



Left: Larry 'Mole' Taylor

Top right: Bob 'Bear' Hite, Henry 'Sunflower' Vestine, Allen 'Blindowl' Wilson

Bottom Right: Adolfo 'Fito' de LaParra

Interview by Alex Cramer

Interview with the Canned Heat

by Alex Cramer

Canned Heat is the best white blues band around today perhaps. Their hit single "On the Road Again", brought blues to a mass audience. Now they have released another single, "Goin' Up the Country", another traditional blues. If this record becomes a hit then we'll know that we're in the midst of a genuine blues revival.

Inter: Does the name, Canned Heat, come from the Tommy Johnson song?

Henry Vestine (lead gtr): Yes.

Inter: Is your homage to country blues?

Al Wilson (harp): That's half of it. The name sounds like potential energy.

Inter: There seems to be two divergent trends today in white blues — There's your style, going back to country, and then there's Butterfield, adding horns and moving in a jazz direction.

Wilson: Going to the country is only part of it. For instance the way Henry plays doesn't owe much to the country blues.

Inter: He uses quite a bit of distortion, I know. Which brings me to your opinion of Muddy Waters' latest record, "Electric Mud".

Vestine: Initially I liked it. But I don't think it's so hot now.

Wilson: I didn't like it.

Inter: Because of the modern style?

Wilson: No, I didn't think the group consisted of good modern musicians.

Bob Hite (vocal): I don't like it because it ain't Muddy Waters. He's trying to capitalize on the sound white groups are getting. I think it was Muddy's idea to cut the record.

Inter: Do you know which band is backing him?

Wilson: I know for a fact that he didn't know the group when he entered the studio.

Hite: I hope for his sake that he never wants to see them again.

Inter: Somebody like Hendrix can be influenced by Waters. Don't you think the reverse can happen?

Wilson: It's less likely.

Inter: Aside from Junior Wells, Buddy Guy, and a couple of other bluesmen who are in their early thirties, there doesn't seem to be any younger Negroes, in their twenties, coming up.

Hite: There's a lot of them. You just don't know about them. They're still playing in juke joints in Louisiana. There's Albert Collins in Texas who's only 24; in L.A., there's Stacy Johnson who is a real mother. There are a lot of cats living in Chicago who are capable of playing but don't because they can't get work. For instance I understand that Jimmy Rodgers wants to play but his wife won't let him. Floyd Jones works on and off and J.B. Hutto is coming out

of retirement. Johnny Shines is also starting again.

Inter: How's the new Arthur 'Big Boy' Crudup?

Hite: Terrible. They put a rhythm section behind him. Crudup was good without a back-up group. The same goes for John Lee Hooker. When the cat plays by himself he's great.

Inter: When I talked to him last summer, he said he likes having Mayball back him in England.

Wilson: He may simply be lazy now.

Hite: It's in his head that the old time country blues isn't what's happening anymore. You got to have an electric band so that's what he does, and the trouble is that he gets a band, and they play changes and he doesn't.

Wilson: Hooker and his bands have never been able to adapt to each other. No compromise was ever reached.

Hite: There was only one cat that could play with Hooker, and even he had trouble. Only Eddie Kirkland could make it with Hooker.

Inter: How was your English tour?

Vestine: Terrific.

Inter: Did you find that the English dig blues more than American audiences?

Hite: I think they are just starved for American groups. The Doors and Airplane went over well. There are a lot of blues freaks there too.

Inter: Were you framed on your Denver bust?

Hite: Most definitely. The cops planted the grass on us.

Inter: Richard Goldstein commented that you made a big deal of the bust for publicity purposes.

Hite: Who's Richard Goldstein? Oh that cat, he's a motherfucker anyway.

Inter: Is there much tension between East and West coast groups?

Hite: Yes, there's a strong rivalry that exists.

Inter: Why are so many groups splitting up today? Is it ego-tripping?

Vestine: Some of the problem is with travelling together where conflicts between personalities are brought out. Then some musicians want to go off in different directions.

Inter: Do you think this is the case with the Cream?

Fido: The Cream were brought together by their manager solely for money. The reason they broke up was that they hated each other and they would hardly speak to one another. Now that they made a lot of money they can break up.

Inter: Would you change your music for commercial purposes?

Hite: No, our contract with Liberty gives us complete control of our material. We do only the stuff we want to, and gradually we are beginning to produce our own records.

Inter: How about doing t.v. commer-

cial? A lot of rock groups seem to be into it.

Wilson: We'd do it for the money.

Hite: In fact we did a record with the Chipmunks for Christmas.

Fido: Sometimes I used to make \$8 for 12 hours of hard drumming. I ain't going to do that again. Right now we want to make the money.

Wilson: We're tired of hotel rooms with cockroaches.

Skip Taylor (manager): There's some chick from a fan magazine who wants to talk to you. She asked me who was in the band.

Hite: Holy shit. Not another one. As you become more popular, are you conscious of your image and the schtick you have to have?

Wilson: Our manager asked me to grow my hair and move around the stage more. Then I used to stand like a statue, but now I move around more. We were also encouraged to dress in a hip way.

Inter: Are Bob's movements for show?

Wilson: Not at all. He's just a naturally exuberant fellow. That's him.

Inter: Do you think the recent popularity of blues is just a flash in the pan.

Wilson: Yes, I think in a little while its popularity will recede to its former level.

Inter: How about hard rock groups who perform a sort of diluted blues. I'm thinking about Steppenwolf, the Grape, Country Joe and the Dead. Do you resent their success?

Hite: Their popularity won't last long. Already we're more famous than the Grape, and Steppenwolf will disappear from the scene soon. It's just that a group like ours has more staying power. We don't have a faddish following.

Inter: Generally speaking, blues musicians are far superior to the rock stars. Do you find that you get a lot of respect from the popular groups who feel somewhat ashamed of their poor musicianship?

Wilson: Some groups don't give a shit about musicianship; they're far more interested in where their record stands on the charts. With these groups we have nothing in common.

Fido: We've played quite a few gigs with the Iron Butterfly, and they taped us.

Inter: What about your hit single, "On the Road Again"?

Wilson: That came as a complete surprise to us. We tried a few times to consciously produce a commercial number, all without success. Ironically it was our "pure" blues, which made it. But we're happy with it, for it opened quite a few doors for us. Now we're getting bookings in the middle of the week. Of course this makes it hard on us for its very difficult to put your best stuff 5 or 6 nights a week.

Inter: Country blues, and even funky electric blues seem to be dying.

Wilson: That's true. But at the same time people like Hendrix and us are coming up with new hybrids. So that even if the blues dies, a new music is reborn, and consequently I don't bemoan its passing away.

Inter: Who influenced your vocal style?

Wilson: It was mostly Skip James. I'm trying to do Robert Pete Williams, but he is much harder.

Inter: I know that Henry and a couple other blues collectors were involved in rediscovering Skip James. Now that the folk boom has died, is Skip having a hard time making it?

Hite: Skip is almost through. He's back in the hospital with t.b.

Inter: Who influenced your harp playing?

Wilson: Little Walter.

Inter: Do you know the circumstances surrounding Little Walter's death?

Wilson: I think he was involved in a fight over a woman, and he died from the injuries.

Inter: I noticed on his last record, Super Blues, with Muddy and Bo Diddly, his voice was almost gone as a result of drink.

Wilson: That's true he used to drink a lot of gin.

Inter: It seems that a lot of spade musicians like Hooker, Son House, Big Joe Williams, and Otis Spann drink a lot. When I talked to Albert King's musicians, they said he'd put away almost a bottle in an evening. What do you think is the reason for this excessive drinking among black bluesmen?

Wilson: Well with white musicians it's dope, whereas the spades prefer booze. At the rate Buddy Guy is going, he'll lose his voice in a few years.

Inter: Comparing white and black guitarists, the main difference seems to be that the whites rely on distortion and effects while the spades produce a fairly clean sound.

Vestine: I think this is because the whites have the equipment and the volume since they play in large auditoriums, while the blacks are confined to small clubs and so they must be more restrained in their playing.

Inter: It seems to me that only a half-dozen negro bluesmen have achieved moderate success, while many white groups have been able to become popular almost overnight.

Wilson: To a certain extent this is true, because it's easier for the white kids to identify with the white musicians. The black audiences prefer soul music, because that's more aggressive and doesn't have connotations of chitlins and watermelon.

At this point both tape and musicians ran out.