

FORD, CLARENCE
Reel II--Excerpt
December 10, 1975

Summary: Alma D. Williams
& Kay L. Wicker
Check: Richard B. Allen

Also present: Tad Jones
Richard B. Allen

Dalton "Red" Rousseau, trumpet, and Clarence Ford went with Guitar Slim in [19]54. DR and CF were like brothers then. They played together, and they were roommates. Guitar Slim needed a saxophone player and a trumpet player at the same time. GS's manager, Hosea Hill, called DR about the job, and DR told CF about it since neither DR nor CF were working at the time. DR said he was taking it and CF, who had never been on the road, decided to take it, too. GS was working seven nights a week, getting \$20.00 [per musician?] a night. CF said that they could get a room for \$2.00 a night and get a meal in cities like New York for \$1.00 or less. This was CF's first experience on the road. The personnel in Guitar Slim's band included Lloyd Lambert, leader and bass; Guitar Slim, featured attraction and guitar; Lawrence Cotton, piano; Oscar Moore, who was with Slim before any of the other personnel, drums; Joe Tillman, tenor sax; Gus Fontenette, alto; and CF, baritone. CF didn't have a baritone, but Ellis Marsalis, who is still a good friend of his, loaned him one. CF calls EM "a wonderful musician, the greatest piano player I'll ever know." EM played with Joe Jones sometimes. EM stopped playing baritone and played piano[only]. CF was supposed to buy the baritone from EM, but EM finally gave it to CF. CF played baritone with GS about two years until 1956 when CF came home and tried to stay.

CF played the Apollo Theater at the time when you had to read music on sight. If you could not play the music for a show, even though you had never seen it before, you would be replaced. CF says that they are doing that at the Fairmont now.

CF was on the road with GS about two years. They were on the road all of [19]56 and [19]55. The band travelled in a '55 Ford [station] wagon. CF says that it had to be [19]55 when he joined the band because of this. [1955 model cars came out in 1954!:] CF met them in Macon, Georgia. CF went there on a train. As many as nine musicians went in the wagon at times. On the side of the wagon were the words "Guitar Slim and His Orchestra." Slim would ride into town first in his Cadillac with the band in the wagon behind him. That was the way most bands travelled in those days. The singer would make his grand entrance in a Cadillac, and the band would follow in another car. They would always get into town before dark. Everybody would come around, see the band, and come to the dance. GS was good, but nobody knew how good he was. CF says that Ray Charles "got his thing" from listening to GS. CF has not "read anywhere where Ray Charles wrote that down." RC was trying to get started around here at the time. RC used GS's band on his first recording. CF thinks it was "Don't You Know, Baby." [Compare discographies.] CF wasn't on the recording. They used another baritone player since the band did not have a [regular?] baritone.

CF says that GS wasn't intelligent. "He was sort of like a person that had come up on the farm." GS did the most harm to himself. GS drank a lot, and CF believes that this is what killed him. CF says that a lot of people "made money off" of GS because he didn't have the right manager. Everybody was trying to see how much they could get out of GS. CF thinks Hosea [Hill] was his best manager. HH put a band with GS and "sort of handled his affairs." CF thinks that HH had to bury GS. GS stayed in Thibodaux most of the time.

CF says that Slim was an "all right" fellow. GS would say to CF, "I'll never be the musician you are" and "I respect musicians." CF says that GS never thought he [GS] was great like some others. He thought of himself as just "a plain ordinary guitar picker." GS used to pick cotton, and his fingers were very long. CF thinks that that's why GS could do things with the guitar. CF never saw anybody else do some of the things GS did with a guitar. GS used to "walk all around with the guitar." He would hang down from the top of the roof and play at the same time. GS made a good visual attraction.

Some of the tunes Slim sang said a lot. CF says GS died right after he recorded "If I Had My Life to Live Over." Another of GS's tunes called "Sufferin' Mind" was close to Ray Charles. CF claims that Ray Charles heard this and "got his thing from that." CF has not heard the recording but thinks it would sound more like a crude Ray Charles "because the band was playing the same type of style."

CF agrees that GS was not sophisticated. He would come on stage in a red or a green suit. He had a million selling record. Country people liked him. "We did our best in Florida, Mississippi, Alabama." They broke records in Florida. More people came to see them at the Palms in Hollindale over a two week period than anybody else. The band would play, and Slim would come on later. He would play and leave. After the band took intermission, they would play again, and GS would come on afterwards, like a show. CF says that the band had a lot of good arrangements. Lloyd Lambert did not do the arrangements.

END OF EXCERPT

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RBA asks CF about the number of keys that Fats Domino and Guitar Slim played. CF says that GS "played what you call a choke," i.e., a capo[tasto]. CF calls it a "key selector." GS actually played in only one key. A lot of rock players have them now. CF says he played a little bit on the guitar himself. GS would play the guitar himself. GS would play the guitar the same way, but the capo would allow him to play in different keys. GS didn't retune his guitar, but John Lee Hooker did. CF says he played with a variety of people like Sonny Stitt, who taught him things to people like JLH who couldn't tune his guitar [according to whose standards? RBA, Sept. 20, 1979]. CF has played with "from the bottom of the barrel to the top" and had more exposure that way.

CF worked with JLH on a show. People were put with GS like Jimmy Reed, Joe Turner, or T-Bone Walker in a "package." A "package" would be GS, TBW, and JT. The "package" would play, for instance, Texas for three weeks, "everywhere a different town.... People would come out because they wanted to see one of the three." JT's big hit was "Shake, Rattle and Roll," which is a standard. They would always play the Labor Union Hall in New Orleans. Later GS was put in a "package" with Jimmy Reed.

GS played with JLH in Florida. CF says that JLH was amazing. They would play a tune, and he would retune his guitar; they would play another tune, and he would retune his guitar, etc. CF had never seen this done before. JLH would tune his guitar so he

could play a minor or a major chord. He did not use a bottleneck; "that was the reason for tuning it that way." [CF seems to misunderstand the use of a bottleneck.] JLH used a pick, but CF isn't sure what kind. Later, CF saw country and western musicians use "those things" [i.e., capos?].

On that same show was Ed Townsend, a refined singer like Nat Cole. ET had been on the Ed Sullivan show previously and expected the band to get the same arrangement with two horns that Ed Sullivan gets with fifteen pieces. They couldn't do it. CF rejoined the band later on. "We got it together," and ET was well satisfied.

TJ asks if Jimmy Reed and Guitar Slim used to have contests. Whoever had the biggest record would come on last. JR never had a record as big as GS's "[The] Things [That] I Used To Do," so as a rule, JR came on first. The climax of the show was at the end when everyone would come on stage. There would be three acts in the package but never three guitars, only two. Joe Turner would be in the package with GS and JF, instead of a third guitar player. "They would call themselves battling" which drew the crowd.

T-Bone Walker would play his guitar behind his head. GS could make his guitar talk, making it curse. He played the guitar through his legs, hold the guitar with one hand, etc. Johnny "Guitar" Watson

was on the show at times and JGW would talk to guitar and make it answer.

GS's popularity went down in 1956 according to CF. This was a low period for the band. GS made a slight comeback later on. He changed record labels at that time. He went to Ahmet Ertegun [of Atco]. "I Got Sumphin' For You" was the first recording CF did [with GS?]. Bumps Blackwell recorded GS before that. [BB was a producer, apparently of GS's Speciality records.] GS had recorded for BB, but the recordings "didn't do anything." When GS changed labels, he recorded "If I Had My Life to Live Over." During this time CF left. The band had changed; there were only five pieces in the band, and they played mostly at small clubs. Something happened to make the band play with Nappy Brown awhile. CF thinks maybe GS was sick.

Before this, the band was working so little that CF decided to stay home. He says that he was tired of the road. CF then tried working for the Dixie beer company. His brother-in-law was working on the truck; [CF was?] helping. They would work from five in the morning to five in the evening for \$6.00. This was in 1957, the same year that CF joined Fats [Domino]. CF would sometimes work at the Dew Drop [Inn] for \$10 a night the night before, get off at four a.m., go home, and change clothes, and meet the truck for six. CF knew he could not continue to work like that, but he tried. If CF made \$40, "I made a plenty money." Prices had gotten higher and \$40 was not as much as it was in [19]52.

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CF joined Fats [Domino] because Herbert Hardesty, the tenor player, kept asking CF to join the band. CF knew HH from when they played with Dave [Bartholomew]. CF did not want to go on the road anymore. They played at the Dew Drop. One night when they got there, Frank Painia said that there was nothing going on and told them to go home. "No money--"

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