

memoir By STANLEY BOOTH

WHEN WE CAME into the alley, the children stopped playing. They stood poised, watching us. There were two-story brick buildings on both sides, with wooden stairways that shut out all but a thin blue strip of sky. Filthy rags and broken bottles lay on the concrete pavement. There were women sitting on the doorsteps, some of them together, talking, but most of them alone, sitting still, ignoring the heat and the buzzing flies.

"How are you?" Charley Brown spoke to one of them.

"I ain't doin' no good," she said. She did not

look up. The children's gaze followed us as we walked on. The women talking would stop as we came near and then, as we went past, would start again.

Close by, a fat woman was holding a small brown-and-white dog to her bosom. "What you got there?" Charley asked her.

"Little spitz," she said. "Look how dirty he is. He pretty when he clean."

"Nice dog," he said. "Is Furry home?"

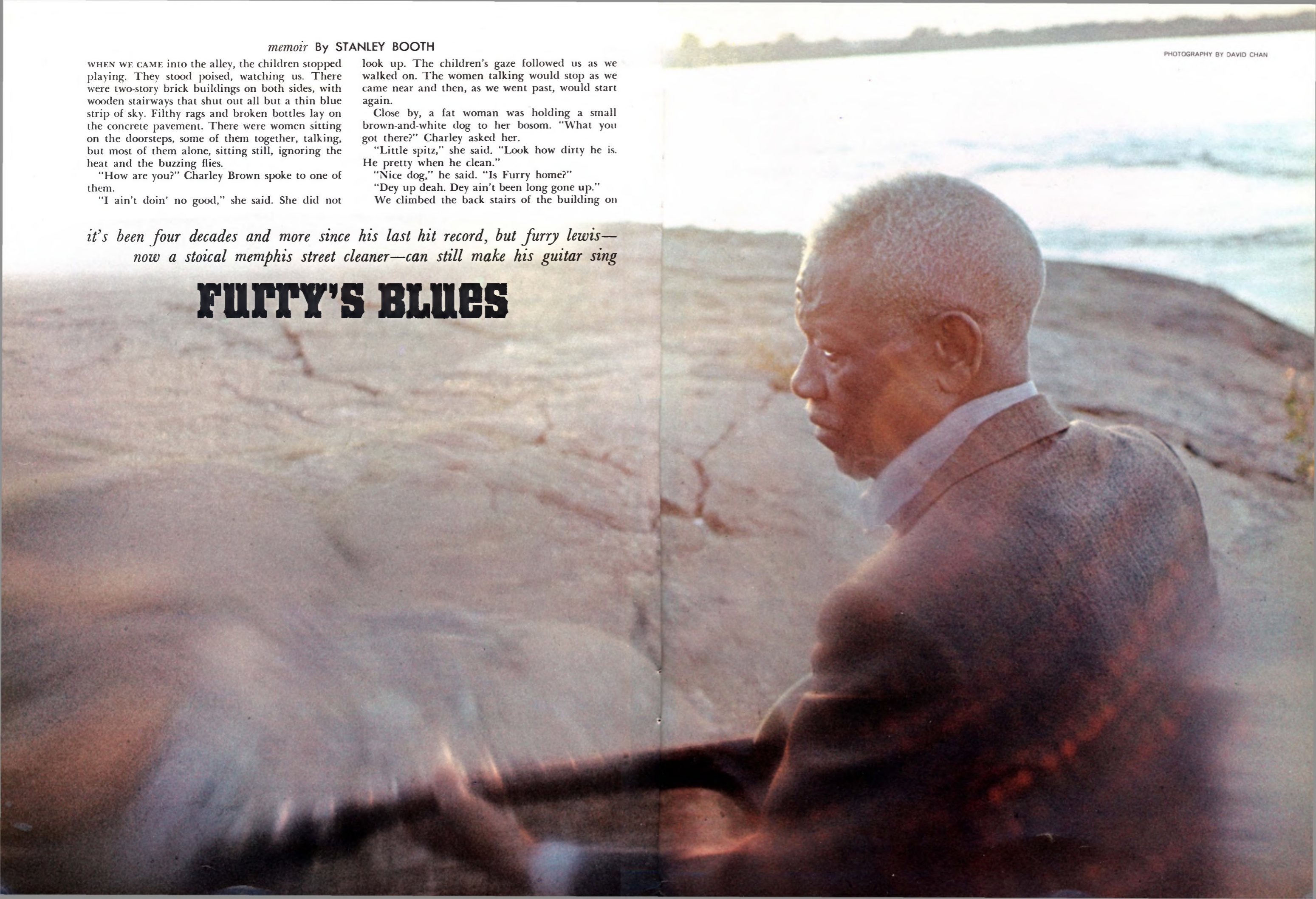
"Dey up deah. Dey ain't been long gone up."

We climbed the back stairs of the building on

*it's been four decades and more since his last hit record, but furry lewis—
now a stoical memphis street cleaner—can still make his guitar sing*

FURRY'S BLUES

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID CHAN



our left and went down a bare, dusty hall to a door with a metal number three over the cloth-patched screen. Charley started to knock, and then we heard the music and he waited. " 'Got a new way of spellin' ," a quiet, musing voice sang, " 'Memphis, Tennessee.' " A run of guitar chords followed, skeptical, brief; " 'Double M, double E, great God, A Y Z.' " Then two closing chords, like a low shout of laughter, and Charley knocked.

The door swung open. There, sitting next to a double bed, holding a guitar, was Furry Lewis. During the heyday of Beale Street, when the great Negro blues artists played and sang in the crowded, evil blocks between Fourth and Main, Furry, a protégé of W. C. Handy, was one of the most highly respected musicians. He was also one of the most popular, not only in the saloons and gambling dives of Memphis but in the medicine shows and on the riverboats all along the Mississippi. In Chicago, at the old Vocalion studios on Wabash Avenue, he made the first of many recordings he was to make, both for Vocalion and for RCA Victor's Bluebird label. But Beale Street's great era ended at the close of the 1920s; since then, Furry has had only one album of his own—a 1959 Folkways LP.

Nor, since the Depression, has he performed regularly, even in his home town. He makes his living as a street sweeper. When he does play, it is usually at the Bitter Lemon, a coffeehouse that caters mainly to the affluent East Memphis teenaged set, but whose manager, Charley Brown, is a blues enthusiast and occasionally hires Furry between rock-'n'-roll groups.

Charley, a tall, blond young man, bent to shake hands with Furry. Furry did not stand. One leg of his green pajamas hung limp, empty below the knee.

The boy wearing gold-rimmed spectacles who had got up from a chair to let us in said, "I'm Jerry Finberg. Furry's been giving me a little guitar lesson." We shook his hand, then Charley introduced me to Furry and we all sat down. The room held a sizable amount of old, worn furniture: the bed, a studio couch, three stuffed chairs, a chiffonade and a dresser. Beside the bed, there was a table made from a small wooden crate.

"It's good to see you, Furry," Charley said.

"You, too," said Furry. "You hadn't been here in so long. I thought you had just about throwed me down."

Charley said that he could never do that and asked Furry if he would come out to the coffeehouse for a couple of nights in the coming week. Furry picked up a pair of glasses from the bedside table, put them on, then took them off again. He would like to, he said, but his guitar was at Nathan's. "This here one belongs to this boy, Jerry." He put the glasses back on the table. It held aspirin, Sal Hepatica, cigarette papers and a Mason jar full of tobacco. Charley said not to worry, he'd get the guitar.

"Will you, sure 'nough?" Furry asked, looking at Charley with serious, businesslike gray eyes.

"I'll get it tomorrow. What's the ticket on it?"

"Sixteen dollars."

"I'll get it tomorrow."

"All right," Furry said, "and I'll come play for you." He reached out and shook hands solemnly with Charley.

"Could you play something now, or don't you feel like it?" Charley asked.

Furry smiled. "I may be weak, but I'm willing," he said. He took a small metal cylinder from his pajama pocket and picked up the guitar. "I believe I'll take you to Brownsville."

He slipped the cylinder over the little finger of his left hand and started to play, his short leg crossed over the longer one, his bare narrow foot patting softly the plain brown boards as he sang. " 'Well, I'm goin' to Brownsville, I'm goin' take that right-hand road' "; the cylinder slid, whining, over the treble strings.

"I was in Brownsville, Tennessee," Furry said, "working on a doctor show, and I met a little girl I liked; but her parents wouldn't let me come around to see her, 'cause I was showfolks, and they was respectable. So I wrote this: 'And the woman I love's got great long curly hair.'" The guitar repeated the line, added a delicate, punctuating bass figure, and then, as if it were another voice, sang the next line with Furry, staying just behind or slightly ahead of the beat: " 'But her mother and father do not allow me there.' "

As he played, I looked around the room. The brown-spotted wallpaper was covered with decorations: Over the bed were a few sprigs of artificial holly, an American flag, hanging with the stripes vertical and the stars at the bottom left, three brightly colored picture postcards and an ink sketch of Furry. On the wall behind the couch, there was a child's crayon drawing in which Jesus, dressed in handsome red-and-blue robes, held out his arms to an enormous white rabbit. Furry's right hand swooped and glided over the guitar, striking notes and chords in what



Furry makes most of his music these days in a Memphis boardinghouse room similar to this. When he does perform publicly, it's at the Bitter Lemon coffeehouse, a local gathering place for moneyed teens. But it's all rock 'n' roll there; the kids don't know much about the blues.

looked but did not sound like complete random. At times, he slapped the guitar box with two fingers or the heel of his hand as, in the same motion, he brushed the strings. "Call that spank the baby," he said. The guitar was both an echo of his voice and a source of complex and subtle accents. He sang, "Don't you wish your woman was long and tall like mine?" then repeated the line, leaving out, or letting the guitar speak, half the words. "'Well, she ain't good-lookin', but I 'clare, she takes her time.'" The bass figure followed, then one amused final chord. Furry laid the guitar down.

"You play beautiful guitar," Charley said.

"Yes, it is," Furry said, holding up the instrument. "Believe I'll be buried in this one."

"Was that Spanish tuning?" asked Jerry, who had been leaning forward, elbows on his knees, listening intently.

"They some beer in the icebox," Furry said.

Jerry sighed and stood up. "Come on," he said to me. "Help bring the glasses." We went into the kitchen. It was almost as large as the front room, with a stove, a refrigerator, a good-sized table and, in one corner, another double bed. A cabinet held gallon jars of flour, sugar, lima beans and an assortment of canned goods: Pride of Illinois white sweet corn, School Day June peas, Showboat pork and beans, Lyke's beef tripe, Pride of Virginia herring, Bush's Best black-eyed peas and turnip greens.

Jerry took a quart of Pfeiffer's beer out of the refrigerator. I found four glasses on a newspaper-lined shelf, rinsed them at the square metal sink ("They clean," Furry called, "but no tellin' what's been runnin' over 'em") and we went back into the other room. We had just finished pouring when there was a knock at the door.

"That's my wife," Furry said, sliding the latch open. "Come in, Versie." She came in, a compact, handsome woman. I introduced myself and the others said hello. Versie, in a pleasantly hoarse voice, told us that only that morning, she had been asking Furry what he had done to make his boyfriends stay away so long.

"They all throwed me down," Furry said, then laughed and told Versie he was going out to play at the Bitter Lemon. She smiled and asked if she could get us anything to eat. We all said no, thank you, and she sat down.

"My wife loves to see after folks," Furry said. "Do anything in the world for people. Feed 'em, give 'em something to drink; if they get too drunk to go home, got a bed in there to put you to sleep on. And I'm the same way. But you know, there's one old boy, I see him every day at work, and every time I see him, he bum a cigarette from me. Now,

it ain't much, but it come so *regular*. So the other day, I told him, 'Boy, ain't but one difference 'tween you and a blind man.' And he said, 'What's that?' And I told him, 'Blind man beg from everybody he hear, you beg from everybody you see.'"

"Well," Versie said, from her chair on the other side of the room, "it's a pleasure to do things for people who are so nice to us. We tried and tried to find out Furry's age, so he could get this Medicare, and Jerry went out to Furry's old school and made them look through the records and find out when he was born. He spent several days, just to help us."

"Found out I was born 1893," Furry said. "March the sixth, in Greenwood, Mississippi. But I moved to Memphis, with my mother and two sisters, when I was six. My mother and father were sharecroppers and they separated before I was born. I never saw my father, never even knew what he looked like." He took a drink of beer.

"Where did you live when you came here?" I asked.

"My mother had a sister lived on Brinkley Avenue," he said. "Call it Decatur now. We stayed with her. They a housing project there now, but I could still show you the spot." He took another drink, looked at the glass, then emptied it. "I was raised right there and walked a few blocks to the Carnes Avenue School. Went to the fifth and that's as far as I got. Started going about, place to place, catching the freights. That's how I lost my leg. Goin' down a grade outside Du Quoin. Illinois, I caught my foot in a couplung. They took me to a hospital in Carbondale. I could look right out my window and see the ice-cream factory."

He took a cigarette from a pack of Pall Malls on the bedside table. "That was 1916," he said. "I had two or three hundred dollars in my pocket when that happened, too; I had just caught a freight 'cause I didn't feel like spending the money for a ticket." He struck a match, but the breeze from the window fan blew it out. Charley took the cigarette, lit it and handed it back. "Love you," Furry said. "Goin' put you in the Bible."

He stuck the cigarette in the corner of his mouth, picked up the guitar and played a succession of slow, blues-drenched chords that seemed to fill the room. "I'm doing all right," he said. "What you want to hear?"

"Do you remember *Stagolee*?" I asked. "What song?"

"One you recorded a long time ago, called *Stagolee*."

"Long time ago—I wasn't born then, was I?" He quickly changed tunings and started to sing the song. He did one chorus, but it went off after the second, which began, "'When you lose your money, learn to lose.'"

"What was that last?" Charley asked.

Furry repeated the line. "That means, don't be no *hard* loser. That's what this song is about." He began again, but after a few bars, he lost the tune. He was tired.

Charley stood up. "We've got to go. Furry."

"No," Furry said. "You just got here." "Got to go to work. I'll pick you up Tuesday night."

"I'm so glad you came by," Versie told Charley, in the hall. "Sometimes Furry thinks everybody has forgotten him."

It had rained while we were inside and the air in the alley smelled almost fresh. The women were gone now and only a few of the children were still out. It was nearly dark. We walked back to the car and drove down Beale Street, past the faded blocks of pawnshops, liquor stores and poolrooms. The lights were coming on for the evening.

* * *

The Beale Street that Furry Lewis knew as a boy had its beginnings when, after the Battle of Memphis in 1862, the Federal Army made its headquarters in the area. The Negro population of the city consisted mainly of former slaves, who felt they had good reason to fear the local citizenry and, therefore, stayed as close to Federal headquarters as possible. After the War, many Negroes came in from the country, trying to find their families. There were only about 4000 Negroes in Memphis in 1860, but by 1870, there were 15,000. Beale Street drew them, it has been said, "like a lodestone."

The music the country Negroes brought, with its thumping rhythms, unorthodox harmonies and earthy lyrics, combined with the city musicians' more polished techniques and regular forms to produce, as all the world knows, the Beale Street blues. Furry cannot remember when he first heard the blues, nor is he certain when he started trying to play them.

"I was eight or nine, I believe," he said, "when I got the idea I wanted to have me a guitar." We were at the Bitter Lemon now, Furry, Versie, Charley and I, waiting for the crowd to arrive. The waitresses, pretty girls with long, straight hair, were lighting candles on the small, round tables. We sat in the shadows, drinking bourbon brought from the liquor store on the corner, listening to Furry talk about the old days.

He was coatless, wearing a white shirt with a dark-blue tie, and he was smoking a wood-tipped cigar. "I taken a cigar box, cut a hole in the top and nailed a piece of two-by-four on there for a neck. Then I got some screen wire for the strings and I tacked them to the box and twisted them around some bent nails on the end of the two-by-four. I could turn

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the nails and tune the strings like that, you see. I fooled around with it, got so I could make notes, but just on one string. Couldn't make no chords. The first real guitar I had, Mr. Cham Fields, who owned a roadhouse, gambling house, and W. C. Handy gave it to me. They brought it out to my mother's and I was so proud to get it, I cried for a week. Them days, children wasn't like they are now." His cigar had gone out; he relit it from the candle on our table, puffing great gray clouds of smoke. "It was a Martin and I kept it twenty years."

"What happened to it?" Charley asked. "It died."

Furry put the candle down and leaned back in his chair. "When I was eighteen, nineteen years old," he said, "I was good. And when I was twenty, I had my own band, and we could all play. Had a boy named Ham, played jug. Willie Polk played the fiddle and another boy, call him Shoefus, played the guitar, like I did. All of us North Memphis boys. We'd meet at my house and walk down Brinkley to Poplar and go up Poplar to Dunlap or maybe all the way down to Main. People would stop us on the street and say, 'Do you know so-and-so?' And we'd play it and they'd give us a little something. Sometimes we'd pick up fifteen or twenty dollars before we got to Beale. Wouldn't take no streetcar. Long as you walked, you's making money; but if you took the streetcar, you didn't make nothing and you'd be out the nickel for the ride."

"That was Furry's wild days," Versie said. "Drinking, staying out all night. He'd still do that way, if I let him."

Furry smiled. "We used to leave maybe noon Saturday and not get back home till Monday night. All the places we played—Pee Wee's, Big Grundy's, Cham Fields's, B. B. Anderson's—when they opened up, they took the keys and tied them to a rabbit's neck, told him to run off to the woods, 'cause they never meant to close."

I asked Furry whether he had done much traveling.

"A right smart," he said. "But that was later on, when I was working with Gus Cannon, the banjo player, and Will Shade. Beale Street was commencing to change then. Had to go looking for work." He rolled his cigar's ash off against the side of an ashtray. "In the good times, though, you could find anything you could name on Beale. Gambling, girls; you could buy a pint of moonshine for a dime, store-bought whiskey for a quarter. We'd go from place to place, making music, and everywhere we'd go, they'd be glad to see us. We'd play awhile and then somebody would pass the hat. We didn't make too much, but we didn't need much back then. In them

days, you could get two loaves of bread for a nickel. And some nights, when the people from down on the river came up, we'd make a batch of money. The roustabouts from the steamboats, the Kate Adams, the Idlewild, the Viney Swing—I've taken trips on all them boats, played up the river to St. Louis, down to New Orleans—white and colored, they'd all come to Beale. Got along fine, too, just like we doing now. 'Course, folks had they squabbles, like they will, you know. I saw two or three get killed."

There were enough squabbles to make Memphis the murder capital of the country. In the first decade of the century, 556 homicides occurred, most of them involving Negroes. Appeals for reform were taken seriously only by those who made them. When E. H. Crump ran for mayor on a reform ticket, W. C. Handy recorded the Beale Streeters' reaction: "We don't care what Mr. Crump don't allow, we goin' barrel-house anyhow."

But as the righteous Crump machine gained power, the street slowly began to change. Each year, the red-light district grew smaller; each year, there were fewer gambling houses, fewer saloons, fewer places for musicians to play.

Then came the Depression. Local newspapers carried accounts of starving Negroes swarming over garbage dumps, even eating the clay from the river bluffs. Many people left town, but Furry stayed. "Nothing else to do," he said. "The Depression wasn't just in Memphis, it was all over the country. A lot of my friends left, didn't know what they was goin' to. The boy we called Ham, from our band, he left, and nobody ever knew what became of him. I did have a little job with the city and I stuck with that. I had been working with them off and on, when there wasn't anyplace to play. They didn't even have no trucks at that time. Just had mules to pull the garbage carts. Didn't have no incinerator; used to take the garbage down to the end of High Street, across the railroad tracks, and burn it."

Before Beale Street could recover from the Depression, World War Two brought hundreds of boys in uniform into Memphis; and, for their protection, Boss Crump closed the last of the saloons and whorehouses. It was the final blow.

Furry sat staring at the end of his cigar. "Beale Street really went down," he said after a moment. "You know, old folks say, it's a long lane don't have no end and a bad wind don't never change. But one day, back when Hoover was President, I was driving my cart down Beale Street and I seen a rat, sitting on top of a garbage can, eating a onion, crying."

* * *

Furry has been working for the city of Memphis, sanitation department, since

1923. Shortly after two o'clock each weekday morning, he gets out of bed, straps on his artificial leg, dresses and makes a fresh pot of coffee, which he drinks while reading the *Memphis Press-Scimitar*. The newspaper arrives in the afternoon, but Furry does not open it until morning. Versie is still asleep and the paper is company for him as he sits in the kitchen under the harsh light of the ceiling bulb, drinking the hot, sweet coffee. He does not eat breakfast; when the coffee is gone, he leaves for work.

The sky is black. The alley is quiet, the apartments dark. A morning-glory vine hanging from a guy wire stirs, like a heavy curtain, in the cool morning breeze. Cars in the cross alley are covered with a silver glaze of dew. A cat flashes between shadows.

Linden Avenue is bright and empty in the blue glare of the street lamps. Down the street, St. Patrick's looms, a sign, 100 YEARS WITH CHRIST, over its wide red doors. Furry, turning right, walks past the faded, green-glowing bay windows of an apartment house to the corner. A moving van rolls past. There is no other traffic. When the light changes, Furry crosses, heading down Hernando. The clock at Carodine's Fruit Stand and Auto Service reads 2:49.

The cafés, taverns, laundries, shoe-repair shops and liquor stores are all closed. The houses, under shading trees, seem drawn into themselves. At the Clay-born Temple African Methodist Episcopal Church, the stained-glass windows gleam, jewellike against the mass of blackened stone. A woman wearing a maid's uniform passes on the other side of the street. Furry says good morning and she says good morning, their voices patiently weary. Beside the Scola Brothers Grocery is a sycamore, its branches silhouetted against the white wall. Furry walks slowly, hunched forward, as if sleep were a weight on his shoulders. Hand-printed posters at the Vance Avenue Market: CHICKEN BACKS, 12½c LB.; HOG MAWS, 15c; RUMPS, 19c.

Behind Bertha's Beauty Nook, under a large, pale-leaved elm, there are 12 garbage cans and two carts. Furry lifts one of the cans onto a cart, rolls the cart out into the street and, taking the wide broom from its slot, begins to sweep the gutter. A large woman with her head tied in a kerchief, wearing a purple wrapper and gold house slippers, passes by on the sidewalk. Furry tells her good morning and she nods hello.

When he has swept back to Vance, Furry leaves the trash in a pile at the corner and pushes the cart, with its empty can, to Beale Street. The sky is gray. The stiff brass figure of W. C. Handy stands, one foot slightly forward, the bell of his horn pointing down, under the

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manicured trees of his deserted park. The gutter is thick with debris: empty wine bottles, torn racing forms from the West Memphis dog track, flattened cigarette packs, scraps of paper and one small die, white with black spots, which Furry puts into his pocket. An old bus, on the back of which is written, in yellow paint, LET NOT YOUR HEART BE TROUBLED, rumbles past; it is full of cotton choppers: Their dark, solemn faces peer out the grimy windows. The bottles clink at the end of Furry's broom. In a room above the Club Handy, two men are standing at an open window, looking down at the street. One of them is smoking; the glowing end of his cigarette can be seen in the darkness. On the door to the club, there is a handbill: BLUES SPECTACULAR, CITY AUDITORIUM: JIMMY REED, JOHN LEE HOOKER, HOWLIN' WOLF.

Furry pushes the garbage onto a flat scoop at the front of the cart, then goes to the rear and pulls a jointed metal handle, causing the scoop to rise and dump its contents into the can. The scoop is heavy; when he lets it down, it sends a shock from his right arm through his body, raising his left leg, the artificial one, off the ground. Across the street, in a chinaberry tree, a gang of sparrows are

making a racket. Furry sweeps past two night clubs and then a restaurant, where, through the front window, large brown rats can be seen scurrying across the kitchen floor. A dirty red dog stands at the corner of Beale and Hernando, sniffing the air. A soldier runs past, heading toward Main. The street lamps go off.

When Furry has cleaned the rest of the block, the garbage can is full and he goes back to Bertha's for another. The other cart is gone and there is a black Buick parked at the curb. Furry wheels to the corner and picks up the mound of trash he left there. A city bus rolls past; the driver gives a greeting honk and Furry waves. He crosses the street and begins sweeping in front of the Sanitary Bedding Company. A woman's high-heeled shoe is lying on the sidewalk. Furry throws it into the can. "First one-legged woman I see, I'll give her that," he says and, for the first time that day, he smiles.

At Butler, the next cross street, there is a row of large, old-fashioned houses, set behind picket fences and broad, thickly leafed trees. The sky is pale-blue now, with pink-edged clouds, and old men and women have come out to sit on

the porches. Some speak to Furry, some do not. Cars are becoming more frequent along the street. Furry reaches out quickly with his broom to catch a windblown scrap of paper. When he gets to Calhoun, he swaps cans again and walks a block—past Tina's Beauty Shop, a tavern called the Section Playhouse and another named Soul Heaven—to Fourth Street. He places his cart at the corner and starts pushing the trash toward it.

From a second-story window of a rooming house covered with red brick-patterned tarpaper comes the sound of a blues harmonica. Two old men are sitting on the steps in front of the open door. Furry tells them good morning. "When you goin' make another record?" one of them asks.

"Record?" the other man, in a straw hat, says.

"That's right," says the first one. "He makes them big-time records. Used to."

Furry dumps a load into the cart, then leans against it, wiping his face and the back of his neck with a blue bandanna handkerchief.

Down the stairs and through the door (the old men on the steps leaning out of his way, for he does not slow down) comes the harmonica player. He stands in the middle of the sidewalk, eyes

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closed, head tilted to one side, the harmonica cupped in his hands. A man wearing dark glasses and carrying a white cane before him like a divining rod turns the corner, aims at the music, says cheerfully, "Get out the way! Get off the sidewalk!" and bumps into the harmonica player, who spins away, like a good quarterback, and goes on playing.

Furry puts the bandanna in his pocket and moves on, walking behind the cart. Past Mrs. Kelly's Homemade Hot Tamales stand, the air is filled with a strong odor. Over a shop door, a sign reads: FRESH FISH DAILY.

Now the sky is a hot, empty blue, and cars line the curb from Butler to Vance. Furry sweeps around them. Across the street, at the housing project, children are playing outside the great blocks of apartments. One little girl is lying face down on the grass, quite still. Furry watches her. She has not moved. Two dogs are barking nearby. One of them, a small black cocker spaniel, trots up to the little girl and sniffs at her head; she grabs its forelegs and together they roll over and over. Furry starts sweeping and does not stop or look up again until he has reached the corner. He piles the trash into the can and stands in the gutter, waiting for the light to change.

For the morning, his work is done. He rolls the cart down Fourth, across Pontotoc and Linden, to his own block, where

he parks it at the curb, between two cars. Then he heads across the street toward Rothschild's grocery, to try to get some beer on credit.

• • •

While we were talking, people were coming in, and now the tables were nearly filled. Charley looked at his watch, then at Furry. "Feel like playing?" he asked.

Furry nodded abruptly, the way Indians do in movies. "I always feel like playing," he said. He drank the last of the bourbon in his glass. "Yes, sir. *Always* feel like that."

"I'll announce you," Charley said. He carried a chair onto the stage, sat down and repeated the lecture he uses whenever he hires an old-time musician. It begins, "Without the tradition of American Negro music, there would be no rock music." The lecture's purpose is to inspire the rock generation with love and respect for the blues. However, this audience, none of whom looks older than 20, seems more interested in each other than in anything else.

When the speech ended, with "I am proud to present . . ." Furry, carrying his battered Epiphone guitar, limped onto the stage. The applause was polite. Furry smiled and waved. "Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "I'm very pleased to be here tonight to play for you all. I've been around Memphis, playing and sing-

ing, for many years. My wife is with me tonight; we've been married many years. When we got married, I only had fifteen cents and she had a quarter." I looked at Charley. He avoided my eyes.

"And then one day," Furry went on, his tone altering slightly, "she upped and quit me, said I had married her for her money."

Furry laughed, Versie laughed, the crowd laughed, and Charley and I looked at each other and laughed and laughed, shaking our heads. "I love him, the old bastard," Charley said. "Sorry, Versie."

But Versie, watching Furry proudly, had not heard.

He had begun to play a slow, sad blues, one that none of us had ever heard, a song without a name: "My mother's dead," he sang, the guitar softly following, "my father just as well's to be. Ain't got nobody to say one kind word for me."

The room, which had been filled with noise, was now quiet. "People holler mercy," Furry sang, "don't know what mercy mean. People . . ."—and the guitar finished the line. "Well, if it mean any good, Lord, have mercy on me."

When, after nearly an hour, Furry left the stage, the applause was considerably more than polite. But I knew that it was only the third time Furry had heard public applause during the year and that in this year, as in most of the years of his life, his music would probably bring him less than \$100. Soon, we would take him home and he would change clothes and go out to sweep the streets. I wondered, as Charley and Versie were congratulating him and pouring fresh drinks, how he had managed to last, to retain his skill.

Furry was sitting back in his chair, holding a drink in one hand and a new cigar in the other, smiling slightly, his eyes nearly closed. I asked him if he had ever been tempted to give up, to stop playing. "Give out but don't give up," he said. He tasted his drink and sat straighter in the chair. "No," he said, "all these years, I kept working for the city, thinking things might change, Beale Street might go back like it was. But it never did."

"But you went on playing."

"Oh, yes, I played at home. Sometimes, nothing to do, no place to play, I'd hock the guitar and get me something to drink. And then I'd wish I had it, so I could play, even just for myself. I never quit playing, but I didn't play out enough for people to know who I was. Sometimes I'd see a man, a beggar, you know, playing guitar on the sidewalk, and I'd drop something in his cup, and he wouldn't even know who I was. He'd think I was just a street sweeper."



"I've had to be both mother and father to her."

