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Fred J. Hay, ed. *Goin' Back to Sweet Memphis: Conversations with the Blues.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001. xxxix + 271 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2301-5.

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Collaborators on a little-known, Japanese-published book entitled *Carvin' the Blues*, documentary historian Fred Hay and artist George Davidson should find considerable attention among blues enthusiasts and historians of the U.S. South with the production of their second collaborative effort, *Goin' Back to Sweet Memphis*. Given that the majority of the book's pages are devoted to annotated transcriptions of interviews with Memphis blues figures, one might surmise that this is little more than a documentary collection meant to satisfy antiquarians of African American music. From the outset, however, Hay makes it clear that he has a larger point to make: Americans have replaced the sincerity of individual experience and social meaning with a commodified and bland consumer culture that "flattens that which is layered, conceals that which is distinctive, dulls that which is brilliant, and glitters that which is subdued" (p. xxv). For Hay, the blues generally, and the history of Memphis's Beale Street particularly, serve as evidence of cultural decay in America. However, as the author is quick to point out, blues music also offers Americans an authentic culture to fight off mass consumerism.

Citing the recent blues scholarship by African Americans such as Angela Davis, Julio Finn, and Clyde Wood, Hay believes that white authors often use the blues for their own purposes, much the same as record executives profited from black musicians or Memphis landlords redeveloped Beale Street as a mainstream tourist attraction. To avoid misinterpretation, Hay relies on what is for blues scholars a time-honored method of letting the musicians speak for themselves. Like Paul Oliver's book bearing a similar title, *Conversations with the Blues*, and William Ferris's *Blues from the Delta* , *Goin' Back to Sweet Memphis* is grounded in a number of interviews with blues musicians. Hay and a colleague conducted all of the interviews–eight in all–in May, 1972, during their freshmen year at Southwestern at Memphis College (today, Rhodes College). Some of the interviewees were well-known, commercially successful musicians such as Booker (Bukka) White and Furry Lewis, while others–Tommy Gary, Boose Taylor, and Little Laura Dukes–represent the larger population of black musicians that remain familiar only to avid blues enthusiasts and those who lived and performed with them.

Fearing that too much analysis of his interviewees will trivialize and commodify their related experiences in ways similar to white record executives' appropriation of blues music for commercial profit, Hay faithfully transcribed each interview in full to allow readers to access the "truth" in these interviews. While Hay's belief that oral histories can, in fact, serve as clear windows into the past may meet with skepticism from some in the

scholarly community–after all, Furry Lewis remembered Franklin and Theodore Roosevelt as being brothers–the interviews do communicate many of the salient aspects of blues musicians' lives. Booker White explained how, as a musician, he rejected the agricultural life common to so many of his southern black counterparts. Memphis Ma Rainey's tale illustrated the vitality of black urbanism as it took shape in the Beale Street neighborhood. Most of the interviewees convey the regular migration of musicians in search of work, as well as the means by which talent scouts found, recorded, and popularized the blues artists and their music. The interviews with White and Lewis–accomplished performers comfortable with attention–went smoothly while others, such as the harmonica accompanist Gary, were difficult and tedious. The transcriptions included neighbors' yelling, thunder claps, and the cracking of beer can tabs; all contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the blues musicians and their environment.

Hays, an experienced documentary historian, annotated each interview with background information about the informants, the recording data for their music, clarifications of statements and points of fact, as well as other notations. Hays surely intended the notes not only to clarify, but also to develop and deepen each performer's account, but many times these notes disrupt the continuity of the conversation and thereby hinder Hay's goal of giving readers the "real thing." Likewise, the omission of lyrics and detailed description of the songs his interviewees played for him creates a series of dead spaces (for lack of a better term) throughout the interviews. Copyright issues may play a role here, and in his defense, Hay provides a substantial "recommended listening" discography in the appendix.

If Hay's main contribution to professional historians of the blues is the documentation of heretofore hard-to-access material, then this book is already a success. However, Davidson's illustrations provide a multi-layered approach to alter the singular effect of Hay's interviews. His cover piece, "Feels like Second and Beale," connotes the coming together of rural music styles and the urban environment of Memphis. Textured backgrounds indicate the movement and energy present both inside and outside the Beale Street juke joints. An emphasis on curves and distorted imagery seem to convey the experience of intoxication–a state of being whose pervasiveness among blues musicians is evidenced in several of the interviews. All of the illustrations, most notably "Between Dark and Break of Day" and "Big Amos," use shape, relationship between subjects of the composition, and facial expression to achieve a visual representation of African-Americana reminiscent of the work of both Archibald Motley, Jr. and Aaron Douglas.

Davidson, himself a musician, fosters Hay's search for truth and authenticity by approaching his subject with the familiarity of a performer. In his preface, Davidson used the word "necromancy"–applicable to blues performance–to describe the abilities of Hay's informant and friend, Joe Willie Wilkins. He further draws the reader into the musicians' world through the use of non-Webster terms such as "funkocopia" and, in a move completely foreign in historical scholarship of the blues, Davidson includes his own blues lyrics to convey his interpretation of the music. Readers who allot the time necessary to meditate on the words and images of Hay and Davidson's work will likely consider *Goin' Back to Sweet Memphis* less of a documentary source and more of a tribute to Memphis's blues artists. The blues performers' words are their great contribution to this book, but Hay and Davidson's presentation of those words commemorates their important place in Memphis's and America's musical culture.

Hay's ascription of authenticity to certain blues performers over others and his mourning over the transformation of Beale Street is interpretively problematic. Like other non-African American blues scholars such as Paul Oliver or Samuel Charters, Hay romanticizes and authenticates a southern past in which cultural traditions such as the blues were stronger and better, despite the institutionalized racism that fostered blues music. Interpretations resting on authenticity can obfuscate the historical effects of continuity and change. For example, he sees as genuine a number of blues performers who, as professional recording artists in urban centers, would have been dismissed by an earlier generation of folklorists because they were detached from the rural roots of blues music. Hay celebrates Beale Street's past as an authentic black cultural center, even though blues performers such as Rainey made a living there by the very fact that their music was a commodity to be sold. Furthermore, where does B. B. King's popular blues club on Beale Street fit into this picture? Does King not represent a true connection to Memphis' blues past, or has his commercialism (most notable is his Burger King advertising campaign) tainted his authenticity? If it does, then Hay should reconsider whether commercial recording devalued or corrupted the music of his interviewees, particularly Booker White.

We should not make too much of this matter of au-

thenticity in Hay's case, however. Memphis's Beale Street and the city's vibrant blues scene had a profound impact on Hay as a young man. His long, close relationship to Joe Willie Wilkins and other local performers, as well as his experience watching Beale Street and other neighborhoods succumb to urban decay, may account for his relative nostalgia regarding Memphis's past. The same force that leads him to bemoan Memphis's urban renewal efforts is the same force–love–that drove him and Davidson to undertake this work. Those among us who value the preservation and commemoration (two very different things that this book achieves) of blues music in Memphis and elsewhere are indebted to Hay and Davidson for their devotion to the music and musicians that we, too, love.

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