

Jerry Ricks is a one-of-a-kind bluesman. His conversations, theories, and philosophies range from architecture and politics to virtually any other intellectual endeavor. He is aware, worldly, and acute. He has lived all over Europe for much of his adult life, and when in the States, seems always to be moving from one area to another. Although he has been dubbed "Philadelphia" Jerry Ricks after the city of his birth and childhood, in the last year or so as many as five states – most recently, Mississippi – can claim him as resident.

*"What a
beautiful
expression . . .
I wanted to
make my guitar
sound
just like that."*

Ricks' early life in music reads like a black American music who's who: a rich musical tapestry heralding such diverse influences as Jimmy Smith, Bud Powell, John Coltrane, Lee Morgan, and Miles Davis from the jazz world, and especially Lonnie Johnson, Lightnin' Hopkins, Brownie McGhee, Sonny Terry, Reverend Gary Davis, and Mississippi John Hurt from the pantheon of blues. His musical influences are as varied as his addresses, yet it is in this tenor of life that there has been the greatest continuity. He has never stopped playing and singing the blues, and he has never stopped paying tribute to the many senior bluesmen who mentored him. Noted booking agent Dick Waterman once remarked that Jerry played with virtually every bluesman of importance during the 1960s, and in every case each of them wanted him

to come on the road with him. Jerry, a devoted family man, however, declined such opportunities to stay in Philly with his wife and children.

From the time he heard Lightnin' Hopkins in the late '50s, Ricks' fate was sealed. "What a beautiful expression," he thought. "I wanted to make my guitar sound just like that . . . I hadn't never seen anybody playing guitar that was that cool. Lightnin' was cool with a process and super rings and all kinds of things – he'd wave his hand in the air, his shoes were shining, and I was fascinated. To me that was like the ultimate of being cool."

Ricks was booking acts – and washing dishes – at Philadelphia's famed Second Fret coffeehouse for its entire tenure (1960-1966). During this time he formed vital bonds with a host of world-class bluesmen that included Son House, Mance Lipscomb, Hammie Nixon, Sleepy John Estes, Buddy Moss, Skip James, Furry Lewis, Bukka White, Reverend Robert Wilkins, Robert Pete Williams, Mississippi Fred McDowell, Josh White, and Elizabeth Cotten in addition to the blues mentors listed above. Jerry recalls: "At the coffeehouse I would hire the traditional acts and the owner would hire what he called the commercial acts. So I had my choice of hiring like all of the bluesmen that were available and all of the bluegrass bands, old-timey bands. Of course I was gonna invite everyone to play at the place that I could learn something from, at the same time, beside love the music, you know. Because the clubs used to play people for a month, so I'd be with 'em all day and all night. I'd be with 'em in the hotel or some of 'em would just stay at my house.

*"... Each one
was so
overwhelmingly
powerful
as a character –
as a person."*

Ricks finds himself gradually entering the sacred realm of the senior bluesman – with the special distinction of being perhaps the most authentic and vital link to the immortal musical fount of his blues mentors, now transcended to icons.

During his Second Fret period, Ricks taught in the music studio formerly operated by Lonnie Johnson and Elmer Snowden as well as in two folk music schools, and played second guitar with all of the visiting bluesmen who visited Philadelphia. His extensive traveling began with a State Department tour of East Africa with Buddy Guy in 1969 and a Smithsonian Institution research project in the Arkansas Delta.

In the 1970s his travels took him to Munich, Toronto, Montreal, Denver (where he was appointed director of the music school of the Denver Folklore Center), Munich again, Basel, Vienna, and Turin. The next decade marked a period of extensive traveling, recording, and music-making throughout Europe, where he renewed old music acquaintances and forged new personal and musical bonds with artists such as Memphis Slim, Champion Jack Dupree, Louisiana Red, Mickey Baker, and Sammy Price. His musical feelings for home never left him, however. "When I was living abroad," he remembers, "that whole feeling . . . of my culture . . . when I hit one of those Broonzy licks or Mississippi John Hurt licks . . . I was home to the culture . . . the neighborhood."

*"The dimension
of Brownie
McGhee's
travels . . .
broke the wall
down
for bluesmen
to travel
the world."*

Then the next bluesman, who was just like an uncle to me playing an instrument, would come in. So between them and just listening to any old 78 I could get my hand on, you know, somebody would tape it for me, I knew a lot of their tunes when I first met 'em. When they saw that I could play generally the shell of the tune, they immediately said 'Come up and back us up.'

"And I don't think they were thinking, 'Well, we're gonna teach you to play this and then you're gonna carry it on.' Because they were so young, except for John. Why would they be thinking this way in their late forties and fifties to begin with? But no, they just kept showing me things. They wouldn't show me how to play a song, actually. What they would do is they would play the song and then they would tell you, 'Don't pay any attention to this, you just listen to what I say. Don't ask me about my fingers, just listen to what I say.' They mainly said, 'I want to show you how my style works.' Because Brownie and them used to say, 'Don't go too deep in the well' if I was looking for certain songs and stuff, but it also meant something, not just looking too deep for a song: don't go too deep in the well, anybody's well, or anybody's business. The same as don't go into somebody's kitchen, or keep out of their bedroom. And don't go too deep in the well."

"Each time I saw these people . . . each one was so overwhelmingly powerful as a character – as a person. Mainly what I learned about was their integrity – their respect for the culture."

*"I don't think
they were
thinking . . .
'you're gonna
carry it on'
because
they were so
young . . ."*

*"This album
gave me
the freedom to
express myself –
the way
I feel about
this music
and the way
I feel about
my mentors"*

Thus, Ricks represents the worldly perspective that only a few bluesmen have enjoyed. And in this respect he again openly and proudly acknowledges his mentors ("the giants," as he also calls them). "The dimension of Brownie McGhee's travels from Australia to India have opened the blues world for every one of us playing today," he told Living Blues magazine in 1992. "They broke the wall down for bluesmen to travel the world." He also readily points to Big Bill Broonzy's groundbreaking European tours, and to Memphis Slim and Champion Jack Dupree, who were among the first bluesmen to live overseas. Jerry must surely have felt their presence as he recorded the first authentic American blues records in both Hungary and Yugoslavia while performing throughout the Soviet Union and its satellite states as well as the majority of Western Europe. In 1988 he visited the United States again to give his first American performance in almost 20 years.

"Now I want to be home," he continued. "I just feel like being home." And, in 1990 he did just that – in his own style – home being wherever he hangs his nomadic hat and smoking guitar. Since his stateside return, he has graced many festivals, schools, concerts, and workshops – sharing both the joy of making blues music and the particular skills that he learned from each of his illustrious teachers. A highlight of recent years came at the 1995 Chicago Blues Festival when he played one last time with his great friend, the late Brownie McGhee, "who practically raised me," Ricks often recalls. The vibe was indeed magical as the elder

statesman and his fully matured student communed once again in the language that has fueled both of their lives. Brownie died shortly thereafter – suddenly – making those moments even more precious.

These days, Jerry is cruising the haunts and habitats of his past masters. His Mississippi tenure leads him through the tiny towns that played host to so many of his fabulous mentors who roamed that great state. In this, his first-ever U.S. recording, Jerry Ricks represents all the many styles that he has known throughout his entire listening and playing career – a musical life now approaching forty years worth of experience. This is indeed the natural blues, issuing from a profound source and cradled in a deep groove. The recording quality is true, even, and honest, capturing the moment in real time.

Jerry seems more than happy with his current situation and the project at hand. "This album gave me the freedom to express myself – the way I feel about this music and the way I feel about my mentors. But, let's let the listener judge."

*"Now I want
to be home . . .*

*I just
feel like
being home."*

– Larry Hoffman

“For something to grow it has to be preserved. It can't throw away its past to go forward. Preservation doesn't have to stand still. You can reach back into something being preserved. We can hold the record right where it is, but the musician should be able to reach into it, find exactly what's inside there that he wants out of it, leave its core right there, take it as far as he can, but leave that central point there. So some kind of way you have to try to find this balance that I was taught, just like how the giants, the mentors, they grew with what they did. You put one hand over here and saying 'Thanks Son, thanks John, thanks Skippy, thanks, Booker,' and you put the other hand over here and say, 'OK, Jerry, go ahead where you're going,' right, but you make sure that you have this hand here, because they come and visit you. They come and call for your butt. I'm serious. You can ask my lady Nancy. They come, they come every time I play. And she'll tell you that two or three days before I have to go play a gig, I'll wake up and she says, 'Who came to visit you?' I say, 'It was John, it was Skippy, it was Rev., they came.' And



© MARK MORRIS

they come to see me all the time. In this recording session they came to see me. They came to see me with tones and lines, all in like one week, they all came and put their little part inside of me. And I don't mind them being there. They're my Linus blanket and I think everybody needs one, and I got one. And I'm proud to have been a part of their life, and I just always want to be a part of their life. That's the way I see it. 'Cause they taught me more than just to play a guitar. They opened up my head to just see the world a different way."

“I think they put something 'new' in the 'old.' And I don't mean just in terms of notes or chords that are moving. I mean, I think of Muddy putting new to the old, I think of Skip, I think of John, I think of all of 'em, they put something new into something that had came before the Civil War, or since we've been on this continent, and they kept putting something new into that. And there's all of these elements what is the old, because when you hear 'em, they paint pictures, and their pictures are old. When I lived abroad, all I had to do was just play one of these tapes and just sit down and play this music, and it only painted one picture. This blues, this kind of blues, only paints one thing: these fields out here, these shotgun houses, that poverty, that pain, it paints that picture, and that's painting the old. You can feel the baptism in the rivers, you can feel the pulse of rural black America, and that's the old part of America, before the migration. It's got roots in it every time you hear it. It's in the dirt and in the pain and everything that my great

grandparents, your great grandparents went through, that fighting each other, whatever happened, it's the pain of this country, and it's old. But we're new. So we can take some of this new and some of this goodness and put it back in this oldness, you know. Make it cleaner, make it nicer. Make it, let's see that their grave is kept clean. And anything I can learn in this point in time in history, which is a lot, I'm putting it back inside of that. I mean how many times do we have to say it: 'Sun gonna shine in our back door someday.' We can only look up. As Furry said, 'I've been down so long it seems like up to me.' You can't go no place but up. And I call that putting the new in the old. People ask me, 'Well, you're still always listening to these things.' I say, 'Yeah. I'm making up things every day and I'm listening to these things because the more I listen to it, the more I understand how profound, how strong it really is, as I just mature.' You've gotta live inside those notes and you'll have to play the instrument to live inside those notes."

"I'm not gonna do anything but play what I play the way I play it, I don't feel there's anything to do but just play it and pay my respects and everything that they've taught me, but also play my own head as they taught me to play it. And whether it fits cliches or not, it's honest and it's the way they played, they didn't fit any cliches either, right? They just played what they played. All they were doing was just playing the music that they loved to play. And I don't feel any different about it."

— Jerry Ricks

Deep In The Well

"Philadelphia" Jerry Ricks

1. James Alley Blues - (6:01) (*Richard Brown, APRS, BMI*)
2. No Place For Me - (7:02) (*Jerry Ricks*)
3. Down In Luck - (3:49) (*Jerry Ricks*)
4. Empty Bottle Blues - (6:28) (*Jerry Ricks*)
5. Change Your Ways - (6:19) (*Jerry Ricks*)
6. Born With The Blues - (4:11) (*Brownie McGhee, Hollis Music, Inc., BMI*)
7. New Pallet On The Floor - (5:06) (*Trad., Arr. Jerry Ricks*)
8. When A Man Gets In Trouble - (4:06) (*Jerry Ricks*)
9. New Avalon - (4:16) (*John Hurt, Wynwood Music Co., Inc., BMI*)
10. Ain't Afraid Of These Blues - (3:19) (*Jerry Ricks*)
11. Gary Davis Medley - (2:19) (*Sally Where'd You Get Your Liquor From: Gary Davis, Shandos Music, ASCAP / Hesitation Blues: Trad., Arr. Gary Davis, Shandos Music, ASCAP*)
12. Troubles - (4:09) (*Jerry Ricks*)
13. Troubled, Lord - (1:57) (*Jerry Ricks*)
14. Swing Low Sweet Chariot - (2:36) (*Trad., Arr. Jerry Ricks*)

*"Philadelphia" Jerry Ricks: vocals & Martin D-76 guitar.
Engineered by Jim O'Neal and John Mohead. Recorded direct to DAT.
Studio assistance: Nancy Klein, Selina O'Neal and Chris Tilden.
All original compositions and arrangements by Jerry Ricks are
published by Drop Top Music (BMI).*

© 1997 Rooster Blues
Records,
232 Sunflower Avenue
Clarksdale, MS 38614
Tel: (601) 627-2209
Fax: (601) 627-9861
E-mail:
Rooster232@aol.com

Please write for our
mail order blues
catalogue

Distributed by
Rounder Records,
One Camp Street
Cambridge, MA 02140
Tel: (617) 354-0700

For more information
on the blues, subscribe to
Living Blues Magazine,
Hill Hall 301
University, MS 38677