

SHARP'S HARP

Now, I'm gonna tell you about Melvin LaCoste, the best damn blues harpist you never heard of. Course, those who knew the blues, those who *played* the blues, those cats knew Melvin, and all those white guys in the North, like Paul Butterfield and Charlie Musselwhite, who wanted to learn how to blow the blues, how to bend those notes until your insides twitched and shimmied, yeah, *those* dudes, they learned at Melvin's feet. Now, why Melvin never got a record cut or a contract with any label, big or small, is beyond me. But this is really how Melvin got his start.

Or should I say, how he got the inspiration for his career in the blues. Or maybe even more correct, how he got his mojo, the sword in the stone, the thing that sent him on his way.

Melvin didn't grow up in Chicago or any of them other northern cities. Melvin, as so many before him, grew up in the Delta, poor as an earwig. This was in the years just before the Second World War, when Melvin was a skinny twelve year old who could barely read or write. But he was drawn to the blues, just as surely as cobras come out of their baskets when called by the swamis tootling their flutes. His Mama, who came from around Clarksville, tried her damndest to keep him away from the juke joints and bars that populated the dirt roads in northwestern Mississippi, but Melvin could not be chained, and he spent many an evening sitting outside, or when he could get away with it, inside listening to the bluesmen and women slippin' and slidin' their fingers up and down the guitars, shoutin' out the blues, and blowin' their harmonicas.

His favorite place was Mabelline's, a ramshackle place held together with tar paper and horseshoe nails. Mabelline was a mulatto, and how she got the place was that Ray Hemphill, a well-off white guy, impregnated Mabelline's mother, and to keep things quiet in his marriage he made a deal with Mabelline, when she was seventeen and startin'

to make noise about who her daddy was, that if he gave her a piece of bottom land along one of those half moon lakes that occupied an old river channel and built her a bar, she would keep her mouth shut and leave him alone.

Course, it wasn't legal to sell liquor in those parts, but Mabelleine figured out pretty quick who to pay off, and soon her place became known in those parts as one of the best places to hear the blues. And after catching Melvin, night after night, sitting outside a window listening to the jammin' and singin' and watchin' adults do things children don't normally see, she took him in and paid him fifty cents an evening to clean off tables and sweep the floors and let him listen to the music if he sat in the corner and didn't bother nobody.

Mabelleine's house band, such as it was, was led by a huge guy named Shuggie Morris. Shuggie wasn't his real name, which was Elroy or Delroy, no one knew for sure, and no one knew how he got the name Shuggie, but that's what everyone called him, 'cept those who called him Shugs. Shuggie stood six two and must have weighed 'bout three hundred pounds, and he played the slide guitar like nobody's business and belted out the raunchiest songs, songs like "Shake Your Money Maker" and "Fool With the Big Tool," and sweat would bead up on his big forehead and drip down his fat cheeks and his eyes would roll back into his head and women would start screamin' and people would be dancin' and shouting, and whew! is all I can say. Then to calm things down Mabelleine would come onto the makeshift stage, which wasn't nothin' but a bunch of pallets nailed together, and croon a slow ballad 'bout how her man done left her, or how her boyfriend done left her, or 'bout how her husband and her boyfriend done left her, and when she finished everyone was sittin' in their chairs kind of lookin' at the floor and shakin' their heads, going "Hmm, hmm, hmmm! Damn, ain't that the truth." And then they would take a break, and everyone would get a refill and start to get juiced for Shuggie's next set.

Every once in a while Mabelleine brought in a visiting musician or band, and one week she managed to get Howard Sharp and the Sharptones. Howard was another one of

those musical geniuses who never got a record contract but was known up and down the river as one of the best harmonica players around. No one called him Howard, though. He was just known as Sharp.

Now, before I tell you what Sharp could do with the harmonica, you have to understand something about harmonicas, especially the kind that Sharp and Little Walter and those cats blew. They called them blues harps, and they weren't nothing but two seasoned and curved pieces of wood nailed together with metal on the outsides and ten square holes between them along the top and little strips of metal attached just under the holes between the pieces of wood that vibrated when you blew into them. And good harpists could purse their lips and blow one note at a time, and sometimes, when the song called for it, two notes like the wind and its echo. And really good harpists could bend a note, make it sound like a car coming at you at high speed and then zipping past, and take your stomach with it.

But Sharp, somehow he could put his tongue over a hole and blow through the two holes on either side of it, and make it sound like he was playing one note going up and one going down and man! That just gave everyone the chills; it straightened out nappy hair and made straight hair curl. Sharp called them his "specials." He only played them a couple times a night, so everyone was breathin' hard and callin' for them, and pretty soon it was like the whole audience was about to have an orgasm except they couldn't until Sharp gave them one of his specials, and when he finally did, there was so much screamin' and hollerin' that you would have thought that Mabelline's would have come crashing down.

Sharp had a penchant for women, which wasn't so unusual, except that he especially liked other men's women. Shuggie had a wife, Muriel, but he also had a girlfriend, Tabitha. Muriel was a big boned woman with a large chest and a fat round ass, which at that time and among those men were prized attributes. Tabitha, on the other hand, had finely chiseled features and a tight body that she wound around Shuggie like a

polecat. One night Shuggie brought Tabitha to hear Sharp. Sharp always acknowledged the other musicians in the audience, sometimes with words, most often with a look or a song. This night he teased the audience saying he wanted to make sure that everyone was paying attention before he gave them one of his specials, but all the time he was just lookin' at Shuggie and Tabitha, bending his thin body towards them and giving them a shit-eating smile.

Meanwhile, Melvin sat mesmerized by Sharp. If Mabelline's was the magic lamp, Sharp was the genie and his harp was his magic wand. Melvin took in how Sharp cupped the harmonica in his hands, sometimes seemed to kiss it, sometimes massaged it with his lips, and sometimes outright devoured it, all the time making marvelous sounds. Melvin was hooked.

Every once in a while Sharp glanced at the bar, which was in the back of the joint, opposite from the stage. The tables and a small dance space were between. He was checking on Muriel, who was perched there, wearing bright red lipstick and a dress that said, "Check out these thighs." Muriel, it turns out, wanted to teach Shuggie a lesson. If he could step out, so could she.

The tension in the house rose in expectation of Sharp's special, and sure enough, eventually he gave them a long, oozy, bendy, spectacular one, and the crowd went into a frenzy, and Tabitha stood up with her hands raised and screamed, and then sat on Shuggie's lap and gave him a smash-mouth kiss that said all anyone could possibly say when they were ready to get it on.

The song ended. Sharp put his harmonica in his shirt pocket and the Sharptones took a break. Sharp headed for the bar, where he joined Muriel and put his rather thin arm around her and then slipped his hand down Muriel's back until it found her buttocks and gave one side an affectionate squeeze. And stayed there.

Shuggie had come up for air from Tabitha's kiss and glanced around, looking for Sharp. He wanted to thank him for that extra "special" that had put his woman in the

mood. His eyes found Sharp. At first, the woman Sharp was with simply looked familiar, then she resembled his wife, but then he realized, it *was* his wife.

Shuggie rose from his chair with a roar, dumping Tabitha on the floor. All eyes focused on him, and the crowd parted like the Red Sea as he stormed to the bar, tossing aside chairs and tables. Mabelline, who had imbibed a bit too much herself that night, was too inebriated to make it to get a shotgun she had stashed behind the bar before Shuggie reached it.

Warned by the commotion, Sharp let go of Muriel's backside and positioned himself to run for it. Shuggie grabbed for him and missed. Muriel tried to place herself between the two of them.

"What the hell are you so mad about, playboy?" she said. But Shuggie would have none of it, and shoved her aside.

"Woman, I'll deal with you later."

Sharp started hustling toward the stage, and Shuggie took out after him, again throwing chairs and tables and a few customers out of his way. Melvin sat scrunched in his corner wide-eyed at the goings on. Unfortunately for Sharp, someone had spilled beer on the floor, and one of his snazzy, smooth-soled Cordovans slipped on it, and Sharp did an awkward split. Shuggie reached him and lifted him off the ground like a toothpick. He shook him violently. Sharp's conk came apart and his harmonica went flying. Shuggie then carried him out the door and threw him ten yards. Sharp gathered himself and stumbled to his car and roared off not to be seen at Mabelline's again.

Inside, the place was abuzz. Mabelline had managed to get her shotgun and fired it into the air, putting out a light and scaring everyone half to death. "Get out!" she ordered Shuggie, "and take that tramp with you. And don't come back until you're ready to pay for all this." She gestured to the broken furniture and the mess on the floor.

But while all this was going on, Melvin had fixated on Sharp's harp, that had skidded under a table. Without thinking what he was doing, Melvin found himself

stretched out on the floor, his hand clasping the harmonica. He held it in front of his eyes, as if it was pirate's treasure, and I guess to him, it was.

Mabelline looked down and saw Melvin's legs sticking out from under a table.

"Melvin, what are you doing down there?"

Melvin pushed the harmonica into his pants pocket. He got up slowly, thinking of what he would say. "Uh, hiding, I guess."

"Well, you better get on home now, before your mother hears about what happened tonight and gets worried about you."

"Yes, ma'am." Melvin left, but he didn't head home. Once he was well away from the bar, he found a log and sat on it and took out Sharp's harmonica. He studied it in the dimness as if it glowed. He rubbed his hands over it. He gave it a soft blow, then another. Soon, he was playing it, gradually getting louder, until he tried bending a note, which he did, and it was as if the thing was teaching him, telling him its secrets, how to blow big and long, short and staccato, and he played that thing and played it as he grew up, played it as he went north, played it when he went to Chicago, played it as word spread and he became one of the best. He coddled it, soaked it, fixed it, and blew it until it finally gave out, years later. And I hear, though I can't attest to it, that it now sits in a glass case on a wall in Paul Butterfield's home recording studio. How *he* ended up with it, well, that's a story for another time.