



Bob Corritore, Lucerne, Switzerland, 2007. Photo: Mike Stephenson.

“I was very hungry to hear all I could” BOB CORRITORE INTERVIEW

By Mike Stephenson

I was born in Chicago on September 27th, 1956 and my parents moved to the suburbs when I was quite young. I think I was two years old so I grew up in the North shore of Chicago, very close to a lot of blues activity, somewhat secluded in the suburbs but at an early age I was able to hear Muddy Waters on the radio and that was a turning point in my life and that's what got me into blues.

Soon as I heard Muddy, that was the direction I was going in for the rest of my life. Even in high school there was opportunities to see blues artists; my very first show at the high school auditorium was the Sam Lay Blues Revival which had Eddie Taylor, Lucille Spann and Johnny Twist but I was already way into the blues at that point and was buying blues records.

I had purchased a Muddy Waters record, a number of Little Walter and Jimmy Rogers records, Junior Wells, J.B. Hutto and Eddie Taylor so I was deep into it at that point. It wasn't too hard to find blues in that area. There was a pizza joint that featured Blind James Brewer that was not too far away from my house, and North Western University was close and they would feature blues concerts that were accessible to someone like me, that was underage like myself.

Otis Rush played at a college nearby and Muddy Waters played in my high school gymnasium, even Luther Allison played at my senior prom in my high school and record stores had all sorts of blues records around.

I got to see Big Walter Horton on Maxwell Street when I was young, so all this stuff was being plugged in at an early age, and when I was eighteen I could get into blues bars and a whole world opened up. I was somewhat shocked by it. The thing about blues that impressed me was one, the music itself.

People like Sunnyland Slim, Louis Myers, Eddie Taylor, Big Leon Brooks, Little Willie Anderson, were all people I would befriend and I would call them some of my closest friends. At that point in the early 1970s, through to the 1980s there were so many great blues artists that were still around

and still active musically and many still creating things. There were also great artists emerging like Magic Slim and The Teardrops and Louis Myers was really at the peak of his performance at that point. Eddie Taylor was playing phenomenally, people like Taildragger were getting their chance to come into focus, Little Mack Simmons was making great records, Lonnie Brooks was launching a Chicago career and Alligator Records was taking off, and Delmark Records were putting out unbelievable records.

I heard Muddy Waters around when I was thirteen and started playing harmonica around that year. I had already played a little guitar, but I gravitated towards harmonica as I had heard that great Little Walter sound and of course I got my first Little Walter record and then Jimmy Rogers that had Little Walter on it, and anything that had Little Walter I was crazy about. Of course the same applies to Junior Wells and James Cotton and all the great harmonica players around then.

I ended up recording Little Willie Anderson and Big Leon Brooks after I launched a record label called Blues Over Blues Records and my first recording project was with Little Willie Anderson.

At that time I had the sense to bring some of the greatest sidemen that you could possibly bring in, so I had Robert Lockwood, Sammy Lawhorn, Jimmy Lee Robinson, Freddie Below, Willie Black were all part of that session. What we had at that point was one of those rare gatherings of the Little Walter players playing in that bag. Little Willie Anderson was the person that enabled all of that, and one point in time he was valet and a good friend of Little Walter and he worshipped Little Walter and his harmonica style, and his harmonica playing was under the spell of Little Walter, and that was what that whole session was about. I recorded that in 1979.

How I got the label going was I was friends with people like Bob Koester. When I was quite young and still in high school I would take the El over to Jazz Record Mart and hang around with Bob and he would tell us what records we needed to buy, and in his style he would be that staunch teacher that he's so well known for, and we would soak up the knowledge, and his wife would be so kind as to give us posters that they had lying around. I always admired Bob for what he has done, and still do to this day, I consider him as being one of the true Chicago label legends.

Little Willie Anderson at that point in time was a great harmonica player that had never recorded, so I loved the idea of making a record with this

great harmonica player that needed to be heard. I went around with the idea that I might know what I was doing as a producer. Well of course the first time through I was blindly going through it, but with all the help of the musicians who had been through many sessions before, and Steve Wisner, Jim O'Neal and Dick Shurman who were all attending the session, I was given whatever direction I needed. In an afternoon we came up with the record.

Then I recorded Big Leon Brooks with the co-production of Steve Wisner whom I admired for his Mr. Blues record label. He had recorded Good Rocking Charles, he had recorded Eddie C. Campbell, Mojo Buford and we were very good friends and we would hang out at the same blues joints. He was a great guy to find out about some of the more obscure players and I was very hungry to hear all I could, and when I got the opportunity to hear someone I hadn't heard before it was always fun to do that, I used to love it. When I was eighteen I would go to Biddy Mulligans and I'd see the Bob Reidy Blues Band who had Carey Bell and Eddie Clearwater, Johnny Littlejohn, and Koko Taylor played at that club with her band, Little Mack Simmons when Lonnie Brooks was in his band, J.B. Hutto And The Hawks, Magic Slim, and this was very close to my house, and then after that I ventured out to the West side to Eddie Shaw's club, the 1815 Club on 1815 W. Roosevelt and he had a major impact in my life. Eddie Shaw had such a great club and there was so much going on there, Little Howlin' Wolf, Johnny Littlejohn, Mighty Joe Young, Otis Rush, and I saw Freddie King there. I went to see The Aces at Louis's Lounge, and from there it was The Checkerboard, Theresa's, Turner's Lounge and all the different places that were around Chicago. So there was a whole world out there that I became familiar with, and as I grew as a player many of the musicians knew me, and they would call me up. That was the thing about Chicago. it was something of a tradition, if you were a player and had some respect, when you came in the house you were put to work, you didn't have a choice and it was an honour to be included among some of the people that were there. It was a definite growing up for me and I loved it.

We recorded Big Leon Brooks a year later, after the Little Willie Anderson thing in 1980, and Steve Wisner and I pooled our money together to do the album. I'd seen him perform at Kingston Mines and he was just a great player and we started going to see him every Sunday night at the Golden Slipper on the West side and he would play with Taildragger's band which had Eddie Taylor, James Scott playing guitars together, and various bass players and drummers.

Willie Kent was playing in that band back then, and it was a great thing Taildragger had going every Sunday night. There was no stage, there was no light except for a red light hanging from a wire behind the stage, so you would see the silhouette of the band, and we talked to Big Leon about doing a record. We finally got our money together and we went to see him, and Taildragger said he was in hospital with some heart problems. We went to the hospital and told him to get better as we wanted to record him. He did get together to do a very fine record for us called 'Let's Go To Town' and on that record we had Louis Myers, Odie Payne, Big Moose Walker, Pinetop Perkins, Eddie Taylor, Junior Pettis from the Magic Slim band, Bob Stroger on bass, and it was another reflection of the great blues talent that was in Chicago at that point, and they were all my friends that I would hang out with regularly.

Back then you would go and see a Sunnyland Slim show and Billy Boy Arnold would show up, Andrew Brown and Smokey Smothers would be in the audience, Good Rockin' Charles and Big Walter might stop in and it went on and on. It was a big family and everybody seemed so happy to be there,



Big Leon Brooks. Photo: D. Shigley. Label shot: Bob Corritore.

it was a wonderful time to be there, everybody was there and participating.

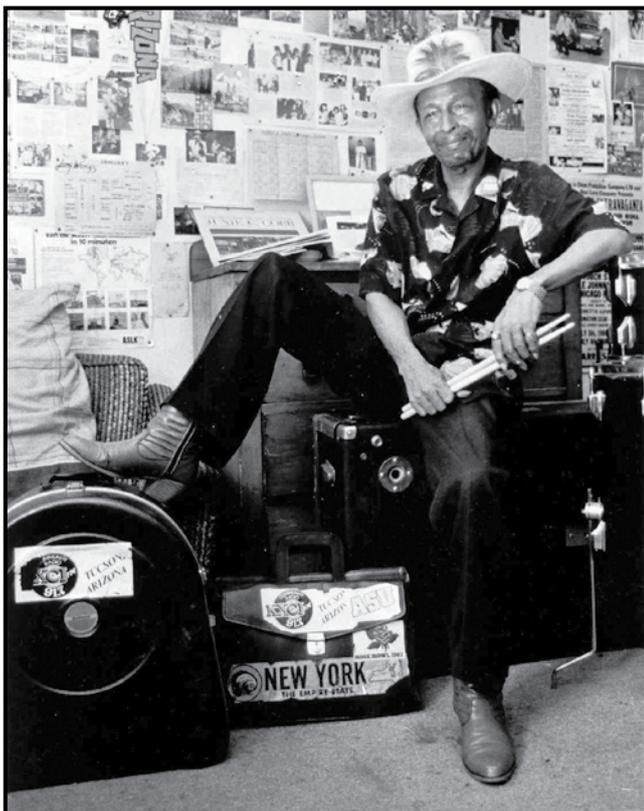
Lots of things were happening. John Brim opened the Broadway night club and B.L.U.E.S. opened up, and I was working at a



Robert Lockwood Jr., Fred Below, Sammy Lawhorn, Little Willie Anderson, Jimmy Lee Robinson, 1979. Photo: Jim O'Neal.

point when Big Leon was not doing well and I would be called upon to play with him, and me and my friend Illinois Slim would work with Taildragger in that band, and I also got to work with Willie Buck quite a bit, and Willie always put together great bands that often had Dave and Louis Myers, Odie Payne and Big Moose Walker. I was the young kid in the band hoping to keep up with these wonderful players and somehow I kept being called back. I knew I was in a very privileged place and I cherished every minute of it and every one of those nights. I would check out Big Mojo Elem and Necktie Nate, and he would have James Scott, and that was always a great show, and I would go frequently to see Junior Wells play over at Theresa's and all the great bands that would happen there. Junior would always do the last set and Mary Lane would do a set, Byther Smith was sometimes in the band, Sammy Lawhorn was playing, John Primer was there also.

At a point, my brother lived in Arizona and I wanted to go and visit him for a while and I



Chico Chism and the great wall – courtesy Bob Corritore.

was in between day gigs, and the money I would make playing music was not enough to live on so I thought I would like to go and visit my brother and spend some time with him for maybe a year. I had every intention of coming back to Chicago. I went over and stayed with my brother for a while in 1981. I enjoyed the weather there and within a month of living in Arizona I get a call from Louisiana Red who I had become friends with at the Delta Fish Market in Chicago. He asked what I was doing and he told me he had a friend Eunice Davis in Phoenix, who had relocated from New York to Phoenix, and Red was going to come out there and do some gigs. Next thing you know, Red's in town and I'm arranging some gigs with him.

Red initially had some romantic interest in Eunice Davis but it didn't work out so after a week I got a call from Eunice, asking me to pick Red up as she had thrown him out. So I ended up having a roommate for a year, which was a great experience, and Red at that time was very vulnerable. He didn't have a home and he would go where he thought people might want him. I was privileged to take him in and make him part of my family, and we would look out after Red, keeping us in gigs and trying to make sure we all survived. It became a very close friendship that I had with Red, which I have to this day. We used to play every day together and it was a time of growth for me, as Red was one of the best at playing the early Muddy Waters, the Aristocrat Muddy Waters, and he played it like nobody's business and he could play great Lightnin' Hopkins, great John Lee Hooker, great Smokey Hogg, Arthur Big Boy Crudup, and he had all those styles down, and more.

During that time in Phoenix I did record a solo record on Red called 'Sitting Here Wondering'. It was a fairly tough time for Red and he broke down in tears when playing some of the songs, and the intensity of that record is strong. The record stayed in the can for some time but at a point in time I sold Blues Over Blues Records to Earwig. Michael Frank was a friend of mine from Chicago and he had started his record label around the same time as Jim O'Neal, so Rooster Blues and Earwig Music were started around the same time so it seemed like a natural home for this record label that I wasn't doing much with at this time. So I made the deal to sell the Big Leon Brooks, Little Willie Anderson recordings, and at the same time I sold the masters to Michael of Red's 'Sitting Here Wondering' that became Earwig Music's introduction to Louisiana Red and from that came a great relationship as Michael is still booking Louisiana Red during his United States tours. And after putting out 'Sitting Here Wondering', Michael put out 'Millennium Blues' and 'Drifting' by Red so Red now has a recorded legacy on Earwig, and I feel proud to have made that introduction.

After a year Red was going on a tour in Europe and he would meet Dora and stay in Germany, and I'm happy that he found Dora, and she is a person that is so needed in Red's life to make Red complete. He has now found a home and appreciation and happiness in Europe.

After that, I was still in Phoenix and shortly after, I started working with Big Pete Pearson and he took me in his band and I worked in that band for two years. This was probably around 1983. In that band were some great

Phoenix-based players. There was a sax player named Brunard Williams who had played in Dyke And The Blazers. He would later be replaced by Bob Tate, who was a player who had worked with Sam Cooke, and had produced and arranged early sides on the West coast cut by Guitar Shorty, he had worked with Ace Holder. Bob Tate was a brilliant musician, and also in that band was another sax player called Emerson Caruthers, who had worked with Big Mama Thornton, and a number of others so there was all of this great knowledge in that band. So these guys pushed me a little further in my musical studies than a harmonica would normally be pushed.

They were doing some things leaning more towards jazz and that taught me some music as a harmonica player that I wouldn't have got near to. After that I worked with Chief Schabuttie Gilliam and then with a guy named Tommy Dukes, and Janiva Magness had one of her early bands that we did together. In 1986 I recruited Chico Chism to come to Phoenix. I had met Chico over at Eddie Shaw's place in Chicago when he was working with, and playing drums with, Howlin' Wolf, and we became fast friends and kept in touch, and when I went to Chicago I'd see Chico. I had some work and asked him if he wanted to come out, and he said he would come out to Phoenix for a six month period to do these gigs and he ended up staying for the rest of his life, living twenty years in Phoenix. I would never have guessed when I first met Chico that he would become one of the most important people in my life. He became my musical partner and dear friend and we both leaned on each other. He was a great bandleader and at a point he could back up anybody and he had that great Chicago beat.

Moving back up a little, in 1984 I started a radio show called 'Those Low Down Blues' and it's still going and you can hear it online these days. It is on KJZZ. It's a weekly show, five hours a week on Sunday nights. I play records, and the cornerstone is those downhome blues and Chicago blues, and we throw in some of that uptown stuff, and where blues and soul would combine, and also a lot of pre-war blues and some zydeco and gospel. One of the things that is fantastic was, I have always enjoyed a live radio broadcast, so in the very first year I had Lowell Fulsom as my guest, and we interviewed him and got him to do a great set of songs. So many people have been guests on the show, like Robert Junior Lockwood, Lazy Lester, Lil Ed, Billy Boy Arnold and many others. In fact there are two compilations that are out, one is called 'Blues On My Radio' and the other is called 'Broadcasting The Blues' and they feature some of the highlights of some of those on air performances.

So in 1991 I opened a nightclub called The Rhythm Room that is at 1019 East Indian School Road in central Phoenix, so it's right in the heart of Phoenix, and for someone like myself it became a place where I was able to combine a lot of the elements that I had done in the past. So I could bring in great artists from Chicago, or different people that were coming through on their way to California, and while they were doing that I took the time out to record them.

With Chico Chism as my regular drummer and my partner we would go and do these wonderful recording sessions, and many of these sides are not released yet. I'm sitting on a whole bunch of masters. We took Jimmy Rogers, John Brim, R.L. Burnside, Big Jack Johnson, Luther Tucker, Carol Fran, Henry Townsend and many others into the recording studio. We also recorded Little Milton, Nappy Brown, Henry Gray many times, Sam Lay, Lil Ed, Smokey Wilson, Robert Lockwood, Robert Bilbo Walker, Dave Porter, Al Garrett, Clarence Edwards, Jimmy Dotson, Bo Diddley and we did many sessions with others, mostly in the same studio. I'm working on putting some of these recordings out.

It will be a nice thing that belongs to the world, as I cannot hold on to them, as I'm feeling guilty about that. Some of these recordings came out on the 'All Star Blues Sessions' record, which was the first national release I have with myself on harmonica. This came out in 1999 and it was some of these highlights put into a compilation, and the connecting thread was that I was the person that put it all together and played harmonica on it. It came out on the Hightone record label. Hightone believed in me enough to put this record out even though I was virtually unknown and a Chicago guy living in Phoenix, and none of that would make sense to the average person as to who this Bob Corritore guy was, but Hightone loved the record and believed in me as a person and they took the chance to get me out there.

My club is open seven days a week and it holds about 275 folks, 360 with the patio. It's not a tiny place, it's about right and it seems it fits into a wonderful niche in Phoenix, because people would be able to see national acts. It was the right size to justify a national act coming through. The club is still running but the U.S. economy is making it a rougher go, but we are hanging in there. Still open seven days a week and we have blues every weekend and sometimes during the week, but we've opened it to other music during the week as a survival thing. Initially when I opened up I could get away with blues seven nights a week, but it has become a different world than that and the blues audience is not able to go out with the same zest as they used to. We have a mix of national blues touring acts and local guys, like Big Pete Pearson plays there regularly both with the Rhythm Room All Stars, which are my band, then with his own band.



Top: Bob Corritore with Billy Boy Arnold courtesy Bob Corritore; Below: Rick Estrin and Bob Corritore. Photo: Kim Danielson.



Long John Hunter plays there regular as he is now a Phoenix resident.

We have some good artists in Phoenix and let me back up a little and talk about the history of Phoenix. Phoenix had a large black population during the 1950s and there were a lot of wonderful records that were made locally or regionally, and within that there were some great artists that are probably not that well known to too many people. There was a great recording studio, most notably Audio Recorders, which is where Duane Eddy recorded so many of his sides and had the famous reverb tank, that was about half a block long that would be perfect for the twang and that particular sound.

There were bands around town like The Tadds with Leroy Fullylove, they did the original 'Bumble Bee' that LaVern Baker would pretty much copy. J.C. Arline was performing around town and a guy by the name of Jimmy Knight, who was a band leader who recorded people like Mojo Buford and who also put Big Pete Pearson into the recording studio for the first time in the 1960s. Also let me note that Louis Jordan retired in Phoenix during the 1950s so he was a prominent part of the neighbourhood at that time period, and was a big inspiration to a lot of folks. Maxine Johnson was a young protégé that was a talented singer and there were a number of wonderful things happening at the time. Also the song 'Linda Lou' recorded by Ray Sharpe was also recorded in Phoenix at Audio Recorders, and you can hear that wonderful reverb on that song. In the 1960s Dyke And The Blazers was happening at Phoenix. Dyke was from New York and lived not far from Broadway Street and Broadway Street is very funky. In part two of his 'Funky Broadway' you will hear a reference to Phoenix, Arizona. That was a band that gave Phoenix a glimpse of what it would be like to make it, and there was that whole r&b and soul thing that was going on as well as the blues, and there was that big vocal group thing happening also, mainly The Tadds and a whole bunch of other vocal groups. I've got a friend called John Dixon, who has done a lot of work with Ace and Bear Family, who has put together some nice compilations. As a matter of fact I have been working with John on a compilation that is called 'Flyin' High' and it is a collection of 27 tracks of all unreleased blues and r&b and gospel things from Phoenix from the fifties and sixties. One name I forgot to mention was Reverend Louis Overstreet, who is on that compilation, who came in from the West coast and he set up shop in Phoenix and he was a beautiful blues gospel guitarist and he made some wonderful records that have a great feel to them. So Phoenix had all this stuff going on but it wasn't well known, as the West coast was really a centre, and Phoenix was kinda a stopover for all that.

These days I'm putting out non-commercial things on South Western Musical Arts Foundation label that I founded some years back. I'm also working with Blue Witch Records and Dale Baich, a good friend of mine. We have put out a number of releases and I am kinda like behind the scene there, as I'm the unofficial house producer for many of their releases. Their first record was a Big Pete Pearson that Dale produced called 'One More Drink' and that kinda sat there. I had produced 'One More Drink' and we put that out, and it had some special guests like W.C. Clark, Ike Turner, Johnny Dyer plays harmonica on a track, Kid Ramos is on there and that CD launched Blue Witch as a national label, and prior to that it was a local label that didn't have national distribution.

Right after that we put out the Dave Riley and Bob Corritore record, and a compilation of music recorded live at the Rhythm Room which was called 'House Rockin' And Blues Shakin' which has on it The Fabulous Thunderbirds, Long John Hunter, Sonny Rhodes, Paul Oscher, Big Pete Pearson and a host of artists. We recently put out a Tomcat Courtney record and two of the guys on the rhythm section, Chris James and Patrick Rynn, are wonderful players and they come in for the Rhythm Room All Stars dates, and we also tour the world together and we play with Big Pete Pearson, Tomcat Courtney. Chris James grew up under the mentorship of Tomcat Courtney, who is a wonderful downhome blues artist. Music is a full time thing for me with my club, producing records, the radio show and playing music and being on the road. I've an arts foundation and I do a newsletter. The arts foundation is a non-profit organisation that works towards a particular cause. It's a corporation that is set up to do business that is not meant to be profitable, so I will put out releases that probably have no real legitimate business reason to exist.

We bring in some concerts and are for the purpose of the arts. The most recent Big Pete Pearson record on Vizztone label is a combination of South Western Musical arts Foundation and Vizztone, and its called 'Finger In Your Eye'. We have out a CD on the Reed family which was Francine, Margo and the whole family, and we even had the mother come in, and its mainly an acapella gospel record and the third release was Chico Chism's 'West Side Chicago Blues Party' and that combines the Eddie Shaw Wolf Gang tracks that originally came out on a Simmons album with Chico Chism's record label. There was a point in time unfortunately when he had had his stroke when he became unable to play, or at least play very much. I asked Chico's permission to put that out knowing that Chico had to have some bragging rights even at a senior age, so there was Chico walking with a cane and sometimes a walker but he had his new CD that he could sell, and as a birthday present I put that out and gave him 500 copies that he could have as part of his pride.

We put out the 'Broadcasting The Blues', which was a 25 year thing. I've recently reissued a Louisiana Red CD 'No Turn On Red' which was on the now defunct Hightone record label. I plan on putting out other things that are now out of print. The best place to get some of this stuff is on Blue Beat Music web site bluebeatmusic.com.

I stay in touch with Chicago and have done some things with Michael Frank from Earwig Records. I have played harmonica on Chris James and Patrick Rynn's record on his label 'Stop And Think About It'. Also on the Dennis Binder record there are some sides recorded in Phoenix that Michael didn't know about, and I connected him with the guy that owned the masters and we were able to get those two sides out, and again that's another Phoenix connection. There are two wonderful sides there with A.C. Reed and adding to the Phoenix thing with Audio Recorders there was a pressing plant called Wakefield Manufacturing, which was considered one of the greatest places. So in one day someone could have a recording session at Audio Recorders, that afternoon go over the Wakefield Manufacturing, and by the end of the day have a trunk load of 45s. So it became known that you could make the stop at Phoenix and do this.

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Bob Corritore, Lucerne Blues Festival, Switzerland, 2009. Photo: Mike Stephenson.