

'I NEVER DID LIKE TO IMITATE NOBODY'

by Robert Springer, Memphis, August 30th 1976



l to r: Robert Burse, Dick Rowles, Laura Dukes, Louis Allen, Wilfred Bell, Will Batts (Bengt Olsson/Laura Dukes)

I visited 'Little' Laura Dukes (as she is known in Memphis) last summer after seeing her as lively as ever on the stage of the Riverfront Festival. She lives with her son in a very nice house in South Memphis. Her diminutive figure seems to have saved her from the common scourge of people her age: rheumatism. I'm happy to say that she's in good health and without major financial problems, thanks mainly to her son. The interview was taped at her home and reveals, among other things, that Laura and Robert Nighthawk né McCollum were once musical and travelling partners.

Robert Springer: When did you join the South Memphis Jug Band?

Laura Dukes: I joined that band in 1944.

RS: Where were you playing before?

LD: I wasn't playin' anyplace.

RS: You were playing the ukelele here on the picture . . .

LD: Yeah, banjo-ukelele.

RS: When did you start playing this?

LD: I started . . . well, I didn't start right then on the ukelele. When I learned how to play music, I learned on the guitar. But I just learned how to play four strings on the guitar.

RS: You said something earlier about 'Ukelele Kid' . . .

LD: Yeah, Robert Burse, he had a brother they used to call him 'Ukelele Kid'.

RS: That was Charlie Burse . . .

LD: That's right!

RS: And Charlie Burse used to be with the Memphis Jug Band . . .

LD: Yes.

RS: Did you ever come across a guy who used to play the banjo with the South Memphis Jug Band . . . Ernest Motley, I thought he might still be here [in Memphis]?

LD: No . . . no, I don't know him, but I do know Gus Cannon that played banjo.

RS: Have you seen him recently?

LD: Ooh, I haven't seen him in . . . I can't tell when.

RS: He's still living in Memphis.

LD: Yeah, he's still around.

RS: But he doesn't play any more.

LD: Really?

RS: Yeah, he's too old, over ninety years old.

LD: I didn't know he was that old!

RS: So, what gave you the idea to start playing an instrument?

LD: Well, my daddy was a musician and I always did want to learn how to play music.

RS: What was he playin'?

LD: My daddy played drums. He was with W.C. Handy.

RS: How long was he with him?

LD: I don't know. I was a little bitty girl.

RS: Did your mother play?

LD: No.

RS: Did you have brothers and sisters?

LD: I have one brother live in Washington, D.C. He wasn't a musician. I also had a brother and sister before I were born but they died when they were babies. I was born on June the 10th, 1907 in North Memphis.

RS: So, how did you get your first guitar?

LD: Well, the fellow that was teaching me how

to play music, he had a guitar.

RS: Who was that fellow?

LD: Robert McCollum.

RS: Was he a well-known musician?

LD: Yeah! He was real good.

RS: Did he play with a band?

LD: No, he didn't play with no band, see, after Robert McCollum and I got together, then he started teachin' me and then that's when I bought me a four-string instrument, but I didn't buy it until I went to . . . first started off, I start playing a ten-string tippie. And then when I got to East St. Louis, Illinois, then that's when I bought a banjo-ukelele. I always did like a small instrument, you know, with four strings.

RS: What took you to East St. Louis?

LD: See, Robert and I, we started out travelling. We would hitch-hike along the roads and stop in stores. Every store we'd stop in to get a lunch or something, they'd want us to play 'em a piece.

RS: How old were you when you went to East St. Louis?

LD: Oh well, I was up in my twenties.

RS: And when did you get your first guitar lesson with Robert McCollum?

LD: In 1933.

RS: Did you write any songs by yourself or did you play other people's songs?

LD: Well, I *did* write a good many songs 'cause we would, of days, we'd sit down, you know, and study up songs. He showed me about every-thing.

RS: What exactly did he teach you?

LD: Mostly we played blues and other songs. We played other songs that came out, like 'The

Old Spinnin' Wheel' and like that.
 RS: What's 'The Old Spinning Wheel'?
 LD: That's a song that come out way back yonder in the '30s and so I learned it and we used to go 'round and play that. We got a job in East St. Louis playin' every night at a man's place and he had a pool-room in the back and he had us to be in the front playin'. He had a Seeburg [juke-box] in there but he wanted us. And it was but just the two of us. Robert would play guitar and I would play the banjo-ukelele. He would sing some songs and I would sing mine.
 RS: How long did you stay in East St. Louis?
 LD: We stayed there 'bout three months, then we started back towards Memphis.
 RS: But how long did all that travelling take on the way up and when you stopped at different places and all? Months? A year?
 LD: No, no, unh-unh. We hitch-hiked but we never would try to catch rides. We could ride the bus, like that, but we was just travellin' the highway, just makin' extra money.
 RS: What about freight-trains?
 LD: I rode a freight-train once, by myself. Long time ago. See, I used to travel with shows, carnivals. I rode a freight-train from Texas to Memphis. I was really young then. That was before I met Robert McCollum.
 RS: What were you doing on those carnivals?
 LD: Singin' an' dancin'. On stage, in the minstrel shows.
 RS: What would you say is the difference between a minstrel show and a medicine show?
 LD: A medicine show is just like a one-night minstrel, just stay in a place just one night. But a minstrel show, they stay in a place a whole week.
 RS: What sort of songs would you sing?
 LD: Oh, I don't know 'em, just songs that'd come out, you know, at that time, back yonder in the '20s, late '20s, 1928, 1929.
 RS: Did you sing the blues?
 LD: No, we had a blues singer on the show.
 RS: Who?
 LD: Effie Moore [?]. She was the blues singer on the show. I never did know where Effie's home was. No. But she had been from Coast to Coast.
 RS: Where did you go with those carnivals yourself?
 LD: The first one I got with was in the North Memphis Amusement Park, when I first got with Effie Moore that was in 1928. Then I left Memphis with her and started to travellin'. We went about different places: Arkansas and Texas and Illinois, places like that.
 RS: Did you stay with the same show all the time?
 LD: I didn't change shows until after I left Effie Moore. When I left her I left her in Wall Queen [?], Texas and come on home.
 RS: Was she the star and head of the show?
 LD: Yes.
 RS: How big a show was it? I mean, how many artistes and performers?
 LD: Oh, I don't know. It was a good many on our show.
 RS: Did Effie Moore have someone behind her to accompany her when she sang the blues?
 LD: Yes, she had a band, but, see, they were down in the orchestra pit. It was a regular band with horns.
 RS: What name did the show go by?
 LD: Effie Moore's Nehi [knee-high?] Steppers.
 RS: Can you remember the other carnivals you were with?
 LD: I was with a carnival one time, they called the manager Dad Hildredge [?] and then when I was with Effie Moore we had on . . . we got on the Great Sutton [Sudden?] Shows. Mr. Frank Sutton, that was his name.
 RS: How long were you with the carnivals altogether?
 LD: I'd say from '28 way back in after '29 and some time in the '30s.
 RS: Why did you quit in Texas?
 LD: Well, I had to come home . . . 'bout my mother. See, my mother was livin' and she sent

me a special delivery, she was low sick in bed and wasn't no one to see after her and my little boy.
 RS: What did you do after coming back to Memphis?
 LD: I left the show in Luxora, Ark. on Easter Sunday and I told Effie Moore I was going home. I told 'er I'd meet her again, so she said alright.
 RS: Did you meet her again?
 LD: Yeah, I got back with her show and travelled . . . I didn't stay with her as long as I did the first time. When I came on back home, then I got on another carnival. I don't even know the name of it, what it was . . . yes it was Dad Hildredge show was where I met Mader [?] and Bubba Mack. Mader Mack and Bubba [Bubber?] Mack. And Mader Mack was a blues singer and Bubba Mack I think he was a comedian. And I had a swell time with them. That was in the 1930s, I don't know what year exactly.
 RS: Was that after you met Robert McCollum?
 LD: Yes, 'cause Robert McCollum he was on the show too! With me . . . he played in the orchestra, he played guitar in the orchestra, see.
 RS: As a singer, was there someone you particularly liked or patterned yourself after?
 LD: No. Well, see, when I was five years old, my daddy put me on a stage with a lady that had a show here in Memphis. Her name was Laura Smith. Well, she had a show and she liked me so well she asked my mother to let me be on the stage with her. So I did and the first song that I sang was 'Ballin' The Jack'.
 RS: How long were you on stage then?
 LD: I think it was a little over half a year. When she got ready to leave, mother wouldn't let me travel with her because I was too small.
 RS: Did you make any money on that show?
 LD: You were only five years old . . .
 LD: Sure! Twenty-five dollars a week!
 RS: What did you do with it? Your mother took it all . . .
 LD: Yeah. I'd give it to mother, see. And so . . . see, my daddy he was playin' in the band too. So, that's how I got my start. 'Cause I learned how to sing and dance before I learned how to play music.
 RS: While you were with those carnivals did you meet people like Ma Rainey?
 LD: Well, the original Ma Rainey? I met her one time. We were in a place in Mississippi, I can't think of the name of this place, and that's where I saw her: she and Effie Moore, they knew each other. See, I was always with Effie Moore, and Ma Rainey was there and we went to this roomin' house and Miss Effie she said she was gonna make me acquainted with her and she did. And I saw Bessie Smith on stage at the Palace Theatre on Beale Street, but I never did get a chance to meet her.
 RS: What did you do after East St. Louis?
 LD: After I left Robert McCollum, I just stayed at home. Oh, I stayed at home a long time before I got with another carnival. The last carnival I was with was in 1947. That was J.A. Gant's [?] Carnival. Well, I was on there by myself, but it was a drummer on there that I knew. His name was Jesse Daniels and he died too, Jesse did. And after 1947, I didn't travel anymore. And then that was when the jug band boys came and talked to me about joining their band.
 RS: How did they hear about you?
 LD: Well, they had been knowin' me 'round on Beale Street, you know, off an' on. I used to play 'round on Beale Street sometime. Way back there in the '30s and the '40s, and . . . but lately . . . I don't know, I just got to the place I don't care about playin' music. All I wanna do is entertain like I'm doin'. Sing an' dance. [A couple of days before, Laura Dukes had done just that with Charlie Banks's band for the Memphis Riverfront Festival at Tom Lee Park.]
 RS: Can you describe the places where you played on Beale Street?
 LD: Well, we went in the Grey Mule, Pee Wee's

Saloon and so many places on Beale Street I done forgot. I would go around with Ukelele Kid.
 RS: Just the two of you . . .?
 LD: No, it would be some more with us.
 RS: Would that be a regular thing?
 LD: Ukelele Kid and Will Shade, we used to call him Son Brimmer.
 RS: But when you played with them, were you part of the Memphis Jug Band or was it just something that just happened like that?
 LD: Well, I'd go 'round with the Memphis Jug Band and I was just a part of it then.
 RS: I read somewhere that the jug bands had to play outside on Beale and couldn't play inside places like Pec Wee's . . . Is that true?
 LD: Well, some of them did play inside.
 RS: I thought it was only jazz bands that were allowed to play inside and all the blues singers and jug bands couldn't . . .
 LD: Mmmh, no. Not the places they would go. They had a place they called . . . right there on the corner of Beale and Hernando, upstairs, used to be the Citizens Club. Well, our piano-player now what's with the band [Charlie Banks], he's the one that opened up the Citizens Club when it started, but I didn't know him then.
 RS: How long have you known him?
 LD: Well, I got with him . . . our used-to-be trumpet player Son Smith, you know, he was blind and he was the manager of the band then, but here, 'bout a month or two ago, he died. He was in his seventies.
 RS: Was that the situation when you were on Beale Street, you know, about blacks and whites? I heard there was a special night for whites in certain places and most of the time they didn't go there . . .
 LD: Well, the onliest time I know was at the Palace Theatre when they had Midnight Rambles. They'd have one night for the whites and one night for the blacks.
 RS: Was Beale Street still alive then every night, or just on week-ends?
 LD: Every night! Every night! In the '20s, '30s and '40s.
 RS: Was it rough for a singer like you to be on Beale Street, I mean, did you have to be afraid that perhaps you might get killed?
 LD: No, not then. Not in those days, but later on in the '50s and '60s was when that started. Well, I tell you, it got to the place it wasn't like it used to be. See, people were afraid to be out, you know, be by themselves at night and everything. Different guys would come down there, even people that didn't even live in Memphis, you know, would come here and they'd . . . I don't know, just a lot of robbin', killin' start to goin' on down there.
 RS: There wasn't any killin' in the '20s and '30s?
 LD: No! Unh-unh.
 RS: When you say people started to be afraid, do you mean whites, blacks or both?
 LD: Any of 'em! That's right.
 RS: Even black people didn't like to go down there?
 LD: No.
 RS: When did the jug band stop [the South Memphis Jug Band] ?
 LD: Well . . . did you ever know a feller used to play one of those bass cans called Dewey Corley?
 RS: Yeah, he was with the Memphis Jug Band, he died a couple of years ago . . .
 LD: Yes he did. It seem like all the older ones is goin' away. But let me see, after our manager died, Will Batts, I just felt like I didn't want to be 'round with them any more.
 RS: But the others kept on playin' didn't they?
 LD: Yeah, once in a while. They would get small jobs, you know, like that.
 RS: And Will Batts died in what . . . '56 or something . . .?
 LD: Yeah, he died in 1956.
 RS: So, during the nine years you were with the jug band where did you go, where did you play?
 LD: Well, we'd go out o' town. We played in Greenville, Miss., oh I can't call the names of



l to r: Laura Dukes, Milton Roby, Wilfred Bell, Will Batts, Robert Burse, 'Looty' (Bengt Olsson/Laura Dukes)

all the places . . . we'd go to Arkansas and I don't know . . . I disremember.

RS: Did you go North?

LD: No, we stayed down South here.

RS: How many records did you make with them?

LD: I never did make no records, no.

RS: Any radio shows?

LD: No. I never knowed that I recorded any records, you know, with them. Not to my knowledge².

RS: Do you remember what songs you were playing then?

LD: No, I sure don't.

RS: Did Charlie Burse teach you anything on the banjo-ukelele?

LD: No. I already knew. See, after Robert McCollum taught me how to play music, then when I got that banjo, then I knew.

RS: Who's the singer you liked best, someone you might like to imitate?

LD: No, I don't know. I never did like to imitate nobody.

RS: Did you know guys like Jed Davenport?

LD: No, I didn't know him.

RS: Now, when did you meet Harry Godwin [owner of Jazzette Records who has helped Laura Dukes, Furry Lewis and others by arranging local gigs for them]?

LD: Let me see, in 1966.

RS: How did he find out about you?

LD: Through Son Smith.

RS: Did you play any between 1956 and '66?

LD: No, I just played 'round home, there amongst the neighbours. We would have a nice time.

RS: And Harry Godwin started getting you some jobs to play?

LD: Yeah, sure did.

RS: You said that Charlie Banks was your manager? When did you meet him?

LD: He was in the band with Son Smith. Sometimes Mr. Godwin gets us jobs and sometimes Charlie Banks gets jobs.

RS: And for the last ten years, how many jobs do you get a year or a week?

LD: I don't know, I've never counted them (laughs).

RS: But, are you busy enough or would you like to be busier?

LD: Well, I think we do pretty good now 'cause we used to . . . twice we had jobs playin' four nights in a week and that was back in the '60s I think.

RS: Did you ever meet W.C. Handy?

LD: Sure, I met W.C. Handy long time ago. Before Beale Street went down and I was with the jug band then and I think . . . we played him a piece. See, that was after he'd lost his eyesight and I met him and his secretary, you know, his secretary is his wife now. We played one or two pieces for him. He liked it fine.

RS: Now, let's see, this picture of the jug band you've got here . . . can you identify the people?

LD: [Starts from left to right] Milton Roby, he's dead.

RS: How long ago, do you know?

LD: No, I don't! Somewhere in the '60s.

RS: What about the next guy there?

LD: He died in the '60s. His name is Wilfred Bell, we call him Birdbreath. They just give him that name, nickname.

RS: Was he just playing the kazoo?

LD: Yeah, that's all. And that's Will Batts. And the next one, we call him Dooley. That's Robert Burse.

RS: And he's still living . . . ?

LD: Yeah, to *my* knowin'. He used to be at Wiggins Barbershop on Mississippi Boulevard.

RS: And the next guy?

LD: Looty³. He's up North. I don't know his real name.

RS: Do you know when this picture was taken?

LD: Back yonder in '46 or '47 something like that⁴. At Hook's Studio.

RS: Why did you decide to have this picture taken?

LD: See, Will Batts he was the boss of the band and he decided we all should get together and have some pictures made. Now I also had another picture with Robert McCollum and his brother Percy. Robert is sitting in a chair with his guitar and Percy was sittin' on the arm of the chair with his harmonica. This Swedish man . . . [Bengt] Olsson took it and said he'd bring it back like he did the other one, but he never did. I sure wish he'd send it back to me. That's the only picture of Robert McCollum I had⁵.

Notes

¹ This seems to contradict the date (1938) given in Bengt Olsson's *Memphis Blues* by Mary Batts. But it also contradicts the date (1944) given by Laura Dukes at the beginning of the present interview (see above).

² Laura Dukes seems to have forgotten that she ever went up North (Cleveland, Ohio in 1954 and probably other places) with the band. She can be heard on 'Kansas City Blues' and 'Lady Be Good' which may have been recorded in Cleveland according to the notes to Flyright LP 113 'South Memphis Jug Band'. Why don't Flyright send a copy to Laura Dukes so her memory can be refreshed and she in turn may tell them or confirm the recording information?

³ Definitely not 'Lotis' as Bengt Olsson understood, but still not an earth-shaking revelation . . .

⁴ This also differs from the date given by Bengt Olsson. Who knows which one is the most likely!?

⁵ D'you hear, Mr. Olsson? This is the picture which appeared on the cover of the Mamlish LP 'Mississippi Bottom Blues'.