The Death of S. F. Tenant Hero Ted Gullicksen

We often hear of people being described as “heroes” after their death. Ted Gullicksen was a true hero and he will be remembered as such.

by Randy Shaw

Ted Gullicksen, leader of the San Francisco Tenants Union and a key figure in the city’s tenant movement since 1992, died unexpectedly on October 13. He was 61. Having spoken with Ted and exchanged emails only a few days before his unexpected death, I know I speak for everyone in saying that his death comes as an absolute shock. He died decades before his time.

I began working with Ted Gullicksen in 1992 on the Prop H campaign, which cut annual rent increases by more than half. For the next decade I spoke with Ted virtually every week, often multiple times. Ted transformed the SF Tenants Union from a group that had never met its potential into San Francisco’s most effective tenant political advocacy group.

Ted worked tirelessly for the tenant cause. He did the work of three people, which is why we all used to say he was irreplaceable. Ted loved San Francisco. That’s why he fought so hard to keep its economic diversi-
ty. Ted’s fondness for his adopted home-
town (he grew up in Massachusetts) was evident when he went from being a Red Sox fanatic to rooting for the Giants. But his thick Boston accent never disappeared.

TED’S SPECIAL POWER

Ted Gullicksen never sacrificed princi-
ple for money. This was the true source of his special power. Since he could not be persuaded to act against tenants’ interests for money, power, access or other offer-
ings, he had an independence that in-
creased his clout.

Ted was also a very highly skilled designer of campaign literature. I highlight this among his many skills because few realize the significance of his talent. No other tenant group leader over the past two decades has had anywhere near Ted’s level of skill in designing the literature that told the tenant story to voters.

And realize: Ted never got paid a dime for designing campaign literature, even though consultants routinely get paid tens of thousands of dollars for doing so. And Ted never asked for a dime, either for himself or the Tenants Union.

Ted saved the tenant movement tens of thousands of dollars in campaign fees each election, boosting its electoral power. Or, more accurately, he enabled tenants to pro-
duce effective mailers and slate cards they otherwise could not afford.

And considering how much Ted Gullicksen loved election campaigns, rare was the even-year election cycle when his campaign lit skills were not put to use.

Ted never wanted an election cycle to pass without putting a tenant measure on the ballot. He shared my skepticism of the Board of Supervisors passing strong pro-
tenant legislation, and I felt fortunate to be working with someone who recognized the importance of winning tenant gains at the ballot.

After tenant groups won their first San Francisco ballot measure with Prop H in 1992, Ted went after the third rail of rent control in 1994: the exemption of owner-
occupied buildings of four units or less.

See Ted Gullicksen Dies page 5

Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground

The Blues and Social Justice, Part 2

by Terry Messman

“Looked around all day for a job, and I looked almost every place.
It’s hard to come home and find hunger on your children’s face.” — Juke Boy Bonner

Those heartrending words are not merely song lyrics. They are the real-life testimony of a bluesman — the single father of three young children — who is singing his sorrow about what it feels like to come home from a fruitless search for work and see hunger and deprivation on the faces of the children he loves all else.

The verses composed by Weldon “Juke Boy” Bonner, a gifted poet and blues musician who grew up as a sharecropper in Texas and lived in poverty in Houston for most of his adult life, provide an important clue into the mystery of why so many blues artists sing with such passion about poverty, injustice and homelessness.

Many of the finest blues musicians in history grew up in poverty — and some of them died still poor. Especially in the first few decades of the blues, many great artists made very little money despite their prodigious talent, and were forced to take menial jobs to make ends meet. Yet, that sometimes gave them the insight to create highly meaningful songs about lives broken down by economic hard-
ships, hunger, evictions, and despair.

We can get a glimpse into this hidden dimension of the blues by taking a closer look at the lives and music of two brilliant Texas musicians: Weldon “Juke Boy” Bonner and Blind Willie Johnson.

THE GHETTO POET

Although almost forgotten today even in blues circles, Juke Boy Bonner was a remarkable poet and a gifted blues gui-
tarist and singer. He sometimes performed as a one-man band, singing his poetic songs while accompanying himself on guitar, harmonica and percussion.

Some of Bonner’s lyrics are poetry in the true sense. Even when he is near despair, his songs are beautiful and uplift-
ing in the way they speak to the human condition. His song, “It Don’t Take Too Much,” offers a melancholy account of a beautiful loser, a man with a heart full of soul, crushed by the weight of the world.

“It don’t take too much to make you think you were born to lose. You got to keep on pushing at that mountain, and it never seems to move.”

The two sides of Bonner’s identity as an artist are expressed by the titles of two of his finest records, produced by Chris Strachwitz on Arhoolie. His dark-blue, despairing side is captured by “Life Gave Me a Dirty Deal,” and his identity as a poet from the poor side of town is expressed as “Juke Boy Bonner — Ghetto Poet.”

See Dark Was the Night page 6
Seniors and Disabled Tenants Struggle for Fair Treatment at Berkeley’s Redwood Gardens

“There is increasing enmity between the residents and management. This is much worse than all the other issues.” — Gary Hicks, Residents’ Council

A vailability of housing for people with low incomes is extremely limited and even more so for seniors and the disabled. They are lucky when they find housing — any kind of housing — and usually only after a long wait. They are particularly fortunate if they are able to live in a pleasant setting and convenient Berkeley location.

Redwood Gardens, located at 2951 Derby Street in Berkeley, is a complex of buildings with 169 apartments, gardens and community facilities for seniors and people with disabilities. It is subsidized by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). And there is an AC Transit bus stop right at the entrance.

Redwood Gardens was established as a co-op 28 years ago by Cooperative Services Inc (CSI). Currently it is managed by CSI Support and Development, which operates a number of co-ops in California. Redwood Gardens is the only development that now is not a co-op. (There is some history behind the change which is not necessary to go into here.)

The CSI Support and Development website outlines the principles of cooperatives. “Living in a co-op means living in a building that is controlled by the resident members. The resident members vote on all major operating decisions, including writing the annual budget.... Becoming a member. The resident members vote on all major operating decisions and even organizing their own co-op if they wish, discussing their concerns, and having those concerns heard, are being denied. And there are some very serious concerns.

Residents are afraid that much of what the project’s management has been doing, and its plans for the future, will have negative impacts on the quality of their lives. The residents have been getting increasingly upset with the management. Complaints, questions and requests are often ignored or simply accepted by the management. CSI expects residents to do major renovations, and they have already begun making changes while not accepting any input from the residents.

There was no discussion of the conversion of a pleasant sun room next to residents’ apartments into a laundry was ignored by management. Construction on the laundry is proceeding. Management has taken over the community room for the construction workers. They are making unwanted noise in the garden and other community spaces.

In the words of Gary Hicks, co-chair with Eleanor Walden of the Residents’ Council, “One of the increasing enmity between the residents and management. This is much worse than all the other issues.”

Tenant Mary Berg wrote a letter to property manager Mary Kirk expressing her objection to a number of manage-

ment’s actions and ending with, “I have always considered Redwood Gardens to be ‘top of the line’ in senior housing ... but with CSI’s management it now has fallen to near the bottom, because CSI (apparently) refuses to consult with the residents and disregards the expressed wishes of the residents.”

She never received a reply.

Arlene Merryman has lived at Redwood Gardens for 21 years. “I’m really upset,” she says. Her voice is shaking as she declares, “All of what’s happening around here makes me so angry I can hardly talk.”

Another resident, afraid of reprisal if her name is made public, is concerned about the lack of communication between residents and management. “I moved here a year ago, gave up my Section 8. So this is where I have to live for the rest of my life. I’ve been happy living in Berkeley being here at Redwood Gardens until recently with all that has happened.”

With a zero-interest loan from HUD, CSI is planning to carry out major renovations. The process will be extremely stressful for many residents. The management or Redwood Gardens explained that they will renovate one apartment at a time, spending just one day on each unit. They expect to make major changes, remodeling kitchens and bathrooms, closets and shelves, possibly floors, etc. — completing it all in one working day.

And the residents must move their belongings out and store them temporarily (it’s not clear where). For the residents, there was no discussion held about the matter. A resident described how it all went down:

“Each person had a 15-minute interview. During that, they gave each of us a piece of green paper with all the details on it about what’s going to happen. One of the things that is particularly disturbing is that we have to provide for our own help to pack. We either have to pay $100 for labor that they would identify or we have to have friends to help.”

Vi McFall was on the waiting list for quite a few years before she was able to get in over four years ago. She is an artist and some of her paintings are hanging in the halls of the complex. (There are a number of artists among the residents displaying some exciting works in the halls.)

“I was happy here till a year ago,” she says. “But it seems like the whole vibe of the place has changed.” Pointing to all her artwork and supplies, McFall says she’s worried about packing it all and storing it out of the way during the renovation. “She’s sure there is no way she could manage it all by herself.

The management plans to begin the process in November. Taking into account weekends and holidays, completing the work on 169 units will take a very long time. Doing the math, it works out to almost eight months. For two-thirds of the year the residents will be living with the stress of not knowing exactly when their turn will come and having to cope with the state of confusion all around them.

Penny Hall has been living in Redwood Gardens since the co-op was first organized 28 years ago. She describes the residents. With a population of close to 200 people it is not surprising to find a diversity of opinions and attitudes among them. There are some people who live their lives paying no attention or simply accepting what is happening.

“Some people are intimidated and are afraid to speak out,” Hall said. “Some are calling HUD, some calling an attorney, some talking with other media — reaching out trying to get help.”

Also, there is a segment of Chinese residents who have limited English and there is no interpreter among them. But for everyone, the threat of eviction and becoming homeless for incurring the disapproval of management always hangs over their heads. Being seniors or disabled individuals with limited incomes, alternative housing options are extremely scarce.

Eleanor Walden is one of the people who has been reaching out. She expresses her outrage. “We give up our rights as human beings by living in a place that will not consult us with, that does not represent us in any way,” she said. “It’s demeaning and disrespectful.”

Walden goes back to the days of the civil rights and anti-war movements. “There comes a time,” she begins to quote Mario Savio.

When residents decided to sit in the sun room to protest the management replacing it with a laundry, she called their action a sit-in and got the attention of the media. “Now my strategy is to go to our representatives” she says, “to inundate the people who are supposed to represent us.”

Walden points out that it’s not just “asking for management to be more respectful.... This is greater than Redwood Gardens in little Berkeley, California.”

What is happening here is happening in public housing projects all over the country. And there is a lesson:

“I’ve been saying the seniors are the next civil rights movement because we are the largest growing segment of society,” Walden said. “We’re the baby boomers. And so housing for seniors, especially if it’s guaranteed by the federal government, is a good investment. It’s not done for any humanitarian reasons. It’s a monetary cash cow.”
Santa Cruz’s ‘Stay Away’ Law Banishes the Homeless

A new stay-away law in Santa Cruz targets the poor, people of color and the unemployed almost exclusively. It is a not so thinly veiled effort to drive undesirable — i.e., people experiencing homelessness — out of our community.

by Steve Pleich

I discussed the need for a Citizens Police Review Board to provide a voice for people experiencing homelessness in Santa Cruz in my article “Civilian Police Review Could Help Homeless People” [see the May 2014 issue of Street Spirit]. Although I still believe that a police review board would be an effective tool in combating the criminalization of homeless-ness in Santa Cruz, I believe that the events presently unfolding call for a shift in strategy from civic action to court action.

The proposed amendment to the Santa Cruz Municipal Code Section 13.08.100 (as amended) is the most recent iteration of retrograde lawmaking aimed at our homeless community. It is presently making its way through the City Council approval process.

The new law is an extension of an ordi-nance approved last June which provided for the issuance of 24-hour “stay away” orders to people who posed some arguable “public health or safety concern” within the city’s parks and open spaces. The proposed amendment, however, goes much further and raises serious con-cerns about its constitutionality. The ordinance as written provided for the issuance of 24-hour “stay away” orders to people who posed some arguable “public health or safety concern” within the city’s parks and open spaces. The proposed amendment, however, goes much further and raises serious concerns about the constitutionality of the ordinance as drafted.

The amendment creates a new stay-away law, according to which Santa Cruz Police Officers, with the concurrence of the City Council, can issue stay-away orders to individuals who have engaged in any one of a wide range of activities the City considers undesirable. The ordinance contains no due process safeguards and empowers the police with the authority to discipline and imprison individuals who do not comply with the court order.

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I Had A Dream of Someone Falling
by Ellen Danchik
I am wandering, wandering. Where will I go? What will I do? I have only a cart. I start falling and falling. God reaches out and before I hit bottom I fall into God’s outstretched hands. Now I know where I will go, where I will go.

The Vendor
by Marilyn Wallner
He made me think of those sad men who sat on street corners during the Great Depression with boxes of apples: 5 cents a piece scratched on a small card, or pencils in a cup: 1 for a cent. He made me think... by Marilyn Wallner

Street Meditation
by Claire J. Baker
We live on a planet that spins beyond hunger, poverty & war. Our weight can’t move the earth & we don’t feel it tipped & turning. The earth from city street so far & yet so near, hard under our feet.

Separate But Unequal
by Judy Joy Jones
I remember as a child seeing two.restrooms for people of different colors and then I knew why there are “art museums” and “women’s art museums” it was only in the ’90s female painters were “allowed” in college art history books let’s see separate art museums for women and men and female painters denied a place in textbooks so I started asking people around the world “Would you please name female painters throughout history?” and most could name none or perhaps one at the most there have been millions and yes there are females in art museums hanging on walls — nude and I wondered why I was struggling as a female painter?

Honor the Warrior
by Marilyn Wallner
Thank you for your service and your arm your leg both legs your nightmares your marriage your life.

LOVE FALLS APART
by Claire J. Baker
Why do you leave without me? I never dreamed you would go. I know this life’s not toast with brie but leave now? What about me, our plan that someday we’d flee together where only the moon will know? It hurts that you’re leaving without me, waving, waving as you go.

Shrines
by Marilyn Wallner
These poles with ghost bikes trusted to them — piles of teddy bears, cards candles with the Virgin’s image — flower offerings looking like brides’ bouquets — now desiccated. The bouquet the girls’ bike rider will never catch. I know about some of them. That girl whose bike’s now spray painted white was hit by a drunk driver as she rode out of the university gate. She had the right-of-way, cold comfort now. That was on the late news. And the two girls— graduating high school seniors, in the spiffy new convertible— they were hit by a truck at the driver at 4 a.m. “They were only having fun,” one of the mothers said. Their pole stayed festive, gay like a Mariel Gras float for over two years before it was stripped clean. Someone from the county no doubt.

Where Is “Somewhere?”
by Claire J. Baker
Where can the homeless harmlessly park, bother no one, and get a decent night’s sleep — not ticketed or routed out? — I’m guessing: maybe under a century-old willow or oak at edge of town? Maybe on a crowded street in a ghetto where nobody gives a spit about anything — especially the homeless? Maybe in a somewhere town there’s an empty, friendly parking lot — SOMEWHERE!!

FROM AN ELDERLY STREET COUPLE
by Claire J. Baker
Long ago we were Spring in Vivaldi’s Four Seasons. Now we are Autumn falling hard toward Winter’s cold strains. We lag behind the processional yet we remain within its music.

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DOORS
by Claire J. Baker
“If the doors of my heart ever close, I am as good as dead.” — Mary Oliver Doors of existence, open wide and wider still. Never lock out life. Proceed toward the next unknown: face whatever balm or gall and all the in-betweens. We are made for such encounters. The next world will return us to the grace we were born with. But we have not yet reached that full-circle place.

Fellow traveler, if you help clear my path and I your path, we can thank each other. If not, still we can believe or come to know that expansiveness helps spirit flowers thrive. They sweeten the air. Open wide, doors. And flowers, grow!

Better Than Magic
by Ellen Danchik
Someone from the county no doubt. The bouquet the girls’ bike rider now desiccated. Looking like brides’ bouquets — flower offerings looking like brides’ bouquets — now desiccated. The bouquet the girls’ bike rider will never catch. I know about some of them. That girl whose bike’s now spray painted white was hit by a drunk driver as she rode out of the university gate. She had the right-of-way, cold comfort now. That was on the late news. And the two girls— graduating high school seniors, in the spiffy new convertible— they were hit by a truck at the driver at 4 a.m. “They were only having fun,” one of the mothers said. Their pole stayed festive, gay like a Mariel Gras float for over two years before it was stripped clean. Someone from the county no doubt.

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He made me think of those sad men who sat on street corners during the Great Depression with boxes of apples: 5 cents a piece scratched on a small card, or pencils in a cup: 1 for a cent. It was pouring rain and strawberries in neat little boxes of apples: during the Great Depression sat on street corners of those sad men who begged all to see her blood soaked tears as she struggled to survive her piercing screams pretending not to hear people walkin by concrete streets An elderly woman searches for her next meal. I bought some berries. made merry with Disney characters. holding an umbrella corner later, he was standing in the spiffy new convertible— they were hit by a drunk driver as she rode out of the university gate. She had the right-of-way, cold comfort now. That was on the late news. And the two girls— graduating high school seniors, in the spiffy new convertible— they were hit by a truck at the driver at 4 a.m. “They were only having fun,” one of the mothers said. Their pole stayed festive, gay like a Mariel Gras float for over two years before it was stripped clean. Someone from the county no doubt.

Chose Air?
by Claire J. Baker
To avoid life’s hurts sometimes we choose simply to be air. But nothing’s that simple: ask air what it’s like to whip into tornadoes; ask air how it feels to bear scorching heat from the sun. Life’s complicated. The challenge is: how human can we become and still survive the process?
Ted Gullicksen was an activist who worked both on elections and on housing squats.

Ted Gullicksen Dies

Recent arrivals to the city may not be aware of this exemption, which removed thousands of long-term tenants from rent control protections. In those days, real estate speculators would buy four-unit buildings, do an owner-move-in eviction of a single unit, and then develop and rent the entire building within six months.

Few thought that the owner-occupancy exemption could be removed. The popularity of “Mom and Pop” landlords had created the exemption in 1979, and most assumed that voters would retain it.

I and other tenant activists were focused on improving housing code enforcement in 1993 and 1994, and we had our own November 1994 campaign (Prop G), designed to take on landlords. Our team targeted a new and different market: our existing tenants! The old-tenants took a stand and showed up for the campaign.

Ted particularly focused on tenants in small buildings. Whereas the former Old St. Mary’s Housing Committee (now Housing Rights Committee of SF) and my organization (San Francisco Tenants Union (SFTU) had focused on large tenement base in larger buildings, the SFTU and former St. Peter’s Housing Committee (now Causa Justa) primarily worked with tenants living in buildings with four to six units or less. So it was understandable that Ted would seek a ballot measure to protect tenants in small buildings.

The 1994 election had the most progressive voter turnout in San Francisco history. It was also held during the eighth consecutive year of a real estate downturn in the city. As a result, the opposition to Prop I spent barely over $100,000. I know that seems insignificant, but the sale of real estate downtown and landlord overconfidence saw surprisingly little money come in against Prop I.

To the surprise of everyone but Ted, I won. And it represented the largest expansion of rent control since the original ordinance in 1979.

STRENGTHENING RENT CONTROL

I worked on so many campaigns with Ted in the decade after the Prop I victory that I lost count. All of our campaigns for tenants prevailed. A landlord effort to reverse Prop I with their “Take Back Our Homes” initiative was soundly defeated. Tenants also defeated a statewide “eminent domain” measure that would have repealed rent control.

Ted and I also worked to defeat a de Young Museum bond because Mayor Brown allowed the full cost of the increased taxes be passed through to tenants. I believe bond proponent spent $1 million to our $10,000.

Brown’s first term, Ted and I led efforts to win sweeping legislation for tenants. We got legislation enacted that would have stopped Ellis Act evictions, only to have the courts wrongly throw it out.

Ted played a crucial role in helping pro-tenant supervisor candidates sweep the 2000 return to defeat the contentious Tenant Union endorsements proved the dividing line among candidates, and tenants could follow the TU slate card to elect candidates who supported them.

The new Board created opportunities for strengthening rent control, which Ted pursued to help us in our campaigns to support rent-controlled housing at Trinity Plaza, and did what he could to stop the demolition of sound housing at Parker Creek.

A TRUE HERO

I often hear of people being described as “heroes” after their death. Ted Gullicksen was a true hero and he will be remembered as such.

In my twenty-plus years working with Ted, we never had an argument. We never had bad feelings after a conversation. Our policy differences were minor. Ted was always someone who looked to work with people, not alienate them. That’s a side of Ted many people don’t know. Ted was the easiest person in the world to get along with, and one never heard a critical word about him from fellow activists.

Ted was a great person to work with. Let’s not lose this fact amidst his many accomplishments.

Ted and I spent less time working together after 2007 when I shifted my chief focus from citywide tenant elections campaigns to the Tenderloin and other issues. But we continued to discuss strategies to combat Ellis Act evictions and worked closely on the Airbnb legislative campaign.

Many are asking where the SFTU goes from here. Bobby Coleman of the SFTU, our past executive director, was the kind of leader who would take whatever role one all spoke to and met with regularity, who was so central to the movement, could suddenly be taken from us. A full year of ongoing organizational activities will be scheduled and publicly announced.

Like Joe Hill, Ted Gullicksen would urge everyone not to mourn, but to organize. Because so much of the tenants’ movement was led by 501(c)(3) groups that can’t endorse candidates, prior to Ted, the tenants’ movement failed to maximize its political power. Ted changed this.

Under Ted’s leadership, for over two decades the Tenant Union candidate endorsements had the gold seal of approval of the political establishment. A countercultural, left-wing Ted Gullicksen had no problem making deals with political insiders with whom the politically correct set would keep their distance.

Ted understood that the broader the reach of the TU slate card, the better for tenants addressed at all without prejudice. If one it is advanced the tenant cause.

Ted may have devoted too much time to election and legislative campaigns at the expense of organizing a broader movement. But amidst an ongoing housing crisis, Ted understandably wanted to pass every conceivable law to reduce displacement. His loss could mean fewer tenant electoral campaigns simply because he is not around to organize them.

Ted never sought glory or credit. He would likely feel sheepish over the incredible outpouring of support that his loss has triggered. But all of us who worked with Ted, know that Ted’s recognition is richly deserved.

Randy Shaw is Editor of Beyond Chron and director of the Tenderloin Housing Clinic.

Ted Gullicksen was a true hero and he will be remembered as such.

The Broader Legacy of Ted Gullicksen

Ted was as much at home in the world of bolt cutters and illegal squats as he was at City Hall. And he showed others that these two worlds were not exclusive.

by Randy Shaw

My tribute to the late Ted Gullicksen (see page one for obituary). Ted was a true hero and he will be remembered as such.
He sings the words “maybe tomorrow” so forcefully, as if he’s grasping at a slender thread of hope. What if tomorrow doesn’t deliver on those hopes?

In another song, “Ghetto Poet,” Bonner sings, “All the lonely days just seem to fade away.” Then the days turn into endless years of broken dreams: “All the lonely years just seem to disappear.”

As we will see, Bonner was not only enduring economic deprivation, loneliness, the pressures of single fatherhood, and disillusionment that his brilliant music never seemed to find a large audience, but was also enduring scary health and economic struggles. Yet when a sensitive poet endures that level of suffering, even his despairing words can still be striking and memorable, as in his song, “Electric Chair.”

“Look like I’m waiting for a tomorrow that will never come, Seems days and days have passed, yet I never see the morning come. It’s enough to make you wish you were never born. Sometimes I wonder where I get the power and the strength to carry on.”

“I’m a Bluesman”

“My father passed on when I was two years old, Didn’t leave me a thing but a whole lot of soul, You can see I’m a bluesman.”

Those lonely and forsaken lines are footage from his soon-to-be-released song, “I’m a Bluesman.” Being a bluesman was at the very heart of his identity, and this song reveals the major themes of his life as reflected in the mirror of the blues.

Weldon Bonner was born on a farm near Bellville, Texas, where his father, Manuel Bonner, was a sharecropper. His very first years seemed to foreshadow all the bad luck that stalked him all his life. He was born in 1932 just as the Great Depression was collapsing during the Depression.

The youngest of nine children born into a poor family, and just as he sang in “In the Big City,” he was orphaned when he was only two. Then, Bonner’s mother died when he was only eight.

“My mother passed on when I was just about eight, I started learning I was growing up in a world of hate. That made me a bluesman.”

In his 1975 book, The Legacy of the Blues, the pioneering blues author and record producer Samuel Charters described the one-on-one conversation between Juke Boy Bonner’s life and his autobiographical song, “I’m a Bluesman.”

After losing both parents, Bonner went to live with an older sister in Bellville. Instead of going to school, he was working in the Texas cotton fields when he was only 13, just as he sang so movingly.

“I go to work in the fields when I was just thirteen, Didn’t get a chance to know what education was.”

In 1963, at the age of 30, Bonner was hospitalized for chronic ulcers and 45 percent of his stomach was removed. During his lengthy recovery, he immersed himself in poetry and had countless poems published in Forward Times, the African-American newspaper of Houston.

Bonner turned many of these poems into beautiful songs and became a fine singer, guitarist, and harmonica player. His music was championed, first by Mike Leadbetter, a leading blues researcher and writer for Blues Unlimited in England, and later by Chris Strachwitz, the founder of Arhoolie Records in El Cerrito, who released his finest records. Yet for all the brilliance of his artistry, Juke Boy Bonner would never become a star.

At the end of “I’m a Bluesman,” Bonner sings the desolate and downhearted words that, in my mind, make him one of the most important and prophetic voices of the homeless condition in America. All the hard knocks he endured gave him the knowledge and sensitivity to capture the frightening insecurity of life on the streets.

“When at night you don’t know where you’re going to sleep, or where you’ll get your next meal to eat That makes you a bluesman, a bluesman. I want to know the world to know how come I’m a bluesman.”

“I’m in the Big City,” Bonner writes of his disillusionment in moving from the hard, bare existence of a sharecropper’s life on a Texas cotton farm to Houston, only to find that poverty had followed him to the big city.

“Here I am in the big city And I’m just about to starve to death.”

“I’m a Bluesman” appeared on “The Sonet Blues Story: Juke Boy Bonner,” and his other songs appeared on “Life Gave Me a Dirty Deal” and “Ghetto Poet.” Strachwitz produced all these intensely moving records by a talented musician and poet who otherwise might have lived and died almost completely unknown.

A HERO OF THE BLUES

Although Bonner never became a big star, he was a voice of his people, a working poet and a courageous bluesman who kept playing even after half of his stomach was removed. He gave concerts and performed at blues festivals all over the country and traveled to Europe with the American Folk Blues Festival. But somehow, he never had a breakthrough.

The life-stories of great artists in America are supposed to follow a rags-to-riches story arc. When a sensitive young man is born into an impoverished family of sharecroppers on a Texas farm just as the Depression ruins the economy, and then loses both parents, we are primed to expect that he has years of hard work and brilliant artistry will be rewarded someday.

Yet, if the first chapters of Bonner’s life were harsh and cruel, the last chapter was outright heartbreak.

Even though he had written and published hundreds of poems, and had recorded blues albums of unquestionable worth and beauty, in Bonner’s last years he held down “a dreadful minimum wage job” in Houston, as Strachwitz explained in the notes to “Life Gave Me a Dirty Deal.”

“The last time I heard Juke Boy in Houston,” Strachwitz wrote, “he was working at a chicken processing plant, depressing work for anyone but especially demoralizing for a sensitive poet like Weldon Bonner.” Strachwitz later wrote that he would never forget the bad shape Juke Boy was in while working that job.

Then, when he was only 46 years old, Bonner died on June 28, 1978, in “the small rented room where he lived” in Houston. The last verses of Bonner’s overpowersong, “It Don’t Take Too Much” express the essential truth of this poet’s lifelong struggle with the blues.

“It doesn’t take too much to make you think you was born to lose That’s why I lay down worrying and wake up with the blues.”

Despite his lack of public recognition, Juke Boy Bonner lived and died a great poet — and a hero of the blues. As I write these words, I realize I am wearing a T-shirt with an iconic portrait of Blind Willie Johnson by the artist R. Crumb and the blaring inscription: “Heroes of the Blues.”

For one forlorn moment, I find myself wishing that Juke Boy Bonner had also been consecrated as a hero of the blues, and that during his lifetime he had enjoyed some of the success lavished on so many lesser musicians.

From past experience, I know where these wishes will soon lead. I’ll begin wishing for a world where the genuine blues artists like Juke Boy Bonner and Blind Willie Johnson are far more celebrated than the Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin and all the others who have grown rich while exploiting the blues.

As long as I’m wishing for the impossible, why not wish for eyesight for the blind? In fact, why not wish for eyesight for Blind Willie Johnson?

Even though justice is too often delayed, it may still show up on some unexpected day. After all, one of the greatest musicians in our nation’s history, Blind Willie Johnson, spent the last 17
This beautiful portrait of Blind Willie Johnson by renowned artist R. Crumb was published in R. Crumb’s Heroes of Blues, Jazz, & Country, along with dozens of iconic portraits of musicians. Crumb’s art also appears on “Heroes of the Blues” T-shirts.

Blind Willie Johnson and the Music of the Spheres

In the opening frames of “The Soul of a Man,” a film by director Win Wenders in the film series “Martin Scorsese Presents the Blues,” NASA technicians are seen loading a golden record on board the Voyager as it is about to blast off to explore the outer reaches of our solar system and then continue on into deep space.

The Voyager Golden Record carried the “Sounds of Earth” — the diverse languages, music and natural sounds of surf, thunder, birds and whales. Carl Sagan likened it to launching a message in a bottle into the “cosmic ocean.” The Voyager Golden Record selected the music of Bach, Beethoven and Blind Willie Johnson to carry on this voyage into the solar system, past Pluto and to the stars beyond.

It is amazing to contemplate this starry destiny for Blind Willie’s music, since during his life he seemed the most earth-bound of men. He was born into poverty in Texas, blinded as a very young child, and later died in obscurity.

Johnson lost his mother at an early age. He would later sing a deeply moving rendition of “Motherless children have a hard time when mother is dead.”

His father sent this sightless, motherless son could find deep within himself, described what Blind Willie Johnson’s music meant to him. “Of course, I’ve tried all my life — worked very hard and every day of my life, practically — to play in that style. He’s so good, I mean, he’s just so good! Beyond a guitar player. I think the guy is one of these interplanetary world musicians.”

He’s exactly right about the “interplanetary” part. Blind Willie Johnson’s performance of “Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground,” an instrumental version of a gospel song about the crucifixion of Jesus, was sent into space on the Voyager as “the human expression of loneliness.”

Sam Charters wrote that Blind Willie Johnson had created a “shattering mood” with this song. Its full title is “Dark was the night and cold was the ground, on which the Lord was laid.”

“Dark Was the Night” is now soaring into space. His music truly has become part of the “music of the spheres.”

Many musicians win gold records for reaching one million dollars in sales (or by later standards, 500,000 units). Blind Willie Johnson’s music is on the ultimate gold record, shining among the stars.

Blind Willie Johnson was a stunning original. Samuel Charters wrote that no one during his time sounded like Blind Willie Johnson as a singer or guitarist. But Johnson would soon influence everyone else. Musicians to this day are still devoting years of their lives in an attempt to figure out his incredibly beautiful and complex slide guitar playing.

In the liner notes to “The Complete Blind Willie Johnson” on Columbia, Charters wrote: “He was one of the most brilliant slide guitarists who ever recorded, and he used the upper strings for haunting melodic phrases that finished the lines he was singing in the text.”

Sandblasted Vocal Cords

Blind Willie Johnson didn’t sing the blues, however. Every song he recorded between the years of 1927 to 1930 was a gospel song, yet his slide guitar playing sounded like the very essence of the blues, and he sang loud enough to wake the dead in a rasping growl that sounded like his vocal cords had been sandblasted.

His beautifully expressive, yet deep and raw vocals remade gospel music so it sounded like the primal blues of the Mississippi Delta, as if the harsh, gravel-voiced singing of Son House had mingled with the intense, passionate vocals of Howlin’ Wolf. Yet Blind Willie Johnson grew up in rural Texas, not Mississippi, and his music preceded most of the blues artists. Where did it come from?

Many of the finest guitarists in the world are in awe of Blind Willie Johnson. Some have spent half their lives trying to replicate what he could do on a slide guitar. How did a blind young man who played in small towns in an isolated area of rural Texas become one of the most masterful guitarists of all?

Kry Cooder, a virtuoso slide guitarist himself, described what Blind Willie Johnson’s playing meant to him. “Of course, I’ve tried all my life — worked very hard and every day of my life, practically — to play in that style. He’s so good, I mean, he’s just so good! Beyond a guitar player. I think the guy is one of these interplanetary world musicians.”

His singing sends chills through my soul. It is a darkly unsettling experience, yet his otherworldly voice offers pure compassion to the motherless and fatherless children of the world. I lost my own father too early. And I love this song.

Children who have lost their parents at a very young age may be lost on some deep level for a very long time. And they may become lost in another sense as well — they may become homeless or spend their childhood days in poverty.

Every time I hear Blind Willie Johnson sing the last verse of this song, images arise of all the motherless and fatherless children who are homeless in modern America, and all the throwaway kids who are released from the foster care system with nowhere to go.

The most haunting image that arises is a picture of Willie Johnson himself, sightless and motherless, trying to make his way in the world by singing these words on street corners to unseen strangers.

“Motherless children have a hard time when mother is dead. What Willie did in the studio was to create this mood, this haunted response to Christ’s crucifixion.” Charters wrote, adding that Johnson created an “achingly” expressive melody with just his slide guitar.

Instead of singing the words of the hymn, Johnson cast aside the lyrics and went for pure emotion, humming along wordlessly in a meditative mood.

Charters wrote, “It was a moment that as moving as it was unforgettable. It was the only piece he played like this, and nothing else similar to it was ever recorded. It remains one of the unique masterpieces of American music.”

It is amazing to contemplate such a starry destiny for Blind Willie Johnson’s music. He was born in poverty, blinded as a young child, and later died in obscurity. Yet his gospel music has been sent into deep space on the Voyager and has now become part of the “music of the spheres.”

Blind Willie Johnson’s entire life prepared him to have the emotional depth and sensitivity to create such a deeply felt response to the crucifixion of a Biblical figure who was born homeless.

Blind Willie Johnson

Blind Willie Johnson’s music sails among the stars.

Motherless Children Have a Hard Time

Johnson’s mother died when he was an infant. One of his most moving songs was sung with all the depth and heartache that a motherless son could find deep within himself. It is now a classic of American music.

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“Motherless children have a hard time when mother is dead, Lord. Motherless children have a hard time, Mother’s dead. They don’t have anywhere to go. Wandering around from door to door. Have a hard time.”

His father sent this sightless, motherless youth out with a tin cup to sing on street corners in small towns in Texas.

The Voyager Golden Record was sent into space in 1977, carrying greetings in 60 languages, sounds of nature and the music of Beethoven, Bach and Blind Willie Johnson.

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Johnson recorded for only three years, from 1927 to 1930, yet during that time he is said to have outsold Bessie Smith, the Empress of the Blues.

**The Homeless Stranger**

He sang hymns and gospel songs, yet as Chatter wrote, these songs “have been so completely changed in his hands that they become his own personal expression, building on the great Biblical figures.” Above all, Chatters added, his songs reflected “the loneliness of the motherless child or the homeless stranger.”

One of my favorite songs of all expressions of the lonely life of the homeless stranger. Willie Johnson walked in darkness all his life and he must have known many lonesome days when all he met were strangers who looked upon him as a blind beggar, a homeless stranger. They had no way of knowing that they were meeting one of the most remarkable musicians in American history.

But we now have encountered a homeless stranger, or a world-class musician, Johnson’s song, “Everybody Ought to Treat a Stranger Right,” is the voice of the homeless.

> “Well, all of us down here are strangers, none of us have no home,
> Don’t never hurt, oh, your brother and sister and cousin too,
> Everybody ought to treat a stranger right long ways from home.”

This song is a reminder to a nation which just officially reported a record number of more than one million homeless children enrolled in the public schools that the lives of every one of those homeless strangers are sacred.

**Dark Was the Night**

Even though Blind Willie Johnson’s records had been selling well, and would soon become deeply influential to other musicians, the Depression ended the careers of many great blues artists, including Blind Willie. In 1930, Johnson recorded his last song. Yet, he kept playing music on the streets and in church gatherings in Beaumont, Texas, all through the 1930s and up until his death on September 18, 1945.

After his death, his music would streak through the 1930s and up until his death in 1939. Blind Lemon Jefferson died alone in a snowstorm on a wintry night in Chicago in December 1929, and Bessie Smith died in Clarksdale, Mississippi, in 1937 following a deadly car accident while traveling on Highway 61 from Memphis into Clarksdale. Elmore James died from a massive heart attack in 1963 when he was only 45 and should have had many more years to play his brilliant slide guitar.

Sonny Boy Williamson II died in 1965, a short time after being in the studio with Robbie Robertson and the Hawks. During the set, Williamson was constantly spitting what Robertson thought was tobacco juice into a can, until he finally realized that Sonny Boy actually had been spitting his blood into the can all night, and returning to play his harmonica.

Even in light of all these tragic deaths, there is something in the brilliant artistry and the forsaken life of Blind Willie Johnson that is deeply touching. He lived and died a genuine, gospel-drenched hero of the blues — not just when he was recording his immortal music, but in my mind, maybe even more during the 15 years from 1930 to 1945 when the sightless street musician continued to play to small numbers of strangers on obscure street corners.

**How We Treat the Stranger**

In remembering his death, an unwelcome thought arises: This is how we treat the unknown stranger, even today; he is living in a society where an unknown blind man is turned away from a hospital and dies in a fire-gutted home, not just in Johnson’s era in rural Texas, but here and now, and in every state of the union.

Even today, we scarcely notice when a slum hotel in the inner city burns to the ground, or when homeless people die before their time due to untreated illnesses and exposure, or that the safety net has been shredded so blind and disabled people are less able to survive. Johnson sang, “Everybody Ought to Treat a Stranger Right,” to warn us that the messiah may appear in the anonymous guise of a nameless, faceless stranger, and that the life of each unsheltered, needy stranger has sacred worth.

Then, he demonstrated the full significance of those lyrics by dying the unnoticed death of the unknown stranger, even though, in this case, he was one of the finest musicians of all time.

T.S. Eliot’s poem, “The Rock,” echoes with the same message about the stranger.

> What is the meaning of this city?
> What is the meaning of this world?
> Do you huddle close together because you love each other?
> What will you answer? “We all shud together to make money from each other!”

On his recording of “Everybody Ought to Treat a Stranger Right,” Blind Willie Johnson asked us that same question, a question that will never go away.

**LIFE IN THE OTHER AMERICA**

When Michæl Harrington discovered a land he called the “Other America” in the early 1960s, he helped awaken the nation to the existence of a vast and largely unseen subcontinent of poverty in the midst of an affluent society. His influential book, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, warned that 25 percent of the people in this supposedly prosperous nation lived in poverty.

The government had ignored and abandoned its hungry and homeless citizens. The cost of living has gone so high, “You know I need to earn a dollar. The coat of living has gone so high. Now then I don’t know what to do.”

He sang the word “need” with such forcefulness that it sounds like a three-syllable outcry carrying all the weight of the weighted blues.

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**Hard Times for FLOYD Jones**

Floyd Jones, one of the finest singers and songwriters in Chicago’s postwar blues circles, composed and performed some highly politicized blues, especially unique in the politically sluggish climate of the 1950s. His “Stockyard Blues” told the story of workers on the picket line, and not only sympathized with the union’s struggle for better wages for those working in Chicago’s stockyards, but also gave voice to the desperation of those who would have to pay higher prices for meat.

Floyd Jones was a gifted vocalist and his dark, heavy vocals resonated with passionate intensity, especially when he sang, “I need to earn a dollar.” He sings the word “need” with such forcefulness that it sounds like a three-syllable outcry carrying all the weight of the weighted blues.

**What will you answer? “We all shud together to make money from each other!”**

**THE HOMELESS STRANGER**

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He sang the word “need” with such forcefulness that it sounds like a three-syllable outcry carrying all the weight of the weighted blues.

**Born in Arkansas and began playing the blues alongside such masterful Mississippi musicians as Johnny Shines, Eddie Taylor, Howlin’ Wolf and Bass Incorporated**

His beautiful music is criminally underappreciated, so much so that it is almost painful to listen to his work today and realize that this great musician was never given his due. In the early 1950s,
Floyd Jones made a handful of brilliant blues for the J.O.B. label, including "Dark Road" and "On the Road Again." He often played in front of great musicians Slim and harmonica great Snooky Pryor. His 1954 anthem, "Hard Times," was a song deeply anguish about reduced hours, lowered wages, poverty and pay- offs. "This is a bad time," sings Jones, "we laying them off by the thousands.

In 1966, Testament Records released an album in their "Masters of Modern Blues" series entitled "Floyd Jones — Eddie Taylor." Floyd Jones sang and played guitar with the powerhouse accompaniment of Otis Spann on piano, Big Walter Horton on harmonica, Fred Below on drums, and Eddie Taylor on guitar. Every one of those musicians was a world-class master. Eddie Taylor’s gui- tar work was some of the most well fuelled blues singer Jimmy Reed’s great success for many years. Otis Spann was the pianist in Muddy Waters’ classic bands, and many consider him to be the finest blues pianist of all time. Big Walter Horton was, along with Sonny Boy Williamson II and Little Walter, one of the finest blues harmonica masters of all time. Drummer Fred Below played on nearly all of Little Walter’s hits and was perhaps the most in-demand session drummer of his time.

That’s the company Floyd Jones kept, yet today he is nearly forgotten. Floyd Jones and this blues ensemble demonstrate the brilliance of the golden era of Chicago’s electric blues in the ’50s and ’60s. These artists not only brought new life to the blues, but were the key inspira- tion for the Rolling Stones, Yardbirds, and many consider him to be the greatest guitarist of his time. Drummer Fred Below played on many of Muddy Waters’ songs, and was a driving force behind an album in their “Masters of Modern Blues” series.

Big Bill Broonzy wrote many blues songs about poverty and racial discrimination.

Floyd Jones was one of the few musicians to speak out for the humanity of low-wage workers who were exploited by the powers that be. In a bitter irony, Jones himself became one of those exploited workers.

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It can lead one to despair to realize that Floyd Jones, a beautiful and soulful song- writer and performer, recorded so little and died in near obscurity in 1989.

The very excellence of Floyd’s work makes his fate even more incompres- sible and bitterly ironic. It is a fate shared by many of his fellow bluesmen.

Floyd Jones was one of the very few musicians who spoke out for the humanity of low-wage workers in Chicago. His songs, “Stockyard Blues” and “Hard Times” are outspoken acts of solidarity with workers who are screwed over by the powers that be.

And then comes the final irony: Floyd Jones himself became one of those screwed-over workers. Here is how Pete Welding describes it in his liner notes:

"In recent years, Floyd has been work- ing as a forklift operator, the latest in a succession of ‘day jobs’ he has been forced to take to make ends meet. It is truly a sad commentary on the state of the blues in Chicago, where one of its finest bluesmen does not even earn a livelihood at what he does so well."

JOHN BRIM’S TOUGH TIMES

John Brim was another great yet large- ly unheralded Chicago blues singer and guitarist who traveled in some of the same circles as Jones. In 1953, Brim recorded one of the gutsiest and most political blues songs, "Tough Times."

With his wife Grace Brim on drums and John Brim on guitar and vocals, "Tough Times" is a classic side of tough Chicago blues with a radical differ- ence — its radical politics.

By January 1954, an economic slow- down in the United States had resulted in a nearly 10 percent unemployment rate in the black community, nearly double the jobless rate for the rest of the nation. Brim responded by warning that unemployment was getting as bad as the worst part of the Depression in 1932.

"Tough Times" has some of the tough anger, and the step-out and start dynamics of Muddy Waters’ "Mannish Boy," but it couldn’t be further removed in its subject. While Muddy delivered a growling vocal about discovering a powerful sense of manhood at the age of five (when his mother said he was “gonna be the greatest man alive”), Brim’s song describes how one’s humanity and manhood are all but destroyed by bad economic conditions.

"Me and my baby was walking and she had a sandal鞋, but she killed it, she tore it up.

"She said, "It seems like times is tough get along like they was in ’32."

"You don’t have no job."

"Our bills is past due now tell me baby, what we going to do?"

If only this song had been heard as it should have been heard, it might have become that rarest of recordings — an anthem for the hard-working class. For in "Tough Times," Brim takes the side of countless workers facing layoffs and pro- longed unemployment, and the hunger and desperation that were almost com- pletely ignored in the mainstream media.

Brim’s blues are a fearless report from the downsize of American prosperity.

"I had a good job working many long hours a week. They had a big layoff and they got poor me. I’m broke and disgusted — in misery. Can’t find a part-time job, nothing in my house to eat. Tough times, tough times is here once more if you don’t have no money, you can’t live happy no more."

OTIS RUSE’S DOUBLE TROUBLE

Even Otis Rush, the epitome of sophis- ticated urban blues, sang passionately of the terrible price of layoffs and economic hardships. In a thrillingly beautiful song he recorded in 1958, "Double Trouble," Rush’s voice and guitar both wail with spine-tingling intensity as they lament how a lost job has left him destitute.

His singing is so intense that you believe every word when he cries out about laying awake all night after being laid off at work. This is the dark night of the soul, turned into a work of art by an absolute master of the blues guitar.

"I lay awake at night Oh so low, just so troubled. It’s hard to keep a job, Laid off and I’m having double trouble."

"Double Trouble," recorded for the Cobra label in Chicago in 1958, is another Eisenhower-era anthem about the layoffs and lack of money that plagued the black community in the midst of affluence.

Rush sang about the same troubles that many people living in Chicago’s slum housing had experienced — no job, no money, no decent clothes to wear, and no sleep at night due to the worried blues.

He has “double trouble” because being laid off and running out of money has ended in his being rejected by his girl-

friend. “You laughed at me walking, baby, when I had no place to go.” It’s bad enough to be homeless, walking the streets all night long, but when he sings of being rejected in that soul-piercing voice, we feel the weight of his torment, the “double trouble” of being broken both economically and romantically.

It is amazing how much this short song reveals about the minor effects of pov- erty. It is hard enough to undergo hunger and unemployment, but it is maddening to suffer deprivation in a society where so many are wealthy. The constant barrage of advertising and propaganda perpetuates the lie that anyone can become wealthy in a capitalist society. "Double Trouble" tells the real story.

"Hey, hey, they say you can make it if you try. Yes, in this generation of millionaires It’s hard for me to keep decent clothes to wear."

In "The Sound of Silence," Paul Simon sang, “The words of the prophets are writ- ten on the subway walls and tenement halls.” Otis Rush’s song is one of those prophetic warnings from the tenements that society should have heeded. A society that neglects and abandons its poorest citi- zens is headed for double trouble.

In 1958, long before middle-class, mainstream America became aware of the terribly destructive effects of poverty and homelessness, Rush was singing about it in Chicago bars and blues clubs.

BIG MAMA’S LANDLORDS BLUES

You know that times must be hard indeed just by listening to the large number of blues songs titled "Hard Times." "Tough Times" and "Ain’t Times Hard." Big Mama Thornton recorded a shout of despair called "Hard Times" in 1952 writ- ten by the famed rock-and-roll songwriting team of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller.

Wille Mae "Big Mama" Thornton had a big hit with Leiber and Stoller’s "Hound
Dark Was the Night
Cold Was the Ground

John Lee Hooker said, "I look at the people in the streets, sleeping in the streets — hard time. I wonder why these people have to do that. If we get out and reach out to those people, it would be a better world."

from page 9

Dog,

One number on the rhythm and blues charts for seven weeks in 1953, and Elvis Presley had an even bigger hit with it. The song was "Mama in London," written by Laura Nyro. Nyro was known for her unique voice and her ability to convey the pain and struggle of her background. She was born into a family of sharecroppers and grew up in a world of poverty and hardship. Her music was a reflection of her experiences, and she used her voice to tell stories of struggle and resilience.

The song "Mama in London" was originally about a mother who was left behind while the father went to work in the city. It was later rewritten to be about the neglect of children and the struggles of poverty. Nyro's music was a powerful tool for conveying the injustices of the sharecropping system.

However, what made the song truly powerful was the way Nyro sang it. She delivered a powerfully convincing performance that captured the feeling of being rejected and alone.

One of the strengths of Lil' Son Jackson is his story-telling ability, delivered in a dramatic singing voice. Chris Strachwitz, who recorded Big Mama Thornton with the Muddy Waters Blues Band, wrote that Jackson had "a beautiful guitar style and a haunting voice."

“Rocks have been my pillow, baby, gravel have been my bed, I ain’t got nowhere, oh Lord, to lay my poor heart on the bed." In the next verse of "Homeless Blues," Jackson tries to hitch a ride on the highway, but finds that everyone passes him by. "Nobody seems to know me," he sings, as he is left deserted on the side of the road.

Jackson's song is truly perceptive in capturing the feeling of being rejected and treated like an invisible man — one of the most painful experiences reported by homeless people. His songs became a model for an outreach, an unobtrusive, adds a new level of emotional suffering to the physical hardships of homelessness.

The sense of feeling worthless and alone and unloved comes to a head when Jackson adds the despair of losing a lover to the torment of being ragged and homeless. It doesn't sound simple to write, but it is truly amazing to see so much meaning captured in so few words. It's a picture of a man going — and it's the poetry of the blues at its best.

"You know I'm so sad, I'm so sad, I'm so sad, I don't know where I'm going."

"If the government's going to be the one who takes care of all the people, they're going to have to do it."

"If you was brown, stick around But as you're black, oh brother, get back, get back, get back."

"There's no Jim Crow and no discrimination. This train is bound for glory, this train."

"Big Bill Broonzy's unconquerable spirit."

Perhaps the most boldly political voice in the blues world of the 1950s and 1960s belonged to J. B. Lenoir, a brilliant and fearless songwriter who took on an entire world of injustices. His song "Eisenhower Blues" had an element of anti-establishment and political pressure forced it to be removed from stores and retitled as the less controversial "The Time of the Prez."

Lenoir sang in an unusually high-regis- ter voice, and he played acoustic guitar in a boogie style he called "African hunch." His voice was very expressive and unique instrument and he delivered powerful performances of some of the most insightful and poignant lines ever written.

"Eisenhower Blues" shows what a creative and daring wordsmith and musician he was. Even though his music was forced a change in his song's title, Lenoir's voice was not silenced.

"Taken all my money to pay the tax I'm only giving you people the natural facts, I'm only telling you people my belief."

"I'm only giving you people the natural facts, I'm only telling you people my belief."

"If you was brown, stick around But as you're black, oh brother, get back, get back, get back."

"There's no Jim Crow and no discrimination. This train is bound for glory, this train."

"Big Bill Broonzy's unconquerable spirit."

Perhaps the most boldly political voice in the blues world of the 1950s and 1960s belonged to J. B. Lenoir, a brilliant and fearless songwriter who took on an entire world of injustices. His song "Eisenhower Blues" had an element of anti-establishment and political pressure forced it to be removed from stores and retitled as the less controversial "The Time of the Prez."
J.B. Lenoir wrote several powerful songs that bravely condemned the racial violence directed at black people and civil rights activists in Mississippi. In “Alabama,” he sang about how his brothers and sisters were murdered in Alabama, and the state let the killers go free.

**The No Shoes Blues of John Lee Hooker**

An astoundingly high number of the musicians most revered by blues lovers were born in Mississippi. In Ted Gioia’s book, Delta Blues, Detroit bluesman John Lee Hooker offered his own reason why. “I know why the best blues artists come from Mississippi,” said Hooker. “Because it’s the worst state. You have the Blues all right if you’re down in Mississippi!”

As Nigel Williamson wrote in The Rough Guide to the Blues: Interviews with the Blues Legends (2001), “the social and economic problems of the Delta region persist to this day, the product and result of its history of enslavement and the legacy of disenfranchisement and race-casting, including the Jim Crow laws, racial segregation of public educational institutions and black disenfranchisement.”

Hooker was born in 1918 in Clarksdale, Mississippi, and as soon as he came of age, he moved to Detroit, where he became one of the pre-eminent blues musicians of his era, with hard-partying boogie music like “Boogie Chiller,” “Boom Boom” and “Dimples.” But Hooker also sang the “Hobo Blues” about riding the rails endlessly, and “House Rent Boogie” about holding parties to raise the rent after being evicted.

Perhaps Hooker’s Mississippi roots show up most clearly in his stark and terribly sad song, “No Shoes.” Written in 1960, just as the nation was finally starting to awaken that a man should suffer, what a man should go through. And I said, after I see the way they treat my daddy, I never was going to stand that to keep my family away. It just worked as hard as I could to get that money to get away.

In his song, “Down in Mississippi,” Hooker chose a line he heard his mother say, “I can’t help but to sit down and cry.”

His description of the Mississippi hunting season is a chilling reminder of the state’s history of lynchings, shootouts, and bombings, the assassination of Medgar Evers in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1963, and the murdered bodies of civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, found buried in an earthen dam in 1964.

“Hobo Blues” is a cry of anguish from the heart of the blues. Giles Oakley wrote, “Mississippi had a reputation for racism and bigotry from the earliest days of Emanicipation; its state of lynchings, reaching a peak in the early days of the Jim Crow laws, was appalling. Oakley added, “During the civil rights campaigns of the 1960s, the state was still a by-word for repression and racism, with several bombings and slayings...”

Even in his song “Vietnam Blues,” Lenoir can’t tear his vision away from the violence raging at home in the South. In what is seen as the beginning of the peace movements of the 1960s, Lenoir sings: “Oh God, if you can hear my prayer now, please help my brothers over in Vietnam.”

With lyrics like this, J.B. Lenoir was not only a blues singer. He was a prophet with a message of extreme importance for his time. “Vietnam, Vietnam, everybody crying about Vietnam. Vietnam, Vietnam, everybody crying about Vietnam. The law all the day killing me down in Mississippi, and Nobody seems to give a damn.”

Lenoir was a man who stood up to the challenges of his time. His last two albums, “Alabama Blues,” released in 1964, and “Down in Mississippi released in 1966, are beautiful expressions of his conscience. Both these records have been labeled as “Vietnam Blues” on Evidence Records.

Tragically, Lenoir died on April 29, 1967, only a year after releasing one of his last albums, “Alabama Blues.” His last album, “Down in Mississippi,” released 50 years later, was one of the many albums that played a significant role in the cultural and political change in America. His music is a reminder to us all of the pain and suffering that was endured by the black community and the importance of standing up for what is right. As Lenoir sang in one of his songs, “I can’t help but to sit down and cry.”

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light-hearted humor, but Lenoir’s song, “Most of the time I see folks argue, it’s a small matter, not worth the trouble” is a powerful statement about the importance of civil rights and the need for unity in the face of oppression.

In Mike Rowe’s book, Chicago Blues, Lenoir describes how he left Mississippi for Chicago in 1949, at age 20. Lenoir told Rowe, “They say they do you down there in Mississippi, it’s like a man shoveling dirt, it’s the same. And I said, after I see the way they treat my daddy, I never was going to stand that to keep my family away. It just worked as hard as I could to get that money to get away.

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How We Find Our Silenced Voices and Learn to Sing

The International Day for the Eradication of Poverty has been observed since 1995, when the United Nations General Assembly designated this day to promote awareness of the need to eradicate poverty in all countries.

Janny Castillo, Hope and Justice Coordinator for St. Mary’s Center, delivered these remarks at the Oakland observance of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, held at St. Mary’s Center in October 2014.

I

in my work as an organizer, I share stories that have inspired me. I would like to share one of these stories now. I will speak in her words because her words are best.

1931 — SOMEWHERE IN AMERICA

When I was three and my brother was five, my mother and father separated. Neither of them wanted us. But my grandmother said, “send them to me.”

My grandmother was very smart and wise. She owned the only black-owned store in a really small town.

When I was seven, we were taken away from her. We were picked up and taken to St. Louis to my mother’s people. We tried to learn and become city kids but it was hard. When I was seven, something terrible happened. I was sexually attacked by my mother’s boyfriend.

I told my brother, even though the man said that he would kill him. But my brother was “kingdom come” to me, and he told me he wouldn’t let himself be killed. My brother told the family and the man was put in jail for one day and one night. Then he was released.

My mother’s friend, Ms. Flowers, knew that I didn’t speak. There was a library about one-tenth the size of the library in the city. Ms. Flowers said, “I want you to read all the books from a - cl, and make notes.” I was eight years old. I read every book. There were many books I did not understand, but I found out that I loved poetry.

When I was about twelve-and-a-half years old, Ms. Flowers invited me to her house for tea cookies and lemonade. She talked about poetry and read to me. Then she said, “You do not like poetry.”

I furiously wrote in my tablet, and said, “yes, ma’am I do.” She kept shaking her finger at me, which I knew to be very rude. I was so upset I ran out the house.

Finally, two huge policemen came into my mother’s house. My brother and I were playing a game on the living room carpet. The policemen looked like giants. They asked what I thought, I would write it. I kept the tablet tied to my waist band, so if anything happened I could write it. My grandmother said, “send them to me.”

That was the best thing that could have happened. My voice hadn’t left me. My voice hadn’t left me.

THE CHILD WHO BECAME A POET

This child went on to become a world-famous poet, who won three Grammys, published seven autobiographies and spoke six languages. She received dozens of awards and more than 50 honorary degrees. She had a fiery, fierce grace and abounding love for everyone. She spoke at the President Clinton inauguration. She was asked by the United Nations to write a poem for the world.

She was born Marguerite Annie Johnson, but you may know her best as Maya Angelou. I will end with a few words from her poem, a brave and startling truth:

When we come to it
We, this people, on this wayward, floating body
Created on this earth, of this earth
Have the power to fashion for this earth
A climate where every man and every woman
Can live freely without sanctimonious piety
Without crippling fear
When we come to it
We must confess that we are the possible
We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world
That is when, and only when
We come to it.

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International Day to Eradicate Poverty

“On this International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, let us recognize that extreme poverty anywhere is a threat to human security everywhere. Let us recall that poverty is a denial of human rights. For the first time in history, in this age of unprecedented wealth and technical prowess, we have the power to save humanity from this shameful scourge. Let us summon the will to do it.” — Kofi Annan

After learning about Maya Angelou’s story, people joined hands in the spirit of community and compassion.

IT IS I

by Janny Castillo

It is I, friends of St. Mary’s, who stand here in this place.
It is I, who once lived head down and bent
Suffering on hard ground and hard times.

So bent I could not,
would not dare to look up and see my light,
OR your light,
OR God’s Divine Light.

A Light whose only purpose was to lead me
from my dark night
into morning light.

See my wrinkles, from too much crying
And not enough laughing
see my feet
walk slowly
so as not to disturb the deep pains
in my knees
and in my back.

I tell you truly, I ran for years
through poverty-rich streets,
rich with violence and despair.
I ran
with longing
for dignity, for food, for rest.

Those days are gone, friends of St. Mary’s.
It is I, who stands here in this place,
I stand here to tell you
that those days behind me,
are only that...
Behind me!

Despite what my history demands of me,
Despite what my circumstances demand of me,
I choose today to stand with you
To stand true, to tell you that
I am strong, capable and well.

I am dignity, I am courage.
I am loved by my Creator.
I am loved by my community.
I am loved by you, my St. Mary’s Friends.
And you are loved by me.