

certain arbitrariness involved in the selection.” And he asks the reader to “think of a sampler CD, a taste . . . of the pleasures awaiting” when delving deeper into today’s Chicago blues scene.

Whites’ knowledge of and love for his subject is strong and unquestionable and the reader is sure to feel and share the author’s hope that the legacy continues. In fact, he presents evidence throughout the book, for example, that suggests the southern soul blues niche is stable and perhaps even gaining traction in African American communities. And there are heart-tugging accounts of the fierce and stubborn personal pride many musicians have—especially the children of guitarist Eddie and singer Vera Taylor—in keeping blues tradition alive.

When the artists speak for themselves we get the most valuable information. What do they think is happening with blues? Is legacy paramount? Is the market manipulated and controlled by “others” who steer the future course and influence the aesthetic? These are important questions. *Blues Legacy* is a great conversation starter. And the answers to these questions may determine what’s to come.

—Justin O’Brien

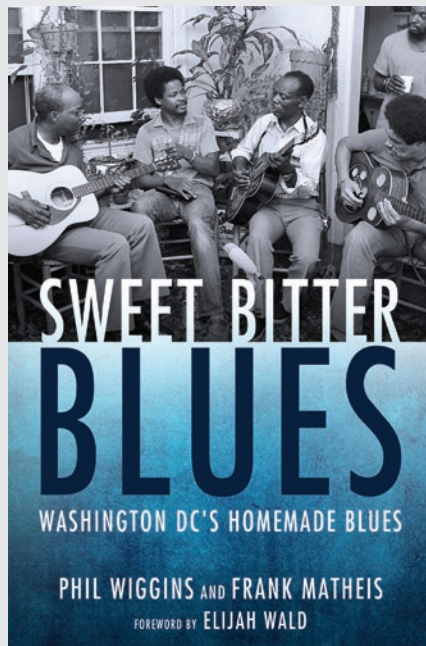
## *Sweet Bitter Blues: Washington, DC’s Homemade Blues*

By Phil Wiggins  
and Frank Matheis

University Press of Mississippi

***Sweet Bitter Blues: Washington, DC’s Homemade Blues***, a collaboration between harmonica maestro Phil Wiggins and ***Living Blues*** contributing writer Frank Matheis, is a unique exploration of the history and development of a distinctive African American blues community from the perspective of an artist who was initiated into the music, thrived there, and went on to bring worldwide recognition to himself and that scene. And although it is very much Wiggins’ book, ***Sweet Bitter Blues*** is also a communal effort that is composed of the harmonica man’s first-person narration; biographies of essential players by Matheis; supporting essays by Matheis, University of Maryland scholar Dr. Barry Lee Pearson, and guitarist Eleanor Ellis; and a foreword by Elijah Wald.

The Washington, DC, blues scene was



essentially home to the acoustic Piedmont style, although Wiggins challenges that nomenclature. In the introduction, Matheis explains that “it is a style native in the Carolinas and Virginia over to Tennessee, but practiced along the entire mid-Atlantic region.” Some of most renowned practitioners include Blind Blake, Blind Boy Fuller, Blind Willie McTell, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, the Reverend Gary Davis, and Peg Leg Sam. While Davis and the McGhee and Terry duo gained wide exposure during the often-overlapping folk and blues revivals of the 1960s, the players who had established themselves in the African American community in DC and surrounding environs—Archie Edwards, John Jackson, John Cephas, Flora Molton, Esther Mae “Mother” Scott, Wilbert “Big Chief” Ellis, and others—were overlooked by outsiders but continued to perform their music for social functions. The scene did connect with the blues revival through three artists who relocated there: Elizabeth Cotten, Mississippi John Hurt, and Skip James. They interacted with the local artists, particularly through the nexus created by the jam sessions held weekly at guitarist Edwards’ barbershop. Other nurturing factors include the Smithsonian Folklife Festivals (and later Smithsonian Folkways Recordings), the National Council for the Traditional Arts, clubs, radio stations, record collectors, archivists, and scholars like Pearson. As a teenager in the early 1970s, Wiggins found his way into the scene.

The role of chronicling the history of Washington’s acoustic blues was essential for Wiggins: “It is important that we, in

the black community, tell our own story of Washington, DC acoustic blues, because that’s the only way the true story is going to be told.” His initial attraction to the harmonica came through an impulse to make music and the reality that it was the only instrument he could afford. When he heard blues players at a Smithsonian festival, he found his home. It was at the 1976 festival, while playing with Ellis, that Wiggins first performed with his soon-to-be 30-year partner, Cephas, opening a door into the roots of the “so-called” Piedmont blues and a world of experience that would soon vanish: “Playing with John Cephas was such a different thing than playing with the younger folks I’m playing with now. I think that it’s just a matter of the times that John came up in, and those times—they don’t exist anymore . . . Today, we’re trying to continue and to re-create it, but when he was starting out as a blues musician he was playing with the African American community at house parties.” They worked together until health issues sidelined Cephas in 2007. Wiggins details their life on the road—a road that increasingly extended around the world. He discusses their major recording sessions, their delight at growing recognition, including the 1987 Handy Award for Entertainers of the Year, and he does not shy away from examining the rough spots in their professional and personal relationships.

Wiggins also talks about the music he has made on his own with artists like Corey Harris and Rev. John Wilkins, as well as his own bands: the Chesapeake Sheiks, House Party, and the Phil Wiggins Tidewater Trio. He points out two events that make him feel he has come to be regarded as a bluesman in his own right: a 2013 ***Living Blues*** cover story by Matheis, “Phil Wiggins—On His Own but Not Alone,” and a 2017 National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship. He uses that stature to level some criticism at the contemporary blues scene, pointing to the ascendancy of blues rock, the frequent absence of African American musicians on festival programs, and paternalistic “handlers” who exploit blues artists. Yet, Wiggins perseveres in his pursuit of the authentic acoustic blues in the communal context in which he first discovered it: “Just about every note of music that I ever played in my life has been dance music, but rarely has it ever been presented as that.” His musical life has certainly been filled with ***Sweet Bitter Blues***.

—Robert H. Cataliotti **LB**