Old Blue,” also known as “Old Dog Blue”), a ragtime piece (“Furry Lewis Rag”), and an additional ballad (“Frankie and Johnny”). He also recorded seventeen previously unrecorded blues (“Baby, I Know You Don’t Love Me,” “Baby, You Don’t Want Me,” “Back On My Feet Again,” “Done Changed My Mind,” “Don’t Want No Skinny Woman,” “Fare Thee Well, Old Tennessee,” “Going to Kansas City,” “Good Morning, Baby,” “I’m Going Back to Brownsville” and two alternate takes titled “Brownsville Blues” (the second of which also uses a

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<sup>26</sup> The studio session resulted in two albums: *Shake 'Em On Down* (Bluesville BvLP 1036) and *Done Changed My Mind* (Bluesville BvLP 1037).

<sup>27</sup> Of the forty pieces that Lewis recorded between 1961 and 1964, the following appear on Lewis’s first career recordings: “When My Baby Left Me” (a version of “Falling Down Blues”); “Big Chief Blues;” “Judge Boushay Blues” (a version of “Judge Harsh Blues”); “I Will Turn Your Money Green;” “Mistreatin’ Mama;” “Perolee (Why Don’t You Come Home Blues);” three versions of “John Henry”; and three versions of “Casey Jones.”

blues built on the traditional song “Rolling and Tumbling”), “Muscle Shoals Blues,” “Roberta,” “Shake ’Em On Down,” “St. Louis Blues,” “This Time Tomorrow,” and “White Lightnin”).

W. C. Handy published “St. Louis Blues” in 1914. “Frankie and Johnny” was made popular by white vaudeville star Frank Crumit in 1927 (Victor 20715). It was also recorded by John Hurt in 1928 (Okeh 400221-B) and Charlie Patton (titled “Frankie and Albert”) in 1930 (Paramount 13110), but the song was in tradition long before this. “Kansas City Blues” was recorded by Jim Jackson in 1927 (Vocalion A 1144) and by Will Shade and the Memphis Jug Band in 1928 (Victor 21185-A). “Shake ’Em On Down” was a hit for Booker White in 1937 (Vocalion 03711, Conqueror 9072, Columbia 30139). “Brownsville Blues” was recorded by John Estes in 1938 (Decca 63653-A). “Skinny Woman” was recorded by Yank Rachell in 1973 (Blue Goose BG 2010). All of this suggests that each of these songs have Memphis-area sources. “Furry Lewis Rag,” “Shake ’Em on Down,” and “Good Morning, Baby” appear to be recent creations but they have a style, form, and function rooted in older music.

#### Mid-Second Career (1965-1969)

Lewis recorded on at least seventeen different occasions from 1967 to 1969—he did not record in 1965 and 1966.<sup>28</sup> Two of these sessions occurred in front of a live audience and three were recorded strictly for research purposes (two by Harry Godwin and Jack Hurley and one by David Evans). The other sessions were recorded either in the field or in a studio with the intent of producing commercial records.

Of the one hundred twenty tracks Lewis produced at this time, between forty-three and fifty are blues.<sup>29</sup> This stands in stark contrast to the seven to twelve performances of ballads

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<sup>28</sup> Lewis may have recorded more, but I have only been able to verify seventeen separate occasions.

<sup>29</sup> The blues Lewis performed are: “Furry’s Blues;” “St. Louis Blues;” “Every Day of the Week;” “Judge Boushé Blues”/“Good Morning Judge”/“Hello Judge”/“Grand Central Station;” “East St. Louis Blues;” “Baby

Lewis recorded during the same period—all ballads are versions of either “John Henry” or “Casey Jones.” Among the blues tracks, just over half (roughly, twenty-seven) are from specific blues families—for example, “Judge Boushé Blues” is the same blues as “Good Morning Judge,” “Hello Judge,” and “Grand Central Station.”

In addition to Lewis’s heavy use of blues, expansion and experimentation are defining features of his late 1960s repertory. With seventeen church songs, fourteen popular songs, seven traditional non-blues songs, five rags (or songs Lewis himself classifies as “rags”), four parlor songs, and three songs that straddle more than one category, plus one toast, two jokes, and five stories, this was the most diverse period of Lewis’s life.<sup>30</sup>

When performing for a live audience during this period, Lewis rarely played anything other than blues. When he was not performing for a formal crowd during this period, he played a fairly even mixture of blues, church songs, and ballads (though blues usually outnumbered church songs and ballads by one or two) but it was not uncommon for him to include one or two songs of other genres. If it was an informal setting, he told one or two jokes, stories, or toasts.

Despite the variation in repertory, there is little diversity among Lewis’s popular and church selections. When performing a popular song, Lewis almost always plays either “All Along the Water Tank” or “Let Me Call You Sweetheart.”<sup>31</sup> If he plays a church song, it is likely

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That’s All Right;” “The Woman I’m Loving;” “Baby I Know You Don’t Love Me;” “Worried Blues”/“Furry’s Worried Blues;” “Don’t You Wish Your Name Was Furry Lewis;” “Blues Around My Bed;” “Skinny Woman;” “Going Away Blues;” “Furry’s Blues”/“Furry Lewis Blues”/“Old Original Furry Lewis Blues;” “Let’s Shake Hand In Hand;” “Going To Brownsville;” “Highway 61;” “M for Memphis;” “Why Don’t You Come Home Blues;” “I’ve Got A Bird to Whistle;” “New Turn Your Money Green;” and “If You Follow Me Baby.”

<sup>30</sup> The traditional non-blues songs Lewis performed are: “Careless Love;” “Chicken Reel;” “Old Dog Blue”/“A Dog Named Blue;” and “Just A Little Fun.” The parlor songs that Lewis performed are: “The Bugle Song”/“The Bugle Waltz;” “Spanish Flang Dang;” and “U.S. Waltz.”

<sup>31</sup> “Let Me Call You Sweetheart” was published by Leo Friedman and Beth Slater Whitson in 1910 and first recorded in 1911 by the all-white vocal group The Peerless Quartet (Columbia A-1057). “All Along the Water Tank” (sometimes shortened to “Water Tank”) is a version of Jimmie Rodgers’s “Waiting For A Train”

to be “When I Lay My Burden Down,” “Glory Hallelujah,” or “See That My Grave is Kept Clean.”

#### Late Second Career (1970-1981)

Lewis did not record for commercial purposes in 1970. From 1971 onward, he recorded on thirteen separate occasions. Six of these occasions took place in front of a live audience, three occurred in a studio, two were field recordings made with commercial intent, and two were field recordings made strictly for research purposes.<sup>32</sup> Of the ten commercial albums released at this time, three are solo albums by Don Nix featuring Lewis, four are group performances (one as part of the Alabama State Troupers, two as part of the Memphis Blues Caravan, and one as part of a fundraiser for the City of Memphis’s Beale Street Renovation Project), and one is a folk blues compilation recorded and produced by Lewis’s friend Jim Dickinson.<sup>33</sup>

Lewis recorded seventy pieces from 1970 to 1981. Of these, between twenty-three and twenty-nine are blues, two to five are ballads, nine are popular songs, eight are church songs, four or five are traditional non-blues songs, six are stand-alone jokes, five are stories, one is a toast, and nine are mixtures of genres.<sup>34</sup>

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(BVE 47223–4); this was originally a traditional song but it became widely popular with the release of Rodgers’s recording.

<sup>32</sup> One of the research recordings was made by David Evans at Lewis’s home on February 2, 1979. Jeff Todd Titon made the other during Lewis’s blues guitar workshop at the 1970 Wisconsin Delta Blues Festival in Beloit, WI.

<sup>33</sup> Nix’s albums are: *In God We Trust* (Shelter SW-8902), *Hoboes, Heroes and Street Corner Clowns* (Enterprise ENS-1032), and *Living By the Day* (Ampex A10140). The Alabama State Troupers Road Show album is titled *Live From a Moment* (Elektra 62010). The Memphis Blues Caravan albums are two volumes of the same collection: *Vol. 1* (Adelphi/Genes BDC 9911), and *Vol. 2* (Memphis Archives MA 7009). Dickinson recorded and produced *The Fabulous Furry Lewis* (Southland SLP-3). The Beale Street Renovation Project album is titled *Beale Street Saturday Night* (Orpheum O-101); two songs from this recording session appear on *DXCVI Down Home Delta* (Fan Club (F) FC 044).

<sup>34</sup> Again, the number of pieces within a specific genre is inexact for the reasons listed above. Of those nine that are of mixed or undeterminable genre, six were never published—these were recorded as part of a session for *Giants of Country Blues Guitar* (Wolf (AU) 120.911—and one, “Iuka,” appears on the rare Don Nix L. P. *In God We Trust* (Shelter SW-8902) but was not included on the more accessible CD and digital download releases of the

There are fourteen unique blues families represented in Lewis's repertoire at this time: "Baby Make Me Stay;" "Brownsville Blues"/"Going Back to Brownsville"/"Right Hand Road;" "East St. Louis Blues;" "The Cat's Got the Measles (and the Dog's Got the Whooping Cough);" "Every Day in the Week (Got Me A Gal)"/"Baby, That's All Right;" "Furry's Blues"/"Furry Lewis's Blues;" "Good Morning Blues"/"Judge Boushé"/"Good Morning Judge;" "Mary Tell Blues;" "My Baby Don't Want Me (Why Don't You Tell Me So);" "Paer Lee"/"Sara Lee;" "St. Louis Blues;" "Take Me Back Baby;" "Turn Your Money Green;" and "The Woman I'm Loving Blues.".)<sup>35</sup> Only five of the fourteen were recorded during Lewis's first professional career, and these differ substantially from the versions recorded during his second career.<sup>36</sup>

Between 1970 and 1981 Lewis recorded ballads only when playing for a formal audience. As is expected, the ballads are "Casey Jones," "John Henry" and "Stag O'Lee." These ballads skew toward blues, and the two renditions of "Casey Jones" sit almost exactly halfway between blues and ballad.

In similar fashion, there is little variety among the popular songs in Lewis's repertoire between 1970 and 1981. He most frequently played one of three songs ("Take Your Time Baby;" "Waiting For A Train;" and "Let Me Call You Sweetheart") but a version of "Happy Birthday" and a version of "I'm Black" (first recorded as "Black But Sweet, Oh God!" by Billy and Mary Mack in 1925 (OKeh 8195) and by Jim Jackson in 1928 (Victor BE-47091)) also appeared on

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album. The album *Living by the Days* (Elektra EKS 74101) includes a song titled "Going Back to Iuka." This is a hard-hitting southern rock-style blues that does not include Lewis and that only makes a questionable reference to him through Nix's use of the phrase "This train I ride," which Lewis often uses in "Casey Jones."

<sup>35</sup> "The Cat's Got the Measles (and the Dog's Got the Whooping Cough)" was popularized by Papa Charlie Jackson, who recorded the song in 1925 (Paramount 12259).

<sup>36</sup> The five blues found in the repertoire of both Lewis's late second career and first career are: "Furry's Blues;" "Turn Your Money Green;" "Casey Jones;" "Judge Boushé;" and "My Baby Don't Want Me."

records from this time.<sup>37</sup> “Battle Hymn of the Republic” (recorded as part of Nix’s *In God We Trust* (Elektra 62010)) and “Will The Circle Be Unbroken” also appear in his repertoire from 1970-1981.

### Conclusion

Lewis’s earliest known repertory was designed to satisfy the expectations of audiences and record executives who were, more often than not, white. They expected African American folk musicians to play blues, so it is of little surprise that Lewis’s repertory during the 1920s consisted mostly of blues; if Lewis left an audience disappointed, he risked leaving with his wallet similarly unfulfilled. But when performing for friends and family, or when playing for his own enjoyment, he probably played rags and popular songs, told jokes, and engaged in the occasional battle of the Dirty Dozens.

Lewis’s repertory at the beginning of his second career was also built on blues, but this can be credited, at least partially, to blues researchers who wanted to hear him play the songs that garnered him attention in the 1920s. As Lewis moved into the middle phase of his second career, he gained the freedom to publicly explore a broader range of music. As a result, he added popular songs, traditional songs, rags, and religious songs (back into) to his repertoire. While he still played to expectations during formal interviews and recording sessions, he made use of more informal sessions to experiment with genres outside of blues and ballads. In addition, Lewis is seen growing as a musician. Not content to play the same songs the same way he did

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<sup>37</sup> “Happy Birthday” was recorded during the session that became *Giants of Country Blues Guitar* (Wolf CD 120.911). “I’m Black” was recorded twice, once as part of the fundraising album *Beale Street Saturday Night* (Orpheum O-101) and once during the session for the album *The Fabulous Furry Lewis* (Southland SLP-3); it is a humorous song with overtly political and social undertones. In the song, Lewis sings: “Some people don’t like their color, but I sure do like mine / I know I’m black and ugly, but I get’s along just fine.” In a resounding chorus, he adds “Lord I’m black, I’m black, I’m B-L-A-C-K black but I’m sweet, by God.” At the song’s conclusion, Lewis adds, “That’s just a little jive . . . I ain’t never heard nobody play that before I did.” While the social and political commentary may not be as overtly biting as that of “Judge Harsh Blues,” Lewis’s ability to wrap criticism in his characteristic humor is noteworthy.



five decades earlier, he sought to create and to innovate, not simply reproduce. His ballads became more like blues, his stories got longer, and his guitar solos were less restricted and more flamboyant.

By the beginning of the 1970s, Lewis rarely played the blues and ballads that he recorded in the 1920s (“Casey Jones” and “Judge Boushay” are the exceptions). Perhaps in response to his advancing age and increased awareness of his own mortality, he was more interested in playing popular and religious songs. Lewis was never known to be a particularly religious man, and he did not appear to suffer the divide between a Christian life and playing the blues, as did so many others—perhaps he felt his handicap, like blindness for many musicians, gave him dispensation to straddle the line between religion and blues. At this point, concerns for his afterlife (his soul as well as his legacy) outweigh the old need to make money.

Although Lewis played a wider range of genres at the end of his second career, there is less variety in his music. Largely due to his declining musicianship—a result of old age and deteriorating health—his songs are more or less improvisations around a standard framework. Such lines as “My first name’s Furry, my second name ain’t never been told,” “Baby, I know you don’t want me,” “I’m a natural-born eastman,” and a verse about “having a woman” for every day in the week make their way into nearly every song he sings.<sup>38</sup> Eventually, it becomes difficult to separate a version of “Furry’s Blues” from, say, a version of “Pearlee.” In addition to conflating blues, he combined ballads and blues, as seen with his turning “Casey Jones” into a blues called “Natural Born Eastman.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> For more on Lewis’s use of lyric formulas, see Chapter 4.

<sup>39</sup> “Eastman” was an African American term for pimp or gigolo. “Natural born” was African American slang in reference to someone with preternatural talents and/or abilities. See Stephen Calt, *Barrelhouse Words: A Blues Dialect Dictionary* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 83, 170.

Lewis did not believe all songs in his repertory were equal. For instance, he played “Natural Born Eastman” and “Furry’s Blues” more than any other blues. If he played a popular song, especially toward the end of his life, it was almost always “Let Me Call You Sweetheart.” Likewise, he played “Glory, Hallelujah” more than any other religious song. It can be assumed that Lewis felt some connection to these songs as they were not often requested by fans and scholars.

Likewise, Lewis had his favorite stories, jokes, and toasts. Many of his stories, especially those recorded during the early part of his second career, focused on W. C. Handy. Specifically, Lewis liked to talk about playing next to Handy on Beale Street and of Handy giving him his first real guitar. He also liked to talk about Pee Wee’s on Beale Street, saying the bar was always open because someone “put the key” to the front door “around a jack rabbit’s neck and they ain’t caught the rabbit yet.”<sup>40</sup>

Many of Lewis’s jokes involved either the consumption of alcohol or church (or both). A particular favorite of his involved a preacher and an elderly woman most often identified as “Sister Mary.” According to Lewis, the preacher asks his congregation to stand and raise a hand if they like sin. Struggling to do so, Sister Mary slowly rises from the old, wooden pew and proudly lifts a hand in the air. Shocked, the preacher says: “Sister Mary, do I understand right? Do you really like sin?!” Embarrassed at having misheard the preacher, Sister Mary quickly declares: “Hell no, preacher! I thought you said ‘gin.’” Immediately following the punch line, Lewis tilted his head backwards and laughed loudly.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> To hear Lewis tell the story of Pee Wee’s, see Furry Lewis, interview by Harry Godwin and Jack Hurley, Memphis, TN, February 7, 1967, Memphis State Oral History Project, University Libraries Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN; or *Beale Street Saturday Night* (Orpheum O-101).

<sup>41</sup> Lewis can be heard telling a version of the story on the album *Memphis Blues Caravan, Vol. 1* (Memphis Archives MA 7008). According to Zeke Johnson, Lewis told this story often. As a way to honor Lewis, Johnson now tells it in his shows, typically as an introduction to the first song of Lewis’s that he plays.

Lewis also liked to tell jokes about the woman with whom he was romantically involved. When Johnny Carson asked if Lewis was married, he replied: “Why do I need a wife when the man next door got one?” In an interview with Godwin and Hurley, Lewis said: “I love my wife . . . I wouldn’t take a thousand dollars for her, and I wouldn’t give a penny for another one like her.”<sup>42</sup> When on stage, Lewis had a habit of telling the audience, in a hushed and somber tone: “I lost my girl friend last week.” Once the crowd fell silent, he would smile and say, “Her husband came and got her.”<sup>43</sup> Again, the delivery was inevitably punctuated by Lewis’s laughter.

Jokes even appear in Lewis’s lyrics. With regard to alcohol, and perhaps as a way of reframing his own struggles with alcoholism, Lewis sang: “I don’t drink no wine, whiskey, neither gin / If you see me sober, make me drunk again” and the traditional verse “If the river was whiskey and I was a duck / I’d dive to the bottom and never come up.” In regard to love and fidelity, Lewis sang: “I ain’t never loved but three women in my life / My mother, my sister, my sweetheart, and my wife.” He would even do an entire song around the premise of “having a woman” for every day of the week: typically, “My Monday’s woman live on Beale and Main / My Tuesday’s woman bring me pocket change / My Wednesday’s woman bring me daily news / My Thursday’s woman buy me socks and shoes / My Friday’s woman cook me something to eat / My Saturday’s woman puts it on the shelf / My Sunday’s woman give me the devil if she ever catch me here / That make me have a woman for every day in the week.”

Lewis had only one toast in his repertory, but he told it often. It is as follows:

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<sup>42</sup> Furry Lewis, interviewed by Godwin and Hurley, February 7, 1967.

<sup>43</sup> This joke was told to me by a man who saw Lewis open for The Rolling Stones in Memphis and, a week later, saw him perform at a Memphis coffee shop. Lewis apparently told the joke on both occasions. I was approached by this man while managing a pop-up exhibit on Memphis music history at the 2015 Memphis Music and Heritage Festival. Upon seeing Lewis’s portrait in the exhibit, the man and his two friends approached me to share stories about Lewis. This sort of interaction with Lewis’s fans has been common throughout the dissertation process.

Our father, who art in Washington, Nixon is his name. He take me off rat trap tobacco and put me on golden grain. The sweetest flower I ever smelled was Lily of the Beach, the worst whiskey ever I drank was right here on Fourth Street. But the hopper grass make the hops and the honeybee makes the honey.<sup>44</sup> Good Lord makes all the pretty girls and Sears and Roebuck makes the money.

According to Lewis, he wrote the toast himself. He also updated the name of the president as need be.<sup>45</sup> Lewis was never recorded reciting the toast as part of drinking festivities.

As this study shows, Lewis's repertory is varied and dynamic, and it is often characterized by a few of Lewis's favorite pieces. During his nearly seven decades of music making, some of the songs he played were learned from other musicians, some were learned by listening to the radio and to records, and he created a great deal of his own. His experiences as a traveling musician, as a recording artist, as a "re-discovered" blues icon, and as an elderly man forced to come to terms with his own mortality and impacted the material he chose to perform. Reacting to each new adventure or challenge, his repertoire was changed so that he had the best possible chance of success. While he is not unique in this way, the breadth of his extant recordings is special as we are able to follow these changes as they occurred over a lifetime that spanned the dawn of twentieth century through the launch of MTV.

One looming question remains unanswered. Considering what is known of Lewis's repertory, is it fit to consider him a "bluesman"? Regardless of period and audience, he did mostly play blues. But he also played a considerable number of popular and traditional non-blues songs, and he almost always played at least one ballad and one religious song—this is especially

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<sup>44</sup> "Hopper grass" is slang for "grasshopper."

<sup>45</sup> One version of the toast can be found in Jim Dickinson's "The Search for Blind Lemon." See Jim Dickinson, *The Search for Blind Lemon* (scheduled for publication in 2017), shared with current author by Mary Lindsay Dickinson, December 12, 2013. An excerpt of "The Search for Blind Lemon" can be found at <http://www.oxfordamerican.org/magazine/item/555-the-search-for-blind-lemon>. Another version of the toast is found on the album *Furry Lewis in Memphis* (Saydisc/Matchbox(E) SDR 190, Autogram ALLP 265).

true of the mid- and late stages of his second career. Furthermore, nearly every one of his performances included stories and jokes.

Considering the variety in Lewis's repertory, Paul Oliver suggests it is more appropriate to consider him a "songster." According to Oliver:

Songsters were entertainers, providing music for every kind of social occasion in the decades before phonographs and radio. They were receptive to a wide variety of songs and music; priding themselves on their range, versatility, and capacity to pick up a tune, they played not only for the black communities, but for whites too, when the opportunities arose. Whatever else the songster had to provide in the way of entertainment, he was always expected to sing and play for dances.<sup>46</sup>

Oliver goes on to say that the songster, in order to fulfill his role, must be able to play whatever type of music the occasion requires, be it blues, ballads, social songs, comic songs, minstrel tunes, or "popular ditties."<sup>47</sup>

If distinction must be made, Lewis is a songster. He does mostly play blues and he often applies a blues aesthetic to non-blues material, but his repertory includes much more than blues. In fact, blues never accounts for even half of his repertory. Still, to call him a "songster" seems only partly right. He was an entertainer more than anything.

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<sup>46</sup> Oliver, *Songsters and Saints*, 22. According to Evans: "Almost all writers on blues have made a distinction between the 'songster' and the 'bluesman.' The former is generally described as someone who performs a broad variety of song types, such as ragtime pieces, popular songs, blues, and church songs, while the latter is someone who performs blues almost exclusively." See Evans, *Big Road Blues*, 108.

<sup>47</sup> Oliver, *Songsters and Saints*, 22.

## CHAPTER 4

### Furry Lewis's Lyrics

#### Preface

Tradition guides the way blues lyrics are composed, but each folk blues musician makes use of this tradition in his or her own way.<sup>1</sup> Lewis's approach to tradition is more nuanced and less rigid than that of his peers. In this chapter, I transcribe, categorize, and analyze Lewis's blues lyrics to understand tradition's role in his compositional processes. Before doing so, I outline the theoretical framework necessary for such a categorization and analysis. Lewis's process for composing lyrics in genres other than blues is also considered, as are lyrical nuances not addressed by the analysis found in prior sections.

A note on methodology: In transcribing Lewis's lyrics, I use spellings that reflect his likely intent so as to avoid placing undue emphasis on lexicological confusion and differences in dialect. For instance, Lewis confuses "collusion" and "collision" and pronounces "murder" as "mur-duh," though I always write the words as "collision" and "murder." Spotting speech pathology would only shift attention from the matter at hand.

Furthermore, over-correction can compromise the essence of Lewis's lyrics, so I refrain from adjusting tenses, such as exchanging "threw" for "throwed." I also preserve common vernacular contractions ("gonna," "em," and "clare" are not replaced by "going to," "them," and "declare") and elisions between "a" and the subsequent word ("a'running) as both have rhythmic implications. My intention is not to serve as Lewis's copy editor but to clear the way for meaningful analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> As is addressed in the preceding chapter, Lewis played a wide range of musical styles. But his music, regardless of genre, was almost always anchored in blues traditions and sensibilities. Furthermore, as evidenced by the analyses presented here, Lewis conceptualized his non-blues lyrics in a traditional blues manner. As such, the present chapter focuses most thoroughly on the lyrics of his blues.

## Lyrical Style

In many ways, the lyrics of Lewis's blues are typical of his time, place, and tradition. Like all pre–World War II blues singers from the Deep South, he uses rhymed couplets (often in AAB or AAAB form) to create non-linear texts. These texts, frequently in a contradictory manner, address themes of love, money, anxiety, wanderlust, injustice, loneliness, etc. In turn, his lyrics typically resonate as universals despite being presented from a first-person perspective.<sup>2</sup>

Lewis's manipulation of the traditional processes for composing blues lyrics is, however, decidedly atypical. To uncover his nuanced and idiosyncratic approach, I build on theories of the use of lyric formulas originally designed by Milman Parry, furthered by Albert Lord for the study of Homeric and other sung epic poetry, and later adapted by David Evans specifically for the study of blues.<sup>3</sup> Before moving on to the analysis, an introduction to the theories of lyric formulas is in order.

At the foundation of lyric formula theory is an understanding that performers of oral epics and many types of folk songs—blues musicians included—spontaneously compose lyrics by drawing from a repertoire of lyric formulas. In this context, a “formula,” as defined by Parry, is “a group of words that are regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a

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<sup>2</sup>This traditional lyrical style is typical of early twentieth century blues musicians and has been described in full on numerous occasions. See David Evans, *Big Road Blues: Tradition and Creativity in the Folk Blues* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982); Robert Springer, “On the Electronic Trail of Blues Formulas,” in *Nobody Knows Where the Blues Come From: Lyrics and History*, edited by Robert Springer (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2006); and Jeff Todd Titon, *Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup>The theories of Parry and Lord were developed for the analysis of oral epic poetry. See Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960). Evans, through his experiences as a student of Lord and a field researcher, adapted the methods for the study of blues lyrics. See David Evans, “Formulaic Composition in the Blues: A View from the Field,” *Journal of American Folklore* 120, no. 478 (Fall 2007): 486; and Evans, *Big Road Blues*, 1982.

given essential idea.”<sup>4</sup> For the study of blues, Parry’s definition must be slightly adjusted.

According to Evans, the wording of blues formulas is more flexible than epic formulas and can, as such, exhibit some degree of lexical variation. This is due in part to blues lyrics ability to adapt to varying metrical conditions.<sup>5</sup>

Formulas exist in varying sizes, with the whole-line formula being the basic practical unit in the blues.<sup>6</sup> When whole-line formulas are combined, they form two-line, or couplet, formulas. In blues, these are typically rhymed couplets in AAB form. Also typical of blues, couplet formulas stand alone, serving simultaneously as whole-stanza formulas. When combined, couplet/whole-stanza formulas form a whole song. To illustrate, I offer the following example from the standard opening of Lewis’s “Judge Harsh Blues.”

X      [      A Good morning, Judge, what may be my fine?  
                  A Good morning, Judge, what may be my fine?  
                  B Fifty dollars and eleven twenty-nine.

Figure 10: Excerpt from Furry Lewis’s “Judge Harsh Blues” (1928)

Here, two whole-line formulas are found. Following convention, the first formula, which expresses the idea of addressing a judge, is labeled A. The second formula, which expresses the

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<sup>4</sup> Milman Parry, “Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making, I: Homer and Homeric Style,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philosophy* 41, vol. 80 (1930) cited in Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 30.

<sup>5</sup> Evans reminds us: “Blues poetry is far less rigidly metrical than most oral epic poetry.” See Evans, “Formulaic Composition in the Blues,” 486.

<sup>6</sup> Following Lord’s lead, Taft and Barnie suggest that the half-line is the essential unit of blues lyric formula. While this may be true theoretically, it is rarely the case in practice. See Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 4; Michael Taft, *The Blues Lyric Formula* (New York: Routledge, 2006); John Barnie, “Formulaic Lines and Stanzas in the Country Blues,” *Ethnomusicology* 22, no. 3 (September 1978): 457-73. As demonstrated by Evans, whose work with blues lyric formulas is based on years of fieldwork and analysis of blues singers’s repertoire, blues singers almost entirely conceive of and employ these formulas in whole lines or whole stanzas. For more on Evans’s discussion of the basic unit of blues lyric formulas, see Evans, “Formulaic Composition in the Blues,” 482-99; and Evans, *Big Road Blues*.



idea of excessive punishment, is labeled B.<sup>7</sup> The entire three-line structure (AAB) forms a whole-couplet formula, generically labeled as X. When added to other whole-couplet (or, whole-stanza) formulas, a version of Lewis's "Judge Harsh Blues" is created.

Principles guide the practice of using formulas for the spontaneous composition of blues lyrics.<sup>8</sup> First, formulas can be built on material that is either original or traditional. For instance, "My first name Furry, my second name ain't never been told" is a whole-line formula of Lewis's own creation. "I got the blues so bad, it hurt my feet to walk," on the other hand, is a traditional whole-line formula of anonymous or ambiguous origins.<sup>9</sup> There are, however, degrees of original and traditional, as traditional formulas rarely exist as carbon copies of one another. Instead, it is more common for a formula to be partially borrowed with a blues singer changing enough of the formula to call it his or her "own."

Second, formulas can be stable or volatile.<sup>10</sup> In blues, we may think of the stable formulas as those that are, for one reason or another, found over and over again in nearly identical form. Volatile formulas, by contrast, exist in multiple forms but maintain an explicit idea. For example, the whole-line formula "I woke up this morning, blues all around my bed" is stable within Lewis's repertoire.<sup>11</sup> The whole-couplet formula at the beginning of "Why Don't You Come Home Blues," on the other hand, changes from one performance to another, and is, as such, considered volatile. In 1927 Lewis begins "Why Don't You Come Home Blues" (Vocalion

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<sup>7</sup> "Eleven twenty-nine" is in reference to eleven months and twenty-nine days, a maximum sentence for a misdemeanor that was often handed down as it is one day short of a year and thus, not a felony.

<sup>8</sup> According to Evans, the term "principles" is used instead of "rules" or "laws" "because association and contrast occur in blues texts to varying degrees." See Evans, "Formulaic Composition in the Blues," 491.

<sup>9</sup> This formula appears, perhaps most famously, in Son House's "Walking Blues" (Flyright FLYLP541/Biograph BCD118).

<sup>10</sup> According to Lord: "The most stable formulas will be those for the most common ideas of the poetry." See Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 34. This is more true for non-blues epic poetry.

<sup>11</sup> This whole-line formula may not be stable in the repertoire of other blues musicians.

1134) with: “Pearlee, why don’t you come home? / I ain’t had no loving, gal, since you been gone.” In a recording from 1969 (Adelphi AD 1007) the blues starts: “Tell me Pearlee, why don’t you come home? / You left me, baby, left me all alone.”

Third, “fixed” formulas (be they whole-line, whole-couplet, or whole-stanza) exist only in performances of a specific blues. “Floating formulas,” by contrast, appear in multiple blues. Commonly, fixed formulas have specific thematic or narrative content, while floating formulas express a mood. Like all formulas, both fixed and floating formulas can be made of traditional or original material (or a combination thereof). The following whole-couplet formula appears only in Lewis’s “Judge Harsh Blues” and is, therefore, an example of a fixed formula:

My woman come a’running with a hundred dollars in her hand.  
Woman come a’running with a hundred dollars in her hand.  
Crying “Judge, Judge, please spare my man.”

The “Spelling Memphis” formula, as it can be termed, is a floating formula because it is found in several unrelated blues in Lewis’s repertoire:

I got a new way spelling Memphis, Tennessee.  
Got a new way spelling Memphis, Tennessee.  
Double M, double E, great God, A, Y, and a Z.

This particular instance of the “Spelling Memphis” floating formula is excerpted from the recording of “Pearlee” that appears on the album *Beale Street Mess Around* (Southland SLP 1). It also appears from time to time and with minor variance in Lewis’s performances of “Big Chief Blues,” “Judge Harsh Blues/Judge Boushay Blues/et al.” and “Why Don’t You Come Home Blues.”

Fourth, each blues singer has his or her own system, or repertoire, of formulas from which he or she can draw.<sup>12</sup> These systems are formed over a lifetime of listening and playing.

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<sup>12</sup> Evans, “Formulaic Composition in the Blues,” 490.

As such, each performer's repertoire is unique to him or her. Furthermore, each performer has a particular way of handling his or her unique system. As stated by Lord: "All singers use traditional material in a traditional way, but no two singers use exactly the same material in exactly the same way. The tradition is not all of one mold."<sup>13</sup>

Fifth, a stable and fixed grouping or "core" of formulas can give a blues a degree of identity and continuity. For example, a hypothetical "Blues Z" is made up mostly of floating formulas but has a collection of fixed-couplet formulas at its opening and a pair of fixed-couplet formulas at its end. Despite any number or variation of floating formulas that may be added to the core of stable and fixed whole-couplet formulas, the blues remains identifiable as "Blues Z."

Finally, the art of blues singing is not in the memorization and recall of formulas, but in the spontaneous combination of formulas. According to Lord:

Although it may seem that the more important part of the singer's training is the learning of formulas from other singers . . . the really significant element in the process is rather the setting up of various patterns that make adjustment of phrase and creation of phrases by analogy possible. This will be the whole basis of his art. Were he *merely* to learn the phrases and lines from his predecessors, acquiring thus a stock of them, which he would then shuffle about and mechanically put together in juxtaposition as inviolable, fixed units, he would, I am convinced, never become a *singer* [emphasis added].<sup>14</sup>

### **Formula Analysis**

I analyze the lyric formulas of three of Lewis's most celebrated blues: the family of blues referred to as the "Judge" blues ("Judge Harsh Blues," "Judge Bouché Blues," "Good Morning Judge," and "Grand Central Station"); "Pearlee Blues," originally titled "Why Don't You Come Home Blues;" and the eponymous "Furry's Blues."<sup>15</sup> Lewis recorded each of these blues on

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<sup>13</sup> Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 63.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

multiple occasions throughout both his first and second careers. Some of these recordings occurred in his home, others were made in a studio, and some were recorded in front of a live audience. Each of the three blues include floating and fixed formulas, stable and volatile formulas, and original and traditional formulas in different ways and to varying degrees.

Lewis recorded at least fifteen performances of the “Judge” blues between 1928 and 1981.<sup>16</sup> In 1928 the song was released on the Victor label as “Judge Harsh Blues”—this is undoubtedly a backhanded tribute to Judge Thomas Walker Harsh of Shelby County, Tennessee’s Second Criminal Court for his unjust treatment (perceived or actual) of African Americans. Throughout Lewis’s second professional career, the “Judge” blues is updated with Judge Bouche as the new antagonist—this is a direct reference to Memphis City Court Judge Edward Beverly Bouche. On at least one occasion, the “Judge” blues is referred to as “Grand Central Station”—this is due to the inclusion of a prominent floating formula that mentions the historic train station—but the thematic thrust and emotional impact of the lyrics remain the same.

Of all of Lewis’s blues, the “Judge” blues has the most coherent and complete narrative. Told through eleven fixed formulas, the plot of the “Judge” blues begins with the narrator standing in front of the judge awaiting sentencing. After the narrator proclaims innocence, his girlfriend or wife (often referred to as his “woman”) pleads with the judge for leniency. The judge says a sizeable monetary fine (or perhaps a bribe) is first required for him to “go easy” on the narrator. The narrator then begs his female companion not to cry over his imprisonment. Eventually, the story is extended through the addition of a whole-couplet formula that tells of the narrator laying in his jail cell and blaming his “woman” for his unjust imprisonment.

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<sup>15</sup> Alternate spellings of “Bouche” include “Boushay” and “Boushé. Alternate spellings for of “Pearlee” include “Perolee” and “Paer Lee.”

<sup>16</sup> The first take was not released by Victor, but later appeared on the Yazoo (L1050) and Document (DOCD 504) labels.

In all, the “Judge” blues has eleven fixed formulas. If these formulas are stacked according to their typical ordering within the blues, a “complete” version of the “Judge” blues is formed. While Lewis never performed the “Judge” blues in this configuration—fixed formulas were removed and floating formulas were added—this template allows for cross-comparison of individual performances. The complete version of the “Judge” blues is found in Figure 11. Within the example, each whole-couplet formula is labeled in ascending numerical order according to its first appearance in the blues. For example, whole-line formula 1 has been a staple of Lewis’s “Judge” blues since he first recorded the song in 1928. Whole-couplet formula 10 was not added to the blues until after his 1928 recording sessions, so its numerical value is higher even though it appears at the beginning of the blues.

Good morning, Judge, what may be my fine? Good morning, Judge, what may be my fine? Fifty dollars and eleven twenty-nine.	1
They arrest me for murder, I ain't never harmed a man. They arrest me for murder, I ain't never harmed a man. Arrest me for forgery, and I can't even sign my name.	2
Judge found me guilty, the clerk he wrote it down. Judge found me guilty, the clerk he wrote it down. Found myself, I was penitentiary bound.	10
I ain't got nobody to get me out on bond. I ain't got nobody to get me out on bond. I would not mind, but I ain't done nothing wrong.	3
Please, Judge Harsh, make it light as you possibly can. Please, Judge Harsh, make it light as you possibly can. I ain't did no work, Judge, in I don't know when.	4
My woman come a'running with a hundred dollars in her hand. My woman come a'running with a hundred dollars in her hand. Crying "Judge, won't you please spare my man."	5
"One hundred won't do, better run and get you three. One hundred won't do, better run and get you three. I can keep Furry from the penitentiary."	6
'Cause I'm arrested, please don't grieve and moan. 'Cause I'm arrested, please don't grieve and moan. Penitentiary seems just like my home.	7
People all talking about what they will do. People all talking about what they will do. If they had justice, they'd be in the penitentiary too.	8
Some got six months, some got a solid year. Some got six months, some got a solid year. But me and my partner, we got a lifetime here.	9
I was laying in jail with my back turned to the wall. I was laying in jail with my back turned to the wall. Woman I love was the cause of it all.	11

Figure 11: Fixed Whole-Couplet Formulas Forming a Complete "Judge" Blues

For most performances of the “Judge” blues, Lewis surrounded a core (whole-couplet formulas 1, 2, 5, and 6) with different combinations of floating formulas.<sup>17</sup> Whole-couplet formulas 1 and 2 are always paired together, as are whole-couplet formulas 5 and 6. All performances of the “Judge” blues but one begin with whole-couplet formulas 1 and 2.<sup>18</sup>

There are eight fixed whole-couplet formulas in the two versions of the “Judge” blues Lewis recorded in the 1920s. For these recordings, Lewis did not use any additional floating formulas. In both instances, Lewis performed the whole couplet formulas in order from 1 to 8. Only insignificant differences are found between the two takes, suggesting that Lewis had memorized the lyrics before recording or that he had the lyrics written down in front of him.

When Lewis recorded the “Judge” blues in 1959 (Folkways FA 3823), he performed the lyric core with whole-couplet formula 2 separated from whole-couplet formula 5 by whole-couplet formula 10. The blues is extended beyond these five stanzas through the addition of two floating whole-couplet formulas.

In all of Lewis’s second-career recordings of the “Judge” blues, the narrative arc is established from the outset with the presentation of four or five fixed whole-couplet formulas (typically those that make up the core). The song is then extended by the addition of two to five floating whole-couplet formulas. The lyrical content of these floating couplet formulas varies

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<sup>17</sup> “Good Morning Judge” from a 1969 interview with David Evans, “Perolee (Why Don’t You Come Home Blues)” from the album *Beale Street Mess-Around* (1962-1963) (Rounder LP 2006), and “Judge Boushay Blues” from the album *Shake ’Em On Down* (1961) (Bluesville BvLP 1027) contain whole-couplet formulas 1 and 2 but omit whole couplet formulas 5 and 6. Even though only half of the core lyric formulas are present, each of these blues remains part of the “Judge” blues family as the themes, mood, melody, and guitar part are maintained. See Furry Lewis interview by David Evans, Memphis, Tennessee, 1969, D. K. Wilgus Collection, UCLA Ethnomusicology Archive.

<sup>18</sup> “Furry’s Blues” from *Live at the Gaslight at the Au Go Go* (1971) (Ampex A10140) begins with whole-couplet formula 10, followed immediately by whole-couplet formulas 5 and 6.

from one performance to another, but, as can be expected, remains consistent with the mood established by the core.<sup>19</sup>

In all, Lewis used twenty-nine different floating formulas across his fifteen recorded performances of the “Judge” blues. Of these, only twelve floating formulas are used more than once.

The following table (Table 1) lists all floating whole-couplet formulas used in Lewis’s fifteen extant recorded examples of the “Judge” blues. Minor variations of each formula are possible but only the I’m Here formula is volatile. As floating formulas can be inserted at any point in a blues, they are identified by their key phrase instead of a number. When these identifying phrases are combined with the identifying numbers from Figure 11, an entire performance can be mapped.

Table 1: Floating Whole Couplet Formulas of Furry Lewis’s “Judge” Blues

Name	No. of Appearances In Lewis’s “Judge” blues	Lyrical Content
Bad Luck	1	Bad luck in my family, all done fell on me. / Can’t get my justice, neither my liberty.
Don’t Want Me	1	I know you don’t want me, why don’t you tell me so. / Won’t be bothered with me around your house no more.
Driving Wheel	1	Ever been down, you know how I feel. / Like a broke down engine with no driving wheel.
Fare thee Well	1	Fare thee well, fare the well, babe (if) you call it gone. / I’m going to leave in the morning, I’ll be gone ’fore long.
First Name	1	My first name Furry, second name ain’t never been told. / I been waiting on you ever since you were twelve years old.
Get Along	2	What in the world is a’matter, we can’t get along. / Tell the world I ain’t gonna be here long.
Going Away	1	I’m going away, I’ll be gone a great long time. / If I never see you again, you’s forever be on my mind.

\* indicates a volatile formula.

<sup>19</sup> Regardless of which judge he invokes, Lewis addresses racial inequality in the local punitive system, especially with whole-line formula 8.



Table 1: Floating Whole Couplet Formulas of Furry Lewis's "Judge" Blues

Name	No. of Appearances In Lewis's "Judge" blues	Lyrical Content
Going Back	2	You had no business treating me this a'way. / Going back to Gary and I'm going back there to stay.
Grand Central Station	3	Anybody ever ask you, which a'way I go. / Grand Central Station is the onliest place I know.
Gypsy	1	I went to the gypsy for to get my hambone done. / Gypsy said "Furry, I 'clare you sure need one."
Heavy Load	3	I ain't got so many but I got so far to go. / I don't want to be bothered with no heavy load.
I'm Here*	2	I know my baby, she don't know I'm here. / If she do, she sure don't feel my care.
Lonesome Songs	1	When you hear Furry sing these lonesome songs. / Tell the world I ain't gonna be here long.
Lord Have Mercy	1	Look like "Lord have mercy" do not help me none. / I done tried, tell me what evil have I done.
Matchbox	3	My baby, she throwed my trunk out the door. / I been all day wondering will my suitcase hold my clothes.
Nary Word	1	My mamma dead, my papa 'cross the sea. / I ain't got nobody speak nary a'word for me.
Quit Me	2	My woman quit me, she never said a mumbling word. / Weren't nothing that she see, just something that she heard.
Shake 'Em	3	I know you don't like me, you ain't got to dog me 'round. / Give me my clothes and I will shake 'em on down.
Skin and Bones	1	My woman ain't nothing but skin and bones. / I just give her my money just to help along.
Spelling Memphis	1	I got a new way spelling Memphis, Tennessee. / Double M, double E, great God, A, Y, and a Z.
That's Alright	2	That's all right, baby, that's all right for you. / That'll be all right, just any old way you do.
Treat Me	2	Don't ever let a woman treat you like mine treat me. / Treat you like someone she ain't never seen.
Western Country	3	If I just had a known, I was going to get so long. / Some western country would have been my home.
What Evil	2	Tell me, baby, what evil have I done. / Blood in my body done got too low to run.
Woke Up	1	Woke up this morning, blues all around my bed. / I looked under my pillow, the blues all under my head.

\* indicates a volatile formula.

Table 1: Floating Whole Couplet Formulas of Furry Lewis’s “Judge” Blues

Name	No. of Appearances In Lewis’s “Judge” blues	Lyrical Content
Woman Don’t Care	1	If my woman don’t come, just like the letter read. / Won’t be no (?)
Work House	1	I been to the work house, I done been to the pen. / Fool with my baby, I’m going back again.
Worse You Do	1	Done all that I could, try to get along with you. / The more I do, the worse you do to me.
Wrongness	1	Please forgive me for the wrongness I have done. / Don’t want nothing to come for me on Highway 61.

\* indicates a volatile formula.

While most of Lewis’s performances of the “Judge” blues followed the pattern described above, there are a few aberrations. For instance, in a 1969 interview with David Evans, Lewis used a whole-line formula (“I got a long way to go, short time to go it in.”) in place of a whole-couplet formula. The whole-line formula, named Long Way To Go, is repeated three times to create a whole stanza in AAA form.

In a performance of “Good Morning Judge” from 1962 (Rounder LP 2006; Fat Possum 7-1098) Lewis created a transitional whole-couplet formula by combining the whole-couplet formulas before and after it. The blues begins typically: 1, 2, Treat Me, Gypsy. Lewis then performed three more whole-stanza formulas: Get Along; whole-stanza combining aspects of Get Along and What Evil; What Evil. The combinational whole-couplet formula (Something wrong, we can’t get along / Tell me what evil have I done) is also interesting, as it is the only whole-couplet formula in the song, and one of the few in all of Lewis’s formula repertory, that breaks the traditional AAB rhyme scheme.<sup>20</sup> Although this break causes Get Along + What Evil to be jarring, tension is quickly relieved with the final stanza, which appears as expected.

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<sup>20</sup> In regard to Lewis’s approach to lyric composition, Titon states: “Furry Lewis believed that some musicians were poor singers; they made mistakes and got the order of the stanzas and the words themselves mixed

The performance of “Judge Boushe Blues” recorded by Terry Manning in 1969 (Barclay(F) LP 920 352) is the only recorded example of Lewis inserting floating formulas between sets of fixed formulas. This performance is mapped as: 1, 2, First Name, Going Away, That’s All Right, Work House, 5, 6, 11.

The performance of the “Judge” blues on Lewis’s 1971 album *Live at the Gaslight at the Au Go Go* (Ampex A10140) is structurally different from his other performances. This version is mapped: 10, 5, 6, 10, 2, Bad Luck. Lewis did not begin with whole-couplet formula 1, but replaced it with whole-couplet formula 10. The switch from 1 to 10 is cemented when Lewis paired 10 with 2 at the end of the blues; the repeat of a whole-couplet formula was also rare for Lewis.

Lewis’s most widely known blues is perhaps the eponymous “Furry’s Blues.”<sup>21</sup> Between 1927 and 1970 he recorded “Furry’s Blues” on ten occasions, some of which occurred in front of a live audience while others took place in a fieldwork setting. Recordings from 1927 and 1928 were recorded in a studio.

While the blues has standard melodic and harmonic aspects, there is not any real semblance of narrative or thematic structure. Instead, Lewis used the blues as a canvas onto which he can project any number and combination of floating formulas. The melody and guitar part, then, are the unifying aspects of “Furry’s Blues.” Even the lyrics of the two performances from his first professional career are free-form and show clear evidence of spontaneous composition.

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up. Each stanza must rhyme and make its point, Lewis said. ‘It’s like when you cook; you have to put in all the ingredients and have to put ‘em in the right order or it won’t come out right.’ See Titon, *Early Downhome Blues*, 51. Titon later quotes Lewis as having said, “If it ain’t rhymed up, it don’t sound good to me or nobody else . . . If you don’t rhyme it up, you don’t understand nothing and you ain’t getting anywhere.” See Titon, *Early Downhome Blues*, 52. Obviously this was Lewis’s ideal, not always his practice.

<sup>21</sup> “Furry’s Blues” is alternately titled “Mr. Furry’s Blues,” “Old Original Furry Lewis Blues,” “Furry Lewis Blues,” and “Furry’s Worried Blues.”

Across the ten recorded examples of “Furry’s Blues,” Lewis used forty-six different floating whole-couplet formulas. Of these, thirteen are used in more than one performance. Only four appeared in three separate performances. Five of the forty-six formulas are volatile. Table 2 provides a complete list of the floating formulas used in his “Furry’s Blues.”

Table 2: Floating Whole-Couplet Formulas of Furry Lewis’s “Furry’s Blues”

Name	No. of Appearances In Lewis’s “Furry’s Blues”	Lyrical Content
2 (“Judge”)	1	They arrest me for murder, I never harmed a man. / Arrest me for forgery, and I can’t even sign my name.
Back On My Feet	1	I’m going to tell you something, and it is a sin. / My shoes done got thin, I’m back on my feet again.
Big Leg Woman	1	Big leg lady, take your big leg off of me. / Baby, I ain’t so tired, but I’m just as sleepy as I can be.
Chief Police	1	Going up town in the morning, I’m going to tell the chief of police. / My woman done quit me, and I sure can’t see no peace.
Coffin Sound	1	I’d rather hear the screws on my coffin sound. / Than to hear my good girl says, “I’m jumping down.”
Cried to Death	1	When my baby left me, I liked to cried myself to death. / When I lay down at night, Lord, old Furry can rest.
Crying Stay	1	I’m going, I’m going, crying won’t make me stay. / But the more you cry, the further you drive me away.
Don’t Want Me	3	I know you don’t want me, why don’t you tell me so. / Won’t be bothered with Furry ‘round your house no more.
Down So Long	1	I been down so long, blues don’t worry me none. / I’m gong to leave, you didn’t mean no good no how.
Every Day of the Week	2	My Monday’s woman, live on Beale and Main. / My Tuesday’s woman, bring me pocket change. / My Wednesday’s woman, bring me daily news. / My Thursday’s woman, buy my socks and shoes. / My Friday’s woman, puts it on the shelf. / My Saturday’s woman, give me the devil if she catch me here. / My Sunday’s woman, cook me something to eat. / Makes Furry got a woman, for every day in the week.

\* indicates a volatile formula.

Table 2: Floating Whole-Couplet Formulas of Furry Lewis's "Furry's Blues"

Name	No. of Appearances In Lewis's "Furry's Blues"	Lyrical Content
First Name	2	My first name "Furry," second name ain't never been told. / I been waiting on you, ever since you was twelve years old.
Flagged A Train	1	I flagged a train, run three, four different ways. / She threwed rocks and gravel all in my face.
Forty Rounds of Ball	1	I'm going to get my pistol, forty rounds of ball. / I'm going to shoot my woman, just to see her fall.
Going Back	3	You had no business, treating me this a'way. / I'm going back to Gary, I'm going back there to stay.
Got Me Worried	1	You don't grieve my life, baby, you got me worried now. / I would do a little better, Lord, but I don't know how.
Graveyard	1	I believe I'll buy me a graveyard of my own. / I'm going to kill everybody that has done me wrong.
Grieve and Moan	1	That woman I loving caught the train and gone. / She left me here for to grieve and moan.
Gulf of Mexico	1	I'm going to wash my face in the morning (in the) Gulf of Mexico. / I'm going to eat my breakfast one thousand miles below.
Hand in Hand	1	I know you don't want me, let's shake hand in hand. / I go to my woman, you go to your man.
Judgment Day	1	When I first started, Lord, I lost my way. / But I got lost, and I thought that was Judgment Day.
Let Me Alone*	2	You can scold me here, but you can't when I go home. / I got something at home make you let Furry alone.
Let Me Be	1	When I left my home, you would not let me be. / Wouldn't rest contented till I come to Tennessee.
Made No Stall	1	You know you don't want, gonna, you ough'nt've made no stall. / I got plenty more women waiting for your downfall.
Motherless Child	1	I was three years old when my mother died. / If you mistreat me, you mistreat a motherless child.
Nary Word	2	My mama dead, my papa 'cross the sea. / Got nobody speak nary word for me.
Nashville	1	If you want to go to Nashville, man, ain't got no fare. / Cut your good girl's throat and the judge will send you there.
Need My Help	1	Go on, baby, you gonna need my help some day. / You gonna look for me, baby, I'll be too far away.

\* indicates a volatile formula.

Table 2: Floating Whole-Couplet Formulas of Furry Lewis's "Furry's Blues"

Name	No. of Appearances In Lewis's "Furry's Blues"	Lyrical Content
On My Daniel	2	My baby said she didn't want me no more. / But she's on my Daniel every where I go. <sup>22</sup>
Pencil and Paper	1	Get my pencil and paper, I'm going to sit right down. / I'm going to write me a letter, back to Youngstown.
Poor Heart	1	I wish I had my poor heart in my hand. / I'd show you, woman, how to please a man.
Quit Me	3	When my baby quit me, she never said a word. / Nothing she seen, something she heard.
Right to Stay*	2	This ain't my home, I ain't got no right to stay. / This ain't my home, must be my stopping place.
River Was Whiskey*	1	If the river was whiskey, I'd stay drunk all the time. / So a woman like you could not hurt my mind.
Shake 'Em	1	I know you don't want me, you ain't got to dog me 'round. / Give me my clothes, I will shake 'em on down.
Shape I'm In	1	Don't tell my mama, don't tell her the shape I'm in. / If I tell her, forgive me for my sin.
Some Mornings	1	Some of these mornings, baby, listen to a word I say. / I'm going away to leave you, it will be too late to pray.
Start Down Beale	1	First on Main Street, start down Beale. / I'm looking for the girl they call Lucille.
Suit You*	1	Just take me, baby, try me one more time. / If I do to suit you, keep me a great long time.
That's All Right	3	That's all right, that's all right, any old way you do. / Some day you may want me, and I won't want you.
Think of Mine	1	I see your doney, make me think of mine. <sup>23</sup> / Whoa, baby, try and keep from crying.
Train Fare	1	I'm going away, crying won't make me stay. / If I had train fare, wouldn't be here today.
Treat Me	1	Oh baby, you sure do treat me mean. / Treat me just like someone you ain't never seen.
Whiskey and Women	2	I could had religion this very day. / But the womens and whiskey will not let Furry pray.
Won't Want You*	2	It'll be all right, that's all right for you. / That'll be all right, but I won't want you.

\* indicates a volatile formula.

<sup>22</sup> "Daniel" was an African American slang term for buttocks. See Stephen Calt, *Barrelhouse Words: A Blues Dialect Dictionary* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 69.

<sup>23</sup> "Doney" was an African American slang word with pejorative overtones used in reference to a woman. See Calt, *Barrelhouse Words*, 174.

Table 2: Floating Whole-Couplet Formulas of Furry Lewis's "Furry's Blues"

Name	No. of Appearances In Lewis's "Furry's Blues"	Lyrical Content
World Caving In	1	I dreamt last night that the world was caving in. / Nothing but my baby coming home again.
Worry You Off	2	I'm going away, baby, just to worry you off my mind. / You keep me worried, bothered all the time.

\* indicates a volatile formula.

As with the "Judge" blues, a few of Lewis's performances of "Furry's Blues" are especially notable. Lewis's 1928 recording, for instance, is more thematically unified than others, though it is not limited to a single theme. The whole-couplet formulas for this performance are: Graveyard, Nashville, Forty Rounds of Ball, Coffin Sound, Pencil and Paper, Right to Stay, Let Me Be. The first few whole-couplet formulas concern the related themes of death, murder, and revenge, whereas the final three express the contrasting themes of home and wanderlust. The use of multiple related themes suggests that Lewis, at least in his youth, mentally grouped formulas by theme. As his understanding of the musical tradition deepened with age, he drew from themes in a seemingly random fashion, suggesting that he no longer relied on thematic groupings as a mnemonic or compositional device. Alternatively, the move toward "randomness" could represent a decline in his compositional ability, or a sort of compositional laziness. According to David Evans, some blues musicians developed a tendency to arrange formulas according to principles of association and contrast, often in a "symmetrical" fashion, which seems to be the case in the 1928 version, but not in the post-rediscovery "random" versions.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Personal correspondence with the author and David Evans, October 13, 2016.

With “Old Original Furry Lewis Blues” (1967) (Revival(E) RVS 1008), Lewis extended two whole-couplet formulas by performing them in two forms at once. That is, as volatile formulas. For the whole-couplet formula Suit You, Lewis started normally by singing, in ABB form: “Just take me, baby, try me one more time. / If I do to suit you, keep me a great long time.” He then added the whole-line formula: “If I don’t do to suit you, you can start me down the line.” With repeats, the whole stanza formula is given in ABBC form. Lewis treated the whole stanza formula Won’t Want You in the same way. He began, again in ABB form, with the whole couplet formula: “It’ll be all right, baby, that’s all right for you. / That’ll be all right, any old way you do.” He then adds the whole-line formula: “Someday you may want me baby, and I ’clare I won’t want you.” The entire whole-stanza formula is in ABBC form.

This particular performance also stands out, as it is a post-re-discovery recording that does not use random formulas but formulas unified through contrasting themes. The entire blues is mapped as: Worry You Off, Hand in Hand, Quit Me, Suit You, On My Daniel, Won’t Want You. The first five stanzas are about breaking or getting back together, while the final stanza is a general commentary.

Lewis combined whole-couplet formulas twice during the performance of “Furry’s Blues” recorded by Jeff Todd Titon in 1970. The first instance is found when the whole-couplet formula Whiskey and Women is combined with Going Back:

I could had religion this very day.  
But the women and whiskey would not let Furry pray.  
Women and whiskey would not let me pray.  
'Cause you had no business, baby, treating me this a'way.

The second occurs when the fixed whole-couplet formula 2 from the “Judge” blues is combined with Treat Me:

They arrest me for murder, I never harmed a man.



Arrest me for forgery, and I can't even sign my name.  
Oh baby, you sure do treat me mean.  
Treat me just like something, woman, you ain't never seen.

Unlike Lewis's use of transitional formulas in "Good Morning Judge" (Rounder LP 2006; Fat Possum 7-1098), the original, or "pure," forms of these whole-couplet formulas are not included here. As such, Whiskey and Women + Going Back and the "Judge" blues 2 + Treat Me do not serve as transitional formulas but as compound formulas.<sup>25</sup> This performance is also noteworthy as Lewis uses a fixed formula from one blues (the "Judge" blues) as a floating formula in another.

The shortest version of "Furry's Blues" is found on the Alabama State Troupers Road Show live album (Ampex A10140). The performance is mapped: Don't Want Me, Quit Me, That's All Right. Interestingly, these three whole-couplet formulas are three of the four whole-couplet formulas most often used in the ten recorded performances of "Furry's Blues."

For "Pearlee Blues," Lewis stripped the idea of a core of formulas to its most basic form.<sup>26</sup> Instead of a set or series of fixed formulas, the lyric "core" of "Pearlee Blues" is nothing more than a single, fixed whole-couplet formula used to start each performance. This fixed formula, labeled "1," is as follows:

Pearlee, why don't you come home.  
Pearlee, why don't you come home.  
I ain't had no loving since you been gone.

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<sup>25</sup> This performance is mapped: Going Back, Quit Me, Need My Help, Whiskey and Woman + Going Back, Start Down Beale, Chief Police, "Judge" blues 2 + Treat Me. As expected, these formulas seem random because they are not thematically connected to one another.

<sup>26</sup> "Pearlee" is alternately spelled "Paer Lee" and "Perolee." On *The Fabulous Furry Lewis* (1973) (Southland SLP-3), this blues is titled "Sara Lee." Lewis's "Pearlee" is directly related to Son House's "Pearline," which House first recorded in 1965 (Document (E) DOCD 5663). While the guitar riffs, melodies, and harmonies are similar in both House's and Lewis's versions, the lyrics bear only superficial similarities. House's "Pearline," for example, has only one whole-line formula ("Pearline, what a matter with you, don't care what I do.") and an interjection of the statement "Love you, Pearline, I love you, Pearline."

Lewis increased the versatility of the fixed formula by making it volatile. Other forms include “Pearlee, why don’t you come home. / I’ve been lonesome, ever since you been gone;” “Pearlee, why don’t you come home. / You left me, baby, left me all alone;” and “I’ve been worried all day, worried all night long. / I’ve been worried all day, won’t you please, Pearlee, come home.” All are volatile forms of the same fixed formula as they each beckon Pearlee to “come home.”

In each of the seven extant recorded versions of “Pearlee Blues,” the reduced core is followed by four to eight floating whole-couplet formulas. This technique (a single-couplet core at the start and a various number of floating formulas after) is quite common in folk blues.<sup>27</sup>

Table 3 gives the thirty-two floating formulas and their rate of use across the seven performances of “Pearlee Blues.” Not listed are three whole-line formulas that are presented without a consequent phrase.<sup>28</sup> Once more, slight variation between presentations of a whole-couplet formula is possible.

Table 3: Floating Whole-Couplet Formulas of Furry Lewis’s “Pearlee Blues”

Name	No. of Appearances In Lewis’s “Pearlee Blues”	Lyrical Content
Brother Will	1	Won’t you run and tell, tell my brother Will. / That the woman he loving, she gonna get him killed.
Carbolic and Turpentine*	2	She put laudanum in my coffee, strychnine in my tea. / Turpentine in my biscuit, but she never hurt me.
Coffin Sound	1	I would rather see my coffin rolling from my door. / Than to hear my girl says “I don’t want you no more.”

\* indicates a volatile formula.

<sup>27</sup> For an example, see Evans discussion of the one-stanza core in “Big Road Blues.” See Evans, *Big Road Blues*, 81-4.

<sup>28</sup> “My home’s on the water, and I sure don’t like no land;” “The rising sun will never catch Furry here;” and “Fare well, baby, fare thee well.”

Table 3: Floating Whole-Couplet Formulas of Furry Lewis's "Pearlee Blues"

Name	No. of Appearances In Lewis's "Pearlee Blues"	Lyrical Content
Died When Young	1	I wished I had a'died, baby, when I was young. / I would not have this race to run.
Don't Want Me	1	I know you don't want me, why in the world don't you tell me so. / Won't be bothered with Furry 'round your house no more.
Going Back*	2	This time tomorrow, wonder where will Furry be. / May be in Gary, may be in Tennessee.
Grand Central Station	2	Anybody ask you, which a'way I go. / Tell them Grand Central Station, that's the only place you know.
Hate	1	I hate the fireman, hate the engineer. / And I hate the train that take my baby away.
Laid Down	1	I laid down last night laughing, but I woke up crying. / Talking about Pearlee, Lord, she's always on my mind.
Let Me Die	1	I held my hand to the Good Lord in the sky. / Crying, if Pearlee kill me, Great God, let me die.
Life Is Certain	1	Life is certain, Lord knows, death is sure. / I don't believe, my Lord, I'm going to see Pearlee no more.
Lonesome Hill	1	The sun is setting on some lonesome hill. / When I think about Pearlee, Lord knows I can't be still.
Mean and Dirty	1	You treat me mean, you treat me dirty too. / But the way you treat me, 'clare will never do.
Mother Said	1	If I had a'listened to what my mother said. / I wouldn't be in here, treated this a'way.
Quit Me	1	When my baby quit me, she never did say a mumbling word. / Wasn't nothing she said, something that she heard.
Same Old Used To Be	1	If you catch me stealing, please don't tell on me. / I may be stealing back to my same old used-to-be.
See Missouri	1	Late last night, when the night was still. / I could see Missouri, peeping over the hill.
See You Die	1	I asked my baby, could she stand to see me cry. / She said, yeah, old Furry, I could stand to see you die.
Side of the River	1	When I work so hard, I know it ain't gonna be long. / I don't know what side the river, Lord, Louisiana's on.
Spelling Memphis	2	I got a new way spelling Memphis, Tennessee. / Double M, Double E, God, a Y and a Z.
Standing on the Corner	1	Standing on the corner, feet got soaking wet. / I ain't seen nobody look like Pearlee yet.

\* indicates a volatile formula.

Table 3: Floating Whole-Couplet Formulas of Furry Lewis’s “Pearlee Blues”

Name	No. of Appearances In Lewis’s “Pearlee Blues”	Lyrical Content
Suit You*	2	If I don’t do to suit you, you can start me down the line. / But if I do to suit you, keep me a great long time.
Three Women	1	Ain’t but three womens I ever love in my life. / My mother and sister, sweetheart and my wife.
Treat Me	1	Don’t ever let your woman treat you like mine treat me. / Treat you just like someone she ain’t never seen.
Treetop to the Ground	2	I feel like jumping from the treetop to the ground. / Girl I love, she sure done put me down.
Trouble After While	1	My mama told me, when I was a child. / Good time now, trouble after while.
Walking Blues	1	I got the walking blues, going to get my walking shoes. / Got the blues so bad, I don’t know what to do.
White Lightning	1	You know you didn’t want me, when you laid down across my bed. / Drinking your white lightning, talking all out your head.
Whooping and Hollering	1	I feel like whooping, whooping, hollering, and crying. / Woman I loving, she really gotten on my mind.
World Caving In	1	I dreamt last night the world was caving in. / Weren’t nothing at all but my girl coming home again.
Won’t Want You	1	That’s all right, just any way you do. / Someday you’re gonna want me, now I won’t want you.

\* indicates a volatile formula.

Unlike “Furry’s Blues,” “Pearlee Blues” maintained a consistent theme, even if there is no actual narrative story. This is seen most clearly in a version of “Pearlee Blues” from 1969.<sup>29</sup> This performance is mapped: 1, 1, Lonesome Hill, 1, Side of the River, Life is Certain, 1, Laid Down, Let Me Die. The theme is emphasized through the recurring use of whole-couplet formula 1, which anchors the blues in a state of longing for Pearlee. Similarly, direct references made to Pearlee in the whole-couplet formulas Laid Down, Let Me Die, Life is Certain, and Lonesome Hill continually remind the listener that this blues is about forlorn love. The other whole-couplet

<sup>29</sup> The performance is “Why Don’t You Come Home Blues” (1969) (Adelphi AD 1007).

formulas do not affect the action of the blues's narrative, but instead emphasize the blues's general sense of longing for Pearlee. Only Side of the River does not mention Pearlee, although it occupies a central position in the text.

### **Lyrics of Non-Blues Songs**

Blues ballads are hybridizations that draw influence from Anglo-American ballads, African American ballads, and blues. Typically, blues ballads tell the true, though often embellished, story of a real person through a fractured third person perspective. This real person is exaggerated or embellished to fit the archetype of the "bad man" or "bad woman"—an anti-hero, of sorts, who stands up to injustice, be it personal or institutional. Blues ballads are often sung with instrumental accompaniment (usually an acoustic guitar). The formal structure is often made of a rhyming couplet plus a refrain (represented as: AB + refrain).

Lewis performed all four of the most important ballads in the African American tradition: "Casey Jones," "Frankie and Albert," "John Henry," and "Stack O'Lee." Of these, "Casey Jones" is undoubtedly his most important. Not only did he record "Casey Jones" during his first professional career and on several occasions throughout his second, but it is widely considered to be one of his most significant contributions to the folk blues canon. Lewis played "Casey Jones" more than any other ballad in his repertoire.

Unlike almost all other versions of "Casey Jones," Lewis's thoroughly disregarded history.<sup>30</sup> In fact, aside from a few train references, the story of Jones's heroism is never

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<sup>30</sup> The lyrical content for Lewis's "Casey Jones" is related to traditionally version of the song; by the 1920s, the song was thoroughly established in folk tradition. Casey Jones was a train engineer. He was born Jonathan Luther Jones; the nickname "Casey" was in reference to Jones's hometown of Cayce, KY. He died on April 30, 1900 while piloting an Illinois Central Railroad passenger train from Memphis, TN, towards Canton, MS. When passing through Vaughn, MS, he realized his train was going to collide with the caboose of a three-car freight. Though he slowed the train as best he could in preparation for the impact, the collision resulted in Jones's death. No one else was seriously injured. News of Jones's heroics quickly spread, resulting in his being immortalized in song. Jones was living in Jackson, Tennessee, at the time. He was survived by his wife, Janie Brady of Jackson, and their three children. See Casey Jones Village Online, <http://CaseyJones.com>, accessed December 10, 2015.

mentioned. Instead, Lewis constructed a loose narrative by combining floating formulas with whole-stanza formulas. These formulas address Jones's skill as an engineer, his trademark train whistle, and the misfortune that befell his widow and children.

The whole-stanza formulas that Lewis used to reference the traditional narrative are not original to the body of ballads in honor of Casey Jones. Rather, Lewis interjected "Casey" or "Casey Jones" into older lyric formulas as a means of forcefully inserting the requisite sense of history. An example of this is the whole-stanza formula labeled Alice Fry, taken from "Kassie Jones, pt. 1" (1928):

There was a woman named Ms. Alice Fry.  
Said, "I'm going to ride with Mr. Casey until I die."  
I ain't good looking but I take my time.  
A rambling woman with a rambling mind.  
Got a rambling mind.

As Norm Cohen and David Cohen note, Alice Fry may represent the broader notion of a "bad woman" in folk and popular lore.<sup>31</sup> Regardless of Alice Fry's identity, Lewis uses her as the personification of sexual desire and promiscuity, things that have nothing to do with Jones's train wreck.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Norm Cohen and David Cohen, *Long Steel Rail: The Railroad in American Folksong*, 2nd edition (Chicago and Urbana-Champaign: The University of Illinois Press, 2000), 164. "Frankie and Johnny," also known as "Frankie and Albert," tells of Allen ("Albert") Britt's murder at the hands of his lover Frankie Baker. The murder occurred in St. Louis, MO on October 15, 1899. See Cecil Brown, "Frankie and Albert/Johnny," in *Encyclopedia of African American Culture and History*, vol. 1, edited by Jessie Carney Smith (Detroit: Macmillan Reference U.S.A., 2006), 542-6.

<sup>32</sup> Alice Fry also makes appearances in Lewis's versions of "Frankie and Johnny." She also appears in the lyrics of blues ballads by other folk blues musicians, such as "Frankie and Albert" by Charley Patton (Paramount 13110).

Eventually, Lewis’s “Casey Jones” lost all connection to the conductor, both historically and emotionally. This is reinforced by the change in title, from “Casey Jones” to either “Natural Born Eastman” or “On the Road Again.”<sup>33</sup>

As is characteristic of blues ballads, the stanzas for Lewis’s “Casey Jones” are built on a pair of rhyming couplet formulas. In nearly all of his performances of “Casey Jones,” the first whole-couplet formula of the stanza is given once (AB). The second whole-couplet formula is extended (to either ABB or ABBB) through repetition of its second line. This type of extension is unique to Lewis. This is illustrated in Figure 12.

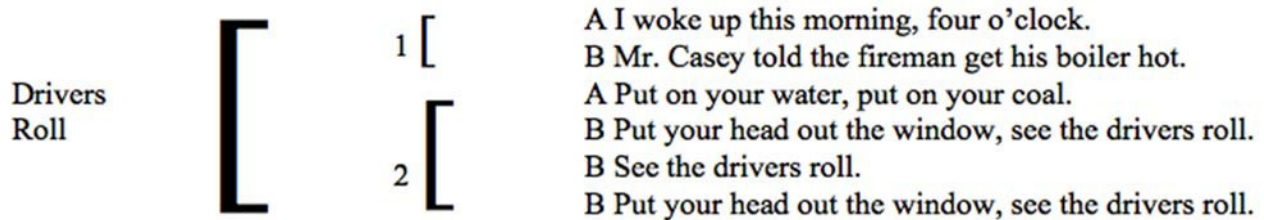


Figure 12: Driver’s Roll Whole-Stanza Formula,  
Furry Lewis’s “Kassie Jones, pt. 1” (1928)

There are occasions when Lewis will break the pattern. The most consistent example of this occurs with the whole-stanza formula Chaney, wherein a third whole-couplet formula is stacked on top of the expected two.

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<sup>33</sup> For one recording of “Casey Jones” (Adelphi AD 1009), Lewis introduces the song by all of its alternate titles: “Casey Jones, A Natural Born Eastman, I’m On the Road Again.” Both Natural Born Eastman and On the Road Again are prominent formulas in Lewis’s performances.

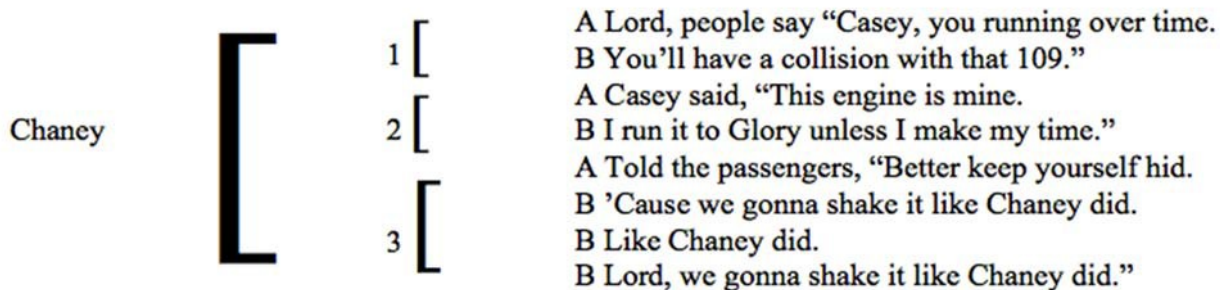


Figure 13: Chaney Whole-Stanza Formula,  
Furry Lewis’s “Casey Jones”

Chaney is a reference to another folksong hero (Stavin’ Chain), one with a predominantly sexual personality, and as such, Lewis’s use of the name pushes the narrative away from the normal Casey Jones story. Like Alice Fry, Chaney likely predates the Casey Jones tragedy.

Regardless of how the stanzas are structured, Lewis always paried the same rhyming couplets together. This indicates that he thought of the formulas he used for “Casey Jones” as whole-stanza formulas, not as whole-couplet formulas to be combined into stanzas. The way he combined these whole-stanza formulas is in line with the traditional processes he used when spontaneously composing blues lyrics.

When Lewis played a popular song, a church song, or a version of a country song, he did not use lyric formulas. Instead he presented the song in its normal verse-chorus structure. The lyric material he used “belonged” to the song in question, and he did not extend the song or muddle the narrative/thematic thrust by adding floating formulas. This is not to say that he did not bring a certain degree of blues sensibility to the lyrics of these songs. On a very regular basis, he allowed his guitar to “sing” the consequent portion of the line or even the entirety of the line. Most frequently, Lewis did this with church songs.<sup>34</sup> In “When I Lay My Burden Down,”

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<sup>34</sup> For an example, see “When The Saints Go Marching Home” (Barclay(F) LP 920 352).



recorded during a 1969 field session with David Evans, Lewis even commanded his guitar aloud to “sing.”<sup>35</sup>

### **Other Observations**

There are important and unusual aspects of Lewis’s lyrics that are not identified through the use of Parry-Lord-Evans analytic techniques. The most significant of these is Lewis’s affinity for varying stanza structures within a single performance. Typically, blues musicians will use a consistent structural form: a twelve-bar AAB, ABB, or AAA; or a sixteen-bar pattern in AAAB or AABB form. While a structural form will remain constant throughout a performance, any stanza may be extended by the addition of a riff (short, repeated melodic phrase). Lewis, however, switched forms multiple times within the same performance of a blues. He varied structural forms often and regardless of audience, but this practice became more common with age. The practice first appears in Lewis’s 1959 recordings.<sup>36</sup>

Lewis’s “Good Morning Judge,” recorded during a 1969 interview with David Evans is an example of this. Here, Lewis began with a AAAB whole-stanza formula followed by a AABBC whole stanza formula that has a guitar riff separating the first and second iteration of the B line. Lewis then performed two whole stanzas in AAAB form before performing a stanza in AAB. The final stanza is AAA.

“Furry Lewis Blues,” recorded as part of the 1973 Memphis Blues Caravan road show (Memphis Archives MA 7009), provides another example. The performance begins with a whole-stanza formula in AAB, moves to a whole-stanza formula in ABAB, then to the whole-stanza formula Every Day of the Week. This is followed by a whole-stanza formula in AA, a

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<sup>35</sup> For more information on Lewis’s “singing” guitar, see Chapter 5.

<sup>36</sup> For an example, see “Pearlee Blues” (Folkway FA 3823).

whole-stanza formula in ABB with the B lines separated by a guitar break, a whole-stanza formula in AAB, and finally a whole-stanza formula in ABAB. The blues ends with a second guitar break.

Every Day in the Week is uncommon, as it is a whole-stanza formula made up of eight related whole-line formulas. Every Day in the Week is also notable as it does not function thematically or emotionally; it is used solely as a means for Lewis to extend a performance. On occasion, the whole stanza formula is used as a basis for a generic blues much as fixed whole-couplet formula 1 functions in “Pearlee Blues.”<sup>37</sup>

Yet another atypical feature of Lewis’s blues is the projection of spontaneously combined and unrelated whole-couplet formulas onto a generic musical template. For Lewis’s “Furry’s Blues” in particular, he maintained a melody and a harmony but drew widely and unpredictably from his repertoire of floating formulas. Such performances functioned more as showpieces as they allowed him full creative range.

Lewis also had the unusual habit of invoking his own name (“Furry”). Generally speaking, blues, and especially the folk blues of the Mississippi Delta region, are a personal expression of general problems wherein success, as it were, lies in universal appeal. A blues singer may sing of his own experiences with alcoholism or loneliness or hard work for little pay, but his or her narrator is typically referred to as “I.” Through the generic “I,” enough ambiguity is created that a listener is able to imagine himself or herself in the role of the narrator. By identifying the narrator as a specific person—as “Furry,” in Lewis’s case—this projection of self is not possible. Instead, the audience is reminded that these are not issues experienced by

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<sup>37</sup>For recordings of Lewis’s blues titled “Every Day in the Week,” see Biograph BLP 12017, Southland SLP-3; Furry Lewis, interview by Harry Godwin and Jack Hurley, Memphis, TN, February 7, 1967, Memphis State Oral History Project, University Libraries Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN; and Furry Lewis, interviewed by Evans, February 2, 1979, personal archives.

everyone, but issues specific to “Furry.” This effect is intensified when Lewis titled his blues “Furry’s Blues.” The implication here is that all circumstances expressed in the performance are preemptively claimed by “Furry.”

The use of “Furry” does not necessarily mean that Lewis was placing himself at the middle of the action. It is more likely that he was lending his name to himself. There are thus two “Furrys” present: the fictive “Furry” (the one that acts as narrator) and the literal, or real, Furry. The two “Furrys” not only work to create a narrative, but they also contribute to the notion that Lewis is a sort of mythological figure. This form of self-mythologizing can be seen particularly well in the whole couplet *First Name*.

Lastly, Lewis did not use heavy-handed double entendre or sexual innuendo, especially for humorous ends. He rarely used popular blues tropes like “shake my tree” and references to “jelly roll,” and he certainly did not approach the degree of sexuality found in the lyrics of Bo Carter, one of his contemporaries and a fellow Mid-South native. Instead, Lewis demonstrated his wit through a creative and idiosyncratic handling of blues formulas.

This is not to say that Lewis never used blue humor. On a few occasions, he mentioned his preference (real or otherwise) for the superior sexual abilities of heavy-set women. Notably, Lewis addressed such appetites in his versions of “Skinny Woman,” a song originally recorded by Yank Rachel in 1934 (ARC unissued). Lewis sang: “I don’t want no skinny woman / I want a woman with plenty meat / She can roll all night long / She don’t have to stop to rest.” Lewis was also fond of singing: “Don’t you wish you had a good gal like mine / She ain’t good looking but she takes her time.” His floating whole-couplet formula *On My Daniel* also contained latent sexual references, as “Daniel” was a euphemism for “buttock.”

Lewis preferred to be clever rather than crude. Many of his couplets were meant to create humor through confusion and misdirection. For instance, he sang: “I don’t drink no whiskey, no beer, wine, or neither gin / But if you ever see ol’ Furry sober, won’t you make me drunk again.”<sup>38</sup> More prominent examples include two of his favorite whole-couplet formulas: “I got a new way of spelling Memphis, Tennessee / Double M, Double E, great God, A, Y, and Z” and “Ain’t never loved but three women in my life / My mother, my sister, my sweetheart, and my wife.” According to Zeke Johnson, when asked to explain these couplets, Lewis would only smile wide and laugh.<sup>39</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Lewis, like many singers of folk poetry, spontaneously constructed lyrics by combining traditional, borrowed, and original lyric formulas, each of which contributed to Lewis’s dynamic repertory of lyric formulas. While the tradition that guides the use of lyric formulas is not a static one, Lewis did more than most folk blues singers to contribute to its vitality. As is shown above, he pushed the boundaries of tradition by creating new combinations of lyric formulas, by exploring uncommon formal structures, and by relying heavily (and at times, solely) on floating formulas. Lewis also adapted his approaches to lyric formulas for his use in ballads, in turn moving them stylistically closer to the blues. In this lies Lewis’s artistic mastery. As stated by Lord: “The singer of tales is at once the tradition and an individual creator . . . His art consists not so much in learning through repetition the time-worm formulas as in the ability to compose

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<sup>38</sup> This whole-couplet formula is found in “Farewell, I’m Growing Old,” recorded by George Mitchell in 1967 (Fat Possum CD 80374), and in “Skinny Woman” recorded in 1968 by Karl Gert zur Heide (Saydisc/Matchbox(E) SDR 190), among others.

<sup>39</sup> Zeke Johnson has shared this story with me on multiple occasions throughout my fieldwork.

and recompose the phrases for the idea of the moment on the pattern established by the basic formulas. He is not a conscious iconoclast, but a traditional creative artist.”<sup>40</sup>

Whether it is blues, blues ballads, or something else entirely, Lewis composed with the sensibilities of a pre-War blues musician from Memphis. Analysis of his blues and blues ballads specifically shows that he relied heavily on tradition both in developing a compositional style and as lyric source material. Despite these traditional tendencies, Lewis’s lyrics also show evidence of his characteristic charm and eccentricities. He took what he learned from his mentors and he applied his own creativity. In doing so, he was able to set himself apart while also impacting the tradition. Like his personality, Lewis’s compositional processes for creating lyrics were both expected and unique.

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<sup>40</sup> Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 4-5.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **Furry Lewis's Music**

#### **Preface**

Furry Lewis's idiosyncrasies added (even more) color and dimension to the Deep South's tradition of guitar playing. In this chapter, I explore the most significant aspects of Lewis's music to understand why it sounds the way it does and why it continues to appeal to so many. I begin with descriptions of the various instruments that Lewis is known to have owned. I then discuss Lewis's processes for learning to play guitar. Next, I analyze Lewis's hand positions and physical movements. A description of Lewis's tunings is followed by analysis of his particular guitar and vocal styles. A few final thoughts on Lewis's music conclude the chapter. In addition to references to specific recordings, transcriptions are used to support the analysis.

#### **Guitars**

Lewis owned many guitars during his seven decades of playing music, but fewer than ten are well documented; of these eight or nine guitars, a couple are currently held in museums, one or two are in private collections, but most have been lost to time. There are even one or two that continue to exist only in legend. The reason Lewis has so many "lost" guitars is fairly simple: in addition to the normal patterns of owning, selling, and replacing instruments, Lewis's late-life habit of pawning guitars as a source of temporary income is one that likely developed long before outside parties took interest in his financial plight. In discussing Lewis's guitars, it should also be remembered that photographs and video footage throughout his second professional career provide much needed assistance in the attempt to catalogue his instruments, but it cannot be assumed that he owned every guitar he is photographed holding or that he is filmed playing.

Lewis said that he built his first “guitar” from a cigar box, a stick, and screen door wire, and there is no reason to doubt this. He also said that he acquired his first real guitar in the 1910s, which is also most likely true, whether or not he received it as a gift from W. C. Handy as he wanted us to believe. Lewis told Stanley Booth in 1970 that this was a Martin guitar and that he kept it for twenty years.<sup>1</sup>

A publicity photograph from 1928 shows Lewis holding what appears to be a 1920s Regal flat top guitar (most likely a Victoria model)—this image is recreated on the cover of the Document Records re-release of Lewis’s pre-war material (DOCD-5004). This is likely the first guitar he owned. As an inexpensive instrument, the guitar almost certainly had a high action, which could have impacted the way Lewis learned to play—a high action is conducive to slide playing but restrictive for chording. However, when he acquired it, how he acquired it, and the circumstances through which he lost possession of it remain a mystery.

When he was “rediscovered” at the end of the 1950s, Lewis no longer owned a guitar. And, according to Samuel Charters, he had not owned one for some time—Charters rented an Epiphone from a local pawnshop for Lewis to use while recording Folkways FA 3823.<sup>2</sup> It is clear from Charters’s recordings that Lewis continued to play, but he probably only did so when he could use someone else’s instrument; Lewis would have been presented with this opportunity on a regular basis, as music making was a frequent social activity for his circle of friends.

It is not clear what guitar or guitars Lewis owned or regularly played during the 1960s, although he almost certainly played cheaper acoustic guitars primarily. Video footage from 1968

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Booth, “Furry’s Blues,” *Playboy* 17, no. 4 (April 1970): 114.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel B. Charters, *Walking a Blues Road: A Selection of Blues Writings 1956-2004* (New York: Marion Boyars, 2004), 57-8.

shows Lewis playing an Epiphone acoustic guitar, though it is not the 1964 Texan he later owned.<sup>3</sup>

During the early 1970s, Lewis primarily played a 1968 Gibson B-25N with natural finish and a dark tortoise shell pick guard (serial number: 905410).<sup>4</sup> The guitar has a mahogany back and sides, a triple-bound solid-spruce top, and a rosewood fingerboard. It also features a height-adjustable saddle that allowed Lewis to raise the strings action to a position more suitable for slide playing.<sup>5</sup> Lewis carried this guitar in a black hard leather case. Written across the top of the case in thick white letters is: “W.Furry Lewis.”<sup>6</sup> Currently this instrument is on display at the Memphis Music Hall of Fame, located in downtown Memphis.

By 1976 Lewis was playing a 1964 Epiphone Texan, a guitar that has long been popular with rock musicians. This guitar features a solid spruce top, solid mahogany back and sides, and an adjustable ceramic saddle. Lewis may have even owned more than one Epiphone acoustic guitar, as photographs show at least two different Epiphone cases were used, both of which are hard cases made of black leather. One case has “FURRY” written at the body and “MEMPHIS” at the neck; Lewis was using this case by 1973, as is evidenced by a photograph of Lewis at the eightieth anniversary celebration for the Memphis Public Library.<sup>7</sup> The other has “FURRY LEWIS” written at the body, “MEMPHIS” written at the neck, and a downtown Memphis

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<sup>3</sup> Furry Lewis, “Furry Lewis – Kassie Jones,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DVIXcMCg15c>, accessed February 17, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Ward Meeker, “Furry Lewis’s 1968 B25-N: Heart in Hand,” in *Vintage Guitar* 26, no. 10 (August 2014). The B-25N replaced the Gibson sunburst LG-2 and natural-finish LG3 in 1962.

<sup>5</sup> The height-adjustable saddle was discontinued in 1969. Walter Carter, “Furry’s Favorite Frets,” *Vintage Guitar*, <http://www.vintageguitar.com/19798/furry-lewis-1968-gibson-b-25n/>, accessed Feb. 11, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> There is no space between the “W” and “F.”

<sup>7</sup> Memphis Public Library, “Furry Lewis In Front of Main Library,” Dig Memphis, <http://memphislibrary.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15342coll4/id/1712/rec/1>, accessed 10-12-2016.



telephone number that is likely to have belonged to Lewis (901-525-4874) at the headstock. This guitar was reportedly sold on the Internet auction site Ebay ca. 2010. The sale appears to have been between two private parties. No additional information is available. Figure 14 shows Lewis, his Epiphone Texan, and a case.



Figure 14: Furry Lewis and His Epiphone Texan Guitar, 1976  
Photograph by Barney Sellers of *Memphis Commercial Appeal*

The neck on his Epiphone Texan broke in 1977 or 1978.<sup>8</sup> As a replacement, he purchased an electric guitar, a 1966 Martin GT-70. This guitar features a semi-hollow plywood body, f-holes, bound 22-fret mahogany neck with rosewood fret board, chrome hardware, two exposed DeArmond pickups, and a Bigsby-style tailpiece.<sup>9</sup> This is almost certainly the most expensive

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<sup>8</sup> William Thomas, "Furry to be buried today in rites befitting a bluesman," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, September 16, 1981.

guitar Lewis ever owned. According to Sid Selvidge, who was with Lewis the day he purchased it, Lewis wanted an electric guitar because it was becoming difficult for him to produce enough sound on an acoustic.<sup>10</sup> Figure 15 shows Lewis with his Martin GT-70. The photograph depicted in the figure was found in the newspaper archives at the Memphis Public Libraries. Andrew Yale is identified as the photographer, but no other attribution is given.

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<sup>9</sup> Michael John Simmons, "Catch of the Day: 1966 Martin GT-70," Fretboard Journal, <http://www.fretboardjournal.com/blog/catch-day-1966-martin-gt-70>, accessed February 11, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas, "Furry To Be Buried Today In Rites Befitting a Bluesman."



Figure 15: Furry Lewis and His Martin GT-70 Guitar, 1976  
Photograph by Andrew Yale  
Original Publication Unknown

Lewis may have also owned a Yamaha FG-160 (another affordable acoustic guitar with a high action). Such an instrument appeared for sale on the online auction site Heritage Auctions in October 2005, and though the auction’s advertisement claims Lewis as the guitar’s one-time owner, there is no evidence of it—Lewis did sign the guitar with a black felt-tip marker but this fails to prove ownership.<sup>11</sup> The website does not provide information pertaining to the guitar’s current owner.

The National Music Museum at the University of South Dakota own a 1930s Regal arch top alleged to have belonged to Lewis. Of course, this is not the instrument Lewis is holding in the publicity photograph from 1928, as this guitar was made after the photograph was taken. Along with guitar, the National Music Museum also has a black leather, hard shell case, which features “W. Furry Lewis” written on its top in thick, white letters. Lewis began routinely marking his guitar cases in this manner later in life, so it seems that he used the 1930s Regal arch top during his second professional career (post-1959), not his first, or possibly not at all.<sup>12</sup> It seems odd that Lewis would have used a 1930s guitar during his second career, and there does not appear to be any photographic or video evidence to suggest that he did, so the authenticity of the instrument remains questionable. The guitar and its case were given to the National Music Museum at the University of South Dakota as part of a larger donation from a private, unnamed collector in Memphis. Though the collector remains anonymous, he may be the same man who ran a fraudulent Memphis music museum and instrument trade business during the 1980s and

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<sup>11</sup> Heritage Auction writer, “Furry Lewis Used Guitar,” <http://entertainment.ha.com/itm/vintage-guitars-and-musical-instruments/furry-lewis-used-guitar-one-of-the-very-best-blues-storytellers-and-an-extremely-nimble-guitarist-furry-lewis-was-the-owl/a/616-21367.s?ic4=GalleryView-ShortDescription-071515>, accessed February 11, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> During his second professional career, Lewis had a habit of writing his name on his cases in thick white letters. This is evident in many photographs. Lewis may not have written on his case himself. For an example, see Photograph 1. Lewis’s handwriting during the last few years of his life can be seen in Appendix C, Item 8.

1990s. This “collector” purportedly purchased old instruments that he later sold for a much higher price by falsely claiming they once belonged to a musician of significance.

I have heard on many occasions that the Rolling Stones gave Lewis an electric guitar when he performed as one of their opening acts in either 1975 or 1978. Apparently the guitar was given in addition to Lewis’s financial remuneration. Despite the tenacity of this story, I have been unable to confirm this. It may be that rumors of this guitar have been circulating for so long that the story is now accepted as truth. If so, this is another example of Lewis’s mythos impacting his biography. It may also be that the Rolling Stones gave Lewis the funds to purchase a guitar and that he used these funds to buy the Martin GT-70.

Like many Deep South folk blues musicians, Lewis frequently played guitar with a slide. Recalling the day they met, Charters says that Lewis played slide with a pocketknife held “between the third and fourth fingers of his left hand.”<sup>13</sup> When Charters returned to Lewis’s home later that day, he recalls: “He [Lewis] had spent most of the afternoon sawing the neck off a Royal Crown Cola bottle to use as a slide on his little finger.”<sup>14</sup> In an interview with Jack Hurley and Harry Godwin from 1967, Lewis says that he used a glass slide as a young man but abandoned it when he developed a technique for making a slide out of metal.<sup>15</sup>

In practice, Lewis used whichever type of slide he had available to him, but photographs, videos, and personal accounts do suggest he preferred using a metal slide.<sup>16</sup> Lewis gave one of these slides to Steve LaVere, who allowed me to photograph it during my research trip to

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<sup>13</sup> Charters, *Walking a Blues Road*, 59.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Furry Lewis, interview by Harry Godwin and Jack Hurley, Memphis, TN, February 7, 1967, Memphis State Oral History Project, University Libraries Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN. For more information on Lewis’s construction of a slide, see Chapter 2.

<sup>16</sup> Mary Lindsay Dickinson recalls Lewis using a broken champagne bottle as a slide. Don Nix recalls Lewis using a broken beer bottle as a slide. See Chapter 2.

Greenwood, Mississippi in July 2014. As is seen below (Figure 16), the slide has a small interior bore that fits tightly around the fifth digit. Photographic and video evidence also shows that Lewis wore his slide tightly around the top knuckle of his fifth digit. This caused the slide to extend well past Lewis's finger. As such, Lewis's control of the slide was limited, often resulting in notes not fully sounding and slides occurring between a wider range of notes than perhaps was intended.



Figure 16: One of Furry Lewis's Metal Slides  
Owned by Steve LaVere  
Photograph by Tyler Fritts

## The Learning Process

Lewis began playing the guitar sometime around 1910, and he probably learned the same way as his contemporaries. Describing the typical process, David Evans says: “This [learning process] would have begun with the potential blues singer recognizing that there was something ‘in the air’ and would have ended in his being able to make this air music manifest in the form of blues performances. Of course, what was in the air was largely determined by what the singer heard performed by other blues singers around him.”<sup>17</sup> For Lewis, the blues singers around him included Jim Jackson, James Manus, Willie Pope, Will Shade, and Frank Stokes. In an interview with Godwin and Hurley from 1967, Lewis credits Little Birdie (Richard Williams) and Guy Schoofers (Johnny Rice or Johnny Wright) among his important early influences.<sup>18</sup> No information about either man remains. When talking to Fred Hay, Steve and Linda LaVere, and Bob Eagle in 1972, Lewis said that he learned from a man named “Blind Joe.”<sup>19</sup> Lewis’s “Blind Joe” is unlikely to have been Blind Joe Taggart or Blind Joe Reynolds, as Taggart was not in Memphis at this time and Reynolds was too young. Furthermore, “Blind Joe” is a rather generic name likely shared by many people. Lewis also tells Godwin and Hurley that he began singing for Charley Jackson and Landis Walton (perhaps Landers Waller), both guitarists, before he learned to play the guitar. Lewis says Jackson was “way younger” than him.<sup>20</sup>

After becoming accustomed to the “air music” made by Jackson, Manus, Stokes, and others, Lewis began to “manifest” his own music by imitating Jackson, et al. In doing so, he was,

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<sup>17</sup> David Evans, *Big Road Blues: Tradition and Creativity in the Folk Blues* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 253.

<sup>18</sup> Furry Lewis, interview by Godwin and Hurley, Feb. 7, 1967.

<sup>19</sup> Fred Hay, ed. *Goin’ Back to Sweet Memphis: Conversations with the Blues* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2001), 84.

<sup>20</sup> Furry Lewis, interview by Godwin and Hurley, Feb. 7, 1967.



perhaps unconsciously, also learning a tradition of blues composition. In other words, Lewis was learning more than how to duplicate someone else's performance of a blues or a ballad; he was learning the language (both musical and lyrical) of the pre-War blues tradition in the Deep South.

When asked about his learning process, Lewis told Godwin and Hurley: "If I go somewhere and look at a person's hands . . . and hear him play and make a different tune, different sound, and this and that, I couldn't go home and do that right away . . . but I kept that (tune) in my head. Sometimes just take my fingers, run down, down on one string, get the whole song out of one string. Run up and down, stop it at different places till it sound good and until I got so I could use the other five."<sup>21</sup> Having acquired the style's basic building blocks, Lewis then learned to form larger ideas, and eventually complete songs. This can be compared to the way a child learns language: first s/he learns nouns, then verbs. Eventually s/he can combine words into sentences and eventually into paragraphs.

While Lewis claimed to have never had a music teacher—and this is almost certainly true if "music teacher" is defined in a classical sense—it is possible that some of the musicians whom he was imitating (especially Jackson) offered explanations of chord shapes, picking styles, etc., in an informal manner. Lewis told Allan and Hurley in 1967: "They didn't have nobody, no music teacher or nothing. That's the only way I learned, [on] my own self. If I go somewhere else and somebody else play anything, I go home and [try to] play the same thing."<sup>22</sup>

In the same interview with Allan and Hurley, Lewis says that the first thing he learned to play was "E natural" tuning.<sup>23</sup> The implication here is that Lewis understood improvisation in a

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<sup>21</sup> Furry Lewis, interview by Hurley and Godwin, Feb. 7, 1967.

<sup>22</sup> Furry Lewis, interviewed by Allan and Hurley, May 4, 1967.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

specific tuning as analogous to playing a specific song. This may also mean that Lewis learned to improvise before he learned to play (semi-)composed songs.

Despite experiencing a learning process like that of his contemporaries, Lewis's music stands apart. This is because he learned to play the guitar in Memphis while others learned before they came to Memphis. That is to say, other folk guitarists anchored their approach to the guitar in a specific local style, while Lewis, thanks to Memphis's status as a desirable destination for struggling musicians in the surrounding countryside, was immediately exposed to a wider range of styles. Equally important is the fact that Lewis learned to play guitar at a time when Frank Stokes, Dan Sane, and Will Shade were creating a unique Memphis guitar sound—Stokes, widely considered the “Father” of Memphis blues guitar, began busking on Beale Street ca. 1910. Learning to play before a style is fully cemented fostered in Lewis a reliance on creativity instead of a reliance on standard practices. By watching Stokes, Sane, Shade, and others, Lewis learned to experiment.

### **Hands and Movement**

Andrew W. Cohen's 1996 article “The Hands of Blues Guitarists” is the definitive study of blues guitarists's picking hand positions.<sup>24</sup> Using recordings, photographs, video footage, personal observation, and biographical data, Cohen catalogued hand positions for ninety-four African American blues guitarists. In the article, he argues “there was a regional clustering to the ways that African American folk and blues guitar players from the early part of this [the twentieth] century held their picking hands and that these postures facilitated certain musical patterns while inhibiting others.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Andrew M. Cohen, “The Hands of Blues Guitarists,” in *Ramblin' On My Mind: New Perspectives On the Blues*, edited by David Evans (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 152-78. Cohen's article first appeared in *American Music* 14, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 455-79.

According to Cohen, Lewis used a “stacked” hand position. Cohen explains: “In the stacked position the index finger sits directly below the thumb, such that if a straightedge were held against the tips of the two digits, it would cross the strings at a ninety-degree angle. Put differently, the thumb and finger cannot pass each other, but the finger can get out of the way by pulling sideways across the string instead of pulling more or less straight up.”<sup>26</sup> Cohen adds that it is through the stacked position that Lewis was able to play with an alternating thumb picking technique—“alternating thumb” describes a switching back and forth between lower and higher bass strings.<sup>27</sup>

While playing, Lewis’s index finger almost always plucked the string, though he occasionally used his middle finger along with his index finger. When he did make use of both the middle and index fingers, he likely did so as a way of maintaining the rhythm and tempo of a piece—once it has hit a string, the index finger has to reset before striking another string, whereas the middle finger, in its neutral position, is already poised to strike. For stabilization while playing, he kept his fourth and fifth digits firmly planted on the pick guard.

Nine musicians from the Mississippi Delta region born before 1906 in Cohen’s survey used the stacked hand position.<sup>28</sup> Of the same group, three employed an alternating thumb picking technique. Only Lewis uses both. Lewis’s stacked hand position is evident in Figure 17.

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<sup>25</sup> Cohen, “The Hands of Blues Guitarists,” 152.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 173-5.



Figure 17: Furry Lewis's "Stacked Thumb" Picking Style  
Photograph by staff photographer of *Memphis Press Scimitar*, September 14, 1981

Through the use of a stacked hand position and the alternating thumb picking style, Lewis's playing was idiosyncratic but not entirely foreign to musicians of his time and place. In fact, he likely developed this approach while attempting to model his playing on that of those around him. Moreover (and arguably more importantly) Lewis learned to innovate and experiment with tradition while watching Jackson, Polk, Stokes, Wilkins, and others.

Cohen's discussion of the hand positions of blues musicians is impressive, and the depth and breadth of his study are unparalleled. But Cohen does not consider arm movements and fretting hand positions. Analysis of these aspects reveals even more about Lewis's approach to the guitar.

Lewis played by draping his arm over the guitar at a forty-five degree angle from his torso. The position of his arm and hand on the guitar caused him to strike the strings directly over the guitar's sound hole. His wrist remained straight and motion for strumming was generated by pivoting his arm at the elbow—in other words, his shoulder and wrist were locked.<sup>29</sup> When using a slide, the slide crossed the highest three or four strings though Lewis played most of the melody on the highest string. To play the melody, his left wrist cocked backwards and rotated clockwise and his thumb pressed against the back of the guitar's neck. When not using a slide, the fifth digit on Lewis's left hand was inactive; he may have avoided fretting with this finger as it frequently wore a slide.

Lewis also incorporated unique motions into his playing. For instance, he sometimes used an overhand, or "over-the-top," grip that allowed his left index finger to press all six strings at the same fret. In open tunings, the finger serves as a sort of ad hoc capo by easily shifting the

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<sup>29</sup>Lewis's movements are clearly seen in videos posted to YouTube.com. Two of the better examples are: "Furry Lewis – When I Lay My Burden Down," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CCqbKdnHZTs>, accessed February 16, 2016; and Furry Lewis in Leon Russell and Friends, originally aired on December 5, 1970 on US TV, KCET Los Angeles.

harmony.<sup>30</sup> From this overhand position, he used the side of his thumb and the lowest joint of his index finger (the one closest to his palm) to fret the lowest string. Lewis also used his left elbow to “fret”—he would smack the strings with his elbow—and would occasionally drum on the strings with his fingers. Similarly, he was in the habit of making a flourishing motion with his left arm as he strummed with his right hand. When performing as part of a concert, his movements were more elaborate. Occasionally, he flailed both arms while playing. These sorts of motions were solely intended as theatrical, as any effect on sound production was a negative one; discordant notes and a banging sound from the slide bouncing off the fret board were commonly produced.

Lewis developed his showmanship (flailing, fretting with his elbow, etc.) while performing on the medicine show and while busking in downtown Memphis. As noted, these practices do not add to (and arguably detract from) the music, but they do make Lewis more fun to watch. This was especially important late in Lewis’s life when his musical abilities began to decline and he was forced to find non-musical and/or extra-musical ways to entertain his audience.

### **Guitar Tunings**

According to Lewis, he used four tunings: Spanish; Sebastopol; E Natural; and Cross Note.<sup>31</sup> Spanish and Sebastopol are open tunings (G major and D major, respectively) used by

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<sup>30</sup> Jeff Todd Titon, *Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977).

<sup>31</sup> Furry Lewis, interviewed by Godwin and Hurley, February 7, 1967. Samuel Charters provides the following anecdote about Lewis’s tunings: “When I returned from Europe in 1961, Ken Goldstein, who was supervising the Prestige Records Bluesville series, sent me back to Memphis to do two more albums with Furry. For the 1961 recordings I used Sam Phillips’s Sun Studio, and the engineer was Scotty Moore . . . The sessions with Furry were a long series of discussions between the two guitarists about Furry’s Mississippi tunings. We would begin a song and I would hear Scotty’s voice over the studio loudspeaker, ‘What’s that tuning you’re using, Furry?’ and I would sit waiting while Scotty came into the studio and sat with Furry until they’d figured it out.” See Charters, *Walking a Blues Road*, 55. From this, it appears that Moore was familiar with only standard tuning.

many pre-War folk blues guitarists in the Deep South, and, as such, project a strong sense of regional identity. “E Natural” is equivalent to standard guitar tuning, and Cross Note is a hybrid of an open tuning and standard tuning—“Cross Note” is more commonly used by blues guitarists to refer to any open tuning, although Guitar Shorty (John Henry Fortesque) of North Carolina also referred to “Cross Note” as a combination of an open tuning and standard.<sup>32</sup> The tunings not only determine how Lewis’s music sounds but how he plays the guitar.

Spanish and Sebastopol have a shared history. Spanish originates from the special open tuning required to play the popular parlor piece “Worrall’s Original Spanish Fandango” (1860) by Henry Worrall. The tune of “Worrall’s Original Spanish Fandango” is indebted (at least spiritually) to Europe’s rising interest in Latin dances and music; cultural interest stemmed from Europe’s colonial interests in the region. The origins of Sebastopol lie in Worrall’s “The Siege of Sebastopol” (1860), yet another parlor piece that requires an unconventional open tuning system. The tune of “The Siege of Sebastopol” was written in commemoration of a battle that occurred during the first Crimean War. Sebastopol is also the name of a town in central Mississippi. In popular parlance, the tuning is often corrupted to “Vastapol,” though the spelling “Vastapool” more closely resembles Lewis’s pronunciation.

Both of the tunings and their names were introduced into the music culture of African Americans in the Deep South when the blues was beginning to coalesce (the late nineteenth and early twentieth century). At this time, guitars sold by mail-order department stores such as Sears and Roebuck’s were packaged with tune books that included “Worrall’s Original Spanish Fandango” and “The Seige of Sebastopol.” It was quickly discovered that the unconventional tuning systems required for these pieces were perfect for slide playing, an Africanism that was

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<sup>32</sup> Bruce Bastin, *Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition in the Southeast* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 282.

preserved and perpetuated by southern African Americans through the playing of a monochord instrument, sometimes known as a “diddley bow.”<sup>33</sup>

Spanish is tuned to DBGDGD (from high to low). When strummed on the open strings, a second inversion G major chord is produced. The sixth and fourth strings are tuned to octaves, which are not fretted but plucked in alternation to create harmonic support. The highest three strings are tuned to an open G major chord. Lewis used the three high strings to play the melody.

In Spanish, the subdominant (IV) and dominant seventh (V7) chords can be formed with two fingers. Moving between chords is simple, with one finger changing position by one string (Figure 18).<sup>34</sup> When using these fingerings, the V7 chord is missing the third scale degree (F#), giving it an open, ambiguous quality.

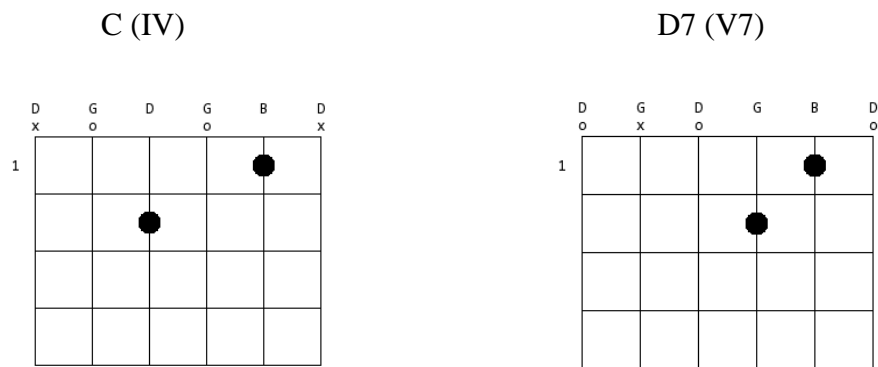


Figure 18: Fingerings For C (IV) and D7 (V7) in Spanish Guitar Tuning

Spanish is a versatile tuning that allowed Lewis to play pieces from each genre in his repertoire. Because of this, it was his most used tuning. In Spanish, Lewis played: “Baby That’s All Right”; “Back On My Feet Again”; “Big Chief Blues”; “Bugle Waltz”; “Casey Jones”; “Don’t You Wish Your Mama”; “Going to Brownsville”; “Farewell To Thee”; “Furry’s Blues”;

<sup>33</sup> David Evans, “Afro-American One-Stringed Instruments,” *Western Folklore* 29, no. 4 (October 1970): 229-245.

<sup>34</sup> In all figures that show fingering for chords, “x” represents a muted string, “o” represents an open string, and “1” indicates the location of the first fret.



“Glory Hallelujah”; “Good Looking Girl Blues”; “Let Me Call You Sweetheart”; “Longing Blues”; “Mama’s Fish”; “Old Dog Blue”; “Pearlee Blues”/“Why Don’t You Come Home Blues”; “Roberta”; “Rock Island Blues”; “Skinny Woman Blues”; “St. Louis Blues”; and “Worried Blues.”

Sebastopol is tuned to DAF#DAD, from high to low. It functions similarly to Spanish, although the lowest strings in Sebastopol emphasize the tonic (D) rather than the dominant (A), and the highest three strings create a first inversion major triad. As with Spanish, Sebastopol also makes use of the octaves in the bass. When tuned to Sebastopol, the subdominant (G) and dominant seventh chords (A7) are played with three fingers. The dominant seventh chord is yet again missing the third scale degree (C#). Switching between chords requires the middle and ring fingers to shift by one string. This is illustrated in Figure 19.

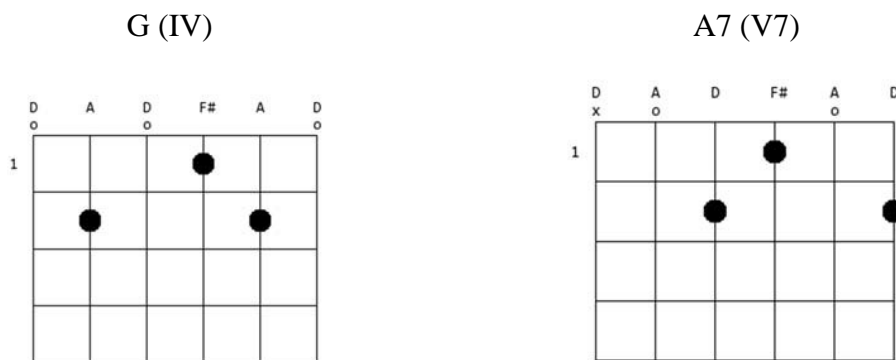


Figure 19: Fingerings For G (IV) and A (V) in Sebastopol Guitar Tuning

Although fewer songs are in Sebastopol as opposed to Spanish, Lewis used the tuning frequently. Its rate of use suggests that Lewis had a particular fondness for this group of songs. In Sebastopol, Lewis played: “Falling Down Blues”; “Going Away Blues”; “Furry Lewis’s Careless Love”; “John Henry”; the “Judge” blues; “See That My Grave Is Kept Clean”; and “When My Baby Left Me.”

Lewis referred to standard tuning (EBGDAE) as “E Natural.” He may have used this peculiar nomenclature because the E notes are in the “natural” position—that is, on the first and sixth strings. Unlike open tunings, the strings have mostly a quartal relationship. As such, standard tuning does not lend itself to slide playing, nor does it work well with Lewis’s style of free improvisation. Consequently, Lewis tended to avoid standard tuning when playing blues, but he used it for country, popular, and ragtime songs. While in E Natural, Lewis played: “Furry Lewis Rag” (key of C); “Let’s Shake Hand In Hand” (key of G); “Take Your Time Rag” (key of C); and “Waiting On A Train” (key of G). No chord diagrams are shown for E Natural tuning, as many keys can fairly easily be played from this orientation.

Crossnote is tuned EBGEAE, creating a hybrid of “E Natural” and Sebastopol.<sup>35</sup> Only the fourth string is altered from its sounding pitch in E Natural, by raising it a major second, from D to E. When played as open strings, the highest four strings produce a E minor chord in root position. The use of a minor tuning is abnormal for blues musicians of Lewis’s time and place though it is not unheard of. Skip James, for instance, used an open D minor tuning (DAFDAD), but Lewis, unlike James, usually fretted the third (G) string. In Lewis’s Crossnote, parallel octaves occur between the fourth and sixth strings, which allowed him to play runs an octave apart. Both the IV (A) and the V7 (B7) chords are made with two fingers. The index finger is in the same position on the third string for both (Figure 20). The V7 is again missing the third scale degree (D).

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<sup>35</sup> According to Zeke Johnson, Lewis said that to play in Crossnote, one had to “cross the major over the minor.”

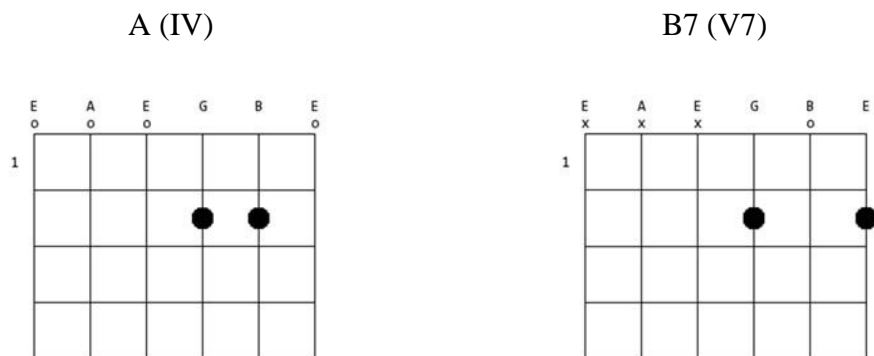


Figure 20: Fingerings For A (IV) and B7 (V7) in Crossnote Guitar Tuning

In Crossnote, Lewis played “Creeper’s Blues”; “Going to Kansas City”; “I Will Turn Your Money Green”; “Jellyroll”; “Mean Old Bedbug”; “Mistreatin’ Mama”; “Shake ’Em On Down”; and “White Lightning.”<sup>36</sup> Though several things can be played in Crossnote, Lewis used it sparingly, at least compared to Spanish and Sebastopol.

Because the note E is difficult for Lewis to reach with his voice, pieces in Crossnote are usually significantly flat. For instance, each of the five songs in Crossnote on *Shake ’Em On Down* (BvLP 1036) (“Shake ’Em On Down,” “White Lightnin’,” “Goin’ To Kansas City,” “I Will Turn Your Money Green,” and “Long Tall Gal Blues”) sounds in the key of C, a major third below the expected (E).

In the Deep South tradition, and for Lewis in particular, all tuning schematics represent an idea rather than an ideal. That is, relative tunings are used. For example, the guitar on a recording of the “Judge” blues from 1962 (FP80374) is tuned C#G#FC#G#C# and the guitar on a recording of the “Judge” blues from 1969 (Barclay(F) LP 920 35) is tuned EBG#EBE but both preserve the intervallic relationship of Sebastopol. To facilitate comparative analysis, pieces in Spanish are always transcribed in G and pieces in Sebastopol are always transcribed in D. The sounding key of each transcription is noted.

<sup>36</sup> Evans, *Big Road Blues*, 273.

On rare occasions, Lewis played a piece in a different tuning than his normal one. For instance, “Casey Jones” is typically played in Spanish, though he plays it in Sebastopol on Barclay(F) LP 920 35. These discrepancies are likely caused by Lewis not wanting to retune or by a lack of set list. This can result in unintended notes. During an interview with Zeke Johnson, I was told that Lee Baker devised a way for him to tune Lewis’s guitar without embarrassing Lewis. When seconding Lewis, Baker strummed his guitar a few times and declared something akin to “Mr. Furry, my guitar doesn’t sound right. Will you help me?” After exchanging guitars with Lewis, Baker proceeded to conspicuously tune Lewis’s guitar while Lewis tried to diagnose the non-existent problem with Baker’s. It is not known if Lewis was aware of what Baker was doing.

### Style

Lewis’s music is part of the Deep South tradition. This is evident in several ways. For example, his guitar playing was strong and confident. He also frequently played with a slide. Moreover, he frequently used folk tunings associated with the Deep South; he used simplistic harmonic frameworks built from one, two, or three chords; his ornaments were largely limited to pull-offs, triplets, and tremolo; he relied on a series of eighth notes as the basic rhythmic pattern for almost everything he played;<sup>37</sup> his tempos gradually increased over the course of a performance; and his guitar melodies had a distinctive vocal quality—Lewis even frequently asks his guitar to “sing.”

Lewis, also like his Deep South contemporaries, composed music by combining new and traditional musical materials—this is similar to the way Deep South folk blues musicians use lyric formulas to compose lyrics. Each performance of “Creeper’s Blues,” “I Will Turn Your

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<sup>37</sup> As Evans points out, a basic rhythm built from a series of eighth notes is characteristic of the local blues guitar style around Drew, MS. Musicians from the Drew tradition also sometimes use a quarter-and-eighth note triplet as the basic rhythm. See Evans, *Big Road Blues*, 246.

Money Green,” “Shake ’Em On Down,” and “White Lighnin’,” uses a traditional bass formula (Musical Example 1) underneath melodic material original to Lewis—the transcription is taken specifically from “Creeper’s Blues” (1929) (Vocalion 1574).



Musical Example 1: Bass Formula for Lewis’s “Creeper’s Blues” (1929), 0:31-0:37

Tommy Johnson, Big Bill Broonzy, and Tommy McClennan also use versions of this bass formula. According to David Evans: “The bass figure in the first line of [Tommy] Johnson’s guitar part (measures 1-4) [of “Big Road Blues”] is heard also in Big Bill Broonzy’s version of ‘Joe Turner Blues’ (Vogue 131; Folkways FA 2326; Folkways FG 3586; Verve MGV 3001). Broonzy [originally from Lake Dick, Arkansas] . . . claimed that this was one of the earliest blues he knew, dating it before the turn of the century . . . Tommy McClennan, also from [Lewis’s hometown of] Greenwood [Mississippi], played the figure in the same key and tuning as Tommy Johnson (EBGDAD, key of D) in his ‘New ‘Shake ’Em On Down’ (Bluebird B8347).”<sup>38</sup> Evans also notes that Broonzy’s guitar is in Open D (DAF#DAD).<sup>39</sup>

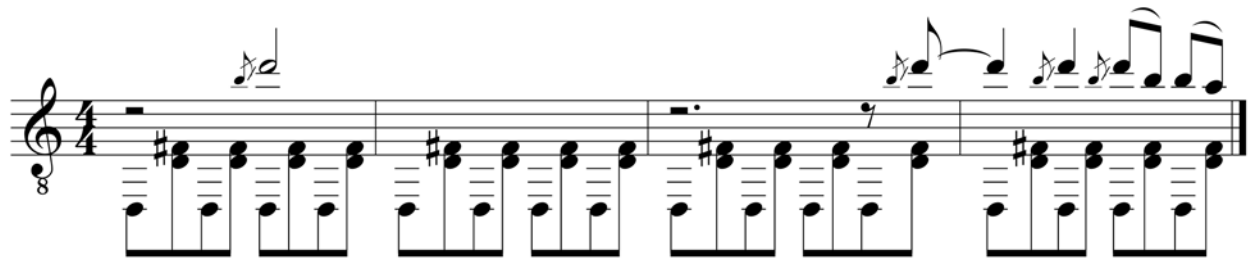
But Lewis’s playing strays from the standard practices of the Deep South tradition in a few key ways. One of the most significant is the nearly ubiquitous downbeat created by heavy down strokes of his thumb on alternating strings (i. e., the alternating thumb picking style). This

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<sup>38</sup> Evans, *Big Road Blues*, 273.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

is seen in the transcription of the “Judge” blues found in Musical Example 2. Note that Lewis is able to create a chord by alternating between a single string and two strings simultaneously



Musical Example 2: The “Judge” Blues/”Good Morning Judge” (1967)  
(Fat Possum FP80374), 0:45-0:52

Most of the time, this alternating bass serves as a backdrop to Lewis’s vocal melodies, though he will, on occasion, use it as a sort of vamp that connects one stanza to the next or one melodic idea to another.

Lewis also pushed the idea of a “singing” guitar beyond its traditional limits. Like other blues musicians, Lewis will beckon his guitar to “sing” the antecedent of a phrase—in doing so, Lewis almost perfectly mirrors the vocal melody with the guitar—but he will also stop singing, sometimes in the middle of a word, and use the guitar to finish the vocal phrase. This is heard particularly well in a version of “Glory Hallelujah” recorded in 1969 (released as “Lay My Burden Down,” Lucky Seven CD 9206) (Musical Example 3).<sup>40</sup> The top staff of Musical Example 4 contains the vocal line and the bottom staff contains the guitar part. The words “sung” by the guitar are given parenthetically. In the example, the guitar sounds an octave lower than the vocals

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<sup>40</sup> “Glory Hallelujah” is not a blues song (it is a church song), but Lewis performs it with blues sensibilities. This is a common feature of his non-blues repertoire. For more on Lewis’s repertoire, see Chapter 3.

The image shows a musical score for two songs. The top system is for "Glory Hallelujah" and the bottom system is for "Lay My Burden Down". Both are in 4/4 time. The top system has a vocal line and a guitar line. The vocal line starts with "Glo - ry (Glo - ry) Hal-le - lu - jah When I" and the guitar line has a bass line with chords. The bottom system has a vocal line and a guitar line. The vocal line starts with "(lay my bur - den down)" and the guitar line has a bass line with chords. The score is written in treble clef with a key signature of one flat.

Musical Example 3: Vocal and Guitar Melodies for “Glory Hallelujah”/“Lay My Burden Down” (Lucky Seven CD 9206), 0:42-0:53

Lewis lets the guitar “sing” the entirety of a verse near the end of the song. He introduces this verse by saying: “Guitar, I want you to sing it for me once. Just take your time and sing it for Furry. Just sing ‘Glory Glory When I Lay My Burden Down.’ Alright now. Start off.” After the first phrase, he adds encouragement: “That’s right. Keep on.” At the end of a sung verse before a second guitar chorus, Lewis congratulates the guitar: “Listen! Wasn’t that good?”

Lewis also had a habit of varying stanza lengths (10-bar, 12-bar, 13-bar, etc.) within a single piece. To make asymmetric structures work musically, he would either shorten or lengthen the time spent on a chord or he dropped a couple of beats leading into another stanza. Musical Examples 4 and 5 show Lewis varying the stanza length in “I Will Turn Your Money Green”

(Bluesville BvLP 1037).<sup>41</sup> Here, Lewis's guitar is in Crossnote (typically: EBGEAE) though it sounds a major third flat. The transcription indicates the sounding pitch.

The image shows four staves of musical notation in 4/4 time, representing the first stanza of the song. Each staff contains four measures of music, indicated by diagonal slashes. Chord symbols are placed above the staves: the first staff has four 'C' chords; the second staff has 'C', 'C', 'C', 'F', 'F' above its five measures; the third staff has four 'C' chords; and the fourth staff has 'G', 'C', 'C', 'C' above its four measures. The first measure of the second staff is marked with a '5' at the beginning.

Musical Example 4: “I Will Turn Your Money Green” (1961) (Bluesville BvLP 1037),  
First Stanza

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<sup>41</sup> For an example of Lewis using multiple lyric structures in one piece, see Chapter 4.



Musical Example 5: "I Will Turn Your Money Green" (1961) (Bluesville BvLP 1037),  
 Second Stanza

The first stanza (Musical Example 4a) is sixteen bars long and begins with six and a half measures of the I chord (C). The second stanza (Musical Example 4b) is thirteen bars long and begins with five and half measures of the I chord. After the IV chord's (F) early entrance in measure five of the second stanza, Lewis extends it by an additional two beats. He then returns to the V chord (G) three measures ahead of the pace set by the first stanza. Both stanzas end the same way (with the chord progression: I, I, V, I, I, I).

Lewis relied on, and departed from, tradition within a single composition. This is illustrated in the analysis of three specific pieces (the "Judge Blues," "Casey Jones," and "Let Me Call You Sweetheart"), all of which are considered by Lewis's fans and blues researchers alike to be among his most significant works.

The first is "Good Morning Judge," a typical version of Lewis's "Judge" blues recorded by George Mitchell in 1962 (FP8037). The transcription (Musical Example 6) shows Lewis's

guitar part during the stanza; as is expected, the guitar part repeats, in more or less the same way, throughout the blues. The transcription shows an idealized, composite version of the guitar part during the stanza; the small melodic and rhythmic differences between each iteration have been eliminated as a means of facilitating comparison.

Musical Example 6: “Good Morning Judge” (FP80374), Guitar During Stanza

As evidenced by Musical Example 5, the blues is in a D major tuning (specifically, Sebastopol). The transcribed excerpt also shows that rhythms are built on a series of eighth notes and that harmonies are restricted to the tonic and subdominant.

Ties to the Deep South tradition do not end there, as the tempo for the blues increases steadily throughout the performance; at the beginning of the blues, the tempo is moderate (around 95 beats per minute) but by the end of the blues, the tempo has increased significantly (to around 150 beats per minute). Likewise, both the vocal and guitar melodies are simple, staying almost completely within the first five notes of the scale (DEF#GA); the vocal melody

tends to revolve around the notes of the tonic triad while guitar solos tend to focus on the fifth and sixth scale degree (A and B). Also typical of the tradition, Lewis makes the guitar melody more interesting by adding slides of a third (performed with a slide), grace notes, and triplets played by hammering on notes. He also uses his slide to create highly “vocal” guitar solos, although his verbal encouragement of his guitar is atypical (“Guitar, sing that for me once”). His slide work is tight, especially when compared to his performances of the “Judge” blues in the last few years of his life.

Lewis’s personal style of guitar playing is evident in the constant bass figure played with alternating thumb technique. Lewis begins each bar by playing a low tonic (D) before completing the chord with a dyad (D, F#) played on the upbeat—note the fifth scale degree is missing from the chord. This figure continues throughout the piece—Lewis adds the fifth scale degree to the harmony when he shifts to the IV chord (G major).

The shift from tonic to subdominant harmonies is similarly notable. During first vocal stanza, the guitar only briefly goes to the IV chord, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Harmonic Rhythm for The “Judge” Blues (1967) (Fat Possum FP80374),  
First Vocal Stanza

Mm.	1 - 4	5	6	7	8 - 12
Chord	I	IV	I	IV	I

Lewis’s mixing of tradition and personal creativity is evident in his non-blues repertory, as well. The 1969 recording of “Casey Jones” made by Terry Manning (Barclay(F) LP 920 352) is an excellent illustration of this. Here, “Casey Jones” like all of Lewis’s performances of the blues-ballad—is in a traditional tuning (Spanish). The blues-ballad also has a deliberately simple harmony, as is typical of blues-ballads from the Deep South—the I chord is played throughout the stanza and a brief IV chord appears between stanzas. And, there is a constantly increasing

tempo (from around 80 beats per minute at the beginning to around 200 beats per minute by the end).

The continuously repeated bass figure used as the ballad's foundation (Musical Example 7) shows Lewis's ability to innovate. Lewis alternates between a single low note (here, the third scale degree is on the first beat and the tonic note is played on the third beat) and higher notes. Again, the transcription shows an idealized composite of the lick as it disregards small inconsistencies between iterations. This lick is repeated almost continuously throughout the blues-ballad.



Musical Example 7: "Casey Jones" (Barclay (F) LP 920 352), Guitar Lick, 0:59-1:05

As in previous examples, Lewis plays this with alternating thumb technique, but the bass figure for "Casey Jones" alternates between a single note and a fully formed triad, as opposed to a dyad.

Although it is not necessarily a departure from tradition, the melody of Lewis's "Casey Jones" is deceptively complicated and is, as such, a departure from Lewis's normal modus operandi concerning the composition of melodic structures. Although there are only four pitches (B, D, E, and G), melodic notes are always played on the upbeat. As the thumb is constantly busy with an alternating bass, the second (or perhaps third) digit plays the melody. Though this is not the most complicated piece to play, it does require advanced technique—Zeke Johnson, who

learned “Casey Jones” while sitting beside Lewis, drops repeated melodic notes to make it easier to play. Despite Lewis’s reputation as a slide player, his finger picking style as showcased in “Casey Jones” demonstrates a higher degree of precision, both melodically and rhythmically, than he is often credited with possessing.

Lewis’s performance of “Let Me Call You Sweetheart” from 1969 (Adelphi/Genes GCD 9911) is an example of his applying traditional Deep South blues sensibilities to a song not from the Deep South. “Let Me Call You Sweetheart” was originally published by Leo Friedman and Beth Slater Whitson in 1910 and first recorded in 1911 by the all-white vocal group The Peerless Quartet (Columbia A-1057).<sup>42</sup> The song was a national sensation in 1911, which is about the time Lewis began playing the guitar. We can assume that this was one of the first songs Lewis learned to play and that he continued to play it throughout his life for nostalgic reasons—as evidenced in the attached discography, “Let Me Call You Sweetheart” was Lewis’s favorite non-blues piece to play. Lewis performs the chorus, more or less as it is written, and one verse. The words for the verse differ from those of the original.

Lewis brings the song closer to a traditional blues aesthetic by modifying the original’s bass figure. As “Let Me Call You Sweetheart” is in triple meter (almost everything else Lewis plays is in duple meter), the figure is adjusted so that the single low note occurs on the downbeat of each measure and the dyad occurs on beats two and three. He also uses the guitar as a voice, mirroring the vocal melody (Musical Examples 8 and 9).

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<sup>42</sup> Henry Burr led the Peerless Quartet. For the recording, the group is billed as “The Columbia Quartet,” as the recording was released on the Columbia label.

The image displays a musical score for the song "Let Me Call You Sweetheart". The score is written in 3/4 time and consists of five systems of music. Each system includes a vocal line in the upper voice and a piano accompaniment in the lower voice. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 3/4. The score begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp. The first system contains measures 1 through 6. The second system, starting at measure 7, includes a measure rest for 8 measures. The third system, starting at measure 14, also includes a measure rest for 8 measures. The fourth system, starting at measure 21, includes a measure rest for 8 measures. The fifth system, starting at measure 28, includes a measure rest for 8 measures. The piano accompaniment is primarily composed of chords, with some eighth-note patterns in the left hand. The vocal line features a mix of quarter, eighth, and dotted notes, with some phrases spanning across bar lines.

Musical Example 8: "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" (Adelphi/Genes GCD 9911),  
Verse, 0:00-0:39

The first system of the musical score shows the piano accompaniment. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The music features a series of chords and single notes, with some rests in the treble staff.

The second system includes a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is on a single treble staff with lyrics underneath. The piano accompaniment is on two staves (treble and bass clef). The lyrics are: "I am dream - ing Dear of you Long - ing for you all the while". The piano part includes a *rall* marking and features chords and single notes.

The third system continues the vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is on a single treble staff with lyrics underneath. The piano accompaniment is on two staves (treble and bass clef). The lyrics are: "Day by day \_\_\_\_\_ Dream - ing when the More and more \_\_\_\_\_ Long - ing for the". The piano part includes a *rall* marking and features chords and single notes.

Musical Example 9: "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" by Leo Friedman and Beth Slater Whitson

skies are blue When they're gray; ——— When the  
 sun - ny smile, I a - dore; ——— Birds are

sil - v'ry moon - light gleams Still I wan - der on in dreams  
 sing - ing far and near Ros - es bloom - ing ev - 'ry - where

In a land of love, it seems Just with you. ———  
 You, a - lone, my heart can cheer You just you. ———

Musical Example 9: "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" by Leo Friedman and Beth Slater Whitson



CHORUS  
*p-f*

Let me call you "Sweetheart" I'm in love with you —

Let me hear you whisper that you love me too —

Keep the love - light glowing In your eyes so true — Let me

call you "Sweetheart" I'm in love with you. you. —

Musical Example 9: "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" by Leo Friedman and Beth Slater Whitson

Additionally, the original song is in the key of B ♭ major, but Lewis plays it in the key of G in Spanish tuning. He also reduces the harmony to a single static chord (I). Furthermore, Lewis plays “Let Me Call You Sweetheart” with a slide. On this song, his slide work is even looser than normal, which furthers the “folk” aesthetic—Lewis slides between notes a second, a third, and a fourth apart.

Lewis’s style of singing blues was deeply rooted in Memphis and Deep South traditions: his vocal melodies were simple lines that mostly moved in a smooth, conjunct motion; melodies began at a high(er) pitch level before gradually falling toward the tonic; the range rarely went beyond an octave; he did not use melismatic embellishments; he did not sing with vibrato; and his vocals were full of raw emotion. According to Charters: “[Lewis’s] singing had almost an amateurish hesitancy about pitch and phrasing, but this only enhanced the loose and informal feeling of Memphis music.”<sup>43</sup>

Lewis, more or less, always sang the same way. His only significant shift in vocal style occurred between his first and second recording sessions (1927). On the recordings from the first session, he moaned the blues instead of “singing” them. For “Everybody’s Blues” (Vocalion 1111), “Mr. Furry’s Blues” (Vocalion 1115), “Sweet Papa Moan” (Vocalion 1116), “Rock Island Blues” (Vocalion 1111), and “Jelly Roll” (Vocalion 1115), the moan is achieved via his primary vocalism. That is, a nasal slide that begins on the tonic note, moves to the dominant, and returns to the tonic—though Lewis clearly starts on the tonic, it functions as a grace note to the dominant rather than an independent melodic note, thus preserving the sense of a falling melodic contour typical of Deep South blues singing. The entire motion (sliding from tonic to dominant and back) happens multiple times over the course of a phrase. Some variation of this angular melodic idea

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<sup>43</sup> Samuel B. Charters, *Sweet as the Showers of Rain: The Bluesmen, Volume II* (New York: Oak Publications, 1977): 11.

is used as the foundation for each of these early vocal melodies—one variation occurs at 0:18 into “Everybody’s Blues” when Lewis sings one and a half iterations of the melodic idea (sliding from tonic to dominant to tonic to dominant) instead of a single iteration (sliding from tonic to dominant to tonic). Lewis is only a vocalist on “Everybody’s Blues,” “Mr. Furry’s Blues,” and “Sweet Papa Moan,” so it may be that he sang in this moaning style as a way to stand out from other blues singers of the time.

Lewis may have sung this way because he was “trying too hard” to convey the characteristic emotional weight of the Deep South blues. Or, it may be that record producers encouraged him to sing in this manner so that he would sound “more authentic.” Either way, his earliest recordings possess an exaggerated sense of pain and suffering.

When Lewis returned to the studio later that year, he was no longer moaning his lyrics. The vocal melodies for “Falling Down Blues” (Vocalion 1133) and “Big Chief Blues” (Vocalion 1133) particularly stand out as examples of his (perhaps newly formed) skill as a blues singer. In both instances, the initial slide from tonic to dominant is gone. The result is cleaner sounding melodies. And, by subduing the moan, he allowed the lyrics to serve as the primary vehicle for the blues’s emotion. He sang in this more reserved style on most of the rest of his pre-World War II recordings. But, he did revert to the nasal, sliding style on “Judge Harsh Blues” (Victor V38506) from 1928 and “Creeper’s Blues” (Vocalion VO 1574) from 1929, but these are the only exceptions.

When he was re-discovered in 1959, Lewis’s voice had matured. As is particularly evident in “Going to Brownsville” (Folkways FA 3823), his singing had become more forceful and his tone had deepened and became more rounded. He had also developed a complex approach to dynamics that gave his singing a richness not found on his pre-War recordings.

In the last couple decades of Lewis's life, his voice continued to deepen. He even developed a bit of a raspy quality. Most striking is that his singing nearly turned to shouting when he became overwhelmed by the emotion of performing (something that happened regularly during Lewis's later years). This is heard particularly well during "Furry's Blues" on the Alabama State Troupers Road Show's 1972 album *Live From A Moment* (Orpheum O-101).

Like his guitar playing, Lewis's singing rarely receives the praise it deserves. His singing was simple and it was consistent with local and regional traditions, but these are not bad things. Like his friend Booker White (whose vocal style is regularly praised), Lewis could sing loud and forcefully, but he could also sing softly and delicately like John Hurt (another of Lewis's colleagues frequently praised for his vocal style). Lewis may not have demonstrated great vocal range or the vocal dexterity necessary to execute intricate melodic passages, but his singing was dynamic and emotional. These are qualities that should not be overlooked.

### **Conclusion**

As a child of about ten years old living in Memphis, Tennessee, Lewis became so enamored with the music played by street performers and party musicians that he made himself a guitar from scrap materials. He quickly learned to imitate the music made by those around him. Not long after, he was touring the region with Jim Jackson, Will Shade, and possibly Gus Cannon as part of a medicine show. Combining all the sounds and lessons gained on the road with those from his hometown, Lewis developed a way to play traditional music with a little extra flair. While nothing he did was revolutionary, he was able to create music that is indebted to his musical tradition as well as his own creativity.

Lewis was not the best technical guitarist. This is obvious when comparing his records to those of Frank Stokes, Jim Jackson, and many others. His intonation was often faulty, his phrases

were not uniform, and he would start a song without ever thinking about the ending. Varied forms, inconsistent lyric structures, and simple harmonies are also found throughout Lewis's music. But these things are not faults in the music. Nor are they evidence that Lewis misunderstood the general principles that guided the Deep South music tradition. From the analysis above, it is clear that Lewis knew the principles of the style but refused to be restricted by convention. For the most part, he did what he wanted when he wanted to. His music is all the more interesting for it.

By combining innovation with tradition, Lewis's music is unpredictable yet familiar. Where a twelve-bar phrase with AAB lyric structure is expected, he might perform a fifteen bar phrase with AAAB lyric structure. Instead of playing a normal twelve-bar harmonic pattern (I-IV-I-V-I or I-IV-I-V-IV-I), he will use an incomplete IV chord to vary an otherwise static tonic harmony. Or, instead of singing an entire phrase, he will personify his guitar and let it take over the vocal line. Whatever the song or the situation, he allows his musical intuition and his emotion to shine through.

This is not to say that all of Lewis's musical eccentricities were for the betterment of the music. His theatrics and unpredictability were particularly problematic when Lewis played with a second guitarist or harmonica player. During an interview, Linzie Butler, Lewis's most regular harmonica player, said, "When you were doing shows with Furry, you didn't know what song he was going to start off with or what key he was going to be in. You just had to be ready because Furry would just take off however the mood hits him." This can be heard on the few recordings that survive of Lewis playing a live show with someone else. Lewis's performance on

*The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson is a particularly good example, as Lee Baker (who is playing off stage) stumbles for several bars before falling into Lewis's rhythm.<sup>44</sup>

While Lewis was never the most talented musician or the most skilled guitarist, he is far from the least entertaining. Part of his appeal is certainly connected to his charismatic personality and the magnetism of his lore, but these things would eventually fall flat if there was nothing sonically attractive and intellectually intriguing about his music.

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<sup>44</sup> For more information on Lewis's performance on *The Tonight Show* see Chapter 2.

## CHAPTER 6

### Furry Lewis in Summary

#### Preface

Furry Lewis was never the best or most famous musician in Memphis. Yet he made a substantial impact on Memphis's music culture. Even three and a half decades after his death, people throughout the city perform his music and share his stories. But why is this? As the previous chapters have shown, there are several contributing factors.

Lewis approached music differently from others. His music is founded in traditional musical processes and material but he, more than others, lived in the musical moment and refused to be restricted by convention—for instance, he had no qualms about following a 12-bar AAB stanza with a 15-bar AAA stanza. These things make his music feel more genuine. They also make his music more interesting, even if his musicality suffers.

Lewis was more than a bluesman or a songster; he was an entertainer. He understood his abilities and he knew how best to use them. If he failed to dazzle a crowd with his musicianship, he told jokes, performed “tricks” on his guitar, or smiled widely. Lewis, it seems, rarely (if ever) left an audience displeased. Even though his music was his central attraction, it was far from the only thing he had to offer.

He had the rare ability to be all things to all people. On one hand, Lewis's stories feed a mythology that shrouds him in mystery, engenders a sense of curiosity, and provides him with a heightened degree of credibility concerning Memphis music and history. According to his stories, he was a witness to many of the city's most important musical changes, including the launching of both W. C. Handy's and Elvis Presley's careers. He was extraordinary. But,

amazingly, the opposite is also true, as Lewis was in many ways a real-life stereotype of old African American blues musicians: he was poor, under-educated, and self-taught.

And Lewis approached life differently than most. Despite all he had to complain about (financial woes, personal relationship failures, alcoholism, chronic physical pain, institutionalized racism, etc.), he rarely did. He was always kind to fans and he was fiercely loyal to those he cared about. Although Lewis understood that his fans paid his bills (sometimes even directly), his friendly disposition seems to have been more than an act. Simply put, he had a gift for making others happy regardless of his own emotional state.

In recent years Lewis has made his way back into Memphis's musical zeitgeist through the renewal of his annual birthday celebration, the reinvigorated musical careers of his protégés, and a renewed interest in preserving the city's folk musical heritage. Because of these things, his music is once again being played in coffee houses around town, people are actively maintaining his gravesite, local periodicals are writing articles about him, and local radio stations are playing his music.<sup>1</sup>

### **Remembering Furry Lewis**

Lewis's musical legacy still vibrates through the music and music culture of Memphis. These "vibrations" extend from two parallel, though not completely separate, paths of influence. The first and most obvious of these paths connects Lewis with the young folk and blues musicians of the city. The second follows a continuum from Lewis to some of the city's most significant rock musicians.

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to my own efforts, local blues musician Eric Hughes visits Lewis's grave to ensure it is cared for. Hughes is a native Memphian who began performing at various establishments on Beale Street in 2001—his official biography on the Memphis Blues Society webpage claims he has performed around two thousand shows on Beale Street. He is a previous winner of the Memphis Blues Society's "Battle of the Blues" annual competition. He also holds multiple nominations for "Beale Street Entertainer of the Year," an honor awarded by the Beale Street Merchants Association. Hughes is a tour guide for the Memphis-based Backbeat Tours; on his musical tours of Memphis, he regularly performs Lewis's music.



Lewis's blues influence continues through Linzie Butler, Elmo Lee Thomas, and Zeke Johnson.<sup>2</sup> Of the three, only Johnson takes direct musical influence from Lewis, but Lewis has undeniably impacted the way each thinks about blues and Memphis music.

Butler is a harmonica player who grew up in a musical family in Jackson, Tennessee.<sup>3</sup> In the late 1960s, he was living in Memphis when he met Lee Baker, Jr.<sup>4</sup> The two quickly became friends and Butler was soon hired as the roadie for Baker's band, Moloch.<sup>5</sup> It was through Baker that Butler met Lewis. By 1974 Butler was regularly joining Lewis and Baker on stage at Peanut's Bar. As the friendship between Butler and Lewis developed, Butler became Lewis's regular harmonica player—according to Butler, Lewis reverentially referred him as “my harmonica boy” or simply as “Harp Boy.”<sup>6</sup> Butler played with Lewis on a fairly regular basis for the remainder of Lewis's professional life. The last show Butler played with Lewis was at the Orpheum Theatre shortly before Lewis's death.<sup>7</sup> Although Butler has played with several of Memphis's renowned blues musicians (such as Piano Red, Mose Vinson, Big Sam Clark, etc.), he feels most connected to Lewis.

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. David Evans is an active blues musician in Memphis who knew Lewis but does not consider Lewis to be one of his primary musical influences.

<sup>3</sup> Butler told me that his father, a musician and sharecropper, played with the original Sonny Boy Williamson. All of Butler's siblings are musicians of one degree or another. In addition to playing blues, Butler founded the reggae band Kaya and the Weldors [*sic*] in 1980s.

<sup>4</sup> John “Little Johnny” Larkin introduced Butler and Baker. Butler was in high school at the time.

<sup>5</sup> In my interview with Butler, he specified that Baker was the one that hired him.

<sup>6</sup> While in the dressing room at an event being held by the University of Tennessee at Martin, Lewis told Butler: “See, Harp Boy, you getting this blues thing right, but you don't drink enough.” Lewis then instructed Butler to grab a fifth of whiskey out of his guitar case. Butler secured the bottle and took a long drink. Lewis exclaimed: “Damn, boy! I didn't mean for you to learn it all at once.” This story was told to me during an interview with Butler at his home in Memphis, TN, on January 31, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Memphis shortly before the historic theatre closed for renovation on Christmas Day 1982. The Orpheum Theater, History, [https://www.orpheum-memphis.com/orpheum\\_theatre\\_info/history](https://www.orpheum-memphis.com/orpheum_theatre_info/history) (accessed: June 9, 2016). This was likely one of Lewis's last public appearances.

Elmo Lee Thomas (a harmonica player, electric guitarist, and vocalist) is a member of the Last Chance Jug Band and the founder of Elmo and the Shades—the Last Chance Jug Band is Memphis’s most popular jug band, and the Shades are a blues and soul band that has long been one of Memphis’s most popular party bands.<sup>8</sup> Thomas grew up listening to elderly blues musicians across the city, and while a student at Overton High School in the mid-1970s, he regularly attended Lewis’s shows at Peanut’s Bar. While he did not have a personal relationship with Lewis, and while he does not mimic Lewis’s sound, he claims Lewis as a major influence. According to Thomas: “Rufus Thomas and Furry Lewis, those guys, are kind of like the spirit of what I want my stage to be like: fun, a good fun time.”

Zeke Johnson, a folk blues musician and retired high school teacher originally from Ripley, Mississippi, perpetuates Lewis’s legacy more than any other currently active Memphis musician. Born in 1943, Johnson has lived in Memphis since he was in the sixth grade. After a stint as a vocal performance major, Johnson eventually earned a bachelor’s degree in history from Memphis State University (now The University of Memphis) and a teaching certificate from Southwestern at Memphis (now Rhodes College). He first tried to play the guitar when he was a child but did not commit to it until his release from the military—he used his G. I. bill to purchase a guitar, a sound system, and records. He began his music career playing at the Razor’s Edge, a coffee house co-sponsored by Memphis Methodist and Presbyterian foundations.

Johnson first became aware of Lewis when, in May of 1965, he heard Lewis perform at the Bitter Lemon as the opening act for folk singer Henry Moore. According to Johnson: “I had no idea who Furry was, but the minute I heard him play ‘John Henry’ I said ‘I got to know how

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<sup>8</sup> The Last Chance Jug Band is led by founder David Evans. The Shades are comprised of studio musicians from Stax and Hi Records. The band includes: Tommy Lee Williams (sax, flute, percussion, vocals); Harold Beane (guitar); Mickey Gregory (trumpet, vocals); John Groesse (bass guitar, vocals); and Brian “Big Easy” Wells (drums, percussion). Before his death in 2015, Ben Cauley was also a member.

to do that.”” During a break in Lewis’s set, Johnson asked him to strum the chords a few times so that he could secure the progression in his memory. He drove home to get his guitar, immediately tuned it down to Sebastopol (Open D), and began to duplicate what Lewis had played.

By 1974 Johnson was performing as one of Lewis’s regular second guitarists. He was also Lewis’s devoted pupil.<sup>9</sup> According to Johnson, Lewis was always willing to listen to him play and to provide feedback, but most of Johnson’s training, as it were, came from observing and imitating Lewis. The relationship was symbiotic. Lewis passed on his musical tradition to Johnson, and Johnson provided Lewis with much needed support both on and off the stage. By guiding Johnson’s musical development, Lewis was also able to shape Johnson into his ideal second guitarist.

Johnson’s guitar playing, lyric construction, and showmanship are all heavily inspired by Lewis’s. Though he does not play the guitar exactly like Lewis (he tends to strum with Lewis’s chord shapes rather than pick the notes), he does use his thumb to keep a constant beat and he uses the same frettings that he learned from Lewis. Lyrically, Johnson imitates Lewis’s formulaic construction by moving formulas freely between versions of Lewis’s blues. Johnson also inserts his first name into his lyrics as homage to Lewis.

At the age of seventy-two, Johnson plays more regularly now than he ever has; he plays coffee houses and smaller music venues in and around Memphis several times a week, and he even tours some, playing as far away as North Carolina.<sup>10</sup> And though his repertoire is substantial, he never fails to include at least a couple of Lewis’s songs in his set; these

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<sup>9</sup> Johnson’s playing incorporates influences from Lewis, Booker White, John Estes, Fred McDowell, Frank Stokes, Willie Johnson, and Bob Dylan. Johnson was also a close friend of White. He played on at least one occasion with Estes, McDowell, and Jessie Mae Hemphill.

<sup>10</sup> Johnson has been featured on blues radio stations in Texas and France.

performances are always bookended by a story or anecdote about Lewis. For Johnson's audiences, which are usually comprised of a nearly even split between older local music aficionados and younger non-Memphians, these performances serve to either remind people of an old friend or as an introduction to Lewis. In 2014 Johnson spearheaded efforts, along with Judy Peiser of the Center for Southern Folklore, to restart the annual Furry Lewis Birthday Celebration—the celebration was discontinued following Lewis's death in 1981. Johnson has also dedicated at least one track on each of his six albums to Lewis. Most of these are Johnson's versions of Lewis's songs, but one ("Furry Was A Friend") is Johnson's tribute to Lewis.

Johnson's playing is a relatively minor factor in his efforts to continue Lewis's legacy. More significant is the fact that he is able to instill a respect for Lewis's music (and for Lewis, in general) in the young musicians he mentors. Because of Johnson, these young musicians regularly add at least one of Lewis's pieces to their sets at coffee houses and "dive" bars around town. As a result, Memphis's young, creative (and typically white) musicians once again consider Lewis "cool." Johnson takes great pride in his ability to pass the lessons Lewis taught him on to the next generation of Memphis musicians. Kyle Carmon, one of Johnson's pupils, has self-produced an album of his versions of Lewis's songs ("Casey Jones," "Turn Your Money Green," "John Henry," "Creeper's Blues," "Grand Central Station," and "Furry's Blues").



Figure 21: Furry Lewis's Annual Birthday Concert  
Center for Southern Folklore, March 7, 2014  
Seated left to right: Jimmy Crosthwait, Zeke Johnson, Kyle Carmon  
Photograph by Tyler Fritts

Lewis's lasting impact on Memphis's rock scene is stronger than his impact on the city's blues. This influence is founded in friendships between him and a handful of influential young rockers (Jim Dickinson, Sid Selvidge, Lee Baker, Jr., Jimmy Crosthwait, and Don Nix) who established their reputations during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Nix is the most underappreciated Memphis rocker. In 1958 he and fellow classmates at Memphis's now-defunct Messick High School founded the band The Royal Spades.<sup>11</sup> In 1961

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<sup>11</sup> Nix played saxophone.

the band was rebranded as The Mar-Keys and recorded their hit single *Last Night* (Atlantic 8055) at Stax Records.<sup>12</sup> The success of the track led to the Mar-Keys being named the first house band for the quickly growing studio.<sup>13</sup> As such, The Mar-Keys were essential in creating the signature sound associated with this iconic American studio.

After parting ways with The Mar-Keys, Nix shifted from soul to rock. Although he enjoyed a somewhat successful recording career (recording for Elektra and Shelter Records), he is best known for his work as a producer and songwriter. As a producer at some of America's most influential studios (Stax, Shelter Records, Ardent Studios, and Muscle Shoals Sound Studio), Nix has worked with Leon Russell, John Mayall, Albert King, Freddy King, Isaac Hayes, the Staples Singers, Jeff Beck, Eric Clapton, The Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section ("The Swampers"), and George Harrison, among others.<sup>14</sup> As a songwriter, he is best known for "Going Down," which has been recorded by Jeff Beck, Deep Purple, J. J. Cale, The Who, Led Zeppelin, the Rolling Stones, Gov't Mule, Pearl Jam, and others.

Before he was one of the original architects of the "Southern rock sound," Nix was a high school student working as a stocker at a TG&Y store on South Main St. in Memphis. At the end of his shift (usually around midnight) he almost always saw Lewis sweeping the streets. Nix remembers Lewis stopping every so often to sit down to play for a few minutes—according to Nix, Lewis kept a guitar in the sweeper's cart. "I just thought it was a great thing," Nix told me

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<sup>12</sup> Siblings Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton founded Satellite in 1957. Satellite later became Stax (the name is a portmanteau of "Stewart" and "Axton" as well as a play on the phrase "a stack of records"). Axton's son, Charles "Packy" Axton, was a founding member of The Royal Spades. The name "The Mar-Keys," which was a play on the word "marquee," was chosen because Stax was located in a previously abandoned movie theater at the corner of College Street and East McLemore Avenue in Memphis, TN.

<sup>13</sup> Steve Cropper (guitar), Donald "Duck" Dunn (bass guitar), and Wayne Jackson (trumpet) were also members of the The Mar-Keys. Cropper and Dunn later joined Booker T. & The MGs, which served as Stax's house band after The Mar-Keys. Jackson is better known as one of The Memphis Horns (along with Andrew Love).

<sup>14</sup> Nix was a producer for Harrison's *The Concert For Bangladesh*, a 1971 benefit held at Madison Square Garden in New York.

during our interview at his home in Memphis in March of 2014. These encounters must have happened before 1959, as Lewis did not own a guitar before he was re-discovered.

Nix did not actually meet Lewis until Nix returned to Memphis following his service in the United States Army. By this time (the early 1960s), Lewis had already been “re-discovered” and was working towards rebuilding his reputation. According to Nix: “I started hanging around with him at his house. I found out who he was. I mean, I liked him anyway, but when I found out about his background, I got to hanging with him to see what I could learn.” When I asked how he found out about Lewis’s background, Nix laughed and said: “From him!”

Their friendship continued to develop, and by 1966 Nix was taking Lewis to Ardent Studios to record impromptu jam sessions.<sup>15</sup> In 1972 he recruited Lewis to be the “featured” member of his newly minted road show, the Alabama State Troupers.<sup>16</sup> Nix recalls the morning after Lewis arrived in Muscle Shoals for his first rehearsal with The Alabama State Troupers: “I had forgotten that no matter what time he went to bed Furry always woke up between five and six in the morning. He then woke me and I called room service and ordered his breakfast, then went back to bed for a few hours before rehearsal. I would have stayed up all night with him if I had to. It meant more than anything to me to be on this tour with him. Although Jeannie (Greene) and the rest of the band didn’t know Furry, by the end of the tour they grew to love him just as much as I did.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Nix no longer knows the whereabouts of these tapes. According to Nix, all sessions were recorded on three-hour tapes.

<sup>16</sup> In 1970 Nix asked Lewis to take part in Leon Russell’s television special in Los Angeles. For more on the Leon Russell television special and the Alabama State Troupers, see Chapter 2.

<sup>17</sup> Don Nix, *Memphis Man: Living High, Laying Low* (Metro-Jackson, MS: Sartoris Literary Group, 1997, 2015), 173. Nix also says: “Although Furry didn’t need to rehearse, I took him back with me [from Memphis] anyway so he could get to know everyone before the tour.” See Nix, *Memphis Man*, 172.

While Lewis's music did not directly influence Nix's, Lewis did have a significant impact on him. According to Nix: "He [Lewis] had more knowledge than I'll ever have and he could express himself better than most people. I still keep all my important stuff in a cigar box" just like Lewis did.

Lewis did have a direct musical impact on Jim Dickinson, Sid Selvidge, Lee Baker, Jr., and Jimmy Crosthwait. In the mid 1960s these men were among the first group of young, white Memphians to take a serious interest in the city's older African American blues musicians. While they got to know many of the older African American musicians (i. e., Gus Cannon, Booker White, and Robert Wilkins) by regularly attending folk blues concerts at local coffee shops such as the Oso and Bitter Lemon, they bonded with Lewis.

Dickinson (vocals, keyboard), Selvidge (vocals, guitar), Baker (guitar), and Crosthwait (percussion, washboard) formed the alternative rock band Mudboy and the Neutrons in 1972. They played a mixture of rock, soul, and folk imbued with blues sensibilities. Their sound was raucous, chaotic, and yet somehow elegant. By the end of the 1970s the band had established a devoted cult following. They remain among the most influential rock bands from Memphis; Tav Falco and his Panther Burns, the North Mississippi Allstars, and Big Ass Truck are among the bands claiming Mudboy and the Neutrons as direct influences.

Although they played many shows during the 1970s, 1980s, and into the 1990s, Mudboy and the Neutrons only recorded three albums: *Known Felons In Drag* (ROSE 98); *Negro Streets At Dawn* (Rose 328 CD); and *They Walk Among Us* (KOC-CD-7913). The song "Split Pea Shell" on *Negro Streets At Dawn* ends with Dickinson reciting Lewis's favorite poem about the



sitting president.<sup>18</sup> A version of Lewis’s “Going to Brownsville” is included on *They Walk Among Us*.

Dickinson, the most notable of the four, was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, but spent most of his life in Memphis. Following graduation from Memphis State University, he recorded at Chips Moman’s American Studio as a member of Bill Justis’s backing band. In 1966 he played keyboards for the Jesters’s “Cadillac Man,” recorded at Sun Studio. He was also an original member of the Dixie Flyers, a frequent backing band for soul musicians recording at Muscle Shoals Sound Studio and (primarily) at Atlantic in Miami. As a producer, Dickinson worked for Ardent Studio and Muscle Shoals Sound Studio. While at Ardent, he produced the now infamous *Third/Sister Lovers* (Rykodisc RCD 10220) by the Memphis band Big Star. Beginning in the late 1960s, he worked directly (as a keyboardist or producer) with Tav Falco and the Panther Burns, Mojo Nixon, Carmen McCrae, Sam & Dave, Ry Cooder, The Rolling Stones, and Bob Dylan, among many others.<sup>19</sup> Recording under his full name (James Luther Dickinson), he enjoyed a successful solo career, releasing eight albums in all—Dickinson’s version of Lewis’s “Casey Jones” is included on the album *Dixie Fried* (1972, Atlantic SD 8299).<sup>20</sup> Dickson died in August 15, 2009.

In his memoir, “The Search for Blind Lemon,” Dickinson writes about seeing Lewis perform live.

For our third date we went to the Oso coffee house which Charlie Brown had opened after the Cottage folded. The Oso was smaller, darker, older, and sleazier. Blues legend Furry Lewis was playing. I couldn’t wait. Charlie had found Furry living on Beale Street and working as a street sweeper for the city. Twice a day

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<sup>18</sup> For more on the poem, see Chapter 3.

<sup>19</sup> Dickinson is best remembered for playing piano on the Rolling Stones’s “Wild Horses” (COC 59100).

<sup>20</sup> Dickinson also compiled *Beale Street Saturday Night* (Orpheum O-101 (LP) and the three-volume set *Delta Experimental Project* (Fan Club FC 044; Fan Club FC 064; Birdman Records BMR 047); Lewis appears on volumes one and three.

with a push broom and a garbage can on wheels, Furry Lewis swept Beale Street-down the gutters and up the cracked and crooked sidewalks. Armed with my Webcor tape recorder I picked up Mary Lindsay and headed for the Oso in north Memphis.<sup>21</sup>

Dickinson adds: “He [Lewis] was an incredible entertainer. It was like watching a living montage of sixty years of American subculture from which I had been separated by lines of race. And now, here it was at my fingertips. I was like an overcharged battery. Mary Lindsay could tell it. ‘That was something special,’ she said when we were back in the car. ‘I feel lucky to have seen that.’”<sup>22</sup>

Selvidge was originally from Greenville, Mississippi, though he, like Dickinson, spent most of his life in Memphis. He was a musician, songwriter, radio producer, record label owner, and anthropologist.<sup>23</sup> During his senior year of high school, Selvidge met Nix, who, along with Dickinson, was working as a producer at John Fry’s newly opened Ardent Studios. Through this connection, Selvidge was given the opportunity to record a few tracks. These tracks led to a small record deal with Enterprise Records, a subsidiary of Stax, in 1969.<sup>24</sup> Thanks in part to Nix, Selvidge secured a recording contract with Elektra in 1971.

In all, Selvidge recorded seven solo albums, five of which include versions of Lewis’s songs: “All Around the Water Tank” on *Waiting On A Train* (PS-105); “Judge Bushey” on *The Cold of the Morning* (PS-101); “Pearlee” and “East St. Louis Blues” on *Twice Told Tales*

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<sup>21</sup> Jim Dickinson, “The Search for Blind Lemon,” *Oxford American: A Magazine of the South* 83 (Winter 2013), <http://www.oxfordamerican.org/magazine/item/555-the-search-for-blind-lemon> (accessed March 28, 2016).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Selvidge taught anthropology at Southwestern at Memphis (now Rhodes College).

<sup>24</sup> The resultant album was “Portrait” (Enterprise ENS-1003). See David Less, “Sid Selvidge Biography,” Memphis Music Hall of Fame, <http://memphismusichalloffame.com/inductee/sidselvidge/> (accessed June 11, 2016).

(Elektra 961473-2); and “Judge Boushey,” “Pearlee,” and “Kassie Jones, Pt. 1,” on *Live At Otherlands* (ARR-31923).<sup>25</sup> Selvidge died May 2, 2013.

Selvidge met Lewis at the Bitter Lemon coffee house in 1974.<sup>26</sup> According to Selvidge, it was Lewis who, albeit indirectly, led to his success as a musician. Selvidge says:

My major recollection of the Bitter Lemon was Furry Lewis. It was an epiphany. I remember Furry playing one night . . . I had never seen him before and I saw his act. He played slide and I had never seen anybody do that in person . . . What Furry did with a slide and with his voice. I think of Furry as a great, great singer . . . but what he could do with the voice he had was so melodic and where he went with it. And that he could do it and play guitar at the same time. At that point when I saw Furry, I wanted to be Furry Lewis. And that was probably the biggest change musically in my life.<sup>27</sup>

According to Selvidge’s son, Steve, Lewis “was one of the most significant men in his life.”<sup>28</sup> He explains: “My Dad, in addition to learning all his music, developed a bond with Furry that meant more to him than just the music and the scene . . . Dad had many funny stories about Furry’s escapades and sayings. But behind all of that was a deep respect and an even deeper gratitude for helping him into a musical world that was more raceless than what he had known before.”<sup>29</sup>

Selvidge adds: “From then on, Furry loomed large in our house.”<sup>30</sup>

According to Memphis music historian Robert Gordon, Baker’s first foray in to professional music came in the late 1960s when he was a member of the pit band at the W. C. Handy Theater in Orange Mound, a historically African American neighborhood in Midtown

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<sup>25</sup> “All Along the Water Tank” is based on Lewis’s cover of Jimmie Rodgers’s “Waiting For A Train” (Victor BVE 47223–4).

<sup>26</sup> Steve Selvidge, “Furry and Sid: On growing up among legends,” *Memphis Flyer*, March 6-12, 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Less, “Sid Selvidge Biography.”

<sup>28</sup> Selvidge, “Furry and Sid: On growing up among legends.”

<sup>29</sup> Selvidge has been an official member of The Hold Steady since 2011. The notion of race is addressed later in this chapter.

<sup>30</sup> Selvidge, “Furry and Sid: On growing up among legends.”

Memphis.<sup>31</sup> In the 1970s he was the driving force behind Moloch, an alternative rock band heralded locally for its creativity. The band's only album was recorded for Enterprise, a subsidiary of Stax, in 1969 (Enterprise ENS-1002). He also appeared on recordings by Alex Chilton, including Big Star's album *Third/Sister Lovers* (1978, Rykodisc RCD 10220). In the mid 1990s Baker formed Lee Baker and the Agitators. They recorded one album, *Fresh Oil* in 1996 (Blues Works Records BLW 5503). Baker died tragically in a house fire on September 10, 1996.

Baker was known for his signature guitar style, which drew heavily from Lewis. According to Gordon: Baker "and other blues enthusiasts began meeting the musicians who had invented the music they loved. Lee's soul particularly reverberated with that of a Memphis bottleneck slide player named Furry Lewis. You could not only hear Furry in Lee's playing but actually see Furry Lewis in Lee Baker. Furry even rechristened him 'Lee Bailey' and ordained him with the gift of a National steel guitar."<sup>32</sup>

Of the four members of Mudboy and the Neutrons, Baker was undoubtedly the closest to Lewis. They recorded an album together in 1969 (Adelphi/Genes GCD 9911), and Baker served as Lewis's primary second guitar player throughout the 1970s. According to Crosthwait, Dickinson (and others) thought Lewis sounded better without Baker but when Dickinson tried to discourage Baker from playing with Lewis, Baker apparently replied with a quip similar to "Yes, but I don't care." According to Johnson, "Furry and I sounded good together, there is no doubt, but he and Lee just meshed so well together."

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<sup>31</sup> Robert Gordon, "Still Getting Down: The legacy of bluesman Lee Baker will survive his tragic death," Memphis Flyer, <http://www.memphisflyer.com/backissues/issue396/comentry396.htm> (accessed June 11, 2016). Orange Mound was the first intentional community formed by African Americans for African Americans in the United States.

<sup>32</sup> Gordon, "Still Getting Down."

Crosthwait is an actor, poet, writer, puppeteer, and musician from Memphis.<sup>33</sup> Despite his varied interests, he has always been a musician. He grew up playing percussion, and in 1964 he and Dickinson recorded and released a jug band 45-rpm record under the name The New Beale Street Sheiks.<sup>34</sup> Through his appearances with Moloch and later Mudboy and the Neutrons, Crosthwait established himself as a top tier washboard player. Like his friends, Crosthwait's understanding of traditional blues rhythms was formed while watching Lewis play.

It was well known around Memphis that Dickinson, Selvidge, Baker, and Crosthwait were Lewis's closest friends. For a few years, if someone wanted to speak with Lewis about a gig or some other sort of professional appearance, they often found themselves going through the members of Mudboy and the Neutrons. These young men drove Lewis to and from gigs and they did their best to secure for Lewis financial compensation for all of his professional engagements. Dickinson, Selvidge, Baker, and Crosthwait considered themselves to be Lewis's main advocates, and Lewis lovingly considered them to be "his white boys."<sup>35</sup>

The Mudboy and the Neutrons roster began to change following Baker's death. First, Dickinson's sons, Luther and Cody, were added to the lineup. After Selvidge's death, his son Steve became an official member of the band. At this point, Mudboy and the Neutrons were rebranded as Sons of Mudboy, though Crosthwait remained a member. Today, they play a few concerts in Memphis each year. These concerts typically have little to no advertisement. People tend to find out through word of mouth. The events regularly have a capacity audience.

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<sup>33</sup> Crosthwait began his stage career as a member of the Memphis Children's Theatre. At seventeen, he became a street performer in New Orleans. In 1965 he moved to Florida to train as a puppeteer.

<sup>34</sup> "The New Beale Street Sheiks" is a take on The Beale Street Sheiks (Frank Stokes and Dane Sane). The Beale Street Sheiks recorded in Memphis in the late 1920s.

<sup>35</sup> Dickinson, "The Search for Blind Lemon."

Aside from their roles in Sons of Mudboy, Luther (guitar and vocals) and Cody Dickinson (drums) are the founding members of the North Mississippi Allstars, a rock band nationally known for their gritty, Deep South sound that draws directly from African American folk traditions of Memphis and north Mississippi where they grew up.<sup>36</sup> Their strongest influences are guitarists of the North Mississippi Hill Country blues (such as R. L. Burnside, Duwayne Burnside, Fred McDowell, Junior Kimbrough) and Hill Country fife and drum players (such as Othar Turner, Sharde Thomas) but Lewis certainly made an impact on them and their understanding of local music traditions. The North Mississippi Allstars's album *Shake Hands With Shorty* (2000, Tone-Cool Records TC34047-1177-2) features a version of Lewis's "K. C. Jones (On The Road Again)."<sup>37</sup> *Shake Hands With Shorty* also includes a version of "Shake 'Em On Down," though it shows little to no influence from Lewis.

A second version of "Shake 'Em On Down," again inspired more by Fred McDowell than Lewis, appears on their 2004 album *Hill Country Revue: Live at Bonaroo* (ATO Records 88088-21529-2) and another performance of "Casey Jones" is included on *I'm Just Dead, I'm Not Gone* (Memphis International Records DOT 0228 LP), a collaboration between the North Mississippi Allstars and Jim Dickinson. Their version of "Going To Brownsville" on the 2015 album *World Boogie Is Coming* (Songs of the South Records SOTS-015/SOTS 4502) is also indebted to Lewis's version of the song.

Like the Dickinson brothers, Steve Selvidge is also an active musician with national attention—he is a former guitarist for the Memphis-based rock bands Lucero and Big Ass Truck

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<sup>36</sup>Luther Dickinson was once a member of The Black Crows.

<sup>37</sup>*Shake Hands With Shorty* includes a version of "Shake 'Em On Down," though it shows little to no influence from Lewis.

and a current member of the Brooklyn-based rock band The Hold Steady.<sup>38</sup> Thanks to his father, Selvidge's childhood was spent at concerts and at the homes of Memphis's elderly blues musicians. Selvidge, though, was particularly close with Lewis. In an article for the *Memphis Flyer* titled "Furry and Sid: On growing up among legends," Selvidge writes: "Furry's music is some of the first I can remember. 'Cassie [*sic*] Jones' in particular—hearing my dad, Baker, and Dickinson playing and singing that song. They would trade verse after verse, with Jimmy Crosthwait always behind the washboard, everyone showing what they learned from Furry."<sup>39</sup> Selvidge continues: "I remember being really little, maybe two or three years old, and going over to just hang out at Furry's house . . . I loved going out there. The whole atmosphere just seemed really laid back and fun, and he was really nice to me."<sup>40</sup> He concludes: "These days, Furry Lewis means so many things to me. He's a familiar voice that always puts me at ease. Musically, he's a continuing inspiration to me, as well as a centering force . . . He was an important man in his [Sid Selvidge's] life, and he influenced my dad and all of his close musical friends in a way that will continue to provide me with musical guidance and inspiration."<sup>41</sup>

Lewis was brought the attention of the national rock audience when he unknowingly became the subject of a song by Joni Mitchell. Unlike his relationship with Nix, Johnson, and the members of Mudboy, his interactions with Mitchell were one-sided. This was not the first (or the last) time Lewis found himself in a toxic relationship with a young white person, but it does stand out as an example of the larger problem.

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<sup>38</sup> Selvidge has been an official member of The Hold Steady since 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Selvidge, "Furry and Sid."

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Steve Selvidge, "Furry and Sid: On growing up among legends," *Memphis Flyer*, March 6-12, 2014. Of Lewis's music, Selvidge writes: "Furry had a finger picking style that was exquisite, complex, and downright funky. His slide playing was otherworldly; at times it would take over the vocal and sing for him. Years playing in medicine shows . . . gave him the chops of a vaudeville entertainer." See Selvidge, "Furry and Sid."

When Lewis hosted Mitchell in his home in 1976, he thought she was interested in his stories because she was a fan. When her song, “Furry Sings The Blues,” was released later that year, Lewis soon came to believe that Mitchell should not be the only one to profit from his name and his life-story—it is likely that Lewis did not feel slighted until his friends suggested that there was something amiss with the situation. Lewis seems to have been mostly troubled with his not having received credit (artistic or financial) for the use of his story. In February of 1977 he told *Rolling Stone*:

The way I feel . . . is your name is proper only to you, and when you use it you should get results from it. She shouldn't have used my name in no way, shape, form or faction [*sic*] without consultin' me 'bout it first. The woman came over here and I treated her right, just like I does everybody that comes over. She wanted to hear 'bout the old days, said it was for her own personal self, and I told it to her like it was, gave her straight oil from the can. But then she goes and puts it all down on a record, using my name and not giving me nothing!<sup>42</sup>

Dick Waterman contacted Mitchell's management on Lewis's behalf.<sup>43</sup> According to Waterman, he was requesting Lewis receive at least half of the writer's credit for the song. He believes the small amount of money Lewis stood to receive from this deal (one quarter of the song's profits) could have given him “something to look forward to” and the artistic recognition may have kept him from feeling abused.<sup>44</sup> Responding to Lewis's and Waterman's request, Elliot Roberts, Mitchell's manager, told *Rolling Stone*: “All she said about him was ‘Furry sings the blues’ the

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<sup>42</sup> Mark Seal, “Furry Lewis is Furious at Joni,” *Rolling Stone*, February 24, 1977.

<sup>43</sup> Waterman was a major figure in blues during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. He is best known as a photographer and a promoter. I met with Waterman in June of 2016 when he gave the eulogy at the unveiling of Frank Stokes's headstone. The event was organized by The Mt. Zion Memorial Fund in collaboration with the Hollywood Cemetery.

<sup>44</sup> Waterman told me he believes Mitchell would have agreed to giving Lewis half of the writer's credit had the decision been hers to make.



rest is about the neighborhood. She doesn't even mention his last name. She really enjoyed meeting him, and wrote about her impressions of the meeting."<sup>45</sup>

Lewis's relationship with white performers created complex racial moments. Many of these were positive (for example, those with Mudboy and the Neutrons), some were not (such as those surrounding Mitchell's song), and others had little to no effect on broader racial dynamics. Nonetheless, race has been, and continues to be, a primary factor in Lewis's legacy. Considering the time and place where Lewis lived, this is unavoidable.

Lewis was born into a poor African American family in Greenwood, Mississippi at a time when post-Reconstruction Era politics and institutionalized racism à la Jim Crow were the norm. In Memphis, the lives of poor African Americans were better, but prejudice was a factor in every facet of life. Even as a moderately successful recording artist in the 1920s, Lewis was not treated as an equal to white men.

Lewis achieved a higher degree of artistic agency in the 1960s.<sup>46</sup> As such, his cultural and social capital was at its highest when race relations in Memphis were at their most tumultuous since Reconstruction. In 1959, the same year that Lewis was re-discovered by Charters, Memphis State University fully integrated its student body with the enrollment of eight African American undergraduates.<sup>47</sup> In 1962 the enrollment of James Meredith, an African American, into the University of Mississippi caused rioting in Oxford that overflowed into Memphis. A year later, a white supremacist group bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama in reaction to Birmingham's African American community organization protests for

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<sup>45</sup> Seal, "Furry Lewis is Furious at Joni."

<sup>46</sup> See Chapter 3.

<sup>47</sup> These eight African American students are known as "The Memphis State Eight." The riots surrounding the Little Rock Nine (the nine African American students who desegregated Little Rock Central High School) occurred in 1957.

civil rights. On April 4, 1968 Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated at the Lorraine Motel in downtown Memphis.

As racial tensions erupted into violence around Memphis, it became (even more) dangerous for black people and white people to openly associate with one another.<sup>48</sup> Lewis, however, continued to play music with his white friends and for a largely white audience—he is not the only African American blues musician to have done so, but he is a significant contributor to the bonding and bridging of Memphis’s white and African American communities.

While some white people were aggressively fighting against desegregation and the enactment of civil rights legislation, there were progressive, young, white people rebelling against the status quo. Although this rebellion took many forms, a genuine interest in the blues, *the* music of local African Americans, was an important way for these young white people to separate themselves from those who encouraged race-based hatred. Lewis and his music were at the center of this.

The benefits of a relationship between Lewis and young progressive whites (and especially between Lewis and Nix, Johnson, Dickinson, Selvidge, Baker, and Crosthwait) flowed in both directions. Just as Lewis gave these young white musicians credibility in the blues world, they gave him credibility with other young white people. By virtue of the “coolness” he borrowed from Nix, Johnson, Dickinson, Selvidge, Baker, and Crosthwait, Lewis possessed a higher degree of social and cultural capital that ultimately allowed him to traverse boundaries and operate within safe spaces (i. e., coffee houses patronized by socially liberal youths) away

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<sup>48</sup> Don Nix told me during our interview in March 2014 that Lewis once protected him from a group of young African Americans. According to Nix, upon arriving at Lewis’s apartment, a small group of young African American men began asking why he was in a black neighborhood. Nix went on to say that Lewis threatened the young men with a cane until they left.

from the racial tensions taking over his city.<sup>49</sup> In these safe spaces, he was able to further bond and bridge a fractured local community.

Lewis's role in easing and healing racial wounds should not be overstated. While he was important to the racial healing and understanding in Memphis during the 1960s and 1970s, he was not the most important person in this fight. It is also worth noting that some African Americans in and around Memphis felt Lewis was damaging the fight for equality by taking on the role of an "Uncle Tom."

Today, Lewis's contributions, like his biography, are often exaggerated, existing somewhere between fact and myth. An example of this is found in remembrances of Lewis's performance at the Memphis Country Blues Festivals held at the Overton Park Shell (now the Levitt Shell). Of the 1965 festival, the first Memphis Country Blues Festival to be held, Dickinson writes: The festival

created a symbiotic community of the remaining first generation blues musicians of the mid-South and the Memphis music underground bohemians. From the Insect Trust and Electric Blue Watermelon to Panther Burns and Mud Boy & the Neutrons, hipsters, hippies, and punk rockers have been interacting with Delta and hill country masters and the flow has gone in both directions. As surely as R. L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough can be heard in Tav Falco and Jon Spencer Blues Explosion, the chaos of the 'crazy white boys' has crept into the sound of every artist on Fat Possum. I perceive this to be a miracle.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> I approach "coolness" from the same perspective as Malcolm Gladwell in his article "The Cool Hunt." See Malcolm Gladwell, "The Cool Hunt," *The New Yorker* (March 17, 1997): 78-94. I also understand "coolness" as a form of social and cultural capital, per Pierre Bourdieu. See Pierre Bourdieu, "Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction," in R. Brown, ed., *Knowledge, Education and Cultural Change: Papers in the Sociology of Education* (London: Tavistock, 1973): 71-112.

<sup>50</sup> Dickinson, "The Search for Blind Lemon." Rev. Robert Wilkins, Joe Callicott, Sleepy John Estes, Hammie Nixon, Nathan Beauregard, and Booker White all performed alongside white musicians for a largely white audience at the Memphis Country Blues Festival from 1965 to 1969.

According to David Evans, Fat Possum's producers more or less imposed this concept of chaos on the African American musicians on their label.<sup>51</sup>

The 1968 Memphis Country Blues Festival occurred on July 20, 1968.<sup>52</sup> It happened more or less as planned, despite the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. three months earlier.<sup>53</sup> I have spoken with several people who were there that night in one capacity or another, and all recall the event as a haven from the racial tensions engulfing the city. One person even described it to me as a "post-racial environment" where skin color did not matter. As these sorts of perceptions come from a position of privilege (all of the people with whom I spoke are white), they undoubtedly differ from those of Lewis and the other featured musicians. However, they also provide important insight into the zeitgeist, suggesting that Lewis and the folk blues were understood, by at least some, as a socio-cultural bridge.

Race is also central to the disagreement between Lewis, Joni Mitchell, and her management. In "Furry Sings the Blues," Lewis is portrayed as the stereotypical "old-time" Memphis bluesman, and though he did fit this stereotype in many respects, Mitchell's portrayal of him is as misguided as it is accurate.<sup>54</sup> Mitchell sings: "You bring him smoke and drink and he'll play for you / It's mostly muttering now and sideshow spiel;" "Why should I expect that old guy to give it to me true;" and "Fallin' to hard luck / And time and other thieves / While our limo is shining on his shanty street." Lewis was poor, he did have a drinking problem, and he did

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<sup>51</sup> Personal correspondence with the author and David Evans, October 13, 2016.

<sup>52</sup> In addition to Lewis, Nathaniel Beauregard, Joe Callicott, Robert Wilkins, and Booker White also performed. A double LP of the concert was issued (Blue Horizon BH(E) 7-63201; re-released as Sire LP 97). The LP includes Lewis's performance of "Furry's Blues;" Lewis's "Skinny Woman" was unissued. Seymour Stein organized the event and Jimmy Crosthwait served as the emcee.

<sup>53</sup> The Lorraine Motel, the site of Dr. King's assassination, is less than five miles from the Levitt Shell.

<sup>54</sup> "Furry Sings The Blues" is the third track on the A-side of Mitchell's 1976 album *Hejira* (Asylum ASY 53053).

often tell fantastical stories, but these truths do not excuse the overt condescension that underscores Mitchell's lyrics.

While Mitchell may have meant to honor Lewis (and this is certainly possible), her poetics dehumanize him and his struggles. She treats him as nothing more than an allegory that she can use to make a general political statement—something akin to “It’s hard being poor and black.” She is not looking to improve his situation, but to profit from a non-consenting muse. Still, the debate of whether or not Lewis was entitled to compensation for the use of his name and story is tangential to the larger point that Lewis (be it rightly or wrongly) felt slighted by Mitchell.

Mitchell's “tribute” did produce some positive results for Lewis. Namely, it brought him to the attention of many who would otherwise have no interest in him or his music. Coverage of the disagreement also brought Lewis's financial and social condition to the attention of whites. Favorable publicity, sympathy, and financial gain ultimately resulted. It should also be noted that Mitchell's prominence likely led to her scapegoating, which resulted in her receiving harsher criticism than was perhaps warranted.

In placing Lewis in the proper social context, it is important to remember that he was not simply a powerless victim of racism and white privilege.<sup>55</sup> When it came to his involvement with any member of the younger, white intelligentsia—Mitchell included—Lewis willingly participated. He was aware of what he was doing and he did so of his own free will. It was these

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<sup>55</sup> In speaking on the history of minstrelsy, Christopher Smith presents an argument that is apropos to the conversation at hand: “Antebellum African American musicians, though disenfranchised by law and custom, were ‘larger-than-life’ symbolic inspirations, and, as a result, were observed, learned from, and (on occasion) imitated by blackface architects. Certainly unequal treatment was part of the antebellum experience for both slaves and free blacks. It is quite another thing, and an indefensible analytical presumption, to conclude that, because African American musicians were denied power, they were unable to identify, analyze, respond to, and symbolically contest racist structures.” See Christopher Smith, *The Creolization of American Culture: William Sydney Mount and the Roots of Blackface Minstrelsy* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 7.

arrangements, racially problematic as they may have been, that allowed Lewis to support himself. Furthermore, it is the confluence of white and black musical cultures that resulted in spectacular new music that was capable of bringing together people of different racial and cultural backgrounds for events like the Memphis Country Blues Festivals.

As was true during the Civil Rights Era, Lewis's current fan base is predominantly white. This has more to do with a declining interest in blues among African Americans than it does with anything directly related to Lewis. The social and cultural histories of the blues are entangled with the struggles, oppression, and hate of the past, and Lewis is (rightly or wrongly) connected with the painful memories (actual and cultural) of these circumstances. While it is interesting that Lewis's most devout fans are white and all but one of his musical disciples are white (Butler being the exception), these facts speak to a broader issue concerning the relationship between racial identity and the blues.

Before ending the discussion of Lewis's legacy, it is necessary to revisit his impact on blues scholarship—after all, this dissertation only exists because scholars before me provided the necessary foundational research to make it possible. In addition to his inclusion in Charters's *The Country Blues*, the book responsible for launching modern blues scholarship, Lewis is discussed in many other blues texts. The most important of these texts are: Evans's *Big Road Blues*; Tilton's *Early Downhome Blues*; and Oliver's *Songsters and Saints*.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Lewis granted interviews to many highly respected writers and researchers, namely Stanley Booth, Samuel Charters, Fred Chisenhall, David Evans, Fred Hay, Karl Gert Zur Heide, Steve LaVere, Margaret

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<sup>56</sup> Samuel B. Charters, *The Country Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1959); David Evans, *Big Road Blues: Tradition and Creativity in the Folk Blues* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Jeff Todd Tilton, *Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977); and Paul Oliver, *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984). For a more complete list of blues books that include Lewis, see the bibliography at the end of this dissertation.

McKee, George Mitchell, Paul Oliver, Jeff Todd Titon, and Bob West.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, Lewis's early recordings of "Kassie Jones, Pts. 1-2" are included on the first set of Harry Smith's influential *Anthology of American Folk Music* (SFW 40090).<sup>58</sup> Despite the anthology's bootleg origins, the collection's importance to American folk music scholarship is unrivaled. For many music aficionados, record collectors, and researchers, Smith's anthology provided the first interaction with the music of pre-War blues musicians, Lewis included. The popularity of the collection is, as such, crucial to the resurrection and re-popularization of Lewis's music.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Whether he lived eighty-eight years (1893-1981), as he would have us believe, or eighty-two years (1899-1981), as is more likely the case, Furry Lewis experienced a long, full life by any standard of measure. Perhaps the most striking feature of his life, though, is the dichotomy running throughout his story. In one sense, he experienced a life very similar to other African American men of his time and place. Born into a poor family in rural Mississippi just before the twentieth century, Lewis spent most of his life in downtown Memphis. Though he endured a severe physical handicap, he found work in a series of odd jobs and short-lived manual labor positions. Eventually, he secured what was considered by most accounts to be a "good" job working as a street sweeper for the City of Memphis. For decades, he suffered with failed romantic relationships and alcoholism. When he died, he had so little money to his name that he was buried without a proper tombstone.

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<sup>57</sup> I had the pleasure of speaking with Charters, Evans, Zur Heide, Titon, Mitchell, and LaVere during the early phases of my dissertation research. Each of these men remembered Lewis fondly and appeared genuine in their enthusiasm to speak with me regarding Lewis.

<sup>58</sup> Harry Smith, an experimental filmmaker, curated the anthology from his own collection of 78-rpm records. The complete collection is a six-album bootleg compilation of ballads, blues, country, and folk pieces recorded between 1927 and 1932. It is now considered to be a watershed moment of the American Folk Music Revival. It was first released in 1952.

A second reading of Lewis's life shows that he was anything but ordinary. As a boy, he built his own guitar. He eventually acquired a real instrument, which he learned to play by imitating the most talented African American folk musicians in Memphis, such as Jim Jackson, Frank Stokes, and Will Shade. After a devastating train accident resulted in the emergency amputation of his leg, he still managed to tour as part of one of the earliest known jug bands in the region. By the end of the 1920s he had established himself as one of Memphis's preeminent folk blues recording artists. After decades of obscurity, a serendipitous meeting with blues researcher Samuel Charters resulted in a rare second professional music career. He went on to play shows in New York City and Los Angeles, and he traveled abroad, performing in Norway. In the last few decades of his life, he opened twice for the Rolling Stones, entertained Joni Mitchell in his home, was a guest on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson, made a movie with Burt Reynolds, and was featured in an article in *Playboy* magazine. More amazing is that he became a sort of spiritual godfather to Memphis's alternative rock movement of the 1970s-2010s. Since his death, he has been honored with induction in to both the Memphis Music and Blues halls of fame.

Lewis exists as a shade, living between worlds of myth and reality, the common and the extraordinary. This dichotomy shaped his life, sustained his career, and it continues to define his legacy. As such, dichotomy has been a running theme throughout this dissertation. Lewis's inherent duality and ambiguity, a product of this dichotomy, is discussed in his biography in Chapter 2. Here, I show how Lewis actively manipulated his own story by drawing on cultural memory, deeply rooted traditions, and the gullibility of his fans. By leaning on Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s analysis of the Esu-Elegbara mythology, I reconcile the two seemingly disparate versions of his life.



The purpose of this dissertation has been to explore Lewis's life, music, and legacy by placing him in the context of Memphis's musical communities, both past and present. To that end, I feel I have been successful. Furry Lewis is a complex figure, and it is not always easy to tell if we are viewing him straight ahead or through a filter of myth, racial politics, or incomplete historical records. But, I hope I have shown why he is special and why people are still fascinated by the music he made.

Admittedly, this dissertation does not provide the final word on Lewis. My study of his lyric formulas can be expanded to trace each of the traditional lines to their earliest known form. Doing so will increase our understanding of the folk blues tradition and will offer further opportunities to compare and contrast Lewis's handling of them to that of other folk blues musicians. Lewis's melodies and guitar licks can also be traced and compared in similar fashion.

Lewis's struggles with a physical disability and alcohol dependence are only briefly addressed in the preceding pages, though they too provide interesting avenues for future inquiry. Doing so may reveal significant and otherwise unobtainable insights into the context and tradition of the blues, as so many folk blues musicians endured similar struggles. Furthermore, there may well be useful information gained by comparing Lewis's struggles and successes with limited mobility to those experienced by folk blues musicians with limited sight (such as Blind Blake, Gary Davis, John Estes, Blind Boy Fuller, Lemon Jefferson, Willie Johnson, Joe Taggart, et al.).

In writing this dissertation, I have not completed transcriptions of Lewis's entire repertoire but only selected portions of pieces I believed to be relevant to my goal of understanding Lewis's compositional style. For a musicologist with better ears than my own, constructing full transcriptions of all of Lewis's available recordings would reveal nuances in his

style that are not otherwise accessible. Full transcriptions of his complete catalogue would also show more thoroughly how Lewis's approach to certain pieces changes in relation to time and place.

It will also be interesting to revisit Lewis's legacy a few decades from now. Will Lewis's mythology grow? Will young people still be playing his music in Memphis coffee houses? Or, will he be all but forgotten?

I hope it is clear that Lewis was many things to many people: he was a student, a mentor, a colleague, an entertainer, a meal ticket, and a friend. But for me, he is mysterious and intriguing. I love listening to his music now more than ever, and I still get excited when someone shares stories of his high jinks with me. As I have said before, Lewis is a complex character whose stories of fame and fantasy perfectly compliment a musical style that alters the expected just enough to set him apart from the crowd.

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## APPENDIX A:

### Discography

This list does not include reissues of previously recorded materials. This list does preserve the various spellings of song titles as they appear on specific albums (e.g., “Kassie Jones” on Victor Vi 21664 and “Casey Jones” on RBF LP 202). Much of the information listed below has been compiled from previously published discographies.<sup>1</sup> All recordings are listed in order of recording date.

Personnel abbreviations: acc. – accompaniment; b – bass; bj – banjo; bk v – backup vocals; d – drums; g – guitar; h – harmonica; kbds – keyboards; kz – kazoo; md – mandolin; p – percussion; sp – spoken; v – vocals

Note: If no name is present for Personnel, Lewis performed all listed parts.

Personnel/ Take and Matrix Numbers <sup>2</sup> / Catalogue Notes	Track Name	Recording Dates/ Location/Label and Numbers
<b>Furry Lewis v; acc. Landers Waller g; Charles Johnson md-1; unknown sp</b>		
		<b>Chicago, 20 April 1927</b>
C-748*; E-5124*/25W; E-22683/84	Everybody’s Blues-1, 2	Vocalion Vo 1111

<sup>1</sup> C.f., John Cowley and Paul Oliver, eds. *The New Blackwell Guide To Recorded Blues* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996); Robert M. W. Dixon, John Godrich, and Howard Rye, *Blues and Gospel Records 1890-1943*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); Mike Leadbitter and Neil Slaven, *Blues Records 1943-1970: A Selected Discography* (London: Record Information Services, 1987); Les Fancourt and Bob McGrath, *The Blues Discography 1943-70*, 2nd ed. (West Vancouver, Canada: Eyeball Productions, 2012); Les Fancourt and Bob McGrath, *The Blues Discography 1971-2000*, 2nd ed. (West Vancouver, Canada: Eyeball Productions, 2011); and Stefan Wirz, “Furry Lewis Illustrated Discography,” *American Music*, <http://www.wirz.de/music/lewisfrm.htm> (accessed June 20, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> As in *Blues and Gospel Records 1890-1943*, this discography makes use of take and matrix number (See: Dixon, Godrich, and Rye, *Blues and Gospel Records 1890-1943*, 1997). According to Dixon, Godrich, and Rye: “Some recording companies allocated different matrix numbers to different ‘takes’ of the same tune recorded by the same artist on the same day. More usually, however, a single matrix number would be used, with letter or number suffixes (-a, -b, -c, or -A, -B, -C, or -1, -2, -3, etc.) to label the different takes. Sometimes the first take would have no suffix, then the second take would be -A or -1, and so on. Some companies used the same matrix number, with additional take suffixes, for further recordings of the same tune by the same artist at a later date; others would allocate a new matrix number for a recording made on a different day . . . For unissued titles the total number of takes recorded is shown. For Brunswick/Vocalion, and other companies which allocated a new matrix for each take, the issued take is asterisked (thus: C-123\*/4). In other cases the issued take is suffixed to the matrix number (thus: 4141-2). In those cases where the first take has no suffix and is the take issued, it is designated by a double hyphen, (‘- -’), but confusions in reporting mean that some such instances will be shown as though the take were unknown (‘-’) (Dixon, Godrich, and Rye, *Blues and Gospel Records 1890-1943*, xi).”

C-750*/1; E-5183*/84W; E-22685/86	Mr. Furry's Blues-1	Vocalion Vo 1115
C-752*/3; E-5185*/86W; E-22687-88	Sweet Papa Moan-1	Vocalion 1116
<b>Furry Lewis v/g; acc. Landers Waller g</b>		
C-754/5*; E-5122/23W; E-22689/90	Rock Island Blues	Vocalion 1111
C-761*/2/3; E-5180*/81/82W; E-22691/92/92½	Jelly Roll	Vocalion 1115
<b>Furry Lewis probably v/g</b>		
C-764/5; E-22693/94	The Panic's On	Vocalion unissued
<b>V/g</b>		
		<b>Chicago, 9 October 1927</b>
C-1246*/47; E-6688*/89W	Good Looking Girl Blues	Vocalion 1132
C-1248*; E-6698*/99W	Come Home Blues	Vocalion 1134
C-1250*/51; E-6694*/95W	Falling Down Blues	Vocalion 1133
C-1252*/53; E-6692*/93W	Big Chief Blues	Vocalion 1133
C-1254/55*; E-6690/91*W	Billy Lyons And Stack O'Lee	Vocalion 1132, Brunswick 80092
C-1256/57	Casey Jones	Vocalion unissued
C-1258/59; E-6696/97W	Mean Old Bedbug Blues	Vocalion 1134
C-1248*/49; E-6698*99W	Why Don't You Come Home Blues	Vocalion 1134
<b>V/g</b>		
		<b>Memphis, 28 August 1928</b>
45424-1	Furry's Blues	Victor V38519
42425-1	I Will Turn Your Money Green	Victor unissued: "X" LVA3032, Yazoo L1050 (LPs); Yazoo 1050, Document Doc DOCD5004 (CDs)
45425-2	I Will Turn Your Money Green	Victor V38506
45428-2	Mistreatin' Mama	Victor 38519
45429-1	Dry Land Blues	Victor 23345
45430-2	Cannon-Ball Blues	Victor 23345
45431-2	Kassie Jones-Part 1	Victor 21664
45432-1	Kassie Jones-Part 2	Victor 21664
45433-1	Judge Harsh Blues	Victor unissued: Yazoo L1050 (LP); Yazoo 1050, Document Doc DOCD504 (CDs)
45433-2	Judge Harsh Blues	Victor V38506

<b>V/g</b>		
		<b>Memphis, 22 September 1929</b>
M-181-	John Henry (The Steel Driving Man)-Part 1	Vocalion 1474
M182-	John Henry (The Steel Driving Man)-Part 2	Vocalion 1474
M-185-	Black Gypsy Blues	Vocalion 1547
M-186-	Creeper's Blues	Vocalion 1574
<b>V/g</b>		
		<b>Memphis, 18 February 1959</b>
	I'm Going to Brownsville	Folkways FA 3823
<b>V/g</b>		
		<b>Memphis, 24 February 1959</b>
	John Henry	Record, Book, and Films Sales RBF LP 202
	Casey Jones	Record, Book, and Films Sales RBF LP 202
<b>V/g/sp</b>		
		<b>Memphis, 3 October 1959</b>
	You Can Leave Baby	Record, Book, and Films Sales RBF LP 202, 202X [edited]
	Warm up [inst.]	Record, Book, and Films Sales RBF LP 202, 202X [edited]
	Longing Blues	Folkways FA 3823
	John Henry	Folkways FA 3823
	I Will Turn Your Money Green	Folkways FA 3823
	Pearlee Blues	Folkways FA 3823
	Judge Boushay Blues	Folkways FA 3823
	Casey Jones	Folkways FA 3823
	East St. Louis Blues	Folkways FA 3823
	Early Recording Career -1	Folkways FA 3823
	The Medicine Shows -1	Folkways FA 3823
<b>V/g</b>		
		<b>Memphis, 3-4 April 1961</b>
	John Henry	Bluesville BvLP 1036
	When My Baby Left Me	Bluesville BvLP 1036

	Shake 'Em On Down	Bluesville BvLP 1036
	Big Chief Blues	Bluesville BvLP 1036
	Old Blue	Bluesville BvLP 1036
	I'm Going Back to Brownsville	Bluesville BvLP 1036
	Back On My Feet Again	Bluesville BvLP 1036
	White Lightnin'	Bluesville BvLP 1036
	Roberta	Bluesville BvLP 1036
	St. Louis Blues	Bluesville BvLP 1036
	Baby You Don't Want Me	Bluesville BvLP 1037
	Done Changed My Mind	Bluesville BvLP 1037
	Goin' to Kansas City	Bluesville BvLP 1037
	Judge Boushay Blues	Bluesville BvLP 1037
	Casey Jones	Bluesville BvLP 1037
	This Time Tomorrow	Bluesville BvLP 1037
	I Will Turn Your Money Green	Bluesville BvLP 1037
	Frankie and Johnny	Bluesville BvLP 1037
	Longing Blues	Bluesville BvLP 1037
	Long Tall Gal Blues	Bluesville BvLP 1037
<b>V/g</b>		
		<b>Memphis summer 1962</b>
(Recorded by Sam Charters for the film "The Blues")	John Henry	Asch 101
(Recorded by George Mitchell)	Why Don't You Come Home Blues	Fat Possum FP80374
(Recorded by George Mitchell)	Furry Lewis Rag	Fat Possum FP80374
	Mistreatin' Woman	Southland SLP 14, Fat Possum CD 80374
	Fare thee Well, Old Tennessee	Southland SLP 14
<b>Add Will Shade (v-1/h-1/ oil can b- 2)</b>		
	Muscle Shoals Blues -1	Revival(E) RV 1004, Rounder LP 2006
	Furry Lewis Rag -2	Southland SLP 14
	Perolee (Why Don't You Come Home Blues)	Rounder LP 2006
	Good Morning, Baby	Revival(E) RVS 1008
	Brownsville Blues (Roll and Tumble Blues)	Revival(E) RVS 1008
	Glory, Hallelujah	Revival(E) RVS 1008
<b>V/g with Will Shade (jug-1); Laura Dukes (banjolele); Charlie Musselwhite; (h-2)</b>		

		<b>Memphis, 26 May 1964</b>
	When I Lay My Burden Down	unissued
tk 1	Casey Jones -1	unissued
tk 2,3,4	Casey Jones	unissued
	Don't Want No Skinny Woman- 2	unissued
	When I Lay My Burden Down	unissued
	John Henry	unissued
	Baby, I Know You Don't Love Me	Jefferson (Sw) SBACD 12658/9
<b>V/g</b>		
		<b>Memphis, August 1967</b>
	See That My Grave Is Kept Clean (Furry Lewis's Careless Love)	Arhoolie Arh F 1041  Fat Possum CD 80374, 7-1098
	Old Original Furry Lewis Blues	Revival(E) RVS 1008
	Worried Blues	Rounder LP 2006
	Hello Judge	Revival(E) RVS 1008
	Good Morning Judge	Rounder LP 2006
	Good Morning, Baby	Revival(E) RVS 1008
	Glory, Hallelujah	Revival (E) RVS 1008
	U.S. Waltz	Rounder LP 2006
(Recorded by George Mitchell)		
	Good Morning Judge	Fat Possum FP80374
	Worried Blues	Fat Possum FP80374
	Blues Around My Bed	Fat Possum FP80374
	Don't You Wish Your Mama	Fat Possum FP80374
	Roll and Tumble Blues	Fat Possum FP80374
	Old Hobo	Fat Possum FP80374
	Farewell I'm Growing Old	Fat Possum FP80374
	Furry Lewis's Careless Love	Fat Possum FP80374
<b>V/g/sp</b>		
		<b>Memphis, 3 July 1968</b>
	Mama's Fish	Asp LP 1, Arcola CD 1001



	When I Lay My Burden Down	Asp LP 1, Arcola CD 1001
	Kassie Jones with a Message From Furry	Asp LP 1, Arcola CD 1001
		<b>Memphis, 5 July 1968</b>
	John Henry	Asp LP 1, Arcola CD 1001
	Skinny Woman	Asp LP 1, Arcola CD 1001
	Going Away Blues	Asp LP 1, Arcola CD 1001
	Talking	Arcola CD 1001
	Talking	Arcola CD 1001
	Old Dog Blue	Arcola CD 1001
	Talking	Arcola CD 1001
	Let Me Call You Sweetheart	Arcola CD 1001
	Talking	Arcola CD 1001
	Farewell To Thee	Arcola CD 1001
<b>V/g</b>		
		<b>live, Memphis, 20 July 1968</b>
SBH 10303	Furry's Blues	Blue Horizon BH(E) 7-63201, Sire LP 97
SBH 10304	Skinny Woman	unissued
		<b>Memphis, 21 July 1968</b>
SBH 10330	Casey Jones	Blue Horizon BH(E) 7-63228
SBH 10331	Grand Central Station	Blue Horizon BH(E) 7-63228
SBH 10332	John Henry	Blue Horizon BH(E) 7-63228
SBH 10333	See That My Grave Is Kept Clean	Blue Horizon BH(E) 7-63228
SBH 10034	Let's Shake Hand in Hand	Blue Horizon BH(E) 7-63228
SBH 10335	Waiting For a Train	Blue Horizon BH(E) 7-63228
SBH 10336	Let Me Call You Sweetheart	Blue Horizon BH(E) 7-63228
SBH 10337	Big Chief Blues	Blue Horizon BH(E) 7-63228
SBH 10338	Take Your Time Rag	Blue Horizon BH(E) 7-63228

SBH 10339	Skinny Woman	Blue Horizon BH(E) 7-63228
SBH 10340	Glory Hallelujah When I Lay My Burden Down	Blue Horizon BH(E) 7-63228
SBH 10341	Furry's Blues	unissued
(Above also issued on U.S. Blue Horizon LP BM 4605)		
		<b>Memphis, 6 September 1968</b>
	St. Louis Blues	Saydisc/Matchbox(E) SDR 190, Autogram ALLP 265
	Furry Lewis' Blues	Saydisc/Matchbox(E) SDR 190, Autogram ALLP 265
	When I Lay My Burden Down	Saydisc/Matchbox(E) SDR 190, Autogram ALLP 265
	Kassie Jones	Saydisc/Matchbox(E) SDR 190, Autogram ALLP 265
	Going to Brownsville	Saydisc/Matchbox(E) SDR 190, Autogram ALLP 265
	Skinny Woman	Saydisc/Matchbox(E) SDR 190, Autogram ALLP 265
	See That My Grave is Kept Clean	Saydisc/Matchbox(E) SDR 190, Autogram ALLP 265
	John Henry	Saydisc/Matchbox(E) SDR 190, Autogram ALLP 265
	Furry Lewis Rag	Saydisc/Matchbox(E) SDR 190, Autogram ALLP 265
	Careless Love	Saydisc/Matchbox(E) SDR 190, Autogram ALLP 265
	My Blue Heaven	Saydisc/Matchbox(E) SDR 190, Autogram ALLP 265
	Old Dog Blue	Saydisc/Matchbox(E) SDR 190, Autogram ALLP 265

	Spanish Flang Dang	Saydisc/Matchbox(E) SDR 190, Autogram ALLP 265
	Highway 61	Saydisc/Matchbox(E) SDR 190, Autogram ALLP 265
	Toast	Saydisc/Matchbox(E) SDR 190, Autogram ALLP 265
	Glory Hallelujah	unissued
	Nearer My God To Thee	unissued
	Turkey in the Straw	unissued
(Above also issued on Roots(Au) LP 505, with most songs re-titled)		
		<b>Memphis, November 1968</b>
	Casey Jones (Ramblin' Mind)	Biograph BLP 12017
	Harry Furry Blues	Biograph BLP 12017
	Every Day of the Week	Biograph BLP 12017
	Grieve My Mind	Biograph BLP 12017
	Beale Street Blues	Biograph BLP 12017
	When I Lay My Burden Down	Biograph BLP 12017
		<b>Memphis, 5 March 1969</b>
	Going to Brownsville	Barclay(F) LP 920 352
	John Henry	Barclay(F) LP 920 352
	Casey Jones	Barclay(F) LP 920 352
	St. Louis Blues	Barclay(F) LP 920 352
	Judge Boushé Blues	Barclay(F) LP 920 352
	Just a Little Fun	Barclay(F) LP 920 352
	Going Back to Gary	Barclay(F) LP 920 352
	When the Saints Go Marching Home	Barclay(F) LP 920 352
	A Dog Named Blue	Barclay(F) LP 920 352
	Baby That's All Right	Lucky Seven CD 9206
	M For Memphis	Lucky Seven CD 9206
	Worried Blues	Lucky Seven CD 9206
	Lay My Burden Down	Lucky Seven CD 9206
	Let Me Call You Sweetheart	Lucky Seven CD 9206

	Furry's Rag (Take Your Time Baby)	Lucky Seven CD 9206
	Furry Talking	Lucky Seven CD 9206
	Water Tank	Lucky Seven CD 9206
	Make Me A Pallet On Your Floor	Lucky Seven CD 9206
	The Bugle Song	Lucky Seven CD 9206
	How Furry's Doin'	Lucky Seven CD 9206
	Fourth & Beale (F&T Rag)	Lucky Seven CD 9206
	God Be With Us 'Til We Meet Again	Lucky Seven CD 9206
		<b>Memphis, 21 March 1969</b>
	Glory, Glory, Hallelujah	Advent LP 2805
		<b>live, Memphis, 12 June 1969</b>
	Furry Lewis Blues	Arhoolie CD 385
	Walking Blues	Blue Thumb BT 6000
	Judge Boushay Blues	Blue Thumb BT 6000
<b>Furry Lewis V/g; Gus Cannon (v/bj); Willie Morris (g-2); Mike Stewart (g-3); Dewey Corley (kz/b)</b>		
		<b>Memphis, 7 &amp; 10 October 1969</b>
	On the Road Again -3	Adelphi AD 1007
	Why Don't You Come Home Blues	Adelphi AD 1007
	Oh Babe	Adelphi AD 1007
	I've Got a Bird to Whistle - 1,2	Adelphi AD 1007
	Furry's Worried Blues -1,2	Adelphi AD 1007
	Natural Born Eastman No. 2	Adelphi AD 1009
	New Turn Your Money to Green -1,2	Adelphi AD 1009
<b>V/g with Lee Baker Jr. (g)</b>		
		<b>Memphis, 1969</b>
	Judge Boushe	Adelphi/Genes GCD 9911
	Take Your Time	Adelphi/Genes GCD 9911
	East St. Louis Blues	Adelphi/Genes GCD 9911

	Let Me Call You Sweetheart	Adelphi/Genes GCD 9911
	See That My Grave is Kept Clean	Adelphi/Genes GCD 9911
	St. Louis Blues	Adelphi/Genes GCD 9911
	If You Follow Me Babe	Adelphi/Genes GCD 9911
	Glory Hallelujah	Adelphi/Genes GCD 9911
	Natural Born Eastman (Kassie Jones)	Adelphi/Genes GCD 9911
	Bugle Waltz	Adelphi/Genes GCD 9911
	How Long	Adelphi/Genes GCD 9911
	John Henry	Adelphi/Genes GCD 9911
<b>G/sp-1; Ward Schaffer v-2/g-3</b>		
		<b>live, Gaslight, NY, August 1971</b>
	Introduction	Ampex A10140 (LP)
	Paer Lee	Ampex A10140 (LP)
	My Dog Got the Measles	Ampex A10140 (LP)
	Nero My God to Thee [sic.]	Ampex A10140 (LP)
	The Accident -1	Ampex A10140 (LP)
	East St. Louis Blues	Ampex A10140 (LP)
	Waiting for a Train	Ampex A10140 (LP)
	When I Lay My Burdon Down [sic.]	Ampex A10140 (LP)
	Introduction for Ward Schaffer	Ampex A10140 (LP)
	Move to Kansas City -2,3	Ampex A10140 (LP)
	Pallet on the Floor -3	Ampex A10140 (LP)
	Brownsville	Ampex A10140 (LP)
	Furry's Blues	Ampex A10140 (LP)
	The President -1	Ampex A10140 (LP)
	John Henry	Ampex A10140 (LP)
	Turn Your Money Green	Ampex A10140 (LP)
	K.C. Jones	Ampex A10140 (LP)
(LP10140 also on Collector's Issue C-5525 (LP))		
<b>Sp.</b>		
		<b>unk loc, c. 1971</b>

	Spoken introduction to “I Saw The Light”	Elektra EKS 74101 (LP)
(Credited to Don Nix and entitled “Living by the Days” – the remaining tracks do not feature Furry Lewis)		
<b>V/g</b>		
		<b>unk loc, c. 1971</b>
	Iuka	Shelter SW-8902 (LP)
(LP 74101 is credited to Don Nix and entitled “In God We Trust” –the remaining tracks do not feature Furry Lewis)		
<b>V/g</b>		
		<b>live, Long Beach Civic Auditorium, CA 15 October 1971</b>
	Furry’s Blues	Elektra 62010 (LP)
	Baby Make Me Stay/The Gypsy Told Me	Elektra 62010 (LP)
	Right Hand Road	Elektra 62010 (LP)
	A Chicken Ain’t Nothin’ But A Bird	Elektra 62010 (LP)
	Battle Hymn of the Republic	Elektra 62010 (LP)
	When I Lay My Burden Down	Elektra 62010 (LP)
(LPs 62010 and 75022 credited to The Alabama State Troupers Road Show)		
<b>V/g</b>		
		<b>live, Orpheum Theatre, Memphis, c. 1972</b>
	Furry’s Blues	Orpheum O-101 (LP)
	Chicken Ain’t Nothin’ But a Bird	Orpheum O-101 (LP)
	Furry’s Blues	Fan Club (F) FC 044 (LP)
	Turkey In the Straw	Fan Club (F) FC 044 (LP)
(Recorded by Jim Dickinson)		
<b>V/g</b>		
		<b>Memphis, 6 March 1973</b>

	Good Morning Blues (Meet Furry Lewis)	Southland SLP-3
	Take Your Time Baby	Southland SLP-3
	Judge Boushe	Southland SLP-3
	Take Me Back Baby	Southland SLP-3
	B-L-A-C-K	Southland SLP-3
	Every Day in the Week (Got Me a Gal)	Southland SLP-3
	Sara Lee	Southland SLP-3
	Kansas City	Southland SLP-3
	My Baby Don't Want Me (Why Don't You Tell Me So)	Southland SLP-3
	Glory, Glory, Hallelujah (May Good Be With Us Till We Meet Again)	Southland SLP-3
<b>V/g</b>		
		<b>live, Cahn Auditorium, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, 28 September 1973</b>
	Furry Lewis' Blues/"Tailor" Story	Memphis Archives MA 7009 (CD)
<b>V with prob. Don Nix (overdubbed) v/g; Barry Beckett kbds; Pete Carr g; Eddie Hinton g David Hood b; Klaus Voorman b; Roger Hawkins d; Jeanie Greene bk vs; Claudia Lennaer bk vs; Tim Smith p/g/bk vs; Steve Smith kbds/g/bk vs; Wayne Perkins (g/bk vs; Bobby Manuel g; Larry Raspberry g</b>		
		<b>Memphis and/or Muscle Shoals, AL, 1973</b>
	When I Lay My Burden Down (Dedicated to Fred McDowell)	Enterprise ENS-1032 (LP)
(LP 1032 is credited to Don Nix – the remaining tracks do not feature Furry Lewis)		
<b>V/g</b>		

		<b>live, Illinois Valley Community College, Bloomington, IL, 20 March 1974</b>
	“Mother” Story/Mary Tell Blues	Memphis Archives MA 7008 (CD)
(Furry Lewis also recorded ten unissued recordings for Steve LaVere in Memphis, TN 1973-1976)		
<b>V/g</b>		
		<b>Memphis, 4 May 1980</b>
Recordings made by Michael Hortig		
	Going to Brownsville	Wolf (AU) 120.911 (LP/CD)
	Happy Birthday	unissued
	Six unknown titles	unissued



**APPENDIX B:**

**Unpublished Discography**

This list includes recordings of Furry Lewis playing for/with blues researchers. The recordings are held in private collections or university archives. In the case of the former, the recordings were loaned to me for use in this dissertation. None of the material listed below has been published. Unlike the Discography, this list is not comprehensive; only the materials available to me are included.

Personnel abbreviations: g – guitar; sp – spoken; v – vocals

Note: If no name is present for Personnel, Lewis performed all listed parts.

Personnel/Notes	Track Name	Recording Dates/Location
<b>Furry Lewis, v/g</b>		
		<b>7 February, 1967, Lewis's home in Memphis, TN</b>
	Every Day of the Week	
	Furry's Blues	
	Let Me Call You Sweetheart	
	Take Your Time Baby	
	Toast	
	John Henry	
(Recorded by Harry Godwin and Jack Hurley)		
Memphis State University Oral History Project - University of Memphis, Special Collections		
<b>V/g</b>		
		<b>18 March 1967, Lewis's home in Memphis, TN</b>
	St. Louis Blues	
	Take Your Time Baby	
	Every Day of the Week	
	John Henry	
	Casey Jones	
	Let Me Call You Sweetheart	
	Make Me A Pallet On Your Floor	
	Water Tank	
	Water Tank (tk 2)	

(Recorded by Jack Hurley and Harry Godwin)		
Memphis State University Oral History Project - University of Memphis, Special Collections		
<b>Sp</b>		
		<b>4 May, 1967</b>
	Interview	
(Recorded by Dick Allen and Jack Hurley)		
Tulane University Archives		
<b>V/g (electric)</b>		
		<b>20-21 March 1969, Lewis's home in Memphis, TN</b>
	Let Me Call You Sweetheart	
	When I Lay My Burden Down	
	Casey Jones	
	Judge Boushé Blues	
	John Henry	
	The Dirty Dozens	
	Blues – One Kind Favor	
	There's No Place Like Home	
	Toast about President Nixon	
	Chicken Reel	
	East St. Louis Blues	
(Recorded by David Evans)		
D. K. Wilgus Collection, UCLA Ethnomusicology Archive		
		<b>1970, Wisconsin Delta Blues Festival, Furry Lewis Workshop, Beloit, Wisconsin</b>
<b>V/g</b>	Furry's Blues	
	Casey Jones	
	Going to Brownsville	
	Let Me Call You Sweetheart	
	Good Morning Blues	
	Glory, Glory Hallelujah	

(Recroded by Jeff Todd Titon)		
Personal Archive		
		<b>2 February 1979, Lewis's home in Memphis, TN</b>
<b>Add David Evans (g)</b>	Farewell to Thee	
	Baby, That's All Right / Every Day of the Week	
	Let Me Call You Sweetheart	
	The Woman I'm Loving Blues	
	St. Louis Blues	
<b>Add David Evans (g)</b>	Casey Jones	
	Turkey in the Straw	
	I'm Going Away / Stack O'Lee	
	Furry Messes Around	
<b>Add David Evans (g)</b>	Good Morning Judge	
<b>Add David Evans (g)</b>	John Henry	
	Will The Circle Be Unbroken	
<b>V/g</b>		
(Recorded by Jeff Todd Titon)		
Private Archive		

## APPENDIX C:

### Timeline of Significant Events (Historical and Otherwise) in Furry Lewis's Life

Note: The source of each event is given parenthetically beside the date. These sources are meant to be cross-referenced with the included bibliography.

- 1893
  - Born (Godwin and Hurley 1967b; Arhoolie CD 385; Lewis to LaVere; Allan and Godwin 1967)
- 1894
  - Born (Godwin and Hurley 1967a; Evans 1979)
- 1895
  - Born (Godwin and Hurley 1967a)
- 1896
  - Born (1940 Census)
- 1897
- 1898
  - Born (WWI Draft Card)
- 1899
  - Born (1900 Census; 1910 Census; 1930 Census; niece Ophelia to LaVere; Lewis to LaVere)
- 1900
  - Began to learn to play guitar (Godwin and Hurley 1967a)
  - Came to Memphis (Godwin and Hurley 1967a; Evans 1979 [Does not learn guitar before this]; LaVere 1973)
- 1901
  - Began to learn to play guitar (Godwin and Hurley 1967a)
  - Moved to Memphis (Godwin and Hurley 1967a)
- 1902
  - Began to learn to play guitar (Godwin and Hurley 1967a)
  - Began to learn to play guitar (Godwin and Hurley 1967a)
  - Moved to Memphis (Polk City Directory, 1902)
- 1903
- 1904
- 1905
- 1906
  - Left Greenwood for Medicine Show (Barlow 1989; Charters 1959; Olsson 1970)
- 1907
  - Began to learn to play guitar (Evans 1979)
- 1908
  - Began to learn to play guitar (Evans 1979)
  - Moved to Memphis (Olsson 1970)
- 1909

- Born (Evans 1979)
- Handy played for E. H. Crump mayoral campaign
  - Lewis said he was with Handy and Crump (Godwin and Hurley 1967a)
- Moved to Memphis (Olsson 1970)
- 1910
  - Attending school (1910 Census; 1940 Census says completed 4 grades)
  - Started making money through music (Godwin and Hurley 1967a)
- 1911
- 1912
- 1913
  - Received guitar from Handy (Godwin and Hurley 1967b)
- 1914
  - Worked as full-time musician (Godwin and Hurley 1967a)
  - Received guitar from Handy (Godwin and Hurley 1967b)
- 1915
  - Worked as full-time musician (Godwin and Hurley 1967a)
  - Received guitar from Handy (Godwin and Hurley 1967b)
- 1916
  - Lost leg [said this was definitely before he met Handy] (Godwin and Hurley 1967a)
  - Met Handy (Godwin and Hurley 1967a; Godwin and Hurley 1967b; Evans 1979)
  - Played with Memphis Jug Band (Evans 1979)
- 1917
  - Met Handy (Godwin and Hurley 1967a; Evans 1979)
  - Played with Memphis Jug Band (Evans 1979)
- 1918
  - Lived with mother (WWI Draft Card)
  - Worked for Economy Coal Company as dray driver (WWI Draft Card)
  - Met Handy (Godwin and Hurley 1967a)
- 1919
- 1920
  - Played at Jim Kinnane's [early 1920s] (Godwin and Hurley 1967a)
  - Traveled with Memphis Jug Band to Chicago, New York, Washington, elsewhere [1920s] (Godwin and Hurley 1967a)
  - Began playing slide style [1920s] (Godwin and Hurley 1967a)
- 1921
- 1922
- 1923
- 1924
- 1925
  - Last saw Charley Patton (Evans 1969)
  - Took job sweeping streets for the City of Memphis (Lewis to LaVere 1969)
- 1926
  - Last saw Charley Patton (Evans 1969)
- 1927

- “Discovered” by Jack Kapp
  - Recorded in Chicago at Brunswick for Vocalion
- 1928
  - Dropped from Vocalion
  - Signed to Victor by Ralph Peer
  - Recorded for Victor in Memphis
- 1929
  - Recorded for Vocalion
- 1930
  - Worked as street sweeper for the City of Memphis (1930 Census)
- 1931
- 1932
- 1933
- 1934
- 1935
- 1936
- 1937
- 1938
- 1939
- 1940
  - Lived alone on Dunlap (1940 Census)
  - Single
  - Worked as wood salesman with other source of income (1940 Census)
- 1941
- 1942
  - Met Joe Hill Louis and played Greasy Corner for Raggedy Britches (Evans 1969)
- 1943
- 1944
- 1945
- 1946
- 1947
- 1948
- 1949
- 1950
- 1951
- 1952
- 1953
- 1954
- 1955
- 1956
  - Appeared in photograph of Rev. Hooks’s Congregation (LaVere interview)
- 1957
- 1958
- 1959

- Met Sam Charters
- Worked as street sweeper for the City of Memphis (Charters 2004)
- Stella identified as “wife” (Charters 1959)
- 1960
- 1961
- 1962
- 1963
  - Performed with Gus Cannon and Willie Borum at NYU (Charters 1977; *Jet* 1963)
- 1964
  - Became associated with Memphis folk scene, ca. 1964 (throughout 1960s)
- 1965
- 1966
- 1967
  - Interviewed for MSU Oral History Project
- 1968
  - Played Memphis Country Blues Festival
- 1969
  - Interviewed by David Evans
  - Recorded by Terry Manning at Lewis’s apartment at Fourth and Beale
  - Performed at Preservation Hall in New Orleans (Olsson 1970)
  - Met Steve LaVere (LaVere interview)
  - Lived with Versie (LaVere interview)
- 1970
  - Featured article in *Playboy* (Booth 1970)
  - Played Wisconsin Delta Blues Festival
  - Versie identified as “wife” (Booth 1970)
- 1971
- 1972
  - Joined the Alabama State Troupers Road Show
- 1973
  - Joined the Memphis Blues Caravan
- 1974
  - Appeared on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson
- 1975
  - Appeared in *W. W. and the Dixie Dance Kings*
  - Played in Norway at the Molde Jazz Festival
  - Opened for the Rolling Stones in Memphis, Tennessee
  - Played for opening of Muhammad Ali Theater in Memphis (Crosthwait interview)
- 1976
  - Joni Mitchell’s “Furry Sings the Blues” is released
- 1977
- 1978
  - Opened for the Rolling Stones in Memphis, Tennessee
- 1979

- Interviewed by David Evans
- 1980
- 1981
  - Apartment fire
  - Heart attack
  - Dies



**APPENDIX D:**

**Furry Lewis Interviewed by Johnny Carson on *The Tonight Show*, July 11, 1974  
(Full Transcript)**

Johnny Carson: My next guest was supposed to be with us last night, but we ran short of time and we invited him back tonight. He's a grand old man. He's been a blues musician since the 1920s and used to play with the famous W.C. Handy, who wrote the "St. Louis Blues." And he is still working with a group . . . active with a group called the Memphis Blues Caravan and they're going to be touring colleges this fall. Would you give a nice welcome, please, to Furry Lewis?

[Audience applause]

JC: Have you met all these people here? I'm going to put you right here, Furry.

Furry Lewis: Hello. How are you? Pleasure to meet you, sir.

JC: That's Ms. Pleshette, and Mr. McLean Stevenson with the bad collar.

FL: Furry Lewis. Furry Lewis.

JC: Huh? Just sit right down there, would you, Furry?

[Audience applause]

JC: How are you? Nice to meet you. I heard you rehearsing yesterday and I'm glad...we're glad you could stay over and be with us tonight.

FL: Well, I'll greatly do it.

JC: Yeah. Is it true you used to play with W.C. Handy?

FL: Oh, yes. I come up with . . . and we used to play together.

JC: Yeah.

FL: For about forty-some years.

JC: Yeah. Memphis is home for you, is that right, somebody tells me?

FL: Who? My home?

JC: Memphis, Tennessee, you came . . . flew in from Memphis?

FL: I did.

JC: Yeah. Do you like flying?

FL: I don't. [Laughs]

[Audience laughs]

JC: Don't care for it at all, huh?

FL: I really don't.

JC: How old are you? Would you mind telling us?

FL: Eighty-one.

JC: Eighty-one.

FL: I was born the sixth of March in 1893.

[Audience applause]

JC: 1893. Where did you get the name . . . it's F-U-R-R-Y, Furry. Right?

FL: Well, that's just a nickname that I had when I was going to school.

JC: Yeah.

FL: Yeah, you know, I went to school, that'd been many years ago when I went to school. I didn't learn nothing, I stayed in school ten years and had to burn the schoolhouse down to get me out of the first grade. [Laughs]

[Audience laughs]

JC: But you've been playing music since you were...since you were a kid?

FL: Since about eleven years old.

JC: Somebody told me you used to be a...a street cleaner, a street sweeper?

FL: I did.

JC: Where was that?

FL: You mean how long it been?

JC: Yeah.

FL: Oh, that's been quite a while back.

JC: Yeah. What . . . what do they pay you for that? Do you remember?

FL: Oh, well . . . When I was first started working out getting fifteen cents a hour and they raised it to twenty.

FL: Fifteen cents an hour and they raised it to twenty. Yeah, and making ten hours a day.

JC: Ten hours a day for a buck and half.

FL: That's what we did.

JC: That's incredible. Were . . . yeah, go ahead. You ever been married?

FL: No, I tell you, I never been married. I was . . . a lady asked me here yesterday said, "Have you ever been married?" I told her, "No, I never been married." And she said I need a wife, I said no, I don't need no wife. I said, what do I want with a wife when the man next door got one."

[Laughs]

[Audience laughter]

JC: Just never wanted to get married.

FL: Never.

JC: Yeah. Do you . . . [Laughs] Do you live by yourself?

FL: I live by myself.

JC: Yeah. Did you . . . do you have somebody come in, a housekeeper or do you do everything yourself?

FL: There's a lady come clean-up and cook for me.

JC: Is she a good cook?

FL: Yeah, it tastes pretty good to me. [Laughs] Yeah, she cook fine, especially potato custard, I like that.

JC: Potato custard? Never had that.

FL: Haven't? You missed half your life.

[Audience laughter]

JC: [Laughs] When did you . . . when did you first start playing the guitar? How old were you and how'd it come about?

FL: I Start . . . I first started I guess I was about . . . Let me see, exact, I was about between eleven and twelve . . . eleven and twelve.

JC: Are you self-taught? Did you ever take any lessons?

FL: Never take any lessons at all. We always did . . . hear other play and I just go on take it up myself and go home and catch the sound.

JC: Yeah. Just listen to other people and play by ear, huh?

FL: Play by ear.

JC: Did you ever make any records?

FL: Oh, plenty of them.

JC: Yeah.

FL: I got a gang of records out.

JC: Yeah. Are any of these with W.C. Handy, does it go back that far?

FL: Oh yeah. In '26 . . . it was in the '20s.

JC: Now you travel with the Memphis Blues Caravan, is that the group?

FL: That's who I travel with now . . . See, I'm the oldest man with whatever played with Handy, all the rest of them's dead. I'm the oldest one.

JC: Yeah.

FL: At least I'm the onliest one, and I'm with another band now called Memphis Blues Caravan.

JC: Right.

FL: And I mean they tough. You know they call them a rabbit and say it took a good dog to catch them. [Laughs].

[Audience laughs]

JC: How many . . . How many members in the group all together?

FL: There ain't but eight . . . seven of us.

JC: Yeah. You're going around to play the colleges around the country?

FL: We go around and play colleges, and just anywhere we're needed.

JC: Somebody told me you used to play in what they call the . . . the medicine shows.

FL: Oh, I did. I worked doctor shows.

JC: What were those like? What do you mean doctor shows?

FL: Well, that's the medicine show. Well, we traveled around and had a flat-bed, you know, one of those great big old trucks with a flat-bed, that was our stage.

JC: Right.

FL: And so, you know, we were selling medicine and had little runs away from the stage and the crowd be out there, you know, be selling the medicine, and you want to know wants to buy it . . . They said nobody want to buy, you know, a dollar a bottle or something like that, and you see the hands up, he'd run out the ramp, you know, and carry two.

JC: Right. Was the medicine any good?

FL: Well . . . it . . . [Laughs]

JC: Be honest, now, was the medicine any good for a buck a bottle? Suppose to cure everything, I'll bet, gout . . .

FL: Well . . . It's pretty good. [Laughs]

JC: Ok. We're going to take a break a here and then we're going to come back and you're going to do a number for us. Right? With the band?

FL: I will.

JC: Ok. We'll take a short pause, we'll be right back. Stay with us.

[Audience applause]

JC: We're back. If you just joined us we have center stage right now a grand gentleman who plays with the Memphis Blues Caravan. He's eighty-one years old, Furry Lewis, and he's going to do "Furry's Blues." Furry, it's all yours.

FL: Thank you, thank you, thank you. Well, I'm going to start you all off with "Furry Lewis's Blues," one what I made up.

[Audience applause]

[Lewis plays]

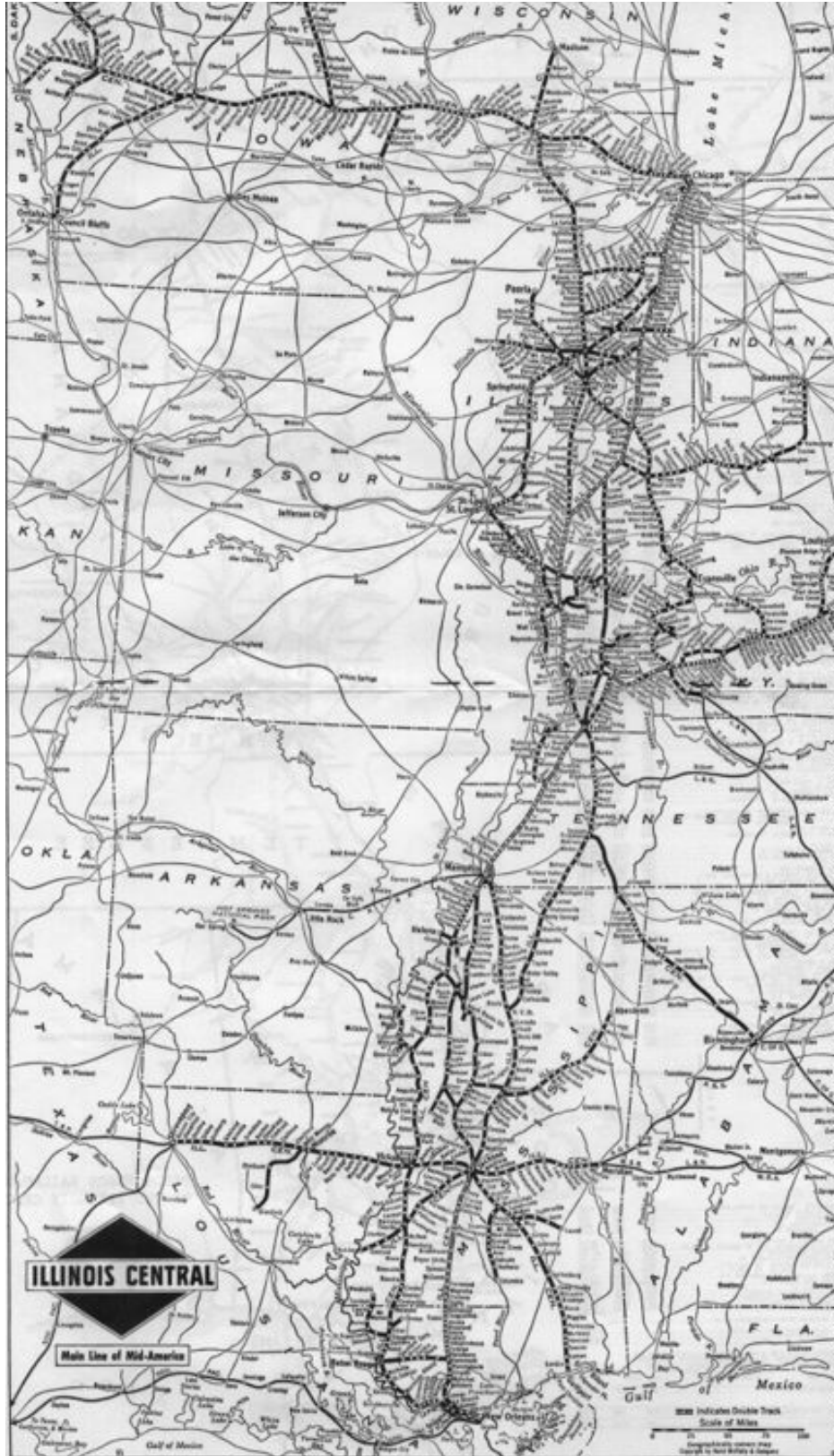
JC: Thank you, Furry. Furry Lewis.

[Audience applause]

JC: We'll be right back, following this message of interest.



Item 2: Map of Illinois Central Rail Line (Pre-1971)



Item 3: Furry Lewis's Registration Card and Registrar's Report, World War I (1918)

**REGISTRATION CARD** 3382

SERIAL NUMBER	180	ORDER NUMBER	3382
---------------	-----	--------------	------

1 *Walter Lewis*  
(First name) (Middle name) (Last name)

2 PERMANENT HOME ADDRESS:  
*925 Prach Memphis Shelby Tenn*  
(No.) (Street or R. F. D. No.) (City or town) (County) (State)

Age in Years: *20* Date of Birth: *March 6 1898*  
(Month) (Day) (Year)

**RACE**

White	Negro	Oriental	Indian	
			Citizen	Non-citizen
5	6 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	7	8 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	9

**U. S. CITIZEN**      **ALIEN**

Native Born	Naturalized	Citizen by Father's Naturalization before Registrant's Majority	Declarant	Non-declarant
10 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	11	12	13	14

15 If not a citizen of the U. S., of what nation are you a citizen or subject?

PRESENT OCCUPATION	EMPLOYER'S NAME
16 <i>Tray driver</i>	17 <i>Economy Coal Co</i>

18 PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT OR BUSINESS:  
*High & L. N. R. R. Mphs Shelby Tenn*  
(No.) (Street or R. F. D. No.) (City or town) (County) (State)

NEAREST RELATIVE  
 Name: *Mother, Victoria Coleman*  
 Address: *925 Prach Mphs Shelby Tenn*  
(No.) (Street or R. F. D. No.) (City or town) (County) (State)

I AFFIRM THAT I HAVE VERIFIED ABOVE ANSWERS AND THAT THEY ARE TRUE

P. M. G. O. *Walter Lewis*  
(Registrant's signature or marks) (OVER)

Form No. 1 (Rev) 43-411

**REGISTRAR'S REPORT**

**DESCRIPTION OF REGISTRANT**

HEIGHT			BUILD			COLOR OF EYES
Tall	Medium	Short	Slim	Medium	Stout	
21	22	23 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	24 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	25	26	27 <i>Gray</i>

28 Has person lost arm, leg, hand, eye, or is he obvious, physically (Specify):  
*left foot off*

29 I certify that my answers are true; that the person registered has read to him his own answers; that I have witnessed his signature and that all of his answers of which I have knowledge are true, except as

*W. B. Cooper*  
(Signature of Registrar)

Date of Registration: *Sept 12-18*

**LOCAL BOARD FOR DIVISION No. 4**  
**CITY of MEMPHIS, STATE of TENN**  
 COMMERCIAL BANK BLDG. UNION AVE  
 (STAMP OF LOCAL BOARD)

(The stamp of the Local Board having jurisdiction of the area in which the registrant has his permanent home shall be placed in this box.)

43-411 (OVER)



Item 4: Concert Poster, Memphis Country Blues Festival, 1968

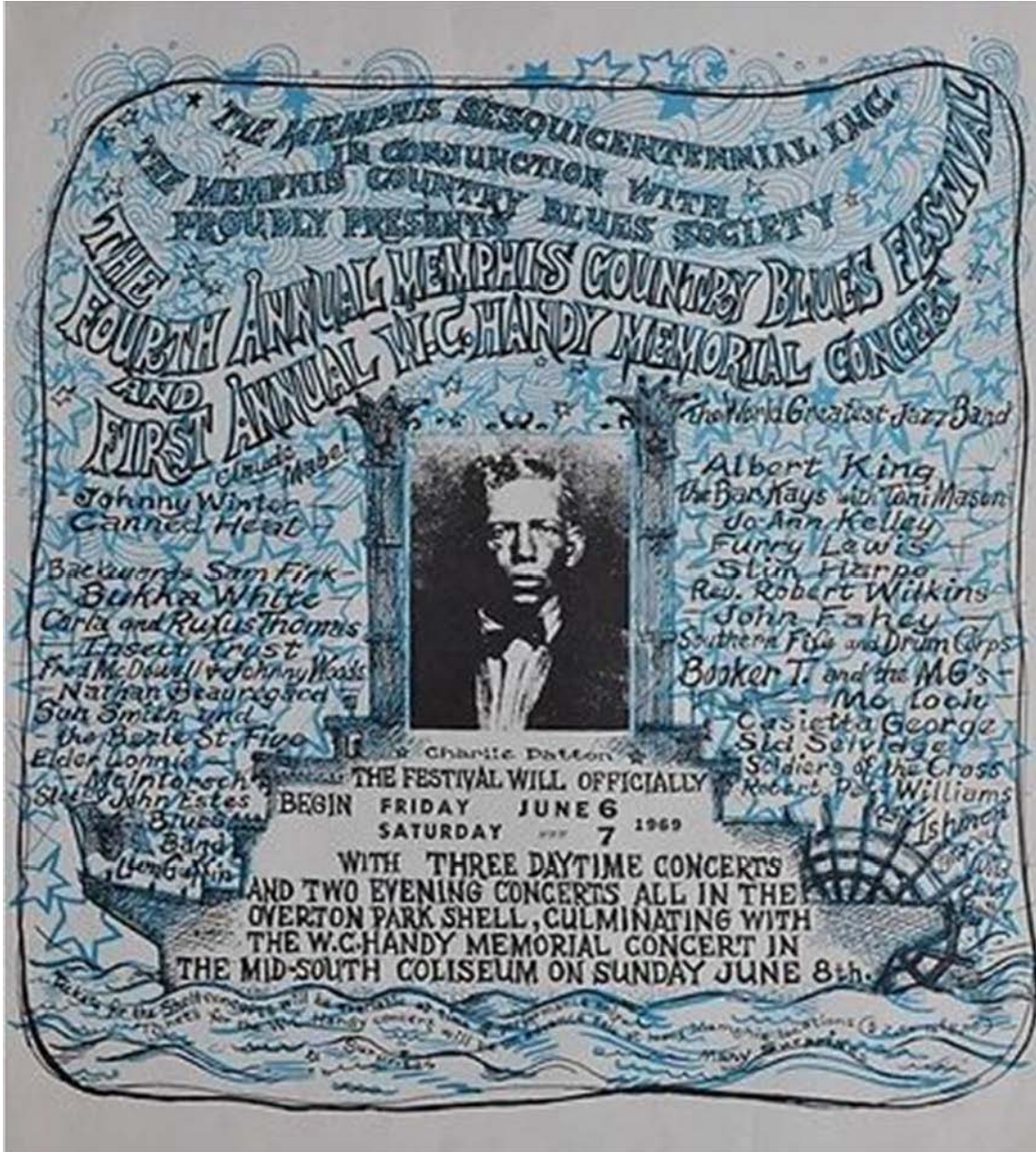
THE MEMPHIS COUNTRY BLUES SOCIETY  
*Presents the*  
THIRD ANNUAL  
MEMPHIS  
BLUES  
FESTIVAL  
WITH THE REAL MEMPHIS SOUND OF ...

TICKETS AVAILABLE NOW  
AT MEMPHIS ARTS COUNCIL  
60 South Audubondale  
FREE AFTER NOON BOOGIE

BUKKA WHITE - NATHAN  
BEAUREGARD - FURRY  
LEWIS - REV. ROBERT  
WILKINS - JOE  
CALLICOTT - THE  
INSECT TRUST - TREVOR  
KOEHLER - THE ELECTRIC BLUE  
WINTERMELON - PLUS OTHER SURPRISES!

OVERTON PARK  
JULY 20<sup>TH</sup> 8:00 P.M.

Item 5: Concert Poster, Memphis Country Blues Festival, 1969




Item 6: Promotional Photograph, Beale Street Caravan, ca. 1973, photographer unknown



Top row, left to right: MISSISSIPPI FRED McDOWELL, JOHNNY WOODS, BUKKA WHITE  
Bottom row, left to right: NATHAN BEAUREGARD, FURRY LEWIS, SLEEPY JOHN ESTES

Item 7: Concert Poster, Furry Lewis with Mudboy and the Neutrons, Year unknown

OCT 31 BEHOLD THE CHILDREN OF THE NIGHT 11 P.M.



2.50 STAG  
2.00 DRAG

**HALLOWEEN  
REVUE & DANCE**

FURRY LEWIS **BIG DIXIE MIME**  
MUD BOY & THE NEUTRONS  
BOBBY RAY & THE RAYGUN

THE EMPEROR'S 2029 COURT

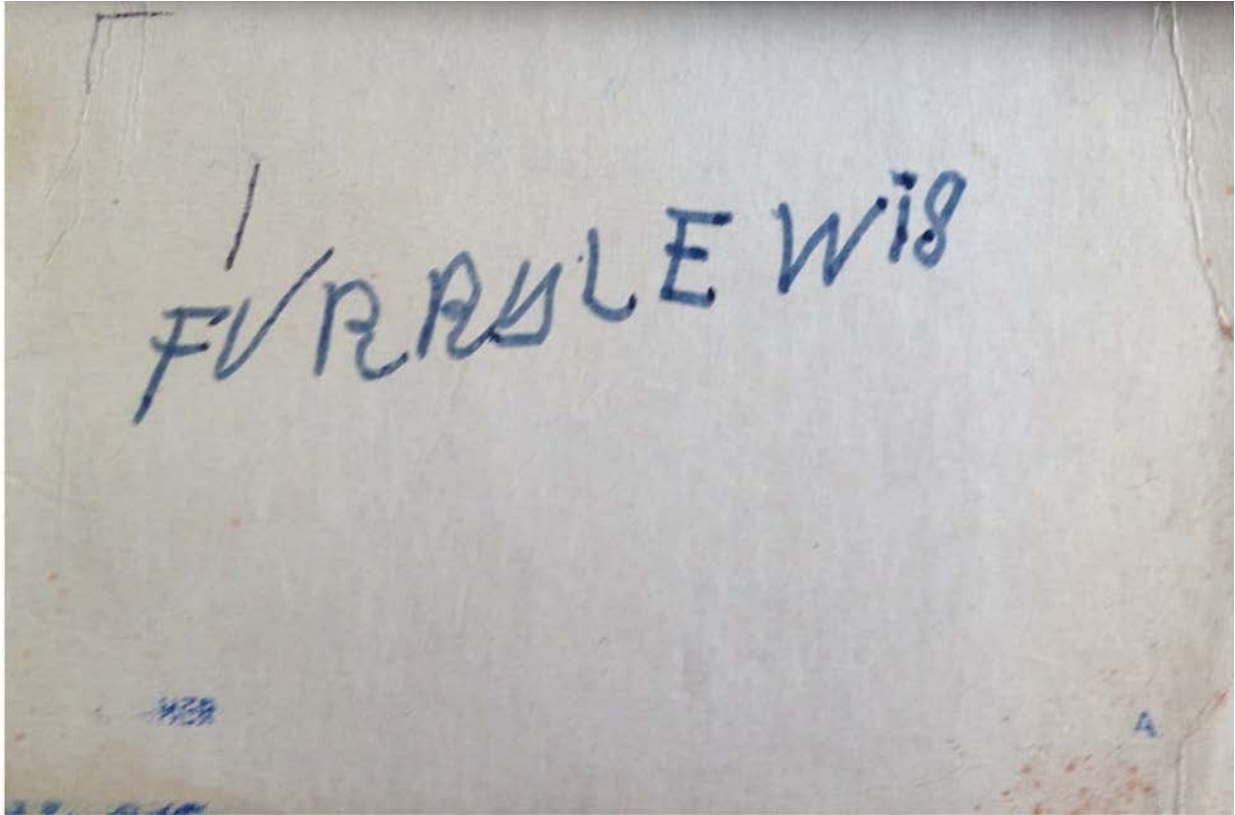
XANADI CLUB

SCOUNDRELS, FETTERS, FORTY-NINE COONS  
WOMEN SILENCE

Item 8: Honeymoon Garner, Booker White, Charlie Feathers, and Furry Lewis, W. C. Handy Park, Memphis, Tennessee, Date unknown, Photograph unknown




Item 9: Furry Lewis Autograph, Owned by Misty Lavander



Item 10a: Furry Lewis's Funeral Program, 1981 (pp 1-2)

MEMORIAL SERVICES  
for the late  
MR. WALTER LEWIS  
March 6, 1893                      September 14, 1981



Wednesday, September 16, 1981  
3:00 P.M.  
J. C. Oates Funeral Home Chapel  
314 Auction Avenue  
Memphis, Tennessee  
VISITATION PERIOD 1:00 P.M.-2:45 P.M.

PROGRAM

Music

SCRIPTURE

PRAYER

MUSIC

EXPRESSIONS FROM FRIENDS

EULOGY                                      REV. JAMES RAINEY

MUSIC

RECESSIONAL

