

Blind Boys interview

BLIND BOYS

It's good to be here. Glad to be here.

ELWOOD

When's the last time you guys were in San Francisco?

BLIND BOYS

Not too long ago. I can't remember the exact date but not too long ago we were here.

ELWOOD

Jimmy let me ask you, you went to the school for the blind at age seven so how did you lose your sight?

BLIND BOYS

I was born blind.

ELWOOD

What was it like as a child?

BLIND BOYS

Well you know it wasn't really that hard because you don't miss nothing that you never had. I had never seen before anyway so you know it didn't bother me in that way. I wondered though why God did that to me cause I had five other brothers that could see and I asked God why did he take my sight and let them be able to see. I know now why he did it.

ELWOOD

Why? What'd you figure out?

BLIND BOYS

Well if I had been able to see I wouldn't be sitting here with you right now and he knew that so he left me blind to do what I'm doing now. Singing the gospel, tell the world about the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ and if I had been able to see I wouldn't be doing that.

ELWOOD

So what kind of music did your family sing in church...?

BLIND BOYS

Well we all we all were brought up in a Christian environment and I was taught my mom was a Christian woman my dad was a Christian man and we were taught about God and we had a big old battery radio back then, we didn't have no electricity in the house so we listened mostly to gospel music, blues and country.

ELWOOD

Do you remember specific musicians, specific singers?

BLIND BOYS

Well we had the gospel quartet called the Golden Gate Quartet and the blues guys were the people like John Lee Hooker, ...Hawkins... all those guys and the country music guys back then were like the Delmore Brothers, you probably never heard of them.

ELWOOD

Tell me about them.

BLIND BOYS

The Delmore Brothers it was a duet guy Alton and Rayland Delmore. They sang you know traditional country ballads and that's what I grew up with.

ELWOOD

Ricky was it the same music for you?

BLIND BOYS

Well, I came along in a different time. I'm 57 years old and I lost my sight when I was 25 from glaucoma and I grew up in a Christian environment also. My mother she sang and she still does sing

and I taught Sunday school, sang in the choir and I listened to mostly R & B music so I was in that age.
ELWOOD

Jimmy, blind from birth how did your parents think you were going to get along, earn a living?

BLIND BOYS

Well my mom was over protective of me. When a lady came one day and told her about this school that they had for the blind and she said no I'm not going to send my child away from me. She finally was persuaded to take me up to that school and when we went up there it was on a Wednesday afternoon. I'll never forget it. I remember it as though it were yesterday. We went up there and she took me there and the principal told her you know about what the school was about and said you can come home for Christmas and when the school was out which was in May. So they would send us home on the bus and they would meet us at the bus station. But when my mom dropped me off she said she started to turn around and come back and get me. That was the hardest thing she ever did she said and that was the hardest thing that ever happened to me cause I thought when she left me I thought that the world had come to an end. I was up there with nobody, didn't know nobody seven years old. It seemed to me as if she had just thrown me to the wolves you know. I didn't know nothing.

ELWOOD

But music was a big part of the school?

BLIND BOYS

Music was a big part. We had a choir there. We had a chorus there we had voice training, piano tuning and all that stuff but yeah music was a big part and that that was one of the things I looked forward to you know by the time I was up there I was into music.

ELWOOD

What did you and the other students listen to then?

BLIND BOYS

Well we had the same thing. Gospel, country and that was about all we could hear back then. Blues too.

ELWOOD

When the Blind Boys started singing as a professional group you know how was the business handled. How did that start?

BLIND BOYS

Well when the Blind Boys left school there was a guy his name was John Goodman. He took over the Blind Boys as their manager and he would you know take the Blind Boys around to different churches trying to get them known, trying to get them exposed to the different... that the people hear, mostly black folks you know. Go to churches, auditoriums and schools and they were overlooked for the big groups like the Pilgrim Travelers and the Soulsters and all that stuff we were overlooked for them. But that was that was giving the Blind Boys exposure see.

ELWOOD

The group sort of adopted that shouting preacher style. Can you tell me about that?

BLIND BOYS

Well you know gospel has a gospel has a beat to it you know like upbeat and its loud because you know gospel we say gospel is good news you know so good news needs to be shouted out that's where that's where that came from.

ELWOOD

What are some of the groups that did that style around that time?

BLIND BOYS

Oh well there was the Pilgrim Travelers... the Soulsters and the Outfield Four all of that all those groups they were very they loved to sing loud and they loved to shout, jump up and down and let the people know how gospel is.

ELWOOD

You know that's singing sacred music but there must have been pressure to sing pop songs which you

know caused people like them to put moods into pop music. Did the Blind Boys feel this same pressure?

BLIND BOYS

Well when Sam Cooke was crazy to go on and be the Blind Boys were all the same opportunity to do that. We didn't do it we tuned it down we had committed our lives to God. We committed ourselves to him and we said that we if he would take care of us we would not deviate from what we were doing and we've still saying that today.

ELWOOD

Did the Blind Boys listen to Sam Cooke?

BLIND BOYS

Of course! Sam Cooke was a great singer man. Even R & B he was good. He had a tremendous voice.

ELWOOD

Ricky somewhat younger were you a fan of Sam Cooke.

BLIND BOYS

Yeah I was always a fan of Sam Cooke. He started the movement actually for music as far as black artists were concerned. He was a good writer, good publisher. He was getting ready to start his own record company around the time that he passed away so ah he was a great guy.

ELWOOD

Let me ask you some...did the group Blind Boys of Alabama always earn their living only from singing, making music.

BLIND BOYS

That's all. That's all we ever done. That's the only thing we know.

ELWOOD

What about a contest between the Blind Boys and the Mississippi Blind Boys?

BLIND BOYS

Well that was brought about from a guy in Newark, New Jersey. He was a very enterprising young soul and he said that he was gonna have a musical battle between, see when the Blind Boys ... start out we were not the Blind Boys of Alabama, we were the Happy Land Jubilee Singers and the Blind Boys of Mississippi was the Jackson Harmonizers so this guy from Newark created the name Blind Boys of Alabama and the Blind Boys of Mississippi so after he got this battle going after the battle was over both groups kept that name, the Blind Boys of Mississippi and the Blind Boys of Alabama.

ELWOOD

Were there rivalries with other groups like the Dixie Hummingbirds?

BLIND BOYS

Oh yeah ... the rivalry was mostly a gimmick we were all friends but the rivalry was just a gimmick to draw the people.

ELWOOD

It worked.

BLIND BOYS

It worked yeah.

ELWOOD

What about the group's reaction to the Gospel at Colonus?

BLIND BOYS

Well that's when the Blind Boys really got exposed I guess when they took when Colonus was presented on off on, on Broadway that's when a lot of people got a chance to really really see what the Blind Boys could do and as a result we were elevated to another level.

ELWOOD

And tell us a little bit about what the Gospel at Colonus was.

BLIND BOYS

Well it was a Greek tragedy it was a story about a guy Oedipus was his name and he was a guy a king but he committed incest so he had kids by his mother and Lee Brewer and Bob Telson created a play about that and how that was done I don't know but anyway it was a it was a play that they manufactured and they it was brought into a gospel atmosphere and they said the Blind Boys would be the ideal group to help bring that into fruition so they called the Blind Boys the Blind Boys went up there and we rehearsed and rehearsed and rehearsed and we got the play going.

ELWOOD

Was there any issue with the Blind Boys singing sacred music and here's this very profane mystical story.

BLIND BOYS

Well Colonus ... we didn't use the profanity thing we didn't we didn't do that yeah.

ELWOOD

How do you think things might have changed uh between growing up in rural Alabama when you did and now?

BLIND BOYS

Well you know back then you know Alabama well the whole south was segregated and we had to sing sometime in a lot of adverse circumstances but as time went on and as things gotten better times got better so we were finally exposed to the well I have to say the white culture and we found out that the white people wanted the Blind Boys all of the time but we just wasn't allowed to give it to you all.

ELWOOD

The same experience for you Ricky?

BLIND BOYS

Yeah we found out that um uh that people are just people you know and its just a lot of times as of today we were always the choice the Blind Boys were always the choice I mean they always had the ability let me back up the Blind Boys always had the ability but they just weren't the choice. Just like today with our president, he happens to be the choice now but his abilities are what brought him to the forefront but him being the choice is what got him the job so it's a great thing that the Blind Boys got opportunity to do what they could do and that's sing the gospel music because I've been following the Blind Boys ever since I was about four years old that's when I was first introduced to the Blind Boys and uh I guess about thirty some years ago is when I first started working with the Blind Boys so I've been around for a long time and its been a great experience and I know a lot about what he's talking about because I was around and I was young but uh I still kinda known what he was talking about so its been a great thing just to see the Blind Boys revolve into what they're doing today because they're well deserving of that but the bible has just let people know that if you be faithful he will do what he said he'll do.

ELWOOD

Do you think that being blind has made any difference in how audiences listen to the group?

BLIND BOYS

Well I don't know I guess I guess you know I guess it is when you see four or five blind people walk out on the stage it is something unique so I guess that based on look but then once they once they hear you its just like any other thing you know ... if we make you feel something you can ... whether you can see or whether you can't you gonna feel it so.

BLIND BOYS

I think it's a great thing because its amazing to see Jimmy Carter at work when he's doing what he's doing, he goes out into the audience and that amazes the people and just to be able to see him do what he does he's the best at what he does he can hold that note longer than anybody I know so I think its amazing to see Blind Boys do what they do I'm a blind drummer myself and you don't really see drummers that are blind and most times when people do see me they have a tendency to forget that I

am blind or I can't see so I think its just amazing just to see Jimmy Carter and all the guys that do what they do. Billy and ... do what they do because they let 'em know that's it not about what you can't do its about what you can do and they have proven that they can do it real well.

ELWOOD

Do you forget that you're a blind drummer sometimes?

BLIND BOYS

I never thought about it, my mantra is I'm not blind I just can't see and that means I might have lost my sight but not my direction so I never really looked at myself as a blind person but I look at myself as a sightless person because ... that you see is not always what it is and beauty is in the eye of the beholder and we can see beauty pretty good.

ELWOOD

I can attest to that I've seen the group before and its quite amazing.

BLIND BOYS

Where'd you see us at?

ELWOOD

At Yoshi's a few months ago.

BLIND BOYS

Oh yeah yeah that's what I'm talking about yeah you're right okay.

ELWOOD

It was a fantastic show.

BLIND BOYS

Yeah.

ELWOOD

What's it like touring these days?

BLIND BOYS

Well it gets kinda hectic sometimes but we've been doing it so long ... it all goes with the territory you know you get up and you make your show you go back to your room and get your rest be ready for the next day.

ELWOOD

Are there any special difficulties as blind musicians or ... what's the ensemble like?

BLIND BOYS

Airports, airports are the thing now, they're beginning to be a hassle ... we had a me and Billy had a rotten day yesterday ... at the airport for almost nine or ten hours trying to get here.

ELWOOD

That's a long time.

BLIND BOYS

Yeah.

ELWOOD

How does the Blind Boys or Alabama music continue to change and evolve?

BLIND BOYS

We got great producers, we have learned that people need people and working together does work and it has worked for the Blind Boys. Chris Goldsmith he has done wonders for the Blind Boys uh we started out with our first record Spirit of the Century which was ... a blues sounding record and we had some of the best musicians on that record and then we moved on to Higher Ground album and he gave us sort of a R&B type thing going on and we moved to the Christmas record which was one of the records we had never done a Christmas record before and then we're doing it with Ben Harper and we did a Ben Harper record and all those are Grammy records and now he came up with a record down in New Orleans with a New Orleans sound so he's batting 100 right about now. We have moved from one stage to another and I think we can really do one of the greatest records that is gonna put the Blind

Boys in another stage that when people see Jimmy BLIND BOYS sing country I think its gonna be great.

ELWOOD

Adjust the mike ... well I wanted to ask actually there's this new CD coming out of all the duets, oops ... there we go ... the Blind Boys ... keeps falling ...

BLIND BOYS

I'll just hold it.

ELWOOD

... although that's not a good idea ... I mean this is one of the things the group does is appear on everyone else's record and its fantastic to hear sometimes and we wanted to ask uh you sang one of the songs from an album with Charlie Musselwhite.

BLIND BOYS

Yeah we did ... neighbor with him and something else ... but anyway we've done a record with a whole lot of people, Charlie Musselwhite, Ben Harper, Aaron Neville, Solomon Burke and this record that's coming out now will be with all these guys that we've collaborated with they're gonna mix it up and put out a record on us as all of the guys that we've done records with they're gonna make a record of that.

BLIND BOYS

And a fantastic girl Bonnie Raitt she's gonna be there.

BLIND BOYS

Yeah Bonnie Raitt's gonna be there.

BLIND BOYS

Yeah its gonna be great.

BLIND BOYS

I think yeah K. D. Lang too I think I'm not sure but I think so.

BLIND BOYS

Oh yeah.

ELWOOD

The Bonnie Raitt song is called When the Spell is Broken.

BLIND BOYS

That's right yeah.

ELWOOD

Tell me about that one.

BLIND BOYS Well we did that one when did we do that in uh was in L.A. I'm not sure but Spell is Broken and did one with K.D. Lang called Walking and I think that's gonna be on there and its gonna be interesting to see how is this gonna work. I hope it works okay we'll see.

ELWOOD

Well having listened to it I can tell you it works incredibly, its an amazing number of styles.

BLIND BOYS

Right that's what I'm saying the Blind Boys have learned to exhaust themselves a lot of times we have to know what it is that makes us who we are and the Blind Boys have figured out that its all about their vocals. The vocals made the Blind Boys and people like to get the Blind Boys to come in and do background and we like to work with different people and it's a whole lot of different styles on their record and we're even gonna do something with Toots on the record and I tell you it's a lot of good styles and a lot of good singing and if you whoever get that record gonna have a very good record on the Blind Boys of Alabama.

ELWOOD

Tell me about that if you can tell me about that Toots Hibbert song Perfect Peace.

BLIND BOYS

That's the Toots song right?

ELWOOD

Yeah.

BLIND BOYS

Well we did here I think it was here in California right Jim?

BLIND BOYS

I think so I don't know where but it was here somewhere yeah.

BLIND BOYS

But it was a good record he was an interesting person to work with we found that,

BLIND BOYS

He sure was.

BLIND BOYS

He was an interesting guy and we enjoyed it he came in and we did what we had to do and it all worked out fine I think I think its gonna be one of the better records of the Blind Boys at least its gonna be different its gonna be called duets and it's a lot of good people on there and I think that people that go out and get this record gonna have another great record by the Blind Boys to add to their collection.

ELWOOD

How bout some of the younger performers like Susan Tedeschi, what was it like working with her?

BLIND BOYS

She was a she was great to work with yeah we ... toured with her for a minute too so she's a great lady, great singer and she was very very nice to work with.

ELWOOD

Nowadays like right now what do each of you listen to what kind of music do you just put on to relax?

BLIND BOYS

I'm a country guy, I love country.

BLIND BOYS

Yeah I like R&B so.

ELWOOD

Any singers that you listen to most?

BLIND BOYS

Well you know um I like well I like Irsha I like a lot of I like Frank and Beverly Mays uh I'm sorta 70s ... I just like what I like if it's got a good thing to it um I like what Angie Stone I like Aretha Franklin she's my favorite and um its like that with me.

BLIND BOYS

Well I'm a country guy like I said I like old traditional country not this modern stuff its too contemporary for me, I like the soul country like Merle Haggard he's my favorite, George Jones is my favorite, Charlie Pride of course and my favorite country music singer of all time was Jim Reeves so I'm a country guy mostly.

ELWOOD

Where do you all live now?

BLIND BOYS

I live in Alabama still.

BLIND BOYS

I live right across the bridge I'm in Atlanta, Georgia.

BLIND BOYS

I used to live in California for a minute in fact not too far from here Stockton, California and I lived in southern California too Los Angeles but I relocated I'm back in Alabama now.

ELWOOD

What brought you back?

BLIND BOYS

Well my mom was getting old she passed away in February she was 103 years old and I wanted to spend her last years with her and that's what I did so that's really what brought me back.

ELWOOD

Let me ask you if there's anything you want to tell Elwood or the blues fans that I haven't asked you about?

BLIND BOYS

I don't know Ricky what you wanna tell em?

BLIND BOYS

I just want to let them know that if you like good music and you appreciate the realness of the music we appreciate you for coming out and being a part of our concerts and we wanna let you know that you important and if you hear about the Blind Boys always go to blindboys.com and whenever you can come out when the Boys are back in town.

BLIND BOYS

Yeah I'd like to say whenever you hear about the Blind Boys continue to purchase our records continue to go to our concerts and be sure to get this record that's coming out, you'll never regret it, its gonna be a great record I think and we just want to appreciate all of you that have been supporting the Blind Boys these many years because had it not been for you we wouldn't be where we are today so we wanna thank everybody and continue to support us, we thank you.

ELWOOD

Well Jimmy and Ricky thank you so much for coming on the program.

BLIND BOYS

Thanks for having us.

BLIND BOYS

God bless.

ELWOOD

Just before we go I wonder if I can get ID's from you

BLIND BOYS

Oh yeah okay this is Jimmy Carter lead singer of the Blind Boys of Alabama and you're listening to the House of Blues Radio with my good friend Elwood.

BLIND BOYS

Hi I'm Ricky McKinney drummer and road business manager for the Blind Boys of Alabama and you're listening to the House of Blues Radio with Elwood.

ELWOOD

Excellent, we also do a local blues show here called Fog City Blues ...

BLIND BOYS

You do that too?

ELWOOD

That's my show actually yeah.

BLIND BOYS

This is Jimmy Carter lead singer of the Blind Boys of Alabama and you're listening to Fog City Blues with my good friend Elwood.

BLIND BOYS

Hi I'm Ricky BLIND BOYS and ... let me do it again, hi I'm Ricky McKinney of the Blind Boys of Alabama, drummer and road business manager, you're listening to Fog City Blues right here with Elwood.