

Victor Lukas: VL
Tracie Wilson: TW

TW: Okay, why don't you just, this is Vic Lukas again with Tracie Wilson in Chapel Hill, North Carolina on June 18, 2007, and maybe you could just describe what it is that you're about to read.

VL: This is a work in progress, and this is an account of a concert that was given at the University of Illinois in, as best I can tell, 1963. And it illustrates a number of interesting points; it was actually written to be the National Endowment for the Humanities' keynote lecture for the Old Time Week at Augusta Heritage Center at Davis and Elkins College, in Elkins, West Virginia in 2005. And as it happened, the paper expanded and I wound up cutting this part out. So here we go, this is an encounter with Robert Johnson. By 1963, the Campus Folksong Club had become a major venue for traditional artists, and our membership of over 600 along with our excellent record for great shows, guaranteed an attendance of 500 or even 1000 strong for any concert. Folklorist Archie Green stresses the beliefs that prompted us to invite concert guests to Illinois, "In our eyes, most of the performers coming to Urbana represented authentic cultural experience. Further, we asserted that citizens in folk societies held rights to their own materials, superior to those of outsiders, interpreters, and merchandisers." I now assert that right also trumps political correctness, a term that had not yet been invented in those days.

Before I go further I would like to remind you of that often retold tale of 'Le Jongleur de Dieu,' or 'The Juggler of God.' There was a monastery in France who's newest novice had been a street juggler, and had only reluctantly been admitted to the monastery. Because of his humble origins, he was not respected by the other monks; he was taught no skills. He was only allowed to do the most menial of tasks, carrying out the slops. As Christmas grew nigh, all of the monks brought presents for the baby Jesus at the creche in the chapel. Brother Baker brought golden loaves of bread, Brother Scriptor brought a beautiful illuminated manuscript, Brother Farmer brought baskets of grain, and so on down the line. But Novice Juggler had nothing to bring. On Christmas Eve, as Brother Abbot made a last visit to the chapel, to his horror he discovered the Novice, juggling right there in the sanctuary, right in front of the Virgin Mary and the baby Jesus, "Sacre bleu! What sacrilege?" the Abbot began to scold the novice for his disrespect. While the speechless Abbot searched for words to express his disgust, the baby Jesus spoke, "No, no, Brother Abbot, the Jongleur has brought me the only gift that he has to give. He gave me everything, he gave me of himself, and his gift is the finest of all."

Archie Green, in his article on the Campus Folksong Club, says a few of these performers live in revival albums, most remain obscure, many are now dead. Our Robert Johnson was not the great delta blues man of the same name. I can only speculate as to whether a historian will ever trace the stories of the many campus guests who introduced college students, coast to coast, to folksong. Can you imagine the handicap for a blues man? To always have any mention of his name immediately followed by, 'Not *the* Robert Johnson?' Of course, now the years have mixed up the dates of original concerts in our minds, but I think that this concert was in the fall or winter of 1963. At this time the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had not yet been enacted. The Reverend Martin Luther

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King had not yet marched on Washington, but had just given his 'I have a dream' speech. George Wallace was governor of Alabama, and a 16th Street Baptist Church had just been bombed. In November of that year, President Kennedy was assassinated. Civil Rights was the most important issue of the day, bar none, and we in the Campus Folksong Club wanted to do our part by exploring and promoting black culture. Our Robert Johnson had a shoeshine stand in Shreveport, Louisiana, and to attract and entertain customers, he sang and played his guitar, did a few dances and told jokes from his many years in the Carnival Medicine Show. He was brought to our attention by Harry Oster, a folklorist from Louisiana State University, who made a specialty of finding obscure traditional musicians, getting them gigs, and putting their music on records. Harry worked with convicts in Angola, the same prison where in 1933, Huey Ledbetter met John and Alan Lomax. Harry helped Robert Pete Williams obtain a pardon on a doubtful murder charge. Sadly, Harry passed away in 2001, after a long illness. Robert was accompanied by Harry when he arrived in Urbana on the afternoon of his concert date. They came to my house to eat and freshen up before the concert. Robert turned out to be a dapper, elderly gent, with a quick smile and a gentle demeanor. We had a pleasant meal of sandwiches, and as Harry and I were talking in the kitchen afterwards, Robert came up to me and said, "Mr. Vic, can I have your shoes? I'd like to give them a shine." I was taken aback, started to protest to Robert that he was our honored guest, his music was all we needed. And Harry grasped me hard by the arm and dragged me into the next room, and in an intense whisper said, "Robert is trying to thank you, his craft is shining shoes. It's just as important to him as his music, and it's all he has to give. Now you get your ass back in there and you accept his gift." Chastened, and a bit conflicted, I went back and thanked Robert and gave him my shoes, to which he put an outstanding shine. We went from there to Lincoln Hall where the concert was to take place. Now, despite our success and national reputation, the powers that be of the University did not entirely approve of the Campus Folksong Club or of Archie. After all, we were student originated, thus not departmentally affiliated, we invited dangerous subversives like Pete Seeger, and, well, I think that Archie may have been suspected of whispering union ideas to the custodial staff. Many of us had, oh gasp, long hair. Unlike any other campus organization, we were required to have armed policemen at our concerts to keep order, and the Star Speaker Program was outright hostile to folk-oriented speakers. However, on this particular occasion, the concert was graced by the presence of a very grand panjandrum of the University Pooh-bahship, whom I shall refer to as "The Dean" who condescended to come and 'See what all this is about.' The first part of the concert was uneventful, and Robert did well although, it was apparent that his musical accomplishments were not in the same league of that of his namesake. As the concert resumed after the intermission, Archie, who was MC, asked Robert to tell us something of his life in the Carnival Medicine Show, and Robert gracefully obliged. Well, it seems that the Medicine Show, was also a strip show, now in those days it was customary to have two strip shows at opposite ends of the midway. One with a name like 'Little Egypt,' had white dancers, and limited exhibitionism would usually only permit white male audiences. The other, with a name something like 'The Ethiopian Burlesque,' would, like Mindy's Famous

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Burlesque on Broadway, offer music, comedy, dancing and striptease. This show would be open to everybody, regardless of age, gender or race. To improve business, the impression was given that somehow this show was hotter than any other. I bet it was. By way of blow off, that's carnie for selling the rubes a little something more as they're induced to leave. Robert's show sold King Solomon's Elixir, the Viagra of its day, which was reported to be the secret of King Solomon's ability to keep all of his many wives happy. Robert referred to his show without self-consciousness as "The Jig Show." Some of you may now be squirming in your seats and wondering if that distasteful quote was absolutely necessary. Hold on to that thought. I can tell you, that you would certainly be less comfortable with the rest of Robert's performance. He spoke of the Midnight Rambles, which, because it was the last show, on the last night of the carnival stand would have more relaxed standards. He demonstrated proudly his part in the proceedings, he told racy jokes, he flapped his arms and quacked like a duck, and he did a dance that involved rolling around on the floor and pelvic thrusts. By the time he'd finished, half the audience had walked out. Robert was heart broken.

Robert's carnival had been a small mud show that had never left the deep south. He thought he knew what audiences wanted for he had successfully worked this routine for more than 50 years in the forties and the early fifties. And he also knew what his customers had liked the day before at his shoeshine stand. Robert did not know, nor did most of us then, that the blues performers we'd seen like Brownie McGhee and Josh White and McKinley Morganfield and Big Joe Williams had learned to adapt their performances for white or college audiences. The Lomaxes had trained Leadbelly to perform for urban audiences, and dressed him up against his wishes in overalls, a straw hat, and a bandana. Robert did not fit the expected bowdlerized stereotype. The dean was outraged, he sent for Archie the next day and had him on the carpet for allowing such obscenity. Race relations had been set back twenty years, how could the Campus Folksong Club allow Robert to engage in such a self-denigrating spectacle? Despite his zeal for racial harmony, the dean failed to consult the black faculty member, who happened to be one of our prominent members, and felt that the only denigration was done by the dean who was rude enough to walk out. Archie was threatened with loss of his job, the Campus Folksong Club was put on probation, and in future we had to clear all concerts with a censorship board. As I look back, I realize that the jokes were no further off color than Cliff Carlisle's, at Mae West, or Sophie Tucker's double entendres. The dean must have forgotten about the far raunchier songs sung by the thousands of fraternity voices at the Greek-dominated U of I every weekend. The wing-flapping and duck noises seemed very similar to those done on the Ed Sullivan Show by Clem Kadiddlehopper, former Medicine Show performer Red Skelton's beloved Toby character. And as for the dance, I think I've seen very similar moves in break, Krump, and other hip-hop dance styles on MTV and on Black Entertainment. I see more to object to along that line in the currently popular movies Barbershop, Barbershop II, and Beauty shop. I wonder, why wasn't Scottish singer Jean Redpath's rendition of "Tommy Makes my Tail Toddle" on that same stage equally condemned. If Robert had been white, would there have been that same flap? Was he being held to a higher standard

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because of his race? How would we have reacted had he been a truly brilliant musical rival to the previous Robert Johnson? I don't know.

Oh yeah, that earlier objectionable quote about the "jig show." Hugh Rossen in his essay on wicked words recognizes the term 'traditional' to vaudeville and minstrel shows for the all-black bands, and suggests it's derived from the term jig as dance. Perhaps this refers to the animated dancing characteristic of black entertainers and black bands and black shows in the past and today. In any case, it's Robert's term and he is free to use it as his tradition suggests. I have a duty to do my best to hear it and understand it as he means it; so do you. Robert was sent back to his shoeshine stand. Neither Archie nor I are aware of any pictures or available recordings of Robert, we don't know what happened to him. The censorship board, to its credit, never blocked any other performances and soon melted away. We tried to be more careful and in a few cases suggested sanitizing with mixed success. Robert had first been victimized by the social and economic forces that denied him an education, and forced him to make his living in humble circumstances. But he found joy and pride in what he did, and found a means of artistic expression, despite obstacles that we cannot even imagine. When that audience walked out, they damaged his pride and he was victimized again. My purpose in telling this story tonight is to remind all of us who reach out to artists not of our own time and culture, that we need to value each person and each performance, within that performer's context. And it is our duty as historians to become aware of that context. Not all artists will be dazzling instrumentalists or have great voices, or be easy to be with. Some will say and do things that disturb us, but that does not diminish the worth of their contributions, nor of them as people worthy of our respect. If we want to collect the harvest of this nation's diverse culture farm then we must accept that it will not all be pre-washed and shrink-wrapped and labeled for our convenience. There may very well be a little dirt attached. We, in the University community as whole, invited Robert to trust us, to tell the truth. And when he did we didn't like to face what we heard, so we dissed him and sent him back to his shoeshine stand with a little less joy and a little less pride. So I thank Robert for his gift, for his music, for the lesson, and yes, for his performance. And to him I say, Robert, to me you will always be *the* Robert Johnson.