

# **The Bitter Southerner Podcast: The Blues Is Dead?**

Chuck Reece: Welcome, neighbors, to The Bitter Southerner Podcast from Georgia Public Broadcasting and the Magazine I edit, The Bitter Southerner. I'm your host, Chuck Reece, and this is the second episode of our second season. And our lesson today begins with the blues. Specifically, the music of Bessie Smith, who was born in 1894 in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Bessie Smith: (singing)

Chuck Reece: [00:01:00] That song, called Empty Bed Blues, was recorded in 1928. So, you know, if you thought nobody sang about sex on the radio until Prince, well, now you've learned something. But that song by Bessie Smith should remind us of something much more important than the carnal pleasures of life. [00:01:30] It reminds us of a truth that we should honor, which is this. In the Jim Crow days of the American South, music was one of the very few activities that allowed our African American brothers and sisters the chance to feel freedom. Bessie's genre, the blues, was her people's music. And the music that came the following morning in the church, gospel, was theirs, too.

Bessie Smith: [00:02:00] (singing)

Chuck Reece: In the drink houses and juke joints that were reserved for them, they could let loose on a Saturday night, drink a little, maybe even wind up doing a little of that good thing. And on Sunday mornings, when the church was reserved for them, they could sing songs of praise to a God powerful enough [00:02:30] to dissolve all the shackles of their life in America.

Rosetta Tharpe: (singing)

Chuck Reece: That was the late, great, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, who was born in 1915 in Cotton Plant, Arkansas.

Rosetta Tharpe: (singing)

Chuck Reece: Bessie Smith [00:03:00] and Sister Tharpe, who were, respectively, the mothers of blues and gospel, are in many ways the mothers of all of America's music, because every American musical form, from jazz, to country, to rock and roll, can trace its roots to the blues and gospel music of African Americans.

Rosetta Tharpe: (singing)

Chuck Reece: In this episode, we pay tribute to that music [00:03:30] and we'll teach you just how wrong you are if you believe that music is archaic at best, or dead at worst. The blues are dead? Oh, hell no.

Rosetta Tharpe: (singing)

Chuck Reece: Later in this episode, you're going to hear from a fellow named Tim Duffy, who, with his wife, Denise, 25 years ago founded a non-profit called a Music Maker Relief Foundation to ensure that the blues, and gospel, and other old time music would live on. The night I first met Tim Duffy, he told me that the blues could never die because the blues is a spirit. To explain that spirit, I wanna first reference [00:04:30] a song that you've probably heard. Late Muddy Waters performing Willie Dixon's classic number, "I'm Your Hoochie Coochie Man." Now listen closely to this one verse.

Muddy Waters: (singing)

Chuck Reece: [00:05:00] So, you just heard Mississippi Muddy Waters tell you that he's got a couple of things he's gonna use to mess with you: a black cat bone and a John the Conqueror root. Most people, when they first learn that song, hear that second one as something like Johnny Concheroo and they maybe think Muddy is referring to [00:05:30] a man by that name. And that's what I thought back in 1977 when I first saw Muddy perform. But Muddy wasn't singing about a man. He was singing about the root of a plant, specifically a John the Conqueror root.

Chuck Reece: Now some people say it "John the Conquer". Some people say it "John the Conqueror". Either way, that's what it refers to. [00:06:00] That root represents a folk tale that was spread amongst slaves about a man named High John the Conqueror. John was, folks say, a slave whose spirit could not be broken. He was, they say, a trickster who could always pull the wool over his master's eyes. Now why did the slaves need a man like John? Well, we're gonna turn to the great Zora Neale Hurston, who was as great a folklorist [00:06:30] as she was a novelist. This is a portion of what Ms. Hurston wrote about High John, and it's read by GPB's La'Raven Taylor.

La'Raven Taylor: High John the Conqueror was a man in full and had come to live and work on the plantations. And all of the slave folks knew him in the flesh. The sign of his man was a laugh and his singing symbol was a drum. It was an inside thing to live by. It was sure to be heard when and where the work was hardest, [00:07:00] and the lot the most cruel. It helped the slaves endure. They knew that something better was coming, so they laughed in the face of things and sang, "I'm so glad. Trouble don't last always." And the white people who heard them were struck dumb that they could laugh. Old Massa couldn't know, of course, but High John the Conqueror was there, walking his plantation like a natural man.

Chuck Reece: Now Tim Duffy believes the spirit of High John is what led him all over the South for more than 25 [00:07:30] years as he searched out the people who made this music, and the ones who are keeping it alive today. I went to visit Tim at his foundation's office in Hillsborough, North Carolina. And the next day we loaded up and drove east to a little town called Farmville to see four women who make the Sunday morning version of our nation's native music.

Chuck Reece: (singing)

Chuck Reece: [00:08:00] Now that sound lifting you up belongs to the Glorifying Vine Sisters, Alice Vines, Audrey Vines, Mattie Vines Harper, and Dorothy Vines [00:08:30] Daniels.

Chuck Reece: (singing)

Chuck Reece: Dorothy describes the Vines Sisters' music this way.

Dorothy Daniels: I would say we sing the hard rock gospel. (laughing)

Chuck Reece: The hard rock gospel?

Dorothy Daniels: You know why I say that? We sing that rock hard and we want to tear it all to pieces. In a song, we don't wanna leave out no, no kinda words and no kinda feeling. It's just a nice good time.

Dorothy Daniels: (singing)

Chuck Reece: Now as I sat among the sisters that day, just swallowed up in their joyful noise, I learned that Dorothy had suffered a stroke right after they got back from performing in Europe the year before. And they had been working for a while to help Dorothy relearn her parts in their song.

Chuck Reece: [00:09:30] (singing)

Chuck Reece: In that very day, in the song you're hearing right now, Dorothy hit that lead line perfectly for the very first time since her stroke. Her sisters called it a miracle.

Chuck Reece: (singing)

Chuck Reece: [00:10:00] The world got a whole lot wider after their brother, Freeman Vines, met Tim Duffy.

Dorothy Daniels: I could not do what a ... Tim over there do. I couldn't do it. But i- it have to be in you to do these things in your heart.

Chuck Reece: Now Tim and Denise Duffy are the kinda people I refer to as Southerners by choice. By birth, they're both Connecticut Yankees, [00:10:30] born and raised in New Haven. But Tim always had a deep passion for music, and when he was in his teens, he started sitting in on the Mississippi folklorist, Bill Ferris' classes on the blues at Yale University. And when Tim's passion turned into college studies, it took him across the ocean. He enrolled in Friends World College, which is now part of Long Island University, but it was founded by a group [00:11:00] of Quakers who believed that students should be in the parts of the world they wanted to study. And that led Tim to Mombasa, Kenya, where he was studying ethnolinguistics, a field that focuses on the communication between a culture and how its people talk.

Tim Duffy: Then I was living in a very insular, um, Muslim neighborhood in Mombasa and, ah, I was just ... found my place. I was ... to be a Kenyan.

Chuck Reece: But then Tim's father [00:11:30] back in Connecticut passed away. So Tim came home to New Haven with several months of work remaining on his degree and that's when he began dating Denise, who worked in the apparel business. And when Tim returned to Mombasa to finish his degree, Denise went with him.

Denise Duffy: We went and lived on a rooftop in Mombasa for seven months while he finished up, while he had his research to do, you know, his senior thesis, so ...

Chuck Reece: Wow. And then-

Tim Duffy: Then we came home.

Chuck Reece: Did you [00:12:00] move back as soon as you finished your degree?

Denise Duffy: So we ... Yeah. We-

Tim Duffy: Yeah.

Denise Duffy: We had, didn't have anymore money.

Tim Duffy: Yeah.

Denise Duffy: We had to go home. (laughing)

Tim Duffy: Yeah.

Denise Duffy: So, you know, we had ... So, and at that point, it was like, "Okay, now what do we wanna do?" Neither one of us wanted to be in New Haven. Tim had loved the music in North Carolina. He wasn't really sure what was next for him and I said, "You know, y-you have all these connections in North Carolina and I think I can get work there. Let's go to North Carolina."

Chuck Reece: [00:12:30] After they got settled, Tim eventually enrolled at the University of North Carolina to study folklore and that's where he first heard about a mysterious musician named Guitar Gabriel, and he began a month long search to find him.

Tim Duffy: He was young. He was 68. But an old 68. Lived by his wit since he was probably four years old, you know? And, um, but he's a master of words [00:13:00] and, um, he's one of these guys who just talked ... You know, when he got talking, he would go for days and everything was pure poetry. It was like meeting Homer or something.

Chuck Reece: Once Tim met Gabe, the wheels of the Music Maker Relief Foundation began turning in his head. Gabe had fallen on hard times but he still continued to perform at unlicensed drink houses in Black neighborhoods.

Tim Duffy: He was living [00:13:30] in a, in-

Denise Duffy: The worst projects.

Tim Duffy: In the worst project. His wife was suffering from deep alcoholism. Um, he had gotten beaten up the year before I met him. C- coming back from the gig, some gangsters beat him with a two-by-four and broke his femur and his legs up. And some really nice social worker in town, he got to meet her and got him on SSI. So he had a little check of like \$450 a month.

Tim Duffy: [00:14:00] (singing)

Chuck Reece: Now Tim was a blues player himself and he was obsessed with picking up the different blues styles of guitar playing that had sprung up over the decades around the South. So when Gabe and Tim began playing music together, they started traveling around doing a few small gigs and selling cassette tapes of their song. And here's a little bit of them performing in 1992 in Tim and Denise's kitchen.

Chuck Reece: [00:14:30] (singing)

Chuck Reece: After a couple of years of performing together, suddenly Guitar Gabe and Tim Duffy found themselves on the stages of places like Lincoln Center, and Carnegie Hall, and big venues in Europe. And those big venue gigs put Tim within contact of big players in the music business.

Chuck Reece: [00:15:00] (singing)

Chuck Reece: See, meeting Gabe, and, and all these other elderly musicians had helped Tim see that there was so much talent out there among artists who weren't ever given the chance to be financially successful. Here's Denise Duffy.

Denise Duffy: The record companies, you know, these artists [00:15:30] are not attractive to them because, you know, they're too old to climb in a van and jump on the road 28 nights a month, sleeping on people's couches. And so the whole, you know, the industry's just not functioning for them.

Chuck Reece: The Duffy's wanted to change that and they got some help from a fellow named Mark Levinson. Levinson is held in high reverence by audio nerds who have \$12,000 to drop on a turntable. Like, if you buy a new Lexus automobile today, your top tier audio [00:16:00] option is a system designed by Mark Levinson. But when the Duffy's met him in 1994, he planted the idea of the Music Maker Relief Foundation in their heads.

Denise Duffy: He was the one that said, you know, you, y- , "We can try and get, you know, we're gonna try and get these guys real record contracts, real gigs, but in the mean time, everyone's starving. You know, why don't you start a non-profit that can help by people choosing and pay the late bill until you can get 'em enough gigs to keep 'em going?"

Chuck Reece: [00:16:30] From there, the Duffy's were able to get more support from wealthy donors, but their biggest breakthrough came not from one particular wealthy donor, but from a tobacco company. From Winston cigarettes, which is the company that gave Guitar Gabriel's hometown its name, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Chuck Reece: (singing)

Chuck Reece: Turns out that the Winston brand had bought [00:17:00] a 20-page ad in the upcoming 30th anniversary edition of Rolling Stone magazine and they needed content to fill those 20 pages. And it turned out that someone who worked at the local ad agency that handled the Winston account was also volunteering at the Music Maker Relief Foundation.

Denise Duffy: This guy works at the agencies, like, "Well, I, I volunteer"

Tim Duffy: He-

Denise Duffy: ... for this little non-profit.

Tim Duffy: Yeah.

Denise Duffy: "Did you see these pictures?" And [00:17:30] whips out the pictures Tim, um, had taken-

Tim Duffy: Yeah.

Denise Duffy: ... for our newsletter. And they're like, "These f- these photos are amazing. Who are these artists?" And he'd start telling 'em the stories-

Tim Duffy: Yeah.

Denise Duffy: ... of these artists. And they're like, "Yes. This is gonna be the ad campaign."

Tim Duffy: And s-

Chuck Reece: And I think that that campaign-

Tim Duffy: Yeah.

Chuck Reece: ... was actually the first time that I ever heard-

Tim Duffy: Yeah.

Chuck Reece: ... of the Music Maker Relief Foundation.

Tim Duffy: And, and-

Denise Duffy: Right.

Tim Duffy: And it's the most in prints of a- any blues [00:18:00] photos in the history of the w- world history 'cause it was a 20 million dollar-

Denise Duffy: Well, yeah. So they first they did this Rolling Stone issue.

Tim Duffy: Yeah.

Denise Duffy: And they just decide they're gonna be these, you know, big photos with, you know, a cool line about each artist.

Tim Duffy: Like I, I play so much guitar, it'll make your ass hurt.

Denise Duffy: Right.

Tim Duffy: If it ain't been in the pawn shop, it can't play the blues.

Denise Duffy: It can't play the blues-

Speaker 6: (laughs)

Denise Duffy: It's a great at ... A- and a lot of them were quotes from the artists.

Tim Duffy: They're all quotes from the artists.

Denise Duffy: You know, from the art- ... And then they just put this teeny Winston logo at the bottom. It was, you know, it [00:18:30] was beautifully done.

Chuck Reece: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Denise Duffy: And so they do-

Tim Duffy: And-

Denise Duffy: ... asset series as ... And people are like, "This is great. We're now gonna put 25% of our ad budget on this Music Maker campaign. So, and-

Tim Duffy: And-

Denise Duffy: And that's-

Chuck Reece: 25%-

Denise Duffy: 25%-

Chuck Reece: ... of the Winston cigarette-

Denise Duffy: ... of the Winst- which at the time-

Tim Duffy: Winston was number two at the time.

Denise Duffy: Right. When, yeah-

Denise Duffy: And they're spending 50 million dollars a year on ads.

Chuck Reece: Yeah, right.

Denise Duffy: So that's 12 million dollars they're gonna spend on-

Chuck Reece: Publicizing y'all.

Denise Duffy: ... on publicizing ... [00:19:00] And they decide, "Well, what are we gonna talk about in these ads?" They're like, "We wanna go to, you know, um, you know, 50 major monthlies and 125 weeklies in all the country. How are we gonna engage with people?"

Tim Duffy: It was 180. Yeah.

Denise Duffy: And they said, "You know what? We're gonna do, um ... Why don't we do a tour? Because then that gives us an excuse to go into all the major markets."

Chuck Reece: And have [crosstalk 00:19:26]

Denise Duffy: "And engage with our customers."

Tim Duffy: Yeah.

Denise Duffy: And we're like, "We think that's [00:19:30] a fabulous idea."

Tim Duffy: So Taj came down and [crosstalk 00:19:32]

Denise Duffy: And so we call. We're like, "We need Taj Mahal."

Tim Duffy: Yeah. I [inaudible 00:19:34]. I said, "We need T- ... 'Cause Taj-

Denise Duffy: (laughs) [crosstalk 00:19:36]

Tim Duffy: Out of all these rock stars, Taj is my hero since I was a kid.

Denise Duffy: Taj is a cool guy.

Tim Duffy: Yeah. And he's a really nice man. And I called Ta-

Denise Duffy: And he knows how to play with all these artists.

Tim Duffy: Yeah, and he said he had no problem w-with it as long as, uh, i-i-it was m- the height of tobacco wars and we're like, "If this brings money to the guys, we don't give a fuck."

Denise Duffy: Yeah, because yeah, we were like, "Oh, is this immoral to take tobacco money?"



Tim Duffy: Yeah.

Denise Duffy: And so we go and talk to the artists and they're like, "Immoral? [00:20:00] Wh- like, we've been making our li- ... We're these North Carol- I- these Carolina, um, African Americans from Carolina-

Denise Duffy: They're like, "We've made our living off tobacco our whole lives."

Tim Duffy: They've worked in the plants.

Denise Duffy: It's like, "Why wouldn't we take their money?"

Tim Duffy: They've grown the tobacco, they've rolled the tobacco, they-

Denise Duffy: (laughs)

Chuck Reece: Pick the tobacco.

Denise Duffy: Exactly. Everything. They've been making their money off tobacco forever.

Tim Duffy: Yeah.

Denise Duffy: Yeah. And this was gonna be, this is gonna be fun. It was gonna, you know, they were making-

Tim Duffy: So ... Yeah.

Denise Duffy: And we had these amazing images-

Denise Duffy: ... and the amazing stories, [00:20:30] and the talent. So, you know, Tim calls Taj and we put together this tour of Taj going out with Cootie Stark and, you know, Pattman, uh, Beverly Watkins, John Dee Holeman. And every show, we would put on these incredible ... We did 42 cities.

Tim Duffy: Yup.

Denise Duffy: We'd put on these incredible four to six hour marathon shows of blues and people w- ... It was fabulous.

Tim Duffy: And, and the guys ... I split all this money with the guys, so like-

Denise Duffy: They were making money.

Tim Duffy: I took guys from-

Denise Duffy: They were making five grand a weekend-

Tim Duffy: F- fo-

Denise Duffy: ... and staying in four [00:21:00] star hotels. They were digging it.

Tim Duffy: Yeah, I was making guys, like guys that were destitute, \$80,000 a year.

Denise Duffy: Yeah. It was, it was a big deal.

Chuck Reece: Now over 25 years, Music Maker has extended that hand to more than 400 musicians. It has recorded more than 7,000 performances, commercially released about 2500 songs. The number of grants it's extended to musicians now tops 12,000. Now Music Maker, [00:21:30] believe it or not, does all this work with an annual operating budget of only about a million dollars. But they've learned how to stretch that money to keep music and history alive for generations.

Denise Duffy: We support the torch bearers so they can then take the torch and pass it on to the next generation. Because otherwise, if nobody does that, every time one of these artists die, th- the treasure trove-

Denise Duffy: ... of cultural knowledge-

Tim Duffy: Dies.

Denise Duffy: ... that they have dies with them. If they've not been recorded, if we don't have [00:22:00] their, their oral history, if we don't have their picture, every time one of these guys, they're gone.

Precious Bryant: (singing)

Chuck Reece: Now that is the voice of one of the torch bearers, Precious Bryant, from Waverly Hall, Georgia. She died in 2013 when she was 71 years old, but [00:22:30] before her death, Precious saw her career flourish thanks to the Music Maker Foundation. They gave her a monthly stipend for prescription medicine, for food, for utility bills. And in addition, they produced Precious' album and helped her book and travel to shows across the US and abroad. And to top it off, they even hooked her up with two guitars. But she had started playing way back when she was nine [00:23:00] years old.

Precious Bryant: See, they had what some call a family guitar. There was a great old [inaudible 00:23:05] and I couldn't tote it. I usually just dragged it around. And I kept on till I sh- learned how to play it. My uncle bought me a little ukulele. Along that time, they said, "Santa Claus coming to you." I started with that.

Chuck Reece: In many ways, the blues was Precious' way of communicating.

Precious Bryant: My baby don't stand no cheating.

Chuck Reece: One of the folks Precious passed the torch to [00:23:30] is a musician named Jake Xerxes Fussell.

Jake Fussell: (singing)

Chuck Reece: Jake was born in Columbus, Georgia and lives today in Durham, North Carolina. But he studied at Precious Bryant's feet when he was young.

Jake Fussell: It's okay if music is mediated or whatever and that's [00:24:00] the way that you learn stuff, but learning things directly is a whole other ball game. I never had any kind of real formal teacher who'd like sit me down and said, "This is the way you pick this out." Precious never served that function for me or anything. (laughs) She, it was more like she would play and I would sit there and try to keep up, you know? But in the bigger picture, like how did that affect my music, I don- ... It's like, uh, that's the reason I play music.

Chuck Reece: Tim and Denise [00:24:30] Duffy and their crew at Music Makers always made connections like that to ensure that when someone is ready to pass the torch, there's another one to receive it. And their foundation, in many ways, has become a life support system for America's native music. Tim told me that Guitar Gabriel, who passed away in 1996, taught him how to live inside the spirit of that music.

Tim Duffy: Like Gabe told me that blues will never die. It's a spirit. [00:25:00] It's not a, i-it's a cu- ... You can't kill culture. He told me, like when they, the slaves were here, they took the drums away from 'em. They tried to do everything systematically to destroy them and it still goes on.

Alice Vines: (singing)

Chuck Reece: Alice Vines of the Glorifying Vines Sisters told me that she believes Tim helps artists like her and her sisters [00:25:30] because that's his calling.

Alice Vines: It have to be in you to do these things, in your heart. And just like you, you know, you come all this way from Georgia, it had to be in your heart. God had to give you f- had to give favor from Tim. Then Tim had that favor with us. See what I'm saying?

Chuck Reece: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Alice Vines: But you wouldn't have come.

Chuck Reece: Right.

Alice Vines: And see, people don't know what favor mean. You have the favor of God, but you don't know how to use it. Favor.

Chuck Reece: Amen. (laughing)

Alice Vines: Favor. In faith believing.

Chuck Reece: Right.

Alice Vines: You got to believe in what you do.

Alice Vines: (singing)

Chuck Reece: [00:26:00] Our thanks go out to Tim and Denise Duffy, the Glorifying Vine Sisters, and a whole host of other people who are part of the Music Maker Relief Foundation family. No doubt, the foundation will keep finding such amazing artists and they'll fall on the nose of Tim Duffy as they move into their second quarter century. I've come to believe as I've gotten to know Tim [00:26:30] that he really does carry the spirit of old High John the Conqueror inside him, because he holds up people who have been oppressed because of their skin color or where they live, up in the light, reminding us that the joke is always on the oppressor.

Alice Vines: (singing)

Chuck Reece: We'll [00:27:00] be back to the blues after this break. I'm Chuck Reece. This is The Bitter Southerner Podcast from GPB and The Bitter Southerner magazine.

Chuck Reece: Now if you want a provable data point that the blues will never [00:27:30] die, one thing to look at is how it spans so many generations, and we'll prove it in this next segment, where we visit two blues men, Bobby Rush, Louisiana native who is 86, and Jontavious Willis of Greenville, Georgia, who's only 25.

Chuck Reece: Here's Jontavious playing for me a rendition of Walking Blues.

Jontavious Willis: [00:28:00] (singing)

Chuck Reece: Y'all see how that blues torch is passed down? [00:28:30] Walking Blues was first performed by Robert Johnson of Mississippi in 1936. It was adapted by Muddy Waters in 1941. And now Jontavious Willis has his own spin. I first met Jontavious in April of 2019 at the Word of South Festival in Tallahassee, Florida. He came to perform on our Bitter Southerner stage at that festival and I was blown away 'cause he just seamlessly channels the early [00:29:00] blues greats and he writes new blues songs for his own generation. I had the great good fortune to get a performance from him at Georgia Public Broadcasting's Atlanta studio and he says the blues, to him, reminds him a lot of the gospel music he grew up with as a kid.

Jontavious Willis: I always went to church as a young kid and we we- it wasn't contemporary church. It was old, Southern, Black baptist church. So much of the tempo, much of the time, and much of the, [00:29:30] uh, phrasing, the vocal phrasing was the same. So when I heard blues, it was easy to translate over.

Chuck Reece: I don't know if you could answer this next question exactly.

Jontavious Willis: I could try.

Chuck Reece: But i- it'd be, I'd be interested to know, like, is there one song from the Baptist church that sticks with you, like of all the things that you sang and played growing up in that church?

Jontavious Willis: Mmm. Yeah.

Chuck Reece: What?

Jontavious Willis: I'll give you one.

Chuck Reece: All right. Give me one.

Jontavious Willis: [00:30:00] Ah, I play it a little different, but it's the vocals. So i- in, in blues and in gospel music, the music is secondary.

Chuck Reece: Right.

Jontavious Willis: But the, it's the messa- ... So this is one that my grandmother, and great-grandmother, and grandfather sang.

Jontavious Willis: (singing)

Chuck Reece: [00:32:00] Say, "Amen," somebody.

Jontavious Willis: Yeah, yes, yeah. (laughing)

Chuck Reece: On this long and tedious journey.

Jontavious Willis: That's it.

Chuck Reece: Yup. Uh, so like a lot of folks, then, you grew up with the church music and graduated into something that was ... had a lot in common with it.

Jontavious Willis: Yeah, for sure. Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

Chuck Reece: Yeah, yeah. And that was the blues.

Jontavious Willis: Yeah. For-

Chuck Reece: And like, where did the blues start coming in on top of you in addition to the church music?

Jontavious Willis: Uh, probably around the age of 14. [00:32:30] About 12, I was studying the blues. I starte- ... I always been a- aware of different genres of music, from country music, reggae, you know, all, just all the way around. And, uh, when I heard blues, I understood that it was something that was like a parallel to gospel 'cause like, gospel and, um, blues gave birth to like all of American music.

Chuck Reece: Everything.

Jontavious Willis: (laughs) Everything in-

Chuck Reece: Yeah.

Jontavious Willis: ... Amer- ... But people don't know that like everything come from those two and jazz also. And, um, so I was about 12 when I first started studying [00:33:00] it. My dad always played different, um, records and stuff around the house.

Chuck Reece: Oh yeah?

Jontavious Willis: Uh.

Chuck Reece: Like who?

Jontavious Willis: Uh, Hank Williams, Tracy Chapman, Bob Marley-

Chuck Reece: (laughs)

Jontavious Willis: ... Earth, Wind & Fire. It was a c- ... It was ev-

Chuck Reece: Everything.

Jontavious Willis: Everything. Everything. Um, so I was, n- uh, getting in touch with it that way, heard Muddy Waters-

Chuck Reece: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jontavious Willis: And through Muddy Waters, he, he, uh, ah, kind of made the link go off in my mind, like the connection between the two.

Chuck Reece: I, I'm, it's so interesting that you say that because, like, out of all the, y-you know, the [00:33:30] generally old blues greats, he's the only one I ever got to see.

Jontavious Willis: Oh really?

Chuck Reece: Live. Yeah.

Jontavious Willis: Yeah.

Chuck Reece: Uh. Most people when they think about the blues-

Jontavious Willis: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chuck Reece: ... they know the names Robert Johnson, they know Muddy Waters. But they kinda think like it's an old art form, you know? And then everybody ... every now and then, somebody like you comes along who reminds them that it ain't [00:34:00] dead a bit.

Jontavious Willis: Yeah.

Chuck Reece: That it's a living thing. Like, you know, m-m- ... Tim Duffy who founded the Music Makers Relief Foundation, he said something to me, like you know, he

started that whole foundation after he went on this search to find this guitar player that very few people had heard of but was allegedly like a wizard.

Jontavious Willis: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chuck Reece: ... named Guitar Gabriel.

Jontavious Willis: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chuck Reece: In North Carolina. You've heard of him.

Jontavious Willis: Yup. I've heard of him, yeah.

Chuck Reece: Well, when Tim found him, [00:34:30] he said, "Gabe told me that the blues is a spirit. It never dies." How, how do you feel that spirit?

Jontavious Willis: Um, I started looking at the history of blues and specifically in Georgia. So a lot of people look over Georgia's, um, impact on blues but the reason that a lot of people don't talk about it is because, uh, a lot of the blues musicians from Georgia had already passed before the rediscovery. So, uh, in the 20s, it [00:35:00] was a big boom of, uh, Georgia blues musicians. Columbia Records recorded its first Black blues musician in Atlanta, a guy named Peg Leg Howell. And then, um, and there's like a guy from Ia- Lithonia named Barbecue Bob.

Chuck Reece: Right.

Jontavious Willis: ... in, uh, Statesboro. It was the whole Statesboro Blues that the Allman Brothers got from Taj Mahal, what Taj Mahal got from Blind Willie McTell who comes from Statesboro.

Chuck Reece: Comes ... Statesboro.

Jontavious Willis: Um, then you have, um, uh, he got Ma Rainey down [00:35:30] in Columbus, Georgia who was the author of See See Rider who went on to be an entrepreneur. I hear so many people in Georgia that did so many things for blues but who, I- I, when I was looking it up and I was finding out ... Uh, so I'm f- I was born in LeGrange, Georgia.

Chuck Reece: Yeah.

Jontavious Willis: Which is Troup County. And the Troup County, I went to school in Hogansville, Georgia and I found out in Hogansville, Georgia there was a reverend there by the name of J.M. Gates. He was the first commercial re- uh, reverend to record on record and record at countless ah, uh, [00:36:00] numbers of size, you know? And he, um, told, uh, a guy named Thomas Dorsey, who was originally a blues piano player from Villa Rica, Georgia-

Chuck Reece: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jontavious Willis: ... who went i- on to be the father of Black gospel music who wrote the song, Precious Lord, Take My Hand.

Chuck Reece: Precious Lord, Take My Hand.

Jontavious Willis: See, there we go. And so once I started figuring all this stuff out, and my grandma, and my granddad had known about these people and they heard about these people, I'm like, so it's that deep. But we, we normally get washed over a lot with the Mississippi guys and Chicago guys. [00:36:30] But there's a wonderful rich history right here in Georgia.

Chuck Reece: You know, and that's so interesting because, you know, when you really dive into the different ways blues comes out in the South, there are many distinct styles.

Jontavious Willis: Oh, for sure.

Chuck Reece: Oh, they're, they're like Carolina Piedmont blues-

Jontavious Willis: There we go.

Chuck Reece: ... is different from Southwest Georgia blues, you know?

Jontavious Willis: Yup. Yup. Yeah.

Chuck Reece: Which is different from Delta blues in Mississippi-

Jontavious Willis: Yeah.

Chuck Reece: ... which is different from the hill country blues farther north in Mississippi.

Jontavious Willis: Yeah, that, that's true. So, um, this is a, what I call a ragtime. [00:37:00] It's emulating the ragtime piano on the guitar. So I kinda ...

Jontavious Willis: (singing)

Jontavious Willis: [00:38:00] So you'll find that in Georgia. Man, you go to Barbecue Bob in North Georgia and he'll be playing, in Lithonia ... He'll be playing a, a lowdown thing in open G, or you'll go to Love, Georgia find [inaudible 00:38:37] on a slider. So once I found it, and I'm like, "Whoa."

Chuck Reece: So on this new, on your latest record, which is your second ...

Jontavious Willis: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chuck Reece: Correct?

Jontavious Willis: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chuck Reece: Tell everybody what it's called.



Jontavious Willis: Spectacular Class by Mr. Jontavious Willis.

Chuck Reece: There you go.

Jontavious Willis: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chuck Reece: Spectacular Class, for everybody who's interested, was [00:39:00] produced at a studio in Franklin, Tennessee-

Jontavious Willis: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chuck Reece: ... by Keb' Mo'-

Jontavious Willis: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chuck Reece: ... who was one of those young people 25 or 30 years ago who reminded everybody, "Nah, this ain't dead at all."

Jontavious Willis: Yup.

Chuck Reece: And it's a beautiful sounding record.

Jontavious Willis: Oh, thanks.

Chuck Reece: And it's great and, and you wrote every single song on it.

Jontavious Willis: Every single song.

Chuck Reece: The first song on that record is called The Blues is Dead?

Jontavious Willis: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chuck Reece: With a question mark. And [00:39:30] we both know the answer to that is a, "No, it ain't."

Jontavious Willis: Mm-hmm (affirmative). The blu- the blues will never die. Now it might not never be like it was in the 60s or the 20s but you ca- it's more genres of music now. But it'll never die. [crosstalk 00:39:43]

Chuck Reece: You wanna play that song for us?

Jontavious Willis: I gotcha.

Jontavious Willis: (singing)

Chuck Reece: [00:41:00] Yeah. Yeah, that was good.

Jontavious Willis: (laughs)

Chuck Reece: That was good.

Jontavious Willis: Ohh.

Chuck Reece: [00:43:00] A lot of people think new blues songs don't get written very often.

Jontavious Willis: Well they are ... Yeah, well that's, ah ... And that's the thing 'cause a lot of people, they, um, c- 'cause it's so many, it, it's saturated with blues songs 'cause we talking about songs that've been written since the 1920s. It's not just reaching back to the 80s. So you got, what, 90 plus years of songs that's already out there.

Chuck Reece: Part of [00:43:30] almost-

Jontavious Willis: Yeah.

Chuck Reece: ... the Amer- the, the American songbook now.

Jontavious Willis: Yeah, for sure. This, this go all the way back. But a lot of people have a bad, uh, uh, you know, like I said, the history. Knowing the history is, is the best part about it 'cause if you go back, you can find gems, but a lot of people do the same songs.

Chuck Reece: Yeah.

Jontavious Willis: Um, like Sweet Home Chicago, you know? All those ... Nothing wrong with those songs at all.

Chuck Reece: Hoo- ... No. Hootchie Cootchie Man. Things like that.

Jontavious Willis: But having your own song too. And I, I perform other people's songs.

Chuck Reece: I know you do.

Jontavious Willis: Ah, and the reason I do that, because those people can no longer perform [00:44:00] and I try to shed a light on who they were as people because when they were here and nobody cared, didn't think about ...

Chuck Reece: Right.

Jontavious Willis: You know, most, most of the blues artists-

Chuck Reece: B- Barbecue Bob didn't have Jonny [crosstalk 00:44:10] following them around.

Jontavious Willis: Yeah. Yeah. Oh. No. No.

Chuck Reece: Yeah.

Jontavious Willis: Not at all. Now people were buying records-

Chuck Reece: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Jontavious Willis: ... from all over, but, uh, you know, they, they were seeing it, as like, you know, less than humans. So it's up to me and the people that's playing the music to give the credit where it's due and especially Georgia folks. Like, I'm all for, I'm all f- for, for all the blues musicians, but I, I scream for my, um, [00:44:30] Georgia blues musicians because I know a lot of their children. I know a lot of people that's in the community and folks that knew them.

Chuck Reece: Well ain't many other people screaming.

Jontavious Willis: No.

Chuck Reece: So it's good you're out there.

Jontavious Willis: Gotta scream loud.

Chuck Reece: Yeah. Thanks, Jontavious.

Jontavious Willis: No problem at all.

Chuck Reece: This was great, man.

Jontavious Willis: Thank you so much.

Chuck Reece: Thanks so much.

Jontavious Willis: Thank you.

Chuck Reece: Our thanks to Jontavious Willis. You can actually watch his performances at our studio on our website. And now, [00:45:00] let's visit Jontavious Willis' elder by 61 years, Mr. Bobby Rush.

Bobby Rush: (singing)

Chuck Reece: That's the song Hey Hey Bobby Rush! by Grammy award winner, Bobby Rush. [00:45:30] It's off his 2019 album, Sitting on Top of the Blues. At age 86, Bobby Rush has produced about 400 records and he still performs about 200 shows a year. We talked to him ahead of a performance in Macon, Georgia.

Bobby Rush: I am a free man. I've been locked up and bound because of the color of my skin. But I'm the freest man you ever saw in your life because [00:46:00] I love me, I love what I'm doing, I love who I am, don't try to be nobody else. What you see is what you get. And my plan is now, at this point in my life, do all I can while I can. I know there will come a time I can't, but I won't regret what I did not do.

Chuck Reece: Bobby says that regardless of people's backgrounds, the blues can unify.

Bobby Rush: What do Black, white, or what have you ... Music the only thing I know that [00:46:30] links people together. If you, if you, if you got a good beat, you like what you're doing, and you can prove that you do what you do and you do it

well, you don't have to like me. S- said, "Damn, I don't like him, but damn he good. And, and, it's, it, it, it reaches the core of me."

Chuck Reece: And really, that's how the blues keeps living on. Because it addresses those elemental feelings that all humans have and it does it in ways that allow anyone to hear the music as [00:47:00] part of their own story.

Bobby Rush: I love some Muddy Water, love some B.B. King. I love some, uh, Sonny Boy Williamson. I like a lot of things about Prince, and the Michael Jackson, the newer kind of stuff. When you put 'em all together, I got a piece of all of that and put it in my [inaudible 00:47:18]. And I put them in a bowl and stir it up, you get a Bobby Rush soup.

Chuck Reece: Bobby says some things about the blues can be taught, but not everything.

Bobby Rush: You can teach a man how to play a guitar [00:47:30] from any instrument. You can teach him how to do it. But you can't teach a man how to do what I do, what Elvis Presley did, or Ray Charles did. You gotta be born to do that. I'm born to do this.

Chuck Reece: Bobby Rush was born to do it and it's been evident for decades. To end this episode, I wanna circle back to the Glorifying Vines Sisters in Farmville, North Carolina. As I sat in that little church [00:48:00] where Alice is the pastor, talking with her and her sisters, we began to talk about freedom, about strength, and about where we find solace in rough times. Listen to Alice.

Alice Vines: I, I got my own mind. I live my own life, I tend to my own biddings, so, you know, I don't let peoples influence me. If I don't wanna do something, I ain't gonna do it, you know? I'm not a weak woman. I'm a strong woman. (laughs)

Chuck Reece: Well, there's-

Chuck Reece: I think there's some people who have let religion split 'em off from people.

Alice Vines: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dorothy Daniels: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Chuck Reece: And that don't, that never felt right to me. You know? It's like, because, you know, I don't care what faith you are. When you listen to this-

Alice Vines: Right.

Chuck Reece: You, you know.

Alice Vines: You can lis- you can listen more to a song like, you know, like say like Amazing Grace. You could be going through a lot of trials and tribulations, one of them old hymns will come up. It'll make me cry, it'll make me forget about all the things you done [00:49:00] been through, but, you know, like that's what

brought us here. You know, that's what brought us into this world of old hymns, you know?

Chuck Reece: Amazing Grace. That was one of the things I had in common with the Vines Sisters. I grew up with that song just like they did. Not everybody knows the story of that song. Amazing Grace was written in 1779 by a man named John Newton. Newton's profession? Slave trader. [00:49:30] On his ship, The Greyhound, he hauled human cargo from West Africa to North America. But 31 years before he wrote that song, The Greyhound took its last voyage with Newton at the helm. For two weeks, Newton and his crew fought vicious storms that carried the ship northward and vastly off course. Newton took the storms as a message from God that his trade [00:50:00] was not Godly, not in the least. And years later, he wrote Amazing Grace, his testament that he had been blind but had learned to see.

Chuck Reece: After Alice Vines brought up that song to me, she invited me to sing it with her sisters. Now, my singing voice ain't what it used to be, but that ain't the point.

Chuck Reece: [00:50:30] (singing)

Chuck Reece: The point is that I had the opportunity to share a piece of history and a piece of my heart with these four women. Our pigmentation didn't matter, our geography didn't matter. We were just people singing together and remembering that sometimes in life, inexplicable grace is all we have to lean [00:51:00] on.

Chuck Reece: (singing)

Alice Vines: There you go.

Chuck Reece: And that's it for us today. I want to thank the Glorifying Vines Sisters. In fact, I want to glorify the Glorifying Vines Sisters and [00:51:30] I hope all y'all will take a few moments to send good vibes toward Dorothy and Mattie, who are now both struggling with health problems. We thank Jontavious Willis and Jake Xerxes Fussell. They've both got new albums out this year. Jontavious' latest is called Spectacular Class and Jake's is called Out of Sight. Please give 'em a listen. You'll be glad you did.

Chuck Reece: Thanks to Grant Blankenship of GPB for his great interview [00:52:00] with Bobby Rush. And finally, thanks to Tim and Denise Duffy, along with Aaron Greenwood, Jed Finley, and Cornelius Lewis at the Music Maker Relief Foundation. Their work is critical to the preservation and ongoing health of Southern culture and they deserve your support. Our producer is Sean Powers, Josephine Bennett edits the show. Ever South, our theme song, was written by Patterson Hood and performed by the band, The Drive-By Truckers.

Chuck Reece: Now if you like The Bitter Southerner Podcast, please review it and rate it on Apple Podcasts even if you listen to it somewhere else. That'll help us make sure that more folks find out about it. The Bitter Southerner Podcast is a co-

production of Georgia Public Broadcasting and The Bitter Southerner magazine. You can access more from each episode at [GPB.org/podcasts](http://GPB.org/podcasts). I'm Chuck Reece and my three instructions remain constant: hug more necks, abide no hatred, and spend more time doing what you love with who you love. We'll be back in two weeks with a new episode.