

By Thomas (Mit) Schuller

If you say "Akron, Ohio" to some people and ask them to free-associate, they'll come up with a lot of words (like "Rubber"... the city's main industry) before they'll come up with "blues." Polluted skies, ugly factory sky-scenes, and a permanent rubbery stench make Akron perfect for the idiom, though, and there's a man there who's doing the real thing.

Blind Joe Hill was, in his own words, a "throw-away baby." He was born around 1931 somewhere among Pennsylvania's river towns, but was taken in by a West Virginia family and thus he gives the latter state as his birthplace. When he was seven or eight he was brought to Akron, a city that, like similar northeastern Ohio cities, is notorious for musical aridity. Where there isn't much music, there aren't many music fans, and Joe has had scant musical acclaim. He deserves attention though... not only because he's a one-man blues band (guitar, harmonica in a rack, drums), but because he's good at it.

"I pick my guitar the way Jimmy Reed done, and I blow my harp and play my drums all at the same time. I take up the pattern after him, and after other guitar players like Muddy Waters and John Lee Hooker. I like B.B. King, too, but he got a different style."

Joe first learned about music from the man who assumed the paternal role in his life...

"My daddy... he used to play the guitar and the washboard. Back in them days you didn't have no electricity for playin', all you had was regular guitars and washboards, and you'd go over to somebody's house and they'd have a piano. My daddy used to be able to play the piano, until we come to Ohio. Then he was workin' in one o' them factories, cuttin' rubber, and he had four fingers cut right off... he couldn't play no more then!"

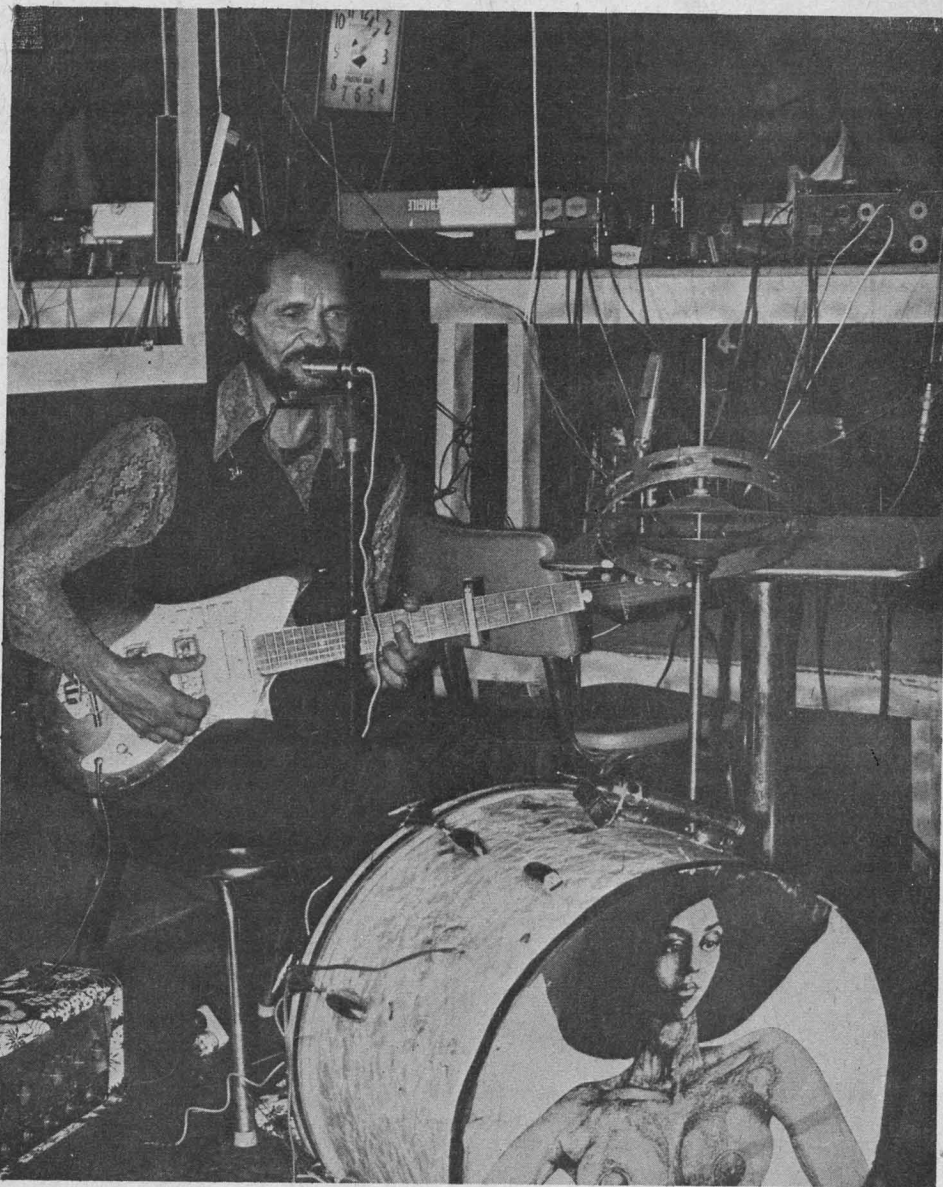
One of the first things anyone notices about Joe is that he gets around awfully well despite his blindness (he uses no cane), and I should take a minute to acknowledge his dog Chum, one of the hippest seeing-eye animals in the trade. He might drag Joe around a little, every once in a while, but still a fine dog. Joe's sightlessness is a result of glaucoma.

I asked him what kind of guitars he liked...

"I don't know what kind of guitar I got, I can't see it. All I know is that it's a guitar. Ain't like I wanted, though, 'cause my stuff got stolen, y'see. I had a Fender amp, and it got stolen out of the place, down at the Moon Street Cafe. I was goin' to play there that night, and I carried my stuff in early and put it in the kitchen behind the counter. When I got back, they had done stole it outta there with all of them people sittin' in there!"

Joe's done some traveling, and has lived a while in Cleveland. He doesn't recall knowing either Robert Lockwood or Arbee

AKRON'S ONE-MAN BAND: BLIND JOE HILL



Amy O'Neal

BLIND JOE HILL on BIG BILL HILL's WOPA broadcast, Banner Show Lounge, Chicago, 1972

Stidham (both Cleveland residents), though both know him. Lockwood was, in fact, involved briefly with Bubble and the Rolling Stones, a Cleveland blues combo that also included Blind Joe and an East Side guitarist named Charles Winston. Joe giggered at a place called Joe's Thing on Buckeye while in Cleveland, and generally liked the city. Had his failing sight not quit on him completely when he was there, he may never have returned to Akron.

"Akron isn't a good town for the blues. They like mostly jazz around here. But Cleveland, around there, they like the blues! There was one fellow called 'T.C.' used to play around Bar-Tee's a lot, he

could get down and play the blues. He had a stroke though... T.C. Cromley I think it was, he lived up there on Quincy. Then there was another fellow, he called himself Guitar Slim, he play around in them places, play the blues and things. Then there's a fellow they called The Regulator, and he had a brother Roosevelt that played after the pattern of Chuck Berry. I'm the onliest one that plays in the style of Jimmy Reed."

Joe saw Reed once, years ago in a long-defunct Cleveland nightery called Gleason's. Lefty Bates was with Reed at the time, recalls Joe, who sat in with Reed on a few songs and enjoyed the experience. ("Jimmy Reed... he was a nice guy, he sit

on the corner and drink wine like you and me do..."

I asked him if there were any other blues musicians in Akron.

"My buddy, the one I taught to play the guitar (Marshall Wright). He plays the blues. There's another guy here in Akron named Scotty, he play like Chuck Berry. That's all (of his name I know) ever since I been knowin' Scotty, who play like Chuck Berry. I wish you could come down (to a coffeehouse called The Berth) and jam with us, there's always somebody with us down there. Lotta times, y'see, they want me to play them old-time songs, so that's what I play. (I do) 'Key To The Highway,' maybe 'Barefootin'...some of Jimmy Reed's songs like 'Went Down To Virginia' and 'Baby You Don't Have To Go'...there's so many that I do. I do a little of the John Lee Hooker style like that one 'Boogie Children.' There's a lot of them, like that record come out, 'Do The Dog.' I do some jazz tunes, maybe somethin' by James Brown. I mostly mix 'em up, but I'm strictly a bluesman myself. I don't even do the song the way it is on the record, I mix it up...I switch it around, accordin' to how I feel."

Except for a single Robert Lockwood weekend, Blind Joe was the only bluesman to play at The Berth, a coffeehouse near Akron University that changed its name to Sam & Gaffer's and later went broke. When I first saw Joe there, he came on stage after about a million local folkies who were obviously Big Men On Campus, and his crowd had dwindled.

He had two-thirds of his apparatus (guitar, harp) with him that night, and played easy, laid-back versions of many blues standards. Jimmy Reed is obviously the fundamental influence, but Joe is a more agile harmonica player than Reed. His "My Babe" (during which he may or may not change into an old traditional number called "I'll Be Glad When You're Dead You Rascal You") is a high point in his repertoire. So's "Bright Lights, Big City," and one of the songs he likes best is "Sweet Home Chicago." Towards the end of his set, he sat down at a piano and demonstrated considerable command of the instrument. (He got the basics of piano playing from his father, but practiced some years ago while in the slammer in Mansfield, where he drew a deuce for auto theft. It should be mentioned that Joe says "he was just along for the ride" and this is probably true...since his sight was failing at the time, it is unlikely that he was driving. Still, he did time.)

One of the reasons for Joe's obscurity was and is the lack of an Ohio recording industry. He has never recorded in his home state, though he did record in Chicago because of a chain of events that goes something like this...

A copy of LIVING BLUES was purchased "down at the hippie store" (Joe's words) by soul singer O.V. Redding and shown to Evelyn Taylor, who acts as Joe's manager. Ms. Taylor contacted both LB and Chicago



DJ Big Bill Hill, who was featured in that issue, #7. (The DJ is, of course, no relation to Blind Joe.) As a result, Joe did a spot on Big Bill's WOPA radio broadcast and impressed Jim O'Neal, who alerted Barrelhouse Records' owner George Paulus. Paulus sent for Joe and recorded him, and Joe returned to Akron, proud to be able to tell his friends that he'd finally made a record.

Paulus never positively indicated when he intended to release the record, but Joe believed it was long overdue when I first saw him at The Berth. It was months later when Paulus told me that he was contemplating a March 1976 release, and I relayed this to Blind Joe. Months passed, I found myself back in Ohio preparing a story on Joe for the Akron BEACON JOURNAL's Sunday magazine. To tie up loose ends on prior interviews I sought him out, finding that he'd involved himself with the Society of the Blind ("the blind school," he called it) in Youngstown. We talked there, and I could see that he'd not been traveling through the music business in anything resembling leaps and bounds. He was living temporarily over a really dumpy rib joint on Wilson called Foy's, and was playing on weekends at the Capri on Hillman Avenue on Youngstown's South Side. He also mentioned some jobs he had over across the bridge in nearby Campbell at the Blossom Lounge, once notorious for allegedly ceaseless smack traffic. Life wasn't being terrific to Blind Joe, and he talked about musical incidentals in his life, like a band he'd led called The Hideaways that gigged at an after-hours bar called the Hideaway (Freddy King's instrumental "Hideaway" was big at the time). He talked about jamming once in Cleveland with Amos Milburn, but mostly he talked about how upset he was over the failure of his album to materialize. Apparently some of his friends didn't believe he'd ever recorded anything.

Very recently, Joe came close to abandoning northeastern Ohio and heading to New York to try and make it, but he gave this up as a bad idea and is still in Akron. Akron should be glad...Blind Joe is one of that city's only musical assets.

Blind Joe Hill's Barrelhouse album BOOGIE IN THE DARK was scheduled for release during the final week of December, and should now be available.

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Andrew "B.B." Odum—SINGS & SINGS & SINGS: WASP Music 26761

45's: \$1.25 each
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 [Write for list of other 45's available, or see ad in LB#29, p. 23].

EP's:
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BLUES & THE POETIC SPIRIT by P. Garon

Back issues #7, 11 & 20 and the books CHICAGO BREAKDOWN and BLUES RECORDS 1943-1966 are no longer available. We are out of stock on the Home Cooking LP's by T-Bone Walker, Lightnin' Hopkins & Juke Boy Bonner advertised in past issues, but hope to have these available again soon.

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