

Charlie Sayles In conversation at the Carlton Studios, Edinburgh, 16/1083

PTB: When did you first get interested in the blues?

CS: I'd never heard the blues, really, until I went into the Service, about '67/'68, and when I was in Vietnam I heard B.B. King in a joint and I wondered why nobody was listening to this guy. Everybody was drinking beer and eating chicken, and that's the first time I heard it and it just knocked me out. So, when I got out of the Service I decided that, you know, I'd buy a harmonica, because there was nothing to do, and I've been going ever since.

PTB: Who are your main influences?

CS: Well, the first one was Sonny Boy Williamson II. If it wasn't for him I don't think I'd be playing.

PTB: For what reason?

CS: Well, I bought this record. It was an English record, Sonny Boy Williamson & The Yardbirds, and for about two months, every time I put that record on I was like, hypnotised. I was just laying on my bed and listening and the harp, it didn't seem like music, it seemed like something else. I could see planes and all this kind of jazz! So that's what got me and then, of course, I just started listening and listening, like I still do. You name a harmonica player and I listen to them. What it is: through the years you tend to concentrate on, like, four or five, then you hear Someone else. Right now I'm into Little Walter, whereas when I first started I couldn't dig him because he was too complicated for me.

PTB: What about the pre-war players such as Noah Lewis, Jaybird Coleman?

CS: Just getting into it. Well, this guy (Dr. Harp) is helping me getting into that. See, what it was : I didn't know who to listen to and I didn't have the ear. I got so into that amplified sound that I kinda thought the acoustic, you know, "I don't wanna know! "Now I find I like it. 'Cause that's where it came from. That's how Little Walter learned, from listening to guys like that, and the big bands. It'll probably take your life to re ally listen to everybody, man. So, you know, I'm just taking it one at a time.

PTB: When did you start playing in public?

CS: I started playing in '71 and when I went to Atlanta, I guess that was between '72 and '73, that's when I first started. I was walking down in the Atlanta underground (?) and I

ran into this white guitar player who was just playing the heck out of the guitar. It wasn't blues, it was just his music. It was almost like what they call Rockabilly, OK? And so, I took out a harp and I heard him say, "Come on", so I started playing. Ended up playing with the guy all over Atlanta. It was almost comical trying to get gigs, a white guy and a black guy in the Deep South, so it was very interesting!

PTB: What took you to New York, where you cut the album?

CS: I was in New York off and on. When I first decided to play the harmonica I was working for a while, the longest job I held was probably for about two months, made enough money and I decided to...I remember I looked at the map, on the bus house, and I said, "I'm gonna go to St. Louis", 'Cause of St. Louis Blues, but on the way I stopped in New York, 'cause New York is very exciting, you know, the movies, and I love movies. So I hung out there. I wasn't playing on the street then. Then I just would travel. Made a lot of money and I tried to get back home and after I left Atlanta and went to New York I had fifteen dollars when I got there. Now, that's not too much money in New York, right, I'd never really played solo. Only done it a couple o~ times and I was really kind of nervous, you know. So I got out there and I said, "Well I think I'll try to be, like, a whole band. Kind of fool somebody!". I fooled 'em, 'cause I was making, like, a hundred bucks a day! That first night I couldn't believe it, man. After I paid my hotel bill I just threw all these coins on the bed and I just kinda, you know, this was, what, seventy dollar's worth of coins! I said, "This isn't bad", 'cause I was making nothing in Atlanta, I was lucky if I made ten bucks a night. So I just started playing.

PTB: How did the album come about?

CS: OK. I was playing on the streets of New York and Dave Sax, an English guy, was riding on a bus and he said that he heard me and got off at the next stop and ran up and talked to me. We became friends and I come to find he's a blues lover, collects blues records and wotnot, and he decided that he was just going to use his own money to put an album out. Because he thought that, you know, I should be heard, or whatever they think. So we just worked that winter and he even went as far as bought a tape recorder, a big one, and he's not rich. He was working, you know, putting in phones, for the electric company.

We did it (the album) and the next year Ralph (Rinzler) invited me to the festival and we sold quite a few of those, and we sold some in England. So, that's so much for the New York thing.

PTB: On that album you sang through your harp. Any reason for doing so then and not now?

CS: Mainly because, see, when I started music I didn't know anything about the structure. I just knew that I liked it and listened to the blues, and it just came natural. I

said, "Well how am I going to sing and play?" and so I figured, like I said, I tried to become a whole band. If you're a whole band you got to sing and then play the bass part (sings), and it just came. My voice wasn't all that great, because when you sing and play the harmonica, if you're like this (assumes harp playing position) I found that singing you need the wind and need to be free and I didn't have that. Also, I couldn't extend my vocals because I thought I had to play in between. Now I'm just learning about the extension and things like that. Plus I never hung out with musicians, I was just by myself. I'm just starting now to hang out, you know, with Dr. Harp or whatever.

PTB: So, what have you been doing since that album?

CS: That's really hard to say, man. I performed for probably about a couple of years, in festivals and, you know, and then I just stopped because I lost the feeling for it. Because performing, you know, it's not just playing the harmonica, you have to deal with people and, well there's a lot of other things that I just don't like. So I just got out of it, you know. I just did the street, maybe Philly or wherever I was, and I got back into it when Ralph talked about I should start a band, because at that time I was teaching harmonica. So I said, "OK". So you know, I decided to get back into the performing thing. What that takes is you've just got to study it, simple as that. Like going to school. Just get everything: you got to get your voice, you got to get timing, you got to get a good tone in the harp. Whatever it takes. I'm still working on it and getting looser and looser, and why not?

PTB: We believe you've now got two bands. Who are the members?

CS: Yeah, it's like I think I like to call me, Dr. Harp and Larry Wise Charlie Sayles & The Saylesmen. We decided to call it that. Now, my band that's more electrified is: Darryl Anderson on bass, he's 21; Eddie Williams on drums, he's 18; Dave Owens on guitar, and he's a little older, he's 29 I believe; and we have another guitar player, but right now he's having problems with money, so he's in New Jersey. His name is Glenn, and then me. In fact Larry used to be in the band, but then he decided he's gonna help us book the band, so that's what Larry's job is now.

PTB: How did you put the band together. Did you advertise?

CS: No, me and Ralph decided that first we gotta have professional musicians. I said, "Wait a minute! I've never worked with musicians". So we figured maybe we better take it from scratch, 'cause I had to learn too. And I'm walking down the street one day and I ran into Darryl Anderson, and he lives right around the corner. I say nothing, 'cause I usually don't say nothing when I'm walking down the street, and he says, "How're you doing?", so I says, "I'm alright". Then I was just going, 'cause I had just talked to a drummer and he was coning down that day, so I goes, "Do you play music?", he says, "Yeah!". I says, "You play bass?", he says, "Yeah!" So I say, "Come on over", and that's

how he came. Came over with a bass with one string missing and he didn't even know the boogie woogie, seriously. Now he's really good.

We've been rehearsing for a couple of years. We're just about ready now, I'd say in the next two months, to really shoot out there.

PTB: What's the make up of your set?

CS: It's half 'n' half, because we figured that people want to recognise something, and so it's half and half. I think it'll always be that way because you have to give those guys credit. The reason I'm playing is because of Sonny Boy, Little Walter and Muddy. You got to do it, in my opinion, plus they're great songs (sings "Dead Presidents"). See, my songs are more personal: "I'm Mad", "People" - These chains are dragging me down, I wonder how you all get around - things like that. But I like the other songs because they're a little more fun and it's another side.

PTB: Tell us a little of your time in Vietnam. You wrote a song about it.

CS: Yeah - Vietnam on a Thursday afternoon, Down in the valley there's nothing but gloom -it just goes on and on. I wasn't talking about fighting, I was just talking about how you get lonely out there. It's a drag man. Fighting off leeches, and climbing mountains and stuff. We was glad when we got fighting. Really. Because then you could rest. If you can imagine ninety guys stretched out in a line your chances of getting hit are you know...Usually it was the other guy in the line getting hit. That's the way it was. In fact really, to tell the truth, Vietnam was one of the best parts of my life.

PTB: In what way?

CS: Well you figure: you'll only, once or twice a month, see some type of action. I'll just tell you, the enemy we was fighting just didn't have the same stuff that we had. They was fighting with World War I stuff sometimes. That's why they had to make booby-traps out of bamboo, because they didn't have other arms. At the time I was there, '68 to '70, we were into small scale attacks, you know, no big stuff anymore and, like I said, it's just not as dangerous, for me anyway. The infant was the best place to be because you were always out. If you were stationary then you'd always get hit

PTB: What does the future hold?

CS: Right now, this is my job and life. Basically, what I do is study music and play, and try and learn how to give it to other people. That's all I really care to do.

PTB: Well we hope you record again soon.

CS: Yeah, I'm sure we will when the time comes. I don't feel that there any rush, because I'm 35 and I don't think I'll die till I'm at least 70! I hope not anyway!

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