



Guitar Shorty and wife, Lena (Valerie Wilmer)

Obituaries

Guitar Shorty

An Appreciation and Memory by
Valerie Wilmer

The death is reported by Pete Lowry of John Henry Fortescue, the North Carolina guitarist better known as Guitar Shorty. Lowry's informant was Danny McLean, the local enthusiast who first ran across Shorty in Rocky Mount, N.C., and through his initial recordings of this amazing man, set the ball rolling. Sadly, all momentum has stopped, and a unique black voice has been stilled.

During his brief period of exposure to the world outside his own rural milieu, Shorty was heard at the Chapel Hill Blues Festival and occasionally at a coffee house in the same town, both through the auspices of Bruce Bastin. But despite his fantasising, it is doubtful whether the guitarist ever moved outside his home state. All that is known about his life is that he was probably born in Bellhaven, N.C., around 1932, and learnt to play from an uncle, Wilbur. He picked

up his bottleneck technique in Winston, and relied on spasmodic fieldwork for employment. He lived until recently in Elm City, N.C., and played music for his own pleasure and for a handful of others. About a year before his death, he and his second wife, Lena, moved to another small town.

It was Bruce Bastin who told me about Shorty when I was gathering material for my photographic book, *The Face of Black Music*, and it was Danny McLean who led me to the man. I consider that he was a very fine musician and truly deserved to be called an *artist*. Having heard him play on seven occasions, I can testify to his originality. Guitar Shorty used varied material and was repetitious neither in imagery nor in musical ideas. Those who would like to know more about what he actually sounded like can listen to the recorded work he left behind — 'Carolina Slide Guitar' (Flyright 500), 'Carolina Country Blues' (Flyright 505), 'Alone In His Field' (Trix 3306). Another album on Trix will be forthcoming. What follows is a personal tribute to this creative spirit.

'How y'all doing?' The North Carolina furniture salesman stood framed in the doorway, unable to concentrate on his rural sales patter. His eyebrows raised in puzzlement and he wiped his brow with the sleeve of his candy-striped shirt. White faces in rural North Carolina are not normally found inside such broken-down wooden houses, yet here were two obvious strangers seated comfortably talking to the lady of the house who was taking the situation in her stride.

His eyes moved back and forth between the room's occupants before he gathered himself. 'A-a-h, I'm from Wilson and I want to see if

y'all want to try this beautiful double-quilted mattress. It's \$200.00 — that's ten dollars a month. It's on sale for the month. You don't have to pay anything for thirty days and your first payment starts next month. You and your husband can just try it out and see if you don't agree it's the best you've ever slept on.' 'Well my husband only just started work,' said Lena Fortescue. 'I'll tell you the truth, I sure would like to have it, but we don't have any money right now.'

The salesman nodded and left, still looking over his shoulder. It was our car parked outside the little woodframe house that had brought about his unscheduled stop. We watched him reverse the big furniture truck out on the road between the tobacco fields. 'I don't want no furniture,' declared Lena after he left. 'Shi-it! Why spend that kind of money?'

The truth of it was that the Fortescues had no money to spend on anything outside of food and other necessities. Despite the Welfare system that prevails in the United States today, there are those unfortunates who somehow manage to slip through the net. The Fortescues were in that bracket, and the conditions under which they were able to actually earn some wages were frankly not far removed from slavery. Living in squalid property rented from the white farmer, there were wages only when work was available. And when their labour was needed, they had to come running.

Heavy rainfall was making farmwork difficult the day the furniture salesman called. Shorty came home early from the tobacco fields where he had been spreading fertiliser. He went straight into the kitchen and while he washed off his muddy arms, he told Lena that he had to 'cut some hogs' the next day. (This means holding

the animals while they are castrated). 'We just slip out their little things and bring 'em home and Lena fix 'em up - she likes that,' said Shorty. Lena grinned sheepishly. 'Make you frisky, though!' Shorty winked.

That evening, they had a visitor - a tall, bespectacled farmworker with a rather aloof manner. His name was Rabbit and later he and Shorty insisted on arguing with Lena about whether she, the fire or the *heat* had cooked the food. Lena was for herself, Shorty for the fire, Rabbit for the heat.

'But fire ain't heat,' maintained Shorty. 'Let me show you.' He grabbed a glowing hot coal from the fireplace and juggled it from hand to hand several times. 'Look! Look!' he shouted joyfully, 'That's fire but it ain't heat!'

Rabbit shook his head and sucked on a lemon disdainfully. Lena stuffed some more snuff into her mouth and sniffed. Shorty had won that round - without getting burnt - and he looked around for his guitar to celebrate. He was quite a master of circumlocutory reasoning, in fact, and frequently came out on top no matter what the competition.

As he attracted more and more white visitors who like the blues and his own music, in particular, so Shorty's playing seemed to have deteriorated a little. Danny McLean told me that he was only a patch of his former self by the time I heard him, and in fact felt responsible for his decline. Alcohol was one of the few pleasures left to a man in his position, and he had tended to get drunk very easily. This added to his sloppiness and made him careless in his playing, especially when he was using the slide. At times he would almost grate the bottleneck against the frets, all finesse gone.

This night, however, he suddenly picked up his guitar and rested it upright against the bed. With one knee on the bed itself, he leaned against his box and played some really fantastic slide. This time he was really thoughtful and careful about it, showing the true artist that lurked inside the buffoon, so seldom appreciated for his true worth. Although I do not make a practice of taping musicians, I am glad that Shorty insisted on me running my cassette recorder that night.

Lena opened her mouth to say something at a crucial point in the rendition. 'Hush up, Lena,' ordered Shorty, 'And you, too, with them Rabbit glasses.' Rabbit sucked on his lemon and looked blank.

Before Shorty had finished playing, Rabbit decided to leave, rather noisily. 'Yeah, OK, Rabbit,' said Shorty without looking up or stopping playing, 'Walk careful now, or you might trip and hurt yourself.' The door slammed shut on his sarcasm, then the truck engine revved angrily, competing with the pelting rain and Shorty's plaintive slide. Throughout it all, the glass of cheap red wine had remained untouched by Shorty's side. That was one night when the music was catharsis enough.

If ever there was a case of the music reflecting the artist, this was it. Shorty would have flashes of creative brilliance as well as tenderness and concern, then lapse into crude displays and mediocrity. These contrasts aptly paralleled the moments of intelligence, wit and humour that were frequently interspersed with interminable drunken arguing and inability to make sense. I am glad that I was able to spend enough time with the man to know his depth.

In his introduction to Paul Oliver's *Blues Fell This Morning/Meaning Of The Blues*, the Afro-American writer, Richard Wright, posed this question: 'Ought not the contraction or enlargement of the environment in which the blues were cradled be the calendar by which the death of the blues can be predicted?'

Those who bewail the fact that the country blues is dying should stop and consider Wright's words. That such a situation as that in which Guitar Shorty and others like him lived and

continue to do so surprises those who have never seen it. Some blues fanciers even find this poverty romantic. But there is nothing romantic about living in a brokendown shack with a roof that leaks. There is nothing romantic about fetching your water from a well, especially in the winter. Likewise, there is nothing romantic about being forced to live in a situation not far removed from slavery.

Make no mistake about it, unskilled rural workers only get paid when there is work to be done. Lena and Shorty did the best they could with what they had, but there is nothing romantic about the *smell* of poverty, nor is there

anything to brag about in having sat with people desperately blotting out their day to day realities with cheap alcohol and in doing so, drinking themselves to death.

The fact that Guitar Shorty was one of the many who contrived to produce beautiful music in the face of such deprivation is a tribute to his innate artistry. Nevertheless, those who would like to see the country blues continue as a living force in its original environment would do well to consider those words of Richard Wright's and to remember that the kind of wretchedness that produced a man like Guitar Shorty should not be allowed to endure.



(Sandy Sutherland)

Arthur Gunter

Fred Reif

Arthur Gunter, who wrote 'Baby, Let's Play House' died March 16 in Port Huron, Michigan, his home for the past ten years.

Arthur was born May 23, 1926 in Nashville, Tenn. and lived there most of his life. He had two brothers who also played the guitar; Larry, his elder brother, was Arthur's influence and teacher. Al, his younger brother, recorded for Excello Records as Little Al Gunter.

Arthur spent most of his time in the early fifties in Ernie's Record Shop. Ernie also started Nashboro Records, which included Excello Records. Arthur would usually arrive with a guitar and a bunch of songs he'd written, begging for an audition. Eventually he was given a break. Arthur was taken into a small studio built in a back room, and allowed to cut some numbers.

'Baby, Let's Play House' came out in 1955. This was his first release, and became a big seller in the South and was covered by Elvis Presley, in '55. It became a big hit for him as well. Though Arthur recorded many more numbers in a variety of styles, he could never recapture whatever it was that sold 'Baby, Let's Play House'. He continued to record for Ernie Young on his Excello label until 1961.

I rediscovered Arthur living in Port Huron, Michigan in 1970. He hadn't played very much in the sixties, except for parties and friends. I got Arthur to sign a new contract with Excello in 1971. An album was released containing fourteen of his singles recorded from '55 to '61. He performed around Michigan including The Detroit Blues Show at the '73 Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival.

In 1973 Arthur won \$50,000 in the Michigan State Lottery. The first two things he bought were a new guitar and amp.

Arthur died just as RCA (American) released Elvis Presley's 'Sun Collection', which includes 'Baby, Let's Play House'. I am sure this would have made Arthur very happy. He was also in the process of recording some new songs for my Black Kettle label.