

This band is not your typical local bar blues stuff and if James Harman considers them serious competition this reviewer rests his case. If interested contact Brian on 07787 7314333 or scotswood.slim@yahoo.com and you can work out your own deal. I guarantee the cost won't be extortionate and you will receive a warm Geordie welcome.

Keith Scoffham

★ BOOKS ★

SWEET BITTER BLUES: WASHINGTON, DC'S HOMEMADE BLUES

Phil Wiggins and Frank Matheis

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It is welcome that this long-awaited collaboration between bluesman Phil Wiggins and journalist Frank Matheis has finally arrived in print. Centred around Phil Wiggins' recollection of his life and career as a blues artist, he and Matheis provide welcome documentation of the Washington D.C. acoustic blues scene and community over the past half-century or so. In addition to Phil Wiggins' autobiography, they give an overview of the D.C. blues scene in the 1960s, of performers that have been and are part of the D.C. acoustic blues scene, Phil Wiggins' tips for harmonica players, and Barry Lee Pearson's interviews with John Cephas and Archie Edwards.

The book observes the rise of interest in whites for the blues that took place in the 1960s when the likes of Mississippi John Hurt and Skip James played Ontario Place and other venues. At the same time as D.C.'s own homemade acoustic blues scene was being carried on by members of the African-American community such as Mother Scott, Flora Bolton, Chief Ellis, Archie Edwards, John Jackson, John Cephas and Phil Wiggins who were carrying forward with a songster and Piedmont blues tradition.

In the introductory chapter, Wiggins and Matheis observe that a convergence of cultural forces helped make Washington, D.C. so special to sustain a thriving country blues scene for forty years. Archie Edwards' Barbershop, with its Saturday afternoon jam sessions, was, and is, a central meeting point for blues musicians, young and old. There were also chroniclers such as Barry Lee Pearson and Otis Williams. The Smithsonian Institution, with its Folklife Center and annual Folklife Festival, provided opportunities for performances before substantial crowds. In contrast, organisations like the National Council for the Traditional Arts and the Travellin' Blues Workshop, publications like Unicorn Times, musical venues, blues radio programmes on WPFW by the likes of Bill Barlow, Nap Turner and Jerry 'The Mama' Washington, and other local radio stations provided a foundation. Also prominent was an older generation willing to carry on the acoustic blues traditions.

Phil's story is split into three parts. The first part deals with his early life, how he started playing music, his entrance into the D.C. acoustic blues community and the beginning of his career as a musician. The lengthiest part of Phil's story is devoted to his partnership with John Cephas. The final section is dedicated to Phil's various activities since John Cephas passed.

I have known Phil Wiggins for over thirty years and admired him as a musician and a person. Still, there was so much about him that goes beyond his musical persona. In telling his story, he gives a glimpse of the D.C. blues community in which he was mentored, then one he flourished in and became a mentor to many today. Phil also provides us with a perspective of someone from the blues culture. Many of those writing about the music (myself included) are outsiders, no matter how much we love this music.

Phil grew up during the time that Jim Crow was being dismantled, which lends insight into how this affected him. He describes starting to play music, and his relationship with Flora Molton, Ed Morris, Mother Scott, Archie Edwards, and John Jackson. He would also meet and learn from Johnny Shines, Robert Lockwood, Jr., and Henry Townsend. Then at the 1976 Folklife Festival, Phil met big Chief Ellis and John Cephas, with whom he started playing as the Barrelhouse Rockers.

Big Chief Ellis returned to his home state of Alabama and passed away, which led to Cephas and Wiggins becoming a duo. There is plenty of insight on John Cephas, and others in this lengthy chapter. There was much he experienced and learned from, such as Archie Edwards' Bunker Hill Road barbershop being the centre of this acoustic blues community. But also, I learned much about Cephas' career as a carpenter at the D.C.



Phil Wiggins and John Cephas, Northbound Blues Club, Glasgow, 1992. Photo: Phil Wight.

National Guard Armory, as well as being one of the foremost fingerstyle guitarists. While born in the Foggy Bottom section of Washington, he loved living in the country down in Bowling Green, Virginia. John was also a master musician and one of the richest vocalists in the blues (one who evoked Big Bill Broonzy with the depth and warmth of his expressive vocals).

Their first album was recorded for a German label and part of a series 'Living Country Blues U.S.A.', which labelled the pair, Bowling Green John Cephas and Harmonica Phil Wiggins, which were stage names they would eventually discard. Phil also played on Flora Molton's album in this series, which also had an album devoted to Archie Edwards. Phil observes that they recorded some of their standard repertoire for this recording. Among the many insights Phil provides is that, for circumstances he describes, he was not satisfied with many of the recordings at the time they were made. Listening to them today, Phil can appreciate them in a manner he previously had not. With John Cephas, Phil travelled throughout the world and had an inquisitiveness about the people and cultures he met that he details in his recollections.

Phil also provides some insight into the founding of the Augusta Heritage Center Blues Week at Davis & Elkins College in Elkins, West Virginia. Joan Fenton invited him after John Jackson had recommended Phil, starting a career of teaching the blues as well as playing that continues to today. Sparky Rucker was another instructor. The next year John Cephas was added to the faculty, and over the years, the Augusta Heritage Center Blues Week has become well known plus inspiring similar workshops around the world.

The last part of Phil Wiggins' story involves carrying on his legacy and the various partnerships and projects he has engaged in. He partnered with Corey Harris, Rick Franklin, Eleanor Ellis and Nat Reese. Reese, like Howard Armstrong, was a performer of a variety of songs that went beyond the blues. With this inspiration, Phil formed the Chesapeake Sheiks with whom he might perform a ballad that Louis Armstrong recorded, as well as a Slim & Slam number. He regularly still performs with Eleanor Ellis and has a fruitful collaboration with an Australian, Dom Turner, with whom he has performed at the Bryon Bay Blues Festival, and continues to teach and mentor others. As he does elsewhere in his narrative, he intersperses short bits about these persons.

As mentioned, Phil has tips for harmonica players. Also, Barry Lee Pearson interviews of John Cephas and Archie Edwards that appeared in Living Blues are reprinted. Finally, there are short portraits of significant persons and institutions that were part of the D.C. acoustic blues scene. These include portraits of Flora Molton, John Jackson, Esther Mae 'Mother' Scott, Bill Harris, The Festival of American Folklife, the Gaines Brothers, Eleanor Ellis and several persons associated with Archie Edwards barbershop including Mike Baytop, Mr. Bones, Nap Brundage, N.J. Warren, Warner Williams and Jay Summerour, and M.S.G. The Acoustic Trio.

The highest compliment I can make of this book, besides how much I enjoyed reading it, is that I learned so much about the D.C. acoustic blues scene. It is also handsomely illustrated. 'Sweet Bitter Blues' is an invaluable addition to the literature about the blues.

Ron Weinstock