

Son House,  
Philadelphia,  
1964.

# Child is Father to the Man

How Al Wilson

Taught Son House

How to Play

Son House

by Rebecca Davis

photos by Dick Waterman

Cambridge, Massachusetts, is still remembered as a center of the "folk revival" of the early 1960s. Many of the scene's denizens — Joan Baez and Tom Rush among them — had learned their music from Pete Seeger and Leadbelly. Some of these folk revivalists occasionally played blues; however, the deepest Delta blues styles took a back seat to the lighter and more approachable sounds of Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee.

There were a few, however, who appreciated the more powerful Delta blues, and their interest was almost fanatical in intensity.

In 1962, a young man named Alan Wilson was living in Cambridge on the fringes of the local folk-music scene. He didn't care much for the popular folk styles; he was more interested in jazz, the first music that caught his attention back in high school and was associated in his mind with the "beatnik" culture of the '50s.

Like the folkies, however, Wilson was discovering the blues. But rather than Leadbelly and McGhee and Terry, Wilson found the blues through *The Best of Muddy Waters*, which a record-collecting friend had played for him. Heavier blues have rarely been recorded, and it is little wonder that what he heard on that album inspired Wilson to devote so much of his musical life to the idiom.

Wilson was only 19, years away from forming the band he would make famous: Canned Heat, best-known for Wilson's hit songs "On the Road Again" and "Going Up the Country," both of which featured his irresistibly pure and delicate vocals. Even before Canned Heat entered Wilson's life, his talent was unmistakable, his prowess astounding, his genius dazzling.

Wilson's fascination with the music became more absorbing with the dusty, scratched 78 discs he turned up, every new album released and each tape that passed around among the local enthusiasts. Every discovery was a revelation. "We had heard a very limited amount of blues compared to what's available today," says his friend David Evans, who was also a part of the Cambridge scene. "Surprisingly, though, we heard a lot of the very greatest, deepest country blues: Son House, Booker White, Robert Johnson, stuff like that."

Eddie "Son" House was one of the most intense blues singers of all. A mentor to both Robert Johnson and Muddy

Waters, his work was documented in 1930 by Paramount and again in 1941 and 1942 by folklorist Alan Lomax during his research for the Library of Congress. Reissued on LP, House's recordings gained the appreciation of young white blues fans such as Wilson, who considered them to be among the most impressive in blues history.

Until 1964, Wilson and his fellow blues fanatics believed that House was either dead or lost beyond any hope of "rediscovery." When Booker White came to Cambridge that April for a coffeehouse engagement, Wilson learned through extensive personal interviews that Son House was, in fact, still alive. White claimed that he had seen House in Memphis, a sighting that instigated great excitement. Word got around in the local blues circle that there was an opportunity to bring to light a blues artist known only from 78 rpm discs recorded in the '30s.

That June, Wilson's friend, Phil Spiro, went to Memphis with Dick Waterman, a local photographer and journalist who had known Wilson for a couple of years. Nick Perls, a New York record collector who owned a car and a tape recorder, also went along. It was a quest that has since become legendary. (Wilson himself chose not to go on the search, due in part to his hopes of obtaining gigs in the Cambridge coffeehouse scene.)

Waterman, Spiro and Perls had no luck in Memphis but decided to go on to Mississippi, where they were given a telephone number for House's relatives in Detroit, who informed them that House was actually living in Rochester, New York. The blues researchers left Mississippi and went back north to Rochester, where, on June 23, 1964, they met the man who was the object of their devoted search.

In some ways, Son House was exactly what everyone had hoped for in a rediscovery. He was willing to begin a second career, and he could still sing with all the power that was apparent on his old records. However, House suffered from a senile hand tremor that was compounded by alcoholism, making guitar playing difficult. He hadn't even owned a guitar for several years.

Like many older blues artists in his situation, House, who was about 62 years old at the time his second career began, had not been aware of a blues revival or that he had fans who



considered him a living legend. This interest in his music from these young white "revivalists" came, then, as something of a surprise and a source of bemusement.

After his rediscoverers brought him to Cambridge, House attempted to play a gig at a local coffeehouse. In a letter to Evans, Alan Wilson described the elderly man's condition: "Son arrived in Cambridge with an old-age tremor, making guitar playing impossible unless he was drunk. When drunk he was a gas musically but otherwise incoherent, totally unable to handle a crowd. We put him on medication, which helped some, but his repertoire is now small and that is another hassle.


"At a short gig at the Unicorn when sober he was pathetic. When he was drunk, he a) played the best blues I have heard up to the time, on occasion, b) gave the crowd 10-minute sermons which were not only nonsensical but nearly unintelligible, and c) took as long as five minutes to tune his guitar. After this episode (not catastrophic, as the house numbered but 15-20 at any time) the medication began to take hold, allowing him to play well with less booze, and Newport began to look good."

Wilson was referring to the Newport Folk Festival, where House tentatively had been scheduled to perform but never actually did. "Son was scheduled to appear Saturday and Sunday afternoons," Wilson continues in his letter. "Unfortunately, on Thursday night he was in the emergency room of a Newport hospital with a) truss b) appendix or c) hernia. I'm still not exactly sure. As of today, Sunday, he remains there.

"Even before this catastrophe Son was tired, homesick and puzzled, and I guess he must be completely out of it by now. (I haven't been allowed in to visit)," Wilson wrote. "Son is still mentally alert and musically vital, but with age has acquired a certain pathos and the type of weakness which leads to alcoholism. (I can't be more precise, you'll just have to meet him.) Death is an obsession, at least when he drinks."

"When we found Son, he was a major-league alcoholic," says Dick Waterman. "He had no motivation to play. If he had a guitar, he would pawn it. He could still sing, though. He could always sing, and he could play slow blues things."

The fiery bottleneck guitar work on his 1930 recordings was something that had slipped away with time and age.



Al Wilson,  
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Even with the aid of medication, he needed to learn to play again.

Shortly after the Newport Folk Festival ended and Son got out of the hospital, Alan Wilson began playing guitar with him every day. Wilson knew the bottleneck style so well that he was able to teach the older man his own classic songs, helping him make his own "rediscovery" of the talent that had gone unused for so many years.

Soon House began remembering the guitar parts that had slipped away from him over the years, and the two were playing together. "Al Wilson taught Son house how to play Son House," explains Dick Waterman. "I can tell you, flatly, that without Al invigorating and revitalizing Son, there would have been no Son House rediscovery. All of Son's successful concert appearances, recordings and him being remembered as having a great second career — all that was because of Al rejuvenating his music."

It took House only a week or two to relearn much of his old repertoire. "It was like when you break a bone and you go into rehabilitation," explains Waterman. "What you get back in the first few days or weeks, that first period of time, is most important. It's like a swift uphill curve, and then it drops off. So Al spent a couple of hours every day with Son, intensely teaching him. Al infused that old music into him, filling him up with the framework of his old playing."

Every day Wilson and House got their guitars out. Wilson might begin a lesson by saying, "In 1930, this is how you played 'My Black Mama.'" He would play the song for House, who was watching his hands intently. "And then when Lomax came and recorded you in 1941, you played it this way." House would exclaim, "Yeah! Yeah! There it is! My recollection's coming hack to me now."

With Wilson's help, he once again became the great bluesman he was always meant to be. Alan Wilson had indeed taught Son House how to play Son House!

In April of 1965, House was scheduled to record an album for Columbia. *Father of the Folk Blues* was produced by John Hammond, a well-known talent scout and promoter of black music. Waterman had become House's manager, and he and Wilson accompanied Son to New York City to record the album. Wilson provided guitar or harmonica accompaniment on four songs: "Empire State Express" and "Levee Camp Moan," which were released on the album, and "Yonder Comes My Mother" and an alternate version of "Levee Camp Moan" which remained unissued until the full sessions were released on com-

pact disc in 1992. It is generally agreed to be an essential blues album and remains one of the finest efforts to come out of the "rediscovery" era.

In April of 1965, as he was helping Son House make these historic recordings, Alan Wilson was only 21. Already he had played a crucial, if often unrecognized, role in the return of this legendary blues figure. It is unlikely that anyone else would have possessed Wilson's unique combination of instrumental skill, enthusiasm for and understanding of the blues, and, just as important, the rapport with House necessary to revitalize his playing.

Not everyone approved of the idea of young "revivalists" playing with older bluesmen. To a folklorist such as Evans, it represented a dilution of the music's cultural meaning. Evans, now a professor of music at Memphis State University, was playing blues with Wilson in Cambridge coffeehouses around that time, but he felt that Wilson was out of place in accompanying the older bluesmen, who represented their own folk culture and tradition. To a strict folk purist, the music seemed adulterated by the playing of someone from a different culture and age group.

"I felt that Al really went a little too far in performing with these artists in public," Evans explains. "But that's what he wanted to do. I kind of left them alone out of respect. I guess I felt that it was kind of wrong to impose myself on the musicians — to some extent even to play with them. That's also how I was trained as a folklore graduate student — not to contaminate the music. Which in a sense you do, no matter how good you are and how much you've gotten into it."

Evans wanted to hear the older performers by themselves for their tradition. Wilson, however, was concerned with the music for its own sake, and while he knew there was a tradition at work, he was interested more in the quality of any given song than in its folk origins. His purism was artistic rather than folkloristic. If his presence could enhance a song, he would rather "intrude" on its untainted folk purity and improve the musical quality than simply accept the music as some sort of cultural document.

Debate over such matters continues today as the work of many older blues artists is adulterated by "guest stars" who perhaps lack Wilson's understanding of the music as well as his good taste. Wilson was one of the few "revivalists" who never overwhelmed another musician with his playing; he was interested only in what he could contribute to a song, what he could contribute to the art to make it more aesthetically pleasing. It was this lack of reluctance to play with older musicians that made the re-emergence of Son House a possibility, much less a success.

House continued to perform for more than a decade before his physical problems (eventually diagnosed as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease) forced a final retirement in 1976. He died in 1988 at the age of 86. His young "mentor" went on to a measure of stardom as a cornerstone of Canned Heat, with whom he was again able to play the role of accompanist for one of his blues heroes: Wilson's harmonica backing for John Lee Hooker on the *Hooker 'N Heat* album was nearly telepathic. But the bright moments were intermixed with episodes of suicidal depression, eventually leading to his death from a drug overdose in September, 1970. He was 27 years old.

