Vera Johnson sent us this item after we published her "Women's Liberation Blues" in 32.3, September 1998. She wrote: "You say you don't recall another blues in my repertoire, but don't forget that I've written at least 275 songs, so you may have missed a few. I remember at the Winnipeg Folk Festival one year, one of those persons was Blind So-and-so... I think it was Colin [Linden] who introduced me to him. It seems he had heard me singing and liked what I was doing and wondered if I had any songs he could use. I had one I thought he would appreciate, called 'Just Like You.'... Anyway, Blind ... liked it and spent half an hour going over it with me, but I don't know if he ever actually used it."

Vera's songbook is still available (and recommended!) from the Society's Mail Order Service. She's giving a presentation at this year's Folk Alliance meeting in Vancouver in February. This year: An Oral History with Vera Johnson. It's nice to see her getting the attention she deserves.

I tried to call yesterday, but the phone wasn't ringing... Anyway, Blind liked it and spent half an hour going over it with me, but I don't know if he ever actually used it.

Just Like You

Vera Johnson

September 13, 1968 SOCAN

I saw a little green lizard thing a-creepin' on the ground,
I saw a little green lizard thing a-creepin' on the ground,
I saw a little green lizard thing a-creepin' on the ground,
I saw a little green lizard thing a-creepin' on the ground,

A    E7      D
F#m  B7      E7

And while I was watchin', it changed from green to brown,
And while I was watchin', it changed from green to brown,
And while I was watchin', it changed from green to brown,
And while I was watchin', it changed from green to brown,

F#m  A        D
F#m  A        D
F#m  A        D
F#m  A        D

And then it switched itself back again before I could turn a round, just like you, babe... I saw a little green lizard thing a-creepin' on the ground, and while I was watchin', it changed from green to brown, and then it switched itself back again before I could turn around, just like you, babe, just like you.

I heard your voice on the telephone, it makes me laugh and sing, I tried to call yesterday, but the phone wouldn't ring, it gobbled up my dimes, ev'ry one, and didn't give me a thing, just like you, baby, just like you, just like you, baby, just like you.

I had a neighbour who beat his dog, then kicked it out the door, I had a neighbour who beat his dog, then kicked it out the door, I had a neighbour who beat his dog, then kicked it out the door, I had a neighbour who beat his dog, then kicked it out the door, I had a neighbour who beat his dog, then kicked it out the door,

The puppy was whimpering, his little sides were sore, The puppy was whimpering, his little sides were sore, The puppy was whimpering, his little sides were sore, The puppy was whimpering, his little sides were sore, The puppy was whimpering, his little sides were sore,

I bought him at a fair, I bought him at a fair, I bought him at a fair, I bought him at a fair, I bought him at a fair,

And when the night he kept running hard, And when the night he kept running hard, And when the night he kept running hard, And when the night he kept running hard, And when the night he kept running hard,

F: My dad, S.J. Mills, Stanley Jabeze....

Growing up in that household was never a dull moment. It was one of the most turbulent in Northern Ontario, Canada, and my dad referred to it as the Italian Circus. The music in the house was incredible. First off, my mom's brothers, my uncles, taught my dad to play. My dad knew my mom's family since he was a young lad, maybe ten years old, up in Copper Cliff, Ontario.

He showed me the Canadian Shield, and the rocks where he used to try to ski. He would strap on boards and try to ski those rockpiles covered with snow and stuff. And he showed me the rocks where he would try to play the chord—he learned the one chord, the G chord, from my uncle Vic, my mom's brother, and he showed me the rocks where he would try to play the chord—the one chord, the G chord, from my uncle Vic, my mom's brother, and he showed me the rocks where he would try to play the chord—he learned the one chord, the G chord, from my uncle Vic, my mom's brother, and he showed me the rocks where he would try to play the chord—the one chord, the G chord, from my uncle Vic, my mom's brother, and he showed me the rocks where he would try to play the chord...

You say you don't recall another blues in my repertoire, but don't forget that I've written at least 275 songs, so you may have missed a few. I remember at the Winnipeg Folk Festival one year, one of those persons was Blind So-and-so... I think it was Colin [Linden] who introduced me to him. It seems he had heard me singing and liked what I was doing and wondered if I had any songs he could use. I had one I thought he would appreciate, called 'Just Like You.'... Anyway, Blind ... liked it and spent half an hour going over it with me, but I don't know if he ever actually used it.

Vera's songbook is still available (and recommended!) from the Society's Mail Order Service. She's giving a presentation at this year's Folk Alliance meeting in Vancouver in February. This year: An Oral History with Vera Johnson. It's nice to see her getting the attention she deserves. Whether or not you could have kept up with him, had he been lubricated! His account of a Huck Finn boyhood on the streets of Toronto is worth the price of admission by itself.

More important for our present purposes is the portrait of Ontario music post WWII that Johnny offers. The combination of Continental music (some of it jazzed), jazz pop (the three Louis—not to mention Lonnie Johnson, who ended his days as a most unexpected To-rontonian of them all), and the folkish blues of Lead Belly and company (and who-knows-who from earlier days, both on 78s and by virtue of the sidetoor Pullman's?) may well surprise many readers, though one surely expects that by Johnny's adolescence during the late 60s, Toronto teenagers were well acquainted with Stax, 7 and the Mysterians, and the British Invasion and its San Francisco echo. Nor, of course, are we surprised that S.J. admired Hank Snow and Snow's model, Jimmie Rodgers.

Johnny continues this multicultural smorgasbord. He's become a favorite blues player in Latvia (and has recorded with Latvian musicians), and when this issue hits the mail will be on tour in Ukraine, Belarus, and Greece. We recommend that you keep an eye on his website for further adventures and releases: <http://www.johnnyv.org> —GWL

"That's something else my dad said to me...."

Johnny V. Mills interviewed by George W. Lyon

Johnny V. Mills' best known recording, released in 1996, is titled If My Daddy Could See Me Now. Despite the rebellious image which musicians are often burdened with, few musicians lack a regard for the past—for their own past or for that of the traditions they represent. Both pasts intersect nicely in Johnny's biography; his father not only taught him to play, but also encouraged him to make a career out of music.

Johnny V. and I spent an afternoon with my tape recorder in a pizza restaurant in Calgary at the end of August 1999. He's a tremendous musician, entertaining enough that I couldn't decide whether to regret we weren't training a bottle of Scotch in some smokier location or to be glad that he didn't have that extra fuel: I'm not at all sure I could have kept up with him, had he been lubricated! His account of a Huck Finn boyhood on the streets of Toronto is worth the price of admission by itself.

More important for our present purposes is the portrait of Ontario music post WWII that Johnny offers. The combination of Continental music (some of it jazzed), jazz pop (the three Louis—not to mention Lonnie Johnson, who ended his days as a most unexpected To-rontonian of them all), and the folkish blues of Lead Belly and company (and who-knows-who from earlier days, both on 78s and by virtue of the sidetoor Pullman's?) may well surprise many readers, though one surely expects that by Johnny's adolescence during the late 60s, Toronto teenagers were well acquainted with Stax, 7 and the Mysterians, and the British Invasion and its San Francisco echo. Nor, of course, are we surprised that S.J. admired Hank Snow and Snow's model, Jimmie Rodgers.

Johnny continues this multicultural smorgasbord. He's become a favorite blues player in Latvia (and has recorded with Latvian musicians), and when this issue hits the mail will be on tour in Ukraine, Belarus, and Greece. We recommend that you keep an eye on his website for further adventures and releases: <http://www.johnnyv.org> —GWL

J: Before or after he met the family?

G: Before or after he met the family?
J: He met them, and then he started hanging out. They all went a month and a half ago. Evo and Vic were like Django and his brother. It's heavy, heavy guitar playing. My Uncle Vic got to the originals back. They're reel-to-reel tapes. I made copies and sent them, and I made copies and sent the originals back. They're reel-to-reel tapes. I made copies and sent them, and I made copies and sent the originals back.

G: Sounds like bones.

J: Yeah, spoons. He would just go into the kitchen and get the spoons and add the rhythm. He had incredible time. Then when the fall would be over, the winter would come, he'd get out of Ontario and go to the west coast. He'd hitchhike or ride the rails. Rod Key was the guy who first turned me onto Chinese bok choir. Early 60s, couldn't have been more than about 1960. I was a young kid. He had tins stuff from Chinatown that he'd brought back from the war, I think he used to drink to black out stuff.

J: He was a cool guitar player. He had interesting ideas. For example, the solo in "Movie On." Those double bass string solos is what turned my dad's crank. Ang-ang-ang-ang, ang-ang-ang, ang-ang-ang-ang-ang... He said, "They sound like wind whistlin' in the trees." He'd say up the tracks. He'd say, "That's the real shit, the real McCoy." My mom and dad would feed them and give them a place over their head and make sure they were comfortable. That was my parents' style. Dad said, "Don't give 'em money. If they're really about it, give 'em a meal, take them in and show 'em kindness. You'll get it back somewhere." That was his kind of thinking. He never got rich, but he was rich with kindness from other people. He was well loved, you know—he really was.

G: He played rack harp and would play all these great fiddle tunes..."Crooked Stovepipe," "Pretty Redwing" and "Silver Bells." He knew them all.

J: He went and saw Hank Snow when he was five years old. There was a pedal steel player. Everything else was wooden. There was a drummer, bass player, upright, two guitar players, fiddle, steel player. Some background singers. I remember seein' him at the old Imperial Theatre, right downtown by Lake Ontario. Then, when he was out from around Sudbury area. There are lots of tales of Dolci and my uncle playing together. Sax and Guitar. And I got those tapes—I finally tracked down the daughter of Fred Dolci in Vernon, BC (through my mother), and got them to me, and I made copies and sent the originals back. They're reel-to-reel tapes. I made copies and sent them.
J: He met them, and then he started hanging out. They all went dad were in the same class at school and became friends. Evo's daughter was the daughter of Fred Dolci in Vernon, BC (through my cousin is their dad. Fred Esposito married my mom's oldest brother, but I think my Uncle Fred's brother, I think my Uncle Fred Esposito is related to Tony and Phil, the hockey players. I can't say for certain because there are a whole bunch of them up that way, but I think my uncle Fred's, or cousin is their dad. Fred Esposito married my mom's mother's older sister Olga and that whole clan are all living down in California these days, but are originally from Sainte Sainte Marie and there's still there, too. Fred Sr. was a good sax player. His son's Joe and Fred Jr. (both in their 60s now) are closet musicians. Joe plays sax and double bass and Fred Jr. plays a jazz style of guitar.

But nobody's really professional. I'm the only one who's put on the boot and went for it. I think that, deep down, they're all kind of wondering about me, but I remember the comments they're all kind of proud of me, but I remember the comments they made on the radio, and whatever 78s he could have; it was just, "That's a great song. Let's forget that. You're going to be a gifted guitar player." That's what he said to me. I was, like, "Hey, you kidding me?" But I remember him rubbing my head.

G: Hank Snow wasn't a bad guitar player.

J: He was a cool guitar player. He had interesting ideas. For example, the solo in "Movin' On." Those double bass string solos is what turned my dad's crank. Ang-ang-ang-ang, ang-ang-ang-ang-ang-ang... He said, "They sound like whooshing out a window," he said, "They sound like the train is going by the tracks." He'd say, "That's the real shit, the real McCoy.

Our house was kind of a way station for these next drifters. My dad would pick them up and stay for a day or two weeks at a time. My dad knew them, he'd pick them up, he'd feed them—he wouldn't give them money, not my mom and dad would feed them and give them a place over their head and make sure they were comfortable. That was my parents' style. Dad said, "Don't give 'em money. If they're really about it, give 'em a meal, take them in and show 'em kindness. You'll get it back somewhere." That was his kind of thinking. He never got rich, but he was rich with kindness from other people. He was well loved, you know—he really was.

Alcohol got him. What do you do? He loved to party. Reading through his last bunch of books, writings and stuff that he gave me—you can see where he was a young man going into the Second World War. He was 19 years old in 1939, and he joined or the Canadian army, and I think that being exposed to all the violence and killing and that was kind of his thinking. He never learned that, you know, the stuff of Music. He never learned that, you know, the stuff of Music. He never learned that, you know, the stuff of Music. He never learned that, you know, the stuff of Music. He never learned that, you know, the stuff of Music. He never learned that, you know, the stuff of Music.

And that was the attitude in the house. My mom and dad sang duets sometimes, real good together—"Are You Mine?" You know, Myrna Loy and Spencer Tracy was one of my favorite songs. My dad sang it better than a Canadian army, my dad sang it better than a Canadian army, my dad sang it better than a Canadian army, my dad sang it better than a Canadian army, my dad sang it better than a Canadian army.

And my dad loved Hank Snow. When Hank Snow broke, my dad went nuts for him because, he said, he was so much like Jimmie Rodgers, like he was the reincarnation of Jimmie or something. He bragged about him "In an 18th Century Drawing Room" and learned all the guitar parts, and played neck harp and would play all those great fiddle tunes—"Crooked Skidoo," "Pretty Redwing" and "Silver Bells." He knew them all.

I went and saw Hank Snow when I was five years old. There was a pedal steel player. Everything else was wooden. There was a drummer, bass player, upright, two guitar players, fiddle, steel player. Some background singers. I remember seein' him at the old theatre that was right across the street from Toronto City Hall, on the south side of Queen Street, near Bay. My dad got me backstage to meet Hank Snow. Hank Snow rubbed my head, and my dad goes, "That's a sign. You're going to be a gifted guitar player."

That's what he used to say. I never was into playing guitar until I was 11 years old. He never ever forced it on me. He never said, "You have to learn. He always said, "If you want to learn, you learn." But he said, "You have to learn." But I remember him telling me when I was five years old, when we came back to the streetcar, going back home after seein' that concert, and he said, "Hank Snow rubbed your head, boy. Don't forget that. You're going to be a gifted guitar player."

When he said to me, "That's the real shit, the real McCoy."

G: Sounds like bones.

J: Yeah, spoons. He would just go into the kitchen and get the spoons and add the rhythm. He had incredible time. Then when the fall would be coming, winter, he'd get out of Ontario and go to the west coast. He'd hitchhike or ride the rails. Rod Key was the guy who first turned me onto Chinese bok keyy. Early 60s, couldn't have been more than about 1960. I was a young kid. He had this stuff from Chinatown that he'd brought back from the markets, looked like celery or something. He said, "Here, taste it; it's Chinese celery. Bok keyy. I remember thinking, "Man, this stuff tastes good!" He said, "It's healthy. Eat this." He was just a wealth of information. This drunkin' rodeo who was just this fountain of knowledge.

Those parties would last all weekend, Friday night, the boys would go grocery shopping. They'd all go grocery shopping for the week. After the groceries were in, they'd go get the beer, whiskey, whatever they were gonna have, and then it'd be 9:00, then 10:00, then 11:00, that was "The MacDermots" place. It shifted from house to house in the neighborhood. Those parties would go on all weekend, George. Sometimes sleeping three and four in a bed with the neighbors, and the women would cook up something—beef stew, maybe fish out there in Alberta, and you'd call "Westerns back east"—so they'd cook up, like, 30, 40 Denver, you know, and bring 'em out on a big platter, and there'd be a bunch of other food come out. To me, it was some of the closest family things to share, you know? The love in that house was incredible—the neighbors, everybody. It was a neat neighborhood.

G: What part of Toronto?

J: Lower Ward, which is right down by Lake Ontario in the original city of York. I could cross the tracks from my place and be in old Fort York. I was just blocks down from the Canadian National Exhibition. The primary sites, the eastern entrance. The original Toronto Maple Leafs hockey, triple A baseball teams. Played hockey with my dad on the ice rink at the university at the stadium. Molson's brewery was right down there too. Carling's brewery was just north of us, Rowntrees, Cadbury's, Neilson's, McKinzies Taff, Laura Secord's. There was OE, Inglis, Massey Ferguson just west of us. It was a blue collar, workin' man's neighborhood. My turf was Spadina Avenue west to St. James, and then up to the lake north to, like, College, College would be really on the fringe.

Smiley Park is where I grew up, the kids played in the army barracks, Stanley Barnsacks, and it was made into a park. And King Street split the parks at Walnut Avenue, which is where I grew up. Right out my front door, right across the street: I could go skating in the winter time, 3:00 in the morning on the weekends. They'd freeze the grass, make a pleasure rink and a hockey rink. Eventually the soccer guys took it over. It got fenced off. We would burn their supplies down, maybe twice or three times. They had to hire private security to be there 24 hours so kids didn't burn it, "cause we were p.o.'d. They were taking our park away. It became a big soccer stadium for the longest time.

Down the street was the Canada Packers and their abattoir. They would be bringing in the cows and the pigs and the sheep, whatever, and sometimes we would go jump from the roof top, down onto the backs of these cows and ride them and be dodging the whips and props from the handlers. They'd be, "You kids?" We could have gotten killed in a heartbeat. But there was riding the cows.

I remember once stamping the pigs. They had 'em all in a pen, and we dropped a bunch of balloons from a roof vent. We were up on the roof, and we blew them up and dropped them through the air vent and the pigs would pop up into the pens, and they got between the pigs and popped, which panicked the pigs, and they busted the gate open, and I'm telling you—I remember chasing something like it.

Pigeon, Pigeon, except it isn't. Don't become dinner on somebody's plate! or something. We were cheering for the pigs, man! We were saying, "Get up there!" All those little oinkers were going, run-
ning up through the streets of Toronto. It was hilarious. One of 'em was acting, you know, dancing up and down the blocks in St. Mary's schoolyard. 'Cause we would hear them at night, man, you know, you were actually making a lot of noise, a sound of death. And that was an awful feeling, man, just an awful sound of death. And we would hear tales of kids up there jumping and missing and getting just bust up. The boards would be stuck out from the ends of the piles, and they'd just be smashing their ribs and everything on the way down. Some of the piles were maybe 30 feet high. So they used to be kids seven to nine years old. What do you do? You're kids, right?

The main Union Station train yard was right there, about 12 tracks. We'd pretend we were the guards of the station entrance, walking half a block, you'd walk down through where the abseit was, and right out to the tracks. You'd be right there. Then you cross the tracks, and you're at old Fort York. We used to jump these tracks. We'd ride the trains like Board of Education, Hamilton and back. One time I was real close; I actually had two fingers of my hand down there for a while.

And I have some last minute recordings of my dad (1971 and 1972). I can remember him singing the tunes he wrote for the boys. We were told not to say, 'I don't know.' When I came home when I was 18 or so, and thinking, 'He's never been recorded.' All these tunes, and he's got 'em up here in his head, but they're not anywhere else. My sister, Kathy, the second oldest, actually typed out all the lyrics that she could find, so I have those. And she catalogued 'em for him. But I remember him singing certain tunes as a kid, but then he didn't sing 'em between the bars, many new ones.

And so I got a few of them. Some of them were love ballads. 'Blue Water and You' is a beautiful tune. And 'The Look et of My Heart' is another one. Then he wrote a tune 'The Ballad of Johnny Eady.' He was wanted by the Board of Education in World War Two. I can't remember, but I'm thinking he was a miller from Manitoulin Island. I think there's a statue in Little Current with his name on it, and he may have been decorated here with the Victoria Cross or something. Along those lines. My dad wrote 'The Ballad of Johnny Eady' to preserve his story. And then there's 'Children's Dreams' where he talks of his childhood experiences in Iran, and names the kids he grew up with, where they were, what they did, all the little incidents. My dad had an incredible memory.

He wrote "Take Me Back to Old Canada" when the war ended and he was going home in August of 1945. It's Canadiana on a more blue collar, personal level than a pop hit tune like 'Four Strong Winds,' or something. It's maybe not for everyone but it's very Canadian. I can't remember, but I think he was talking about the working class iron men of Canada. That, to me, is the important part of my dad's writing. And I'm sure there's tons of guys out there, too, that nobody knows about. When he drove a garbage truck in the early 50s, the open backed garbage truck, he wrote 'The Garbage Man's Song.' And when he took to driving semi-trailer, and he wrote 'Semi Trailer.'

I heard him say, 'You can't talk about it until you've been there.' He said, 'These people that write about something they've never fucking experienced, can blow it out their ass.'

G: You spoke of Lead Belly and Son House. Are you sure about those?

J: Absolutely. He heard them on the radio. Absolutely. He would play a blues, like, for example, a talkin' blues: you know, 'The Talkin' Blues':

If you want to get in trouble,
Let me tell you how to do it,
Get right in the middle of it,
And you're right into it.
You go there to the Promised Land,
Right into the devil's hand.
Thieves' dishes.
Always fighting.
She's hard to manage.

G: I got a gal, her name is Jane,
This old gal lives down the lane.
Won't take a bath, not even a rub,
Afraid she'll fall through the hole in the tub.
She's long and lanky.
Won't keep clean.
Hard to manage.
What's the next one?

Behind the turkey pen the other night,
It was awful dark, I had no light.

I reached around took a hold of a goose,
I heard the neighbor say, 'You better turn 'im loose.'
Well, I grabbed, I rote the bushets.

G: You know this tune? Well, the original one was I think from 'The Preschin Blues,' or 'The Preschin Blues.' With Woody Guthrie he wrote 'Johnny Come Down.' You're with a band, you know this tune?

J: Absolutely. He heard them on the radio. Absolutely. He was talking about listening. And I'm sure they're not anywhere else. That's what you'd listen for. Or when whatever was playing the melody, you know? As the melody moved, you'd move. Not, like, precisely laid out, after two bars, after four bars. No. It was totally up to you, and playing your ability to understand melody and play that way—I give my dad total credit for that. Because what I heard was instilled in me as a kid. And I eventually came back to it. So you'll hear tunes that I write that are weird like that. They'll just have these extra bars, extra little thing here and there. And to me, it's normal. But other guys go, 'Oh, cool trick!' That was what he gave you. He just had a right random hand—oh, God, he should flatpick like Doc Watson. And he taught me that all this double pickin'. He'd say, 'Whatever you can pick going down, you do coming back,' or 'Whichever you can play on the violin.' He'd say, 'Pick it all down strokes. Now pick it all upstrokes.' Then he'd say, 'Close your eyes and pick it all downstrokes. Close your eyes and pick it all upstrokes. Now close your eyes and try to do something just a little easier, a little easier.' You go down and keep the string on the way up to get the next tune. He used to make me close my eyes all the time. He'd say, 'You got it? OK, close your eyes and look, don't look now. Play it.' And he'd say, 'Go practice that.' And he got me doin' little bass line runs with chords, move to the next chord and how to do a bass line with the chord, with a pick, with a flatpick.
ning up through the streets of Toronto. It was hilarious. One of 'em was acting real tough, and I don't know where he was born, at St. Mary's schoolyard. 'Cause we would hear him at night, man, you know, when they're comin' up on the killing floor, and it was an awful feeling, man, just an awful feeling of death. And the smell from the hides when the wind blew from the lake was enough to knock buzzards off a shitgaw. It was just, God, man.

We used to go play in the John B. Smith lumberyard. We'd jump the lumberkiddies. Actually, I was killed there. My mother was terrified. She always said, "I'm glad I only had one boy—you were enough for ten." She used to tell me all the time that in the war they'd come through there because we'd go play The Last of the Mohicans, Hawkeyes and Chinagochag. We'd bury ourselves in the snow between the lumber piles and pretend we were the last of the Mohicans, with our BB guns and air rifles. Climb these piles, which were covered with ice and snow. We'd fly along and jump to the next pile; sometimes you'd miss 'em—you'd grab, you know. Nobody I was ever with died, but we heard tales of kids up there jumping and insignificantly getting just bust up. The boards would be sticking out from the ends of the piles, and they'd just be smashing their ribs and everything on the way down. Some of the piles were maybe 30 feet high. We were kids seven to nine years old. What do you do? You're kids, right?

The main Union Station train yard was right there, about 12 tracks wide. We used to wash my hands under the handrail, walk half a block, you'd walk down through where the abattoir was, and right out to the tracks. You'd be right there. Then you cross the tracks, and you're at old Fort York. We used to jump these trains, and they'd come in. They'd come over here, lucky to get out. My grandfather, Sam Harnick and back. One time it was real close; I actually had two trains, one on each side of me—laying between the tracks—they'd come in—used to dress up for dinner—Sunday dinner, and they'd always be dressed up. You couldn't come to the dinner table scraggly. There'd be no talking at the dinner table. You're there to eat or talk, and they'd tell you to shut your piehole in one time, the dinner room table had two leaves in it, six, seven feet long and maybe three feet wide—come, squared down, grabbed the one leg, lifted the whole fucking table up, put it down, never spilt a drop of water, nothing. He says, "Yeah, still git it."

G: You spoke of Lead Belly and Son House. Are you sure about those?

J: Absolutely. He heard them on the radio. Absolutely. He would play a blues, like, for example, a talkin' blues. You know, "The Talkin' Blues."

If you want to get in trouble, Let me tell you how to do it, Get yourself a wife, And you're right into it. You go from there to the Promised Land, Right into the Devil's head. Threepence dish. Always frighten. She's so hard to manage.

Then it's, I got a gal, her name is Jane, This old gal lives down the lane. Won't take a bath, not even a rub, Affraid she'll fall through the hole in the tub. She's long and lanky. Won't keep clean. Hard to manage.

What's the next one?

Behind the turkey pen the other night, It was awful dark, I had no light. I reached around, took a hold of a goose, I heard the neighbor say, "You better turn 'im loose."

Well, I jumped gullies, I heard the neighbor say, "You better turn 'im loose."

I reached around, took a hold of a goose, I heard the neighbor say, "You better turn 'im loose."

And then a train was coming. I thought it was going to hit me. I jumped over the tracks, turned around, walked back.

J: We were runnin' across the tracks. I saw one train, but I thought I was to the left, and I was actually to the right. I dropped. Right over there. I was about 18 or so. I was runnin' across the tracks. I saw a train, but I didn't see the other one—laying between the tracks—they were going over the top of me in opposite directions. I'm tellin' you, George, I was terrified. I was down like this with my head down and buried.

G: How did you end up like that?

J: Absolutely. He heard them on the radio. Absolutely. He would play a blues, like, for example, a talkin' blues. You know, "The Talkin' Blues:"

If you want to get in trouble, Let me tell you how to do it, Get yourself a wife, And you're right into it. You go from there to the Promised Land, Right into the Devil's head. Threepence dish. Always frighten. She's so hard to manage.

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I reached around, took a hold of a goose, I heard the neighbor say, "You better turn 'im loose."

And the voicenote would change, this way, the thing would change. But that's what you'd listen for. Or when whatever was playing the melody, you know? As the melody moved, you'd move. Not, like, precisely laid out, after two bars, after four bars. No. It was total feel. And I could just play the whole composition and play the melody note for note. It was total feel. For my feel, and playing, and the ability to understand melody and play that way—I give my dad total credit for that. Because what I heard was instilled in me as a kid. And I eventually came back to it. So you hear tunes that I write that are like that. They'll just have these extra half-bars, extra little thing here and there. And to me, it's normal. But other guys go, "Oh, cool trick!" That was what he gave. I never had a street in Canada that wasn't total feel. It was this old style, with these old intros. And me, trying to play along, thinking, "That's not 12 bars. It's supposed to change now." And they'd go, "No, wait. Listen." When the voice note would change, this way, the thing would change. But that's what you'd listen for. Or when whatever was playing the melody, you know? As the melody moved, you'd move. Not, like, precisely laid out, after two bars, after four bars. No. It was total feel. And I could just play the whole composition and play the melody note for note. It was total feel. For my feel, and playing, and the ability to understand melody and play that way—I give my dad total credit for that. Because what I heard was instilled in me as a kid. And I eventually came back to it. So you hear tunes that I write that are like that. They'll just have these extra half-bars, extra little thing here and there. And to me, it's normal. But other guys go, "Oh, cool trick!" That was what he gave.

P: And I have just a wicked right hand—oh, God, he could flatpick like Doc Watson. And he taught me that, all this double flatpick. And he'd say, "Whether you can pick going down, you master a picking pattern, that's not the trick. It's the picking pattern upstrips. He'd say, "Pick it all downstrokes. Now pick it all upstrokes." Then he'd say, "Close your eyes and pick it all downstrokes. Close your eyes and pick it all upstrokes. Now close your eyes and pick that pattern and play it again. He'd say, "Now try picking it with a flatpick. He'd say, "Look, it's a lot easier than that. But I've just learned these extra half-bars, extra little thing here and there. And to me, it's normal. But other guys go, "Oh, cool trick!" That was what he gave.
I mean, you talk to Tim Williams, and Tim Williams will tell you that I can do things with a flatpick that no man should be able to do. That's a fact. I can make it sound like fingerstyle guitar. Because I didn't know any better. I'd be listening to records years later and thinking, 'I didn't know this [Gestures like fingerpicker]—I never saw this thumb and finger thing until I was about 18 years old, was the first time I saw it and went, "Damm! That's how that's done!" Since then I've been trying to get that together, but I've been locked in a pick for so many years that I can literally play bass lines, moving bass line, and grab the melody stuff with my pick. Ask Tim. He'll tell you. He said I got the finger thing I got the picking thing. That's what I do. I'm going to start doing that altogether so unique. Plus I got weird voicings around his normal voicings. I'll build the next inversion and do a weird voicing with it.

G: How'd you get into that?

J: Well, playing with other guitar players and trying to stay out of the way. I'd watch, and I'd try to be playing with another guitarist. So I would watch and learn all the stuff they played and say, "OK," and then go home and woodshed a whole other thing. Then come back and go, "Let's try it." Nine times out of ten, it'd work like a million bucks. Sometimes you'd get real sour notes and whatever.

G: You started playing guitar when you were about 11?

J: Yeah. I remember being 11 years old, my dad, me going to him and saying, "OK, I want to learn." I just woke up and knew, "I want to be a guitar player." And I've held onto that for my whole life. It wasn't about being a star; it had to do with being a killer guitar player. Later in life I realized I'd better learn how to sing a little bit better because there's a million killer guitar players out there. And working with prima donna singers turned me off totally, so I started just, out of necessity, trying to learn how to whistle through tunes. That came 'way later in life, 'way later. But I worked to be a deadly guitar player forever.

G: What year were you born?

J: '53.

G: So this was '64.

J: Yeah, exactly. I remember my dad and uncle taking me down to see Lonnie Johnson that year and the year after in Toronto. He had a little cafe. He also had been playing, I think it was at an old Dixieland kind of band. But he had opened his own little cafe. He also had been playing, I think it was at The Penny Farthing, was the club he was playing at with Dixieland kind of band. But he had opened his own little cafe. And my uncles and my dad said, "Want to see a guitar player? Come here." I remember seeing this guy, and I only saw him twice, but, you know, I remember seeing him and blowing my mind. Thinking, "How can one man make so much music out of a guitar?" And sing so great, and make all these chords and melody things, and make it all work. Like, nothing was missed. No, you didn't need a bass pucker, didn't need anything—he needed himself, his guitar and his voice and that's all. And it was deep. George, it was deep. I was, like, "Damn!" That set me on the belief that I could play rhythm and lead together and get away with it. So that's what I adopted—my whole style—it's a rhythm-lead together and get away with it. But with a bass and drummer was so natural for me. It was just like, "Yeah! Perfect environment!"

G: Do you consider yourself a blues guitarist?

J: You know what I consider myself? I consider myself a musician who happens to express himself through the blues venue. But I love all kinds of music, and I play all kinds of music. I love good music, as opposed to bad music. I don't care what the category is. I'm very much like my dad was and my mom was: if it's a great tune, it's a great tune. Who cares if it's called whatever? It's a great tune. It's got a beautiful melody. Moves me inside— it touches me.

I sort of detect categories, and think of them as a marketer, play more than any artistic endeavour. Years ago, my dad would play what he called "country music" and is now called "traditional music." And now "country music" is something else. To me, if you had to categorize it, he was sort of a country-blues-folk guy. All mismatched into one. I think the marketing guys at record companies and whatever have got so hung up on trying to make a buck and categorize stuff that they've ruined music. It's a great ploy more than an artistic endeavor. Years ago, my dad might have called it "country music" and is now called "traditional music." And now "country music" is something else. To me, if you had to categorize it, he was sort of a country-blues-folk guy. All mismatched into one. I think the marketing guys at record companies and whatever have got so hung up on trying to make a buck and categorize stuff that they've ruined music.

J: Do you play everything?

G: But the guys who were making the records needed to sell something, so they broke it down into gospel and blues.

J: Blues guys, gospel guys, who cares? They played great tunes. Where do you fit the "Spanish Fandang" into all that or Elizabeth Cotton's "Freight Train"? Where do you fit that into the puzzle? Is that country? Is that folk? Is that blues? What is that? I'd hate to hear country guys play the shit out of "Freight Train." "Oh, it's a crossover tune, that's what it is, ya know" [Laughter] "Let's get a new word in there! Get out of town! It's the New, Improved; it's the Extra Vitamin C, you know? It's the New, Biggest Box.

G: But the whole blues thing—there's all that schtick around it.

J: Oh, yeah, and it's ruining it. It's ruining it because the real guys that are out there are not even getting the recognition. For example, let's take Johnny Winter's recordings that are 30 years old, and I remember seeing him and being blown away. The songs are that's 30 years old—played today, it still stands. Still stands solid, like a rock. Will Kenny Wayne Shepherd's and Johnny Lang's stuff stand later? Solid like a rock? That's my question. That's what I get upset with. I don't care if the guy is a valid young nympho, and he's playing—and this holds true with the black folks. This is true. Living Blues magazine is promoting all these new black nonwhites who ain't the shit, either. They're not really lookin' for the major talent, they're just trying to promote and make some money. Sell a magazine, sell a record. Disillusioning the public and making them think this is the new blues.

A lot of people accuse me of being a bitter guy, and I'm not a bitter guy, I'm a very good man. And I'll give credit to cats who did work for a living, who put a lot of music out. We'll be listening to a lot of cats who did work for a living. We'll be listening to "em, "You are the shit." But don't get on that stage and bullshit you. Get on that stage and bullshit me, and I'll tell you, you're full of bullshit. I'll leave. That's how I've been, my whole life.

G: Tell me more about your mother's family. Uncle Vic.

J: My uncle Vic and my uncle Evo. Romagna. Their dad was Salvatore. Salvatore Romagna came over from Italy with his wife Clara. My Italian grandfather, he was a short little guy, well over four feet, you know what I mean? He was about five-one and a half or something. My mom told me this about him. He was a very small boy in church, about 8 or 9, and he had to fret. So he passed winces. That's the story. The whole thing. And there was some sort ofinity, rich sort of, better-than-him kind of lady sitting beside him. She kept looking, sneering down at him, right? He looked up at her and said, "That's OK, lady, you can blame me. I'm only little." [Laughter] Eight years old! Eight years old! Are you kidin' me? Everetto, the oldest son, the one born in Italy. The rest—OLDY, my mom's sister, might have been born in Italy. They lived in Canada, they settle in northern Ontario, you know, so old. The two boys, the two boys, the boys from shifts. So the two boys, the two boys, the boys from shifts. So the two boys, the two boys, the boys from shifts. So the two boys, the two boys, the boys from shifts.

G: Tell me more about the family?

J: Well, I think that there was music in the family before that, because my mother told me about her mom's dad in Italy. My mother's grandfather, Mr. Tamborini, on her mother's side was a full-time violin player and he died on his way to a wed­dling. Ang in Italy at a very early age. My mom doesn't recall all the details, but said her mom told her that he was a very good musician.

G: Vic taught Evo to play the chords, so he could play the melodies. And my father came on the scene. They were both a little older than my dad. My dad was about 10. He met them at school, at Copper Cliff Public School and was taken home by them. Actually by Evo, who befriended him and took him home to the family.

That's the first time he ever ate pasta; he never saw that food, he had a very English background, you know, meat over­cooked and potatoes overcooked and everything overcooked. And then he gets there, and it's all these beautiful meals and cheeses and pastas, and cookin' pork chops until they're just—just—you know, my grandfather, Salvatore, he used to cook the most incredible pork chops. He would keep them on the rack, but cut this way, ready to go, and the big fat cap—and he used to put all these gauze bags with his special seasonings, garlics and parsley and whatever, between them, and he'd wrap it tight and bake it like 200, all day. And then he'd go home. My mother said the smell and taste was phenomenonal.

But that's where my dad learned; he heard Vic playing and got turned onto guitar. And he wanted to learn. So this is my uncle teaching my dad: "No! You put your fingers here!" He used to smash his fingers. [Gestures] "You stupid, put it right there!"

That was Vic.
I mean, you talk to Tim Williams, and Tim Williams will tell you that I can do things with a flatpick that no one should be able to do. That's fact. I can make it sound like fingerstyle guitar. Because I didn't know any better. I'm better at recording right now, but I can't believe this [Gestures like fingerpicker]—I never saw this thumb and finger thing until I was about 18 years old, was the first time I saw it and went, "Damn! That's how that's done!" Since then I've been trying to get that together, but I've been locked in a pick for so many years that I can literally play bass lines, moving bass line, and grab the melody stuff with my pick. Ask Tim. He'll tell you. He said "You got the finger thing got the picking thing. That's what's going to make you a better guitar player so unique." Plus I got weird voicings around his normal voicings. I'll build the next inversion and do a weird voicing with it.

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G: You consider yourself a blues guitar player?
J: Tell me more about your family's mother. Uncle Vic.
My mom and my dad were childhood sweethearts. They got married after the war, but they were sweethearts since my dad was like 13 or 14 and my mom was about 10 or 11. They didn't fool around or anything, but they really liked each other. My mom told me that her mom liked him before and after—after alcohol. And the next whole page is his ramblings about don't ever drink. "Look what it's done to me." And it's three or four pages of him teasing out that he knew 20 years ago that this shit was coming on, he loved to drink and party. There's good lessons there, him laying out he was, no hiding anything, no punches pulled.

Another thing in there I never knew about my dad, and she was married to him her whole life. There's stuff that he shared with me because we were the "men"—"You're carrying on the name; you get the seed!—that he never shared with my mom. "Because she's a woman!" There was that mentality—there's certain things you shared with your wife—you do all this stuff, but there's other things you share with the men. There's two different breeds, he'd tell you. So I would tell my dad about the things that he would do and he would smile.

She never went in that book—it was his private diary or something. My mother would never piny into that stuff. She just related that space—he could leave it right there on the table, and she'd never look at it. Same for him; he would not go near anything of hers. You know what that stems from? It stems from an absolute trust. An absolute bond of trust between the couple. A belief and a respect in each other.

G: You said your mother sang around the house?

J: Uh-uh.

G: ...handcasing chocolates to cute little Italian kids.

J: No. My dad told me about a kid getting shot—digging through all the garbage and getting a bullet. Dead. By mistake. Whoever was on roving picket heard the noise—poogh! He wrote a tune called "The Old Olive Tree," which was all about a young girl who was snacking back from raising the garbage, and somehow he used that idea. That olive tree and yielded to stop four or five times, in German and Italian and English, and she just kept running, and they shot her. It turned out to tell of the soldier going to meet the parents to apologize. It tears you up inside when you read those lyrics. I mean, he paints the picture of their feelings, his feelings, the guy who did the shooting, and... BULLETIN de musique folklorique canadienne 34.4 (2000)

G: Do you have that one?

J: I have the lyrics, maybe some of the tune. I don't know; it's been a long since I heard it. Like I say, when I came back from the navy, I thought, "We don't have any of this." So I'd try to record him; he'd get drunk, and I'd get him up to where the tape recorders were, and he'd say, "Ah, we'll just talk and play." So we'd talk and play, and I'd say, "C'mon, play this song for me." Or "Play this song." "Jeez, I don't know if I remember that one." Then he'd step and say, "Did I ever show you this here?" And get sidetracked. I didn't want to pressure him into things, but I tried to get as much of a record of it as I could. I got some of the stuff, but I don't have all of this stuff. My mother had it on by, like, well, they call them the three Louises, you know—Louis Armstrong, Louis Prima, and Louis Jordan. She was turned on by those guys. She actually played the drums, and she was a crooner. Armstrong played in Sydub, and she came with her girlfriends in the 30s or 40s. She loved that guy. So she was the modern jump-swing influencer in my musical upbringing. My older sisters all had the pop tunes, and I didn't want to do that. I didn't want to play that—it—that's New Orleans style blues. There's all kinds of regional blues.

He was a cool man. He turned me on to Muddy, turned me on to John Lee Hooker. And that's where it started. I was 12 years old. I had my first little band, I was 13. They all wanted to play the pop tunes, and I didn't want to do that. I didn't want to play '99 Tears and all that shit. Whatever. I didn't want to have nothing to do with it. I wanted Hendrix's stuff from England before it ever broke in North America. Cream's first album, John Mayall, all this stuff. And then's there I'd get turned on because I'd see the author, and then I'd go down to Sam's and see if they had the originals. "Get any Otis Rush? Get any Muddy? Get any Howling Wolf? Get any whatver?" That's when I found out that Charles Burnett was Howling Wolf because it was listed as Charles Burnett, and I'd say, "Get any Charles Burnett? And it'd be, like, "No." I'd be looking, and somebody in the store would say, "That's Howling Wolf!" "Howling Wolf? Who's that?"

So I had this power trio like Cream or Hendrix type of rockin' blues at 13 years old. Doing these old tunes, doing 'em my way. I was arranging tunes my way so I could try and sing 'em from day one. Because I could never sing like these guys. I'd try to do some gospel or the spirituals for the soul. But I remember, like the stone. "I'm a King Bee." I'd heard the Stones's "King Bee," and that's where... BULLETIN de musique folklorique canadienne 34.4 (2000)

G: You're not a bad singer now.

J: I think it's using emotional soul cells. I sing strictly on feel, on emotion. The album back on, you go, "Damn! That's a good tune!" But at the time, you know, you're trying to do the other on the painting, and you get this really neat thing, this cool color right there, and you go, "Damn!" To me, it's like a visual pallet or a mental palate or an emotional pallet, or a spiritual pallet. And it's all how it evolved, the more you work it.

G: You must have gone through this: you buy an album for a couple of tunes. And there's three or four tunes on the album you thought were slugs. At the time. But 20 years later you put the album back on, you go, "Damn! That's a good tune!" But at the time, you couldn't get to it. You couldn't get to it. The space. From the minute the first Sputnik went up, he went, "OK, we're on our way."

G: You're not a bad singer now.

J: Well, that's what I say, people say, but I still hear the greats in my head, and I know that I'm not—I want to be like them. That's the great thing about my friends. I don't have a great range, but I try to keep the tune in the realm of my range, and I sing from my soul. I sing honestly. That, I think, comes across. More than a great singer, it's honest singing.

G: You also have to be an intelligent singer—you know what your voice can do, and you know what you want to communicate. The obvious example is Diana. No pipes at all.

J: His lyric content was killer, and his phrasing was killer.

G: To turn his limitation into an emotional statement. That's grey cells.

J: I think it's using emotional soul cells. I ring strictly on feel, on emotion. It's not a head-y thing. To me, it's more a spiritual, emotional thing.

G: Some people are born with a voice that just immediately responds to things, and you're just able to work at it, but some people don't know how to work at it.

J: Also, it's like anything—the more you do it, the more comfortable you become with it and the more you're going to take a chance. Where you wouldn't, say, ten years ago, you've been singing for ten years and you think, "Oh, try that inflection. Try that." See if I can make that work. Or all of a sudden, you hear something you didn't hear ten years ago. I use the analogy of a painter's pallet. When you first start off, you had just these colors. Now it's ten years later, and you've mixed up all these really cool colors! And not only that, but actually you know where to use them! But every so often, one color runs into another on the painting, and you get this really neat thing, this cool color right there, and you go, "Damn!" To me, it's like a visual pallet or a mental palate or an emotional pallet, or a spiritual pallet. And it's all how it evolved, the more you work it.

That's how I sort of guide myself.

You must have gone through this: you buy an album for a couple of tunes. And there's three or four tunes on the album you thought were slugs. At the time. But 20 years later you put the album back on, you go, "Damn! That's a good tune!" But at the time, you couldn't get to it. You couldn't get to it. The space. From the minute the first Sputnik went up, he went, "OK, we're on our way."
married after the war, but they were sweethearts since my dad was 13 or 14 and my mom was I think about 10 or 11. My mom shared with me, his thoughts and inner beliefs and feelings on life, and Louis Jordan. She was turned on by those guys. She actually paid big money to go see Louis Armstrong. Armstrong played the three Louies, you know—Louis Armstrong, Louis Prima, and Louis Jordan. She was fascinated with the music, so I got exposed to that. And that's where it started. I was 12 years old. I had my way. I was arranging tunes my way so I could try and sing 'em my way. I was arranging tunes my way so I could try and sing 'em my way. Because I could never sing like these guys did; they had a range, they had a quality, and they had the mental pallet to sing that way. So I would sing it the way I could sing it and arrange the tune so I could make the tune work with my voice.

G: You're not a bad singer now.

J: Well, that's what people say, but I still hear the greats in my head, and I know that I'm not— I want to be like them. That's the time I keep looking for. I don't have a great range, but I try to keep the tune in the realm of my range, and I sing it. I sing from the top. That, I think, comes across. More than the little ring I keep reaching for. I don't have a great range, but I try to keep the tune in the realm of my range, and I sing it. I sing honestly. That, I think, comes across. More than the range, the limitations, the limitations. I sing honestly. That, I think, comes across. More than the range, the limitations, the limitations. It's my soul guiding my voice at that point when I'm singing. It's not a head-y thing. To me, it's more a spiritual, emotional thing.

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lose a lot of the old stuff because I think a lot of the old stuff is really cool.

To get back to my uncle Vic. That's where my dad started. He heard my uncle Vic play, and he was totally floored.

G: What kinds of tunes was he playing?

J: My uncle Vic was playing jazz tunes. Jazz ballads and stuff.

And traditional Italian tunes that he took and arranged, stuff like that. My dad wanted to learn Jimmie Rodgers and that kind of thing. My uncle definitely knew that, and he would say, "Sure, here."

So from there, then you play that melody, like this. And so my dad taught himself after that.

After the first few years of my showing him, my dad went off on his own and learned.

And he also taught himself rack harp, how to blow fiddle melodies on a rack harp while chording the tune. Which is—man, can't chew gum and tie shoe lace! When I saw him in action, my god! I don't know how he doesn't ram his fingers into his face. I mean, he scares me.

I'm really glad that is difficult until you start trying to do it. I actually put a rack harp on a few times and tried to play a melody and chord along, and it was cluckuck! The only way to describe it.

But it was true. We went to see him and stayed at his place, and him and I played a little bit of guitar. And it was cool—it was kind of like looking at my father. No question, these guys were competitive brothers thing. One-upmanship.

One was—this was my dad—he's in the service corps in the war. He went out and bought the beautiful Gibson guitar. He couldn't afford it. No one could back then. So my dad gave it to him. You know? And I made it into a samba or rhumba. Bump-a-doo-doo doo dapp ppppp. My dad laughed. "Whadaya doin'? It's not a samba." I said, "That's me." He would never play it for anybody, but he and I would fool around with it.

G: What did he think about your power trio stuff?

J: Oh, it was total rejection. I was banished—banished from the badlands. "Electric. Goddamn hippie. Psychoholic!" He used to say, "Am I hurting you? I'm standing on your hair!" Things like this.

[Laughter] My dad hated electric guitars—it had to be acoustic. "They look like a goddamn pork chop. That's not me." I knew I'd have to sound like a goddamn guitar. He always thought it should be natural.

There's other guys, too, like my uncle Bill, my dad's brother played a little bit. And it was him and me using English and Irish tunes together and get along. But my dad's side of the family is a strange English breed. It was a competitive thing.

"Oh, you can do that? I play all the time. Came to town finally, I moved in '79, I thought, "OK, this is a good enough place to be. There's no real blues out here. It's a perfect place for me to try and do what I want to do." I started playing what I called Rockin' Roden, a beer-fueled country rock, which is what Nashville is doing now. I was doing it in '79 and '80 and '81 and getting total rejection. They eventually came around. Sidewinder was a good band. And then I moved the Club 21 Lincoln, a rockabilly band. I had that for about a year, and then I said, "Yeah, I'm doing my own thing. That's it."

I backtracked on my roots a little bit and got myself known as a guitar player and moved through a couple of styles of playing and got some notoriety and recognition, and then said, "OK, I'm making my own band now." And didn't look back.

When this is printed, send a couple of copies to my mom. I want her to know that what my dad did his whole life outside of working, the stuff he did outside of working, was special. It was a cool trip—the childhood I had I was really cool. It wasn't always beautiful—I don't want a picture of it, but it was the blue collar workers. It was really cool. Over the years, I get to talking to people about their childhood, and it wasn't real normal—it was real different. But to me it was normal.
lose a lot of the old stuff because I think a lot of the old stuff is
And traditional Italian tunes that he took and arranged, stuff like
off on his own and learned.
here. When you get good with the chords, then you play the
lize how difficult that is until you start trying to do it. I actually
melodies on a rack harp while chording the tune. Which is—
know I've got a good handle on it, and I know I've got a very
chord along, and it was clusterfuck! The only way to describe it.
man, I can't chew gum and tie shoe laces! When I saw him in
unique, personal approach to playing that you can tell 20 blocks
J: It's my style. And it's very much drenched in a blues style.
up that way. And I know what I'm doing. I know where I got
pick—and I made it into a samba or rhumba. Bump-a-da-doo-
doo dump me... My dad laughed. "Whaddaya doin'? It's not a
doing—" I would fool around with it.
G: What did he think about your power trio stuff?
J: Oh, it was total rejection. I was banished—banished to the
badlands. "Electric. Goodman hippele. Hippodelic!" He used to
say, "Am I hurtin'? I'm standing on your hair!" Things like this.
[Laughter] My dad hated electric guitars—it had to be
wooden. "They look like a goodman pork chop. That's not...
I know I've got a very unique, personal approach to playing that you can tell 20 blocks away that it's me. Good playing. Bad, you can tell it's me.
G: Mostly good. Johnny, you know that.
J: It's my style. And it's very much drenched in a blues style.
But nonetheless it's me. I've taken all my woodshedding and
nothing to make it sound like me. A lick starts, and you think
that might be the start of a Freddy King lick, but it never ended
up that way. And I know what I'm doing. I know where I got
lick. I know that I'm playing it at the V chord, where Otis
might've played it at the I chord or something. I got it over here
now. I got it phrased to work that way. It sounds totally dif-
ter, yet it sounds familiar. I worked hard on that.
J: I started listening to radio about 1975. I just stopped.
That was it. Stopped playing records. Stopped everything and
started developing my style. I went by myself, to be with me, to
not be influenced by anybody. To take all the stuff I had learned
up until then and now apply. Play differently and write
differently. That's what I've been doing. There was a point that
I was—Laurie Lightfoot, who was with me 1980 until about '83,
I remember her coming home about 1981; she said, "There's
some guy, Stevie Ray Somebody, on the radio. I just heard this
guy, he's stealing all your licks." I had a real blues-rooted kind
of thing, but a Hendrix-y kind of sound to it. Which is where Steve
Ray came from. And I stopped my whole style—I threw everything
into the garbage can and started again. That's exactly
what happened. In 1983 I left Sideburner and went back to my
roots. Rockabilly stuff, to get myself back into a space of
rebirth. To start from there again and developed my own little
things. Anything I heard Stevie Ray do that I used to do, I
stopped playing. And started doing it elsewhere.
But it's been 14 years, 15 years, and in the last nine years,
I've definitely got a style unto myself, a signature that most
people don't ever get to put on something. You have a style—
something and know, "That's a Buddy Guy," or "That's a B.B.
King." You can tell. They play it exactly where they heard it. That's something else my dad said to me. He said, as
I was learning the first chords from him, "You've got a choice right now to be a craftsman or an artist." And I said,
"What do you mean?" He said, "You can paint by numbers on
something else, or you can paint the picture yourself.
Therefore..." That's how it is." So from that moment on—the first tune I
learned was "Mockingbird Hill," the first tune I learned to
pick—and I made it into a samba or rhumba.
G: Did your mother's brothers come to play in those home ses-
sions?
J: No. They would come to visit. When Vic came to the house,
he was very rarely played. He would come for a visit, and you
couldn't get this guy to play. "I play all the time. Come to
visit. And, you know, being a player, I can relate with that.
You get visiting people, and they want to play, and you
don't want to play, want you to want to play. You do all the time.
But in the back of my mind I still remember being a little guy
and wanting to hear him play. So sometimes at people's places,
I'll get an accordion or a mandolin or something.
Evo and Vic were not real drinkin' guys. Uncle Evo was a
very successful business man in Montreal. He was a roofer. He's
the guy who brought Flintkote to Canada and had the ex-
clusive rights. He's a very smart guy. Great roofer and a great family
man. Guitar and stuff, that was his pleasure. I wish I could, but
not a lot. In later years, after brothers and sisters started to
die, my mom and Eve had not been close but then the mom visits
back and forth in the last ten years I can remember in all the years I was a kid. They were both busy rais-
ing families and were hundreds of miles apart.
And I missed that. The Italian side—it was just unbelief-
able. Good times, lots of love andacraeni and yelling—and
that's just the way it was. You'd get with the English side, and
if asked for something a little too loud, you'd be... Or, if you
were a kid, Heaven help you. I never did get used to it. "I
don't want to go there." Consequently my dad—not by choice,
but just because kids because we had a way better time on the
Italian side of the family—said, "OK, we'll just go there." My
uncle Bill would come to Toronto and stay at a hotel. He
wouldn't come to stay at the house; he'd stay at a hotel down
the street. And my dad and him would hook up, but they
wouldn't come to the house.
G: Your daddy asked you to take the ball....
J: Absolutely. This was before he died, about a week and a half
before he died. He made me promise. He said, "You have the
talent. Promise me you'll pursue it." So I made the promise. I
did. But it took me three years to get serious. It played on me
as a three years. I never thought I was ready. And then I thought—I moved to Alberta. New life, new place, new
to that. I'm going to go for it. I'll see. Either I do, or I don't.
Fall on my face or stand up. But I'll try. And that's what I did.
So since 1979, late fall, '79 is when I started getting serious.
Up until then it was like ten years of flitting. Get a day job,
play for a while, quit the day job, get another day job, play for
a while, quit the day job. And learning. That was all grown
and then finally, I moved in '79, I thought, "OK, this is a
good enough place to be. There's no real blues out here. It's a perfect
place for me to try and do what I want to do. I started playing
what I coined Rockin' Roden, a beefed-up country rock, which
is what Nashville is doing now. I was doing it in '79 and '80
and '81 and getting total rejection. They eventually came a
round. Sideburner was a good band. Sideburner was a serious
band. And then I made the Club 21 Lincoln, a rockabilly band.
I had that for about a year, and then I said, "Nah, I'm doing
my own thing. That's it. I backtracked on my roots a little bit and
got myself known as a guitar player and moved through a couple
of styles of playing and got some notoriety and recognition, and
then said, "OK, I'm making my own band now." And didn't
look back.

Style Threat, an acoustic ensemble Johnny formed
during the early 90s with guitarist Tim
Wiliams (v Drums), this version of the group
called Be Tender, harmonica. Photograph by
GWL. All other photos courtesy of Johnny V.
Mitts.

DELIVERANCE guys come from northern Ontario, all the university
students in Sudbury, and they are all the people who grew up
around. "Electric. Goddam hippie. Psychedelic!" He used to
say, "They look like a goddam pork chop. That's not..."
G: What do you mean?
J: You can paint by numbers on somebody else's picture, or you can paint the picture yourself. That's how it is. So from that moment on—the first tune I
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Bump-a-da-doo-
doo dump me... My dad laughed. "Whaddaya doin'? It's not a
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Jim building a blues style. That's it." I backtracked on my roots a little bit and
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