

Free every month since March 1987
BLUES - GOSPEL - JAZZ - ZYDECO - BLUES ROCK - ROCK 'N' ROLL

Bits

APRIL 2019

BLUES IN THE SOUTH



THE BiTS INTERVIEW: WOODY MANN

Among guitarists and critics, Woody Mann is considered a modern master. While the country blues are his touchstone, he seems to draw inspiration from every direction, blending a myriad of influences with ease and grace. Pioneering guitar legend John Fahey said it well: "You can hear classical, jazz and blues approaches somehow converging into a single sparkling sound - a sound completely his own. If there was a category simply called great music Woody's music would belong there". (<http://woodymann.com/press/biography/>)

BiTS:

Woody, I want to talk to you about your background as a musician but also about Buxton as well because it's that that attracted me to doing an interview with you. I saw an ad that was put out by your people, and I'm fascinated with what you do. Can we start at the beginning though?



WM:

Absolutely, sure.

BiTS:

You started playing the guitar I think very young indeed. Certainly, you were being taught by Gary Davis by the time that you were 12.

WM:

That's right.

BiTS:

At what age did you start playing?

WM:

Well, I started at about eight, nine years old. Something like that. My brother played guitar and we had a lot of folk music in the house, so folk music was part of the household. There there was a Martin guitar and I just started picking it up and I remember it was very big for me, we had a Dreadnaught, and I just started playing and started hearing some old records. We had like Josh White records and Lead Belly, Paul Robeson and Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, that was kind of the music of the house. So it was always around us and basically, I started getting into folk music of course, and then I was looking for a guitar teacher at some point. I was learning from one tab book I had, but where I was living

there were no guitar teachers and I remember some songs like Candy Man and Cocaine I saw in book and I saw Reverend Gary Davis's name and I just said I'm gonna look him up in the phone book.

BiTS:

Is that what you did?

WM:

Yeah, I just went to the phone book and said I need a guitar teacher, let me check this guy out. I literally went to the phone book and called about three or four Gary Davis's in Queens and finally got his wife Annie on the phone and I said, is this the guy that wrote Candy Man? And she said, Yep. I said can I come over and meet him? She said, sure come on over. And that was it. I went over there and I really didn't know his music, I just know he wrote those songs, so I wasn't familiar with his repertoire at all and when I went to his house, I have all my lessons on tape, and I remember in my first lesson I said, what do you do, what do you play? So he started playing for me and then at that moment I said, that's it, I'm hooked. That was a period of discovery and I went out there as often as my mother could drive me and started learning.

BiTS:

What age would the reverend have been then?

WM:

Well, he died in 1972, he was 76 when he died, I believe, so he must have been about 70. Something like that.



BiTS:

I gather that he had enormous energy when he was teaching you, that the lessons weren't 15 minutes and then it's over.

WM:

Oh God, no no no. My mother would drop me there; I don't think I had a lesson less than three hours. I would spend the afternoon there and he was tireless, like you said, he was dogged. I was the one that gave out before he did, you know, and he would just sit there and play. He loved to play, he loved to teach, he was very happy, and I caught him at a point in his life when he was off the streets, he was proselytising, he had an agent and so nothing he'd rather do than sit around and play guitar and teach me all day. It was a gift, it was great.

BiTS:

I gather that he was very insistent that if he played something you had to play it exactly the same way.

WM:

That's right, [laughing] that's right. But what happened was he was very insistent on that, exactly the same way and then I'd go home and learn it and I'd tape it and write it out. I'd go back the next week, play it exactly the way he'd taught it to me, he goes, no no no, that's not how it goes, it goes like this, and he'd change it

[laughs]. Until I realised after a while, of course, he was improvising and that's what that was about.

BiTS:

That must have been pretty frustrating, I would think?

WM:

Oh, it was, it was crazy, you know, but after a while I realised, OK, you started understanding his approach, that he had certain phrases he liked to play, and he'd mix and match 'em and play 'em. So he was always improvising within what he knew, and that was really the lesson right there, to be honest with you. When I realised that I went, OK, now I understand the whole approach of these blues guys and, you know, Davis. And from Davis listening to records of Blind Blake and Robert Johnson and Big Bill Broonzy. It was really a way in to understand the music and so it was fascinating and so I think that's what drew me to a lot of the other blues records and the ability to take things off records because I would watch Davis play and I went, oh OK, that's how he does it. Because from the recordings it's not that easy to figure out, but once you see it it's like then it starts to make sense.

BiTS:

I believe you actually played a gig with him somewhere?

WM:

No, I never, well I did a house concert at my house where I grew up. I was too young. I never made it to the clubs with him. I didn't drive at the time. So I never drove him around or any of that kind of stuff. I drove with him with other people, but I didn't do any gigs with him properly.

BiTS:

Now tell me something about the film that you made, Harlem Street Singer which was about his life.

WM:

Yeah, I mean initially the story was based on my tapes from my lessons and, you know, it's a story I've always wanted to tell of Davis and how in history he never really kind of I felt, got his due in terms of his place in sort of the history of American music kind of thing. I think it's just a fascinating story and I had a little production company

with my business partner Trevor Laurence who was also a director of films, and we decided OK, let's do this project. We got some funding to start off, all private funding and we started the production. We interviewed as many people as we could, Ewan MacColl, Pete Seeger, Jack Elliott, a lot of people and everybody donated their time and like I said, I just thought it was one of those really important stories because Davis was a great player, but he didn't really influence many people. There wasn't a lot of people who played like him before him or after him. So he was kind of a one-off in the blues history books. Even when I was in New York the blues historians which I knew, a lot of the record collectors and blues writers, they kind of thought, oh, Gary Davis, Blind Gary from South Carolina just sort of a one-off. They didn't really pay him much attention because he wasn't a blues player. So he wasn't in the same sort of trio of blues as Robert Johnson, Son House, Bukka White. He didn't fit into that tree.

BiTS:

That's like people who dismiss Blind Willie Johnson because he wasn't quite a blues player.

WM:

There you go, that's right. And they just say, well he's just sort of a one-off because he doesn't fit into the mould and I think that's always the big problem with blues history and writing, as long as everything fits into a nice little narrative you're OK, but as soon as you get somebody who's outside that, it just doesn't fit and I think that's really the issue with Davis. He did a lot of gospel music, plus his guitar playing was very complicated. Nobody played like him. Nobody played this melodic, harmonic based guitar work that he did, and I think people just didn't know what to do with it. Other musicians couldn't copy it, so he didn't really influence a generation of players and yes, it really wasn't until the 60's and the folk boom when the young white musicians discovered him, it was like then they started eating it up and he became part of the New York folk scene. But in terms of his own audiences from the 30's, 40's, 50's he pretty much lived in total obscurity, you know. So anyway that's why I said we have to tell this story, plus I had the tapes, plus I love the guy and his music. So I said OK, we gotta do this.



Other guitar lessons with Reverend Gary Davis are available on the DVD of the movie Harlem Street Singer - the Reverend Gary Davis Story. Available at <http://amzn.com/B00QMQUALB4> and through <http://www.harlemstreetsinger.com>.

BiTS:

What was he like as a person?

WM:

Well, like I said, I was very young. He was very kind to me, very gentle. I would always give him a hard time about, you know, he'd play a song and I'd say, I don't like that one, play another one. I gave him a hard time. He was always laughing it off and always a good time. Never copped an attitude and I think a lot of it was because I was young and I wasn't a threat to him, you know what I mean?

BiTS:

Yeah.

WM:

I didn't have career and I wasn't trying to get his gig or anything, so he was just very fatherly, you know, very fatherly to me and that's what I appreciated.

BiTS:

I gather that his wife was very influential in his life in giving him direction?

WM:

Oh yeah, yeah. She was always there in the house, always took care of him.

BiTS:

Was she?

WM:

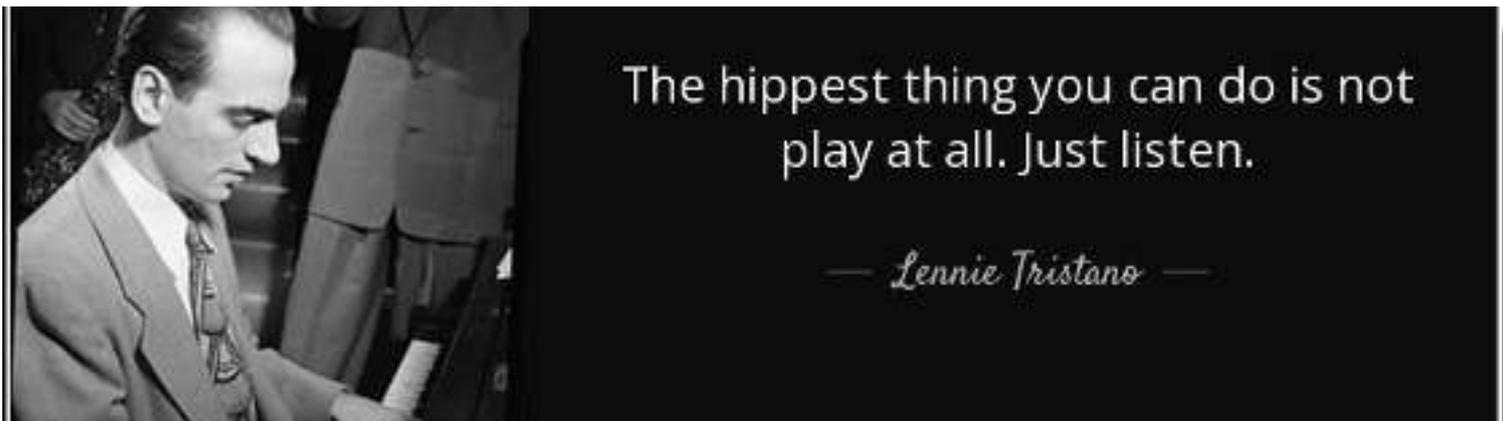
Oh yeah, she was part of the lesson. We'd be having a lesson and she'd be in the kitchen cooking, and she'd pop in every now and then with little comments and stuff and, you know, so lessons were like part of the household. But she was always there, and she organised the churches on Sunday, and that's kind of what that was about. Everything was geared to Sunday church.

BiTS:

There's a quote, Woody, that I've seen of yours which reads I think, 'The blues tradition is a grounding tradition. It's not isolated in time; you don't have to play it like it's always been played'. That sounds like a kind of dig at people who are sometimes called revivalists and I take it you don't consider yourself a revivalist?

WM:

That's an interesting topic. I mean think revivalist in the sense of obviously trying to keep the tradition, talk about the tradition and celebrate the tradition in ways of either teaching it to students or to take the music and make it your own and I think the big part of Davis's music was to be original and I think that was what I learned from him. It was very important to have your own sound, your own originality and I think that was central to all those musicians, whether it's Robert Johnson, you know, like I said Son House, Big Bill, Blind Blake, Bo Carter, Lemon Jefferson. I think they were individual because they worked in isolation, so they naturally were individual because their influences were of their own. But I think it was also important to make their own mark and I always think of blues as an art form not necessarily a folk tradition. Like we don't think of jazz as a folk tradition, we think of it as an art form and certainly you don't have to be African American to play jazz, we know that and if you look at the history of jazz from Louis Armstrong to Lester Young, to Charlie Christian, to Bird, to Prez, you know, the music develops as an art form. I think blues unfortunately sometimes is stuck in time and you can still be part of the blues tradition, use the blues, the craft and the music and the sensibility and personalise it and



extemporise it and still be in the tradition. So I kind of see it like that. That's my own feeling of it.

BiTS:

That very neatly brings me to Lennie Tristano, of course, who was obviously a huge influence on you in that kind of direction.

WM:

That's right, his whole thing also was to be original and to him what jazz was, was a feeling and originality. It wasn't swing, it wasn't be-bop, it wasn't cool. It wasn't a genre it was just an approach to improvisation and his whole thing was improvising, to play what you hear. However it comes out, it comes out, so there was also a great lesson in that and in some ways it was a little bit frustrating at the time because I wanted to get gigs and play jazz and he wasn't really teaching me those tools of the trade. He was teaching me, looking back, how to be a musician, not how to be a professional musician.

BiTS:

What age were you when you started working with Lennie?

WM:

I was in my twenties, I'd say maybe 22, 23 somewhere in there, yeah. If I remember cos after Davis died, I played blues and then I kinda stopped playing blues and I figured let me get into jazz. I was into Dixieland, but I've taken many guitar lessons from jazz teachers in New York and I didn't like it, it was very intellectual. Really above my head, you know, I just wanted to play blues and they were into all these modes and scales and stuff and someone suggested going to Lennie, and it was a completely different approach to jazz.

BiTS:

A lot of the teaching if I read your stuff right involved singing to improvise. Solos by Bird and Prez and others like that.

WM:

That was the central part of the lesson. Every lesson I had to sing a solo for him. With the record, not without the record.

BiTS:

Yes, that's probably more understandable.

WM:

Yeah, I'd put a record on, and I'd take a Prez solo or 16 bars, 32 bars and, you know, ba doo ba ba doo ah, I'd sing along with it, and he said that was the most important part of the lesson to get into the feeling and really understanding the music. So it was great, great fun too.

BiTS:

And tell me, I've read somewhere, I don't know whether you still do it, that at lunchtime you go and sit on the stairs somewhere and play and kind of get in touch with these guys still.

WM:

It's funny you should mention that because this morning I got up, I was gonna go to the stairwell and I figured, oh I'll go after the interview, I'll go out there. I do it every day still [laughing] the stairwell of the building where I live, yeah. I sit there and it's my sanctuary where I meditate with music.

BiTS:

One of my favourite records from a couple of years ago, Woody, is Empire Roots Band but I gather that Bill Sims has passed away very recently?

WM:

I just was gonna say, yes, just a few days ago.

BiTS:

Is that going to survive? What I mean is the band going to survive?

WM:

Yeah, I hope so. I mean I still play with Dave and Brian, but obviously, Bill was a big part of it, and I don't know, did you see Harlem Street Singer, the movie?

BiTS:

I've got a copy of the video in my living room at the moment.

WM:

Lovely, yeah Bill was a sweet guy, a really talented man, talented.

BiTS:

I loved a lot of the work that he did, to be honest with you.

WM:

Yeah, I think he toured a lot over in UK, didn't he?

BiTS:

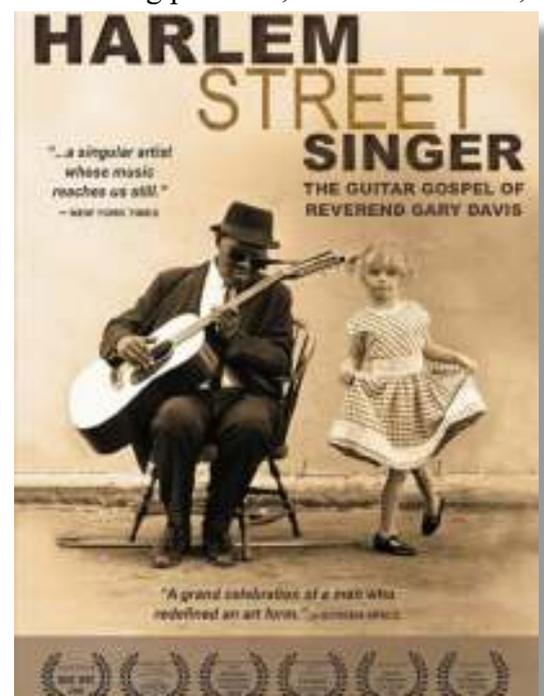
Yeah, once or twice..

WM:

OK.

BiTS:

Let me ask you another question if I may. On your website, there is a picture of you playing a guitar that looks like one of those old Gibson's with the curl at the top. It's obviously not a Gibson.





WM:

Oh, that is a John Monteleone. Yes, that's John Monteleone, it's one of his guitars.

BiTS:

Oh right, it's beautiful.

WM:

And it's fantastic. Yeah, so we're actually doing a film, my next film is on John Monteleone and if you go to the website StreetSingerProductions.com, you'll see a trailer for the movie and it's an eight-minute trailer, check it out, it's really interesting. It's all about John and his instruments.

BiTS:

Let's move on now to Buxton and all of the teaching that you do, I guess. What sort of level do you expect people to be to come and get taught?

WM:

Well, what I try to do with these workshops is open up to a variety of levels but no really total beginners. So I would say if someone is an absolute total beginner, never played a guitar, just can play one chord, I'd say this is not for you. But at the workshops I do have people who would consider themselves, yeah, they play a few chords, they can pick a little bit and then I have players who are actually doing gigs. So it's a variety of levels and I kind of break the workshop up to smaller groups and the idea, the object of the workshop is to leave the workshop with material that's right focused for your level and also it works out really nicely because more experienced players support the beginning players. It's a very inclusive attitude and part of the workshop is to play for each other, like a little concert. But we're just like a song circle and we all just play for each other and it's sometimes the first time people have ever played for people, and you're gonna get over that inhibition because everybody's supporting each other. So that's a nice feature of the workshop.

BiTS:

Some people are terrified, of course, playing in front of other people when they've only ever done it in their bedroom.

WM:

That's right, and that's why part of the workshop is to get over that and to play it in a very supportive atmosphere. So it's a really nice, you know, mixed bag of styles and levels. And some people come with a blues background; some people come with a fingerstyle background, some people are more jazz oriented. So it's really mixed, and I try to find that centre ground and the idea is to learn repertoire but also to understand what you're playing. Understand the fretboard, how to improvise, how to create variations. To understand it cos yeah, we all learn from books and videos, but we don't just wanna learn repertoire we wanna understand what we're playing. And so that's really the focus of the workshop is whatever you're playing, understand what you're playing so you can use

it to further your technique and understanding and that's really the backdrop of the workshop. Buxton's a beautiful place, the hotel is great, so it's turned out to be this annual weekend, you know, music fantasy. It's really great, truly fun.

BiTS:

Optimum on the course, how many?

WM:

Well, I definitely cap it at 14, that's it, that's tops. I've tried with more; it doesn't work, that seems to be very doable for me. So it works, it works. This year I think we're almost full now, we have about 12 now. So there's a couple of spots open.

BiTS:

Woody, you've apparently got a full tour of the UK coming up in June. I'll put some stuff on the BiTS site. **See below_*

WM:

Nice, OK, beautiful. Alright yeah, I'll do that and perhaps on one of these tours we'll get to meet.

BiTS:

Thank you so much for talking to me, it's been a real insight, absolutely wonderful and I must say I've been an



admirer of your playing for, oh years and years and years. I can't even remember. I've got stuff of yours going back 20, 30 years.

WM:

Thanks Ian I hope we can meet up some day. Bye for now

