

George Higgs and the Bull City Blues

By Mike “Lightnin’” Wells*

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For more than sixty years, George Higgs, of Tarboro in Edgecombe County, has been playing and singing the blues in his community and in places as far away as Australia and Switzerland—carrying on a creative musical tradition that he has known since he was a boy. What, exactly, is “the blues”?

Well, no one can say exactly when the blues came into being, but African Americans started this musical style in the southern United States during the late 1800s or early 1900s. Early written reports describe the blues as songs dealing with life, love, hard luck, and good times, made up by black workers with guitar accompaniment. (Influences included spirituals, work songs, chants, ballads, and other musical forms.) This early blues was a type of folk music—created for personal enjoyment at home and in the community.

By 1912, the blues was becoming better known nationally, onstage and through sheet music. W. C. Handy, a bandleader in Tennessee, published “The Saint Louis Blues” in 1914, creating one of the first commercial blues classics. “The Crazy Blues,” performed by Mamie Smith in 1920, is usually considered the first true blues recording. During the 1920s and 1930s, after these early successes, many southern blues musicians became recording artists.

Different parts of the South produced slightly different blues styles. For example, “Piedmont blues” or “East Coast blues”—based in Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia—is more delicate and sensitive when compared to the “Delta blues” of the Deep South, although it does have some of the same melancholy chords and notes. People in the region were less isolated than in areas such as Mississippi, and the blues drew on more outside musical influences—ragtime, marching band, and country music. Piedmont blues also seems to have more of a sense of joy, or “good times,” suggesting that it often has been part of celebrations and dancing.

During the 1930s, Durham became a center for blues musicians playing in this Piedmont style. Several musicians there became successful recording artists and influences. Higgs, growing up in a rural region less than a hundred miles east, would take this influence and creatively interpret his own version of the blues for future generations to enjoy.

A Love for Music

George Higgs was born in 1930 in the small town of Speed (“a slow town with a fast name,” as he is fond of describing it), in Edgecombe County. Before the days of television and video games, rural families found simpler ways to entertain themselves or to relax after a hard day of work. George’s father, Jessie Higgs, was a farmer who played the harmonica for fun. He encouraged his son to learn to play this instrument. Young George listened to professional

harmonica players—including DeFord Bailey, the first African American member of the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Tennessee—on records or on the radio. Sometimes he got to see a live performance. Peg Leg Sam, a traveling blues harmonica man, made a yearly appearance in nearby Rocky Mount during tobacco harvesting season.

As a teenager, Higgs became interested in the guitar. In order to get the money to buy himself one, he had to sell his favorite hunting dog to a neighbor. Luckily for the teen, who was very sorry about this, the neighbor lived close by. The dog spent a lot of time at his former home—allowing Higgs to have a new guitar and the company of his dog, too.

Higgs’s style of playing is influenced by the North Carolina guitar blues of musicians like Blind Boy Fuller and the harmonica style of Sonny Terry and Peg Leg Sam. He often uses a harmonica rack, so he can play the guitar and the harmonica at the same time. Sometimes he performs a song with only his voice and the harmonica. These pieces are some of the oldest in his vast repertoire, often dating back to his youth or learned from his father. His guitar style is direct and forceful, as he picks the guitar using the fingers of his right hand. Higgs is soft-spoken, but he sings in a high-pitched, powerful voice that conveys sweetness and toughness at the same time.

As he became more skilled at his harmonica and guitar playing, Higgs began to perform the blues music he loved in his community and in neighboring counties during fish fries and house parties. For a while, he sang and played guitar with a gospel group called the Friendly Five, in area churches and on radio. He teamed up with a bluesman from Tarboro named Elester Anderson, until Anderson’s early death in the mid-1970s. At that point, Higgs began performing solo for festivals, concerts, and schools across the state, to ever-growing audiences. He has received several awards. In 1998 he made his first of many overseas trips to perform. His first solo CD, *Tarboro Blues*, was released in 2001, and his second, *Rainy Day*, came out in 2006.

Higgs has slowed his touring schedule down some in recent years, staying closer to his home and wife, Bettye. “For as long as I’m alive, I think I’ll always have this urge for this old music,” he said. “I’m going to try to carry it just as long as I’m able, because it’s like history to me.”

A Rich History

North Carolina’s rich history involving this blues tradition included the thriving musical culture based around Durham during the 1930s, when George Higgs was a boy. The Tar Heel State, until about thirty years ago, produced the most tobacco for the world market. Farmers grew their crop and took the harvest to local markets for ready cash during each year’s fall months. Durham—a thriving center of the tobacco market—got the nickname “The Bull City,” for its production of the then-popular Bull Durham cigarette tobacco. As the tobacco industry flourished, so did the local African American community, centered in the Hayti district. Durham offered economic opportunities not found in other parts of the United States, which was in the grip of an economic depression. The city became a center for blacks looking for a better life through jobs related to the tobacco business and for blues musicians who could make money there—especially during tobacco harvesting season, when plenty of people had cash. Among these aspiring musicians were some who made history, shaped the future course of blues music, and inspired a younger generation that included George Higgs—players like Blind Boy Fuller, Gary Davis, Sonny Terry, and Bull City Red.

The most popular of these Durham-based bluesmen proved to be Fuller, born Fulton Allen on July 10, 1907, in Wadesboro. After going blind around 1928, he turned seriously to music as a career. Fuller moved with his young wife to Durham and became a familiar sight in the tobacco warehouse district, playing his guitar and singing for coins. He caught the attention of a local talent scout, who arranged a recording session for Fuller in New York City during the summer of 1935. Included in this historic session were Davis (also blind) and Bull City Red, whose real name was George Washington. The recordings gave the American public their first taste of the Bull City blues.

Fuller became a popular-selling artist known for his fast, upbeat finger-picked rags, as well as his slower, melodic, tough blues. He would record some 135 songs, including the 1940 hit “Step It Up and Go,” which modern blues and country musicians still play. Terry played harmonica on some of Fuller’s records. Songs at that time came out on 78 RPM shellac records, with one three-minute performance on each side. People listened to the records on record players at home or sometimes in jukeboxes. Fuller died in 1941 and was buried at the Grove Hill Cemetery in Durham; sadly, urban renewal caused the removal of his gravemarker. In 2001 a small group of scholars, community leaders, and people who love the blues dedicated a historical marker nearby.

By World War II, the strong musical scene of Durham’s Hayti district was fading. The professional bluesmen, like many other African Americans, began searching for greener pastures. Harmonica player Terry, for example, teamed up with Brownie McGhee, a southern bluesman and guitarist who played in a style similar to Fuller’s. They moved to Harlem, New York, where they were active in that area’s blues community. Along with Davis—by then recognized as a preacher and excellent guitar player—who had also moved to New York, Terry and McGhee became popular during the folk revival of the 1950s and 1960s—performing for a whole new audience of mainly young, urban whites.

Although from a bygone era, the old style of Piedmont blues is not dead. Its list of older-generation players grows shorter as the years pass. During the 1970s, many older blues players came out of retirement; researchers based in Chapel Hill helped present them to the public through recordings and performances. During the 1980s and 1990s, Carolina blues became more respected as an art form, and such Tar Heel artists as Big Boy Henry, Etta Baker, John Dee Holeman, and Algia Mae Hinton carried it across the country and around the world.

George Higgs remains one of the last performers of this old-time Carolina blues from the original second generation. A handful of dedicated younger players keep the style alive and vibrant, adding their own creative ideas. However, the important history that Higgs identifies with so strongly in the music can only be passed along firsthand, by those who lived it.

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