

A black and white photograph of Mance Lipscomb. He is wearing a light-colored, short-sleeved button-down shirt and a hat. He is looking down and playing an acoustic guitar. The background is dark and out of focus.

**Mance
Lipsomb
In Concert**

DVD
VIDEO

A MUSICIAN AND A FARMER: MANCE LIPSCOMB'S LIFE & MUSIC

by Glen Alyn



Photo by Bill Records

Mance Lipscomb is a link to the time when the Blues first came into being. He was a natural genius who, somewhat like Mozart, could hear a song once and go home and sing all the verses and pick out all the notes. That is, if he liked the song and wanted to add it to his repertoire. Though his education never proceeded past the third grade, he was an uncanny observer whose analyses of the world and life around him were refreshingly candid and mostly right on target.

When Mance came into a room to perform, he brought more with him than his guitar and a blues tradition that stretched across the waters to Africa. He brought himself, and a way of being that could startle a drunk or a stoned hippy into a spiritual experience. By the time he was exposed to a national and mostly white audience in 1961, he brought a mastery of the guitar built from over fifty years of his fingers stretching the limits of what acoustic guitar strings were supposed to sound like. He brought a working repertoire of over a hundred songs, selected from the 350 he knew. Just about every song was a classic.

Mance's mastery of his instrument, and his near meditative delivery of his music, made what he played look deceptively easy. That is the mark of a master: one whose technique is so good that it goes unnoticed, so the beholder can concentrate on the communication instead. You could spend a lifetime mastering the nuances and subtleties Mance incorporated into his unique style that was at the same time representative of fellow blues guitarists in many parts of the South, and later the North as these Southerners migrated to more hospitable political climes.

Mance used to say that people had quit playing the guitar as hard as he did, because we're living such a fast life now that we don't take the time to study up on it. We don't take the time required to work through riffs over and over again til we break through our limitations and suddenly something new is heard through the air. "Air" music is what he called his music. Music that came into your "airs" through the open air. Music with a feeling. A repertoire brimming over with "Life Story Songs". There are a fair sprinkling who can play most of the notes Mance played. There are few, if any, who can match his subtlety, and the restrained power exhibited in his effortless delivery.

When you watch this video, try watching it with your ears ("airs"). What Mance plays is much more than meets the eye - either yours or the audience watching Mance that evening in the early seventies. Mance used to give guitar lessons this way: He'd take you into his bedroom and set his guitar on his leg. Then he'd tell you to get your guitar out. Just about when you got it tuned up to his, he'd take off like a bat out of bluesland and go ahead on until you got tired and quit or just flat out gave up. That teaching style is yours in places on this video, if you'll take it. Twenty years later, I still watch my fingers come onto something "new" he taught me out of body memory rather than cognitive understanding. That kind of nonverbal teaching and communication is an African tradition.

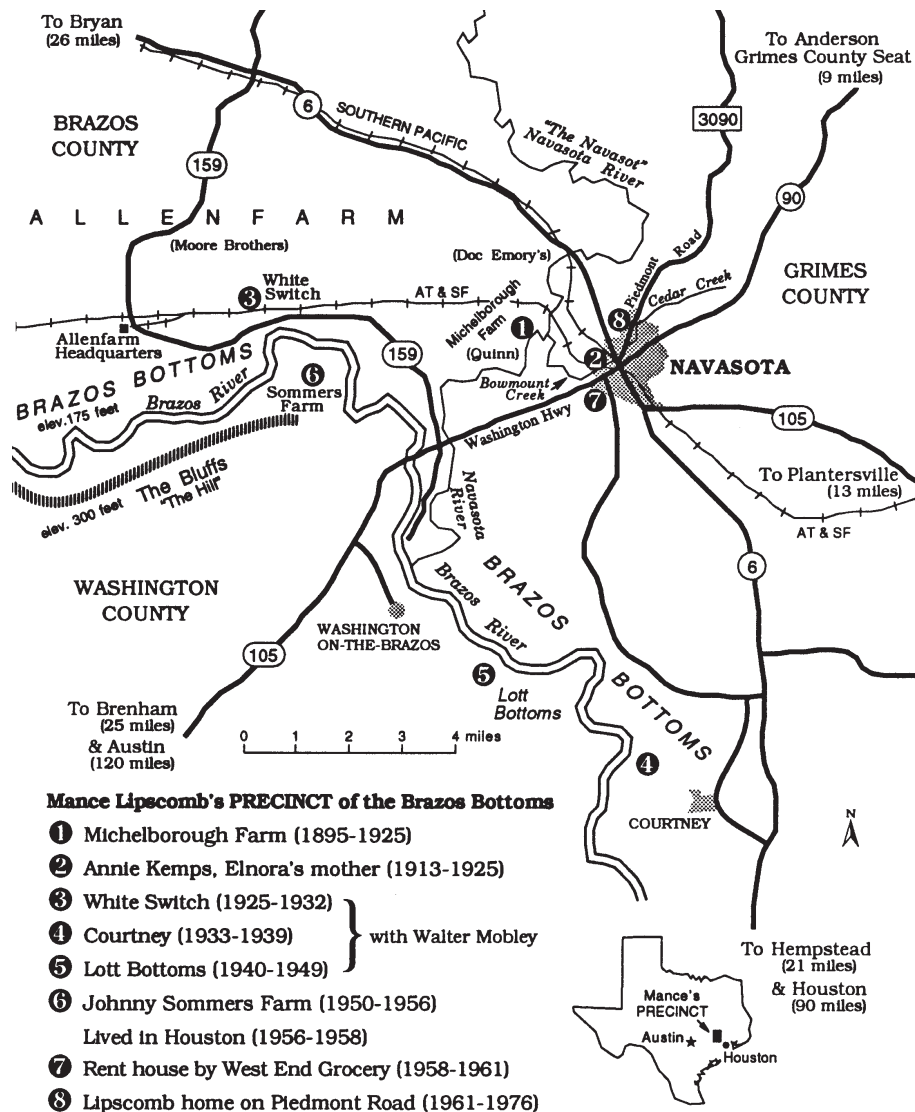
It may be Native American as well. Mance's "Mama Janie" was half Choctaw Indian. Though she didn't teach him guitar, she must have taught him something about rhythm and something about spiritual singing. She could dance with a basket balanced on her head, a feat she'd often perform for

pennies from the whites she worked for. And she was a churchgoer. Mance's father Charles tried to teach him the fiddle he was a master of, and when Mance gave it up in favor of a guitar, his father taught him the basic chords and the bass runs so he could back his fiddling father up at the Saturday Night Dances.

That brings us close to the beginning of Mance's life, because you could say his mother and father made Mance up. I'm going to go over the highlights of Mance's life in my words and from my perspective. Go over the players that influenced him and some of those he in turn influenced. Cover the salient scenes and the turning points of his life as he related them to me, so you can get a sense of where his music came from, and who Mance was as a human being and a legendary country blues guitarist whose repertoire covered nearly a dozen genres besides blues. Mance prided himself on being able to play in most of the popular styles of his times.

Because of that, musicologists tend to call him a "songster" rather than a bluesman. Historians like to label him a sharecropper, too. Mance liked to call himself a musician and a farmer. He didn't fit his own definition of a "songster", because to him a songster was somebody who had a big loud voice, somebody who could be heard for two miles when they led a work-song in the fields. Somebody who relied on their voice to carry their music more than they depended on their guitar or piano or harmonica. Some of the people Mance called songsters were a fieldsinger named Peckerwood, his sister Annie, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Bessie Smith, Mahalia Jackson, Aretha Franklin, Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, B. B. King, Taj Mahal, and Janis Joplin. He called himself, Mississippi John Hurt, Elizabeth Cotten, and Mississippi Fred McDowell "clear pickers". He called Buddy Guy the best picker of the new generation of blues guitarists; but he didn't call him a songster because Mance considered Buddy's mastery expressed more on the guitar than in his singing. So what's your pleasure, bluesman or songster?

If you want to get all the "go-alongs" straight from the mule's mouth, get a copy of Norton's edition of *I SAY ME FOR A PARABLE.: The Oral Autobiography of Mance Lipscomb, Texas Bluesman*. In the meantime, here's a road map that'll get you close to his homeland.



Map by Glen Allyn, Cartography by Dr. Dennis Fitzsimons

Mance Lipscomb was born on the north bank of the "Navasot" River, a mile and a half north of Navasota, Texas, on a big farm in Brazos County known as the Quinn Farm or the Brosig Plantation. His parents named him Bodyglin Lipscomb. That was on April 9, 1895. When he later crossed the Navasot on a railroad trestle bridge to court his future bride Elnora in the town of Navasota, he landed in Grimes County without even getting his feet wet. That was about 1912. By then, he'd chosen the name Mance for himself. It stuck.

His father Charles played fiddle. He was one of the few professional musicians in what Mance called their precinct. Charles would play reels, breakdowns, and joke-songs like

Arkansas Traveller at the barn dances that came to be called Saturday Night Suppers shortly after the turn of the century. Many said he could make the fiddle sing just like it had a human voice — an African tradition that created talking drums able to be heard for fifty miles. In addition, Charles brought his son songs dating back to pre-Civil War, and minstrel and carnival songs of the late 19th century. And he taught his little boy the fundamentals of pacing your music to follow and support the gait of your dancers. Like flamenco, Mance's guitar playing developed as an accompanying instrument for his dancers. That steady beat that no horse, mule, or heckler could pitch him out of was the foundation for his universal appeal. You never miss a beat with Mance. Even amidst the syncopation, counterpoint, and hung blue notes.

Not too far from the same time, Charles left his wife and family and Mama Janie bought her son his first guitar. A gambler came through the fields and sold it to her for a dollar and a half. That was three days' wages back when Mance was twelve years old. As a way of saying thanks, Mance like to drove her and his brothers and sisters crazy plunking on the dadgum thing every chance he got and some he just took. Not long after, Mance could be found on top of a soap box so he wouldn't get stepped on, passing behind his father on Saturday nights, trying unsuccessfully to stay awake all night like his father could.

Mance grew up with ten brothers and sisters. All of them could play some kind of instrument or sing. His older brothers Charles Jr. and Ralph could out play him on guitar until Mance got way up in the teenage. He said his sister Annie had a voice like Mahalia Jackson. His youngest sister Pie died of a heart attack last year as she was preparing to sing solo in her church choir. What's easy to forget about these people is what they did mostly: plow, weed, cultivate, lay by, pick cotton, wait for winter to be over and start all over again. Five and a half days out of every week, year in and year out. Music was developed in the precious few hours between darkness and sleep, and at the Saturday Night Suppers or at church, if you chose religious over secular. That endless work, at the same time futile and rewarding, is in the background of every moment and every story in Mance's life.

Navasota blacks called it "Caint ta Caint": you can't see

in the morning when you hitch up your mules and go out to the fields to head down your first turnrow, and you quit work when you can't see to come in and head the mules back in the lot. This is the way of most rural life-styles, whether the people are black, brown, yellow, red, or white. The difference here is not in the hours, but in the degree of oppression wielded upon blacks in the Navasota area. Between 1890 and 1910, thirty percent of its African American population had moved elsewhere.

On December 3, 1908, Texas Ranger Frank Hamer became the town marshal of Navasota. In the dozen years leading up to his arrival, violence had become commonplace between the White Man's Union and the alliance of the predominantly black Republican Party and the Farmers' Alliance. Lynchings and shootings reached levels of intolerance for some of the more law-abiding citizens, resulting in Hamer's appearance. After throwing a leading citizen in the middle of the muddy street, Hamer took a liking to a little black kid who had just taken to calling himself Mance. Little Mance took Hamer around the backroads and byways for the next two years. Even though many Mexican-Americans saw Hamer differently along the Texas Mexico border, Mance for the first time saw a white man who would manhandle and arrest a rowdy white just as quickly as he would a black. Hamer went on to become the legendary lawman who tracked and killed Bonnie and Clyde as well as scores of others. Decades later,



Photo by Ed Badeaux

Mance went on to become a legendary bluesman whose likeness came to reside on a Gambian postage stamp in West Africa, in a series entitled "History of the Blues".

Mance was feeling his oats by sweet sixteen. He got religion and then was barred from the church. He went back to playing his "devil music" on his guitar. He shopped around and had a yen for those big legged women. On December 13, 1913, the month of the big flood in Navasota, he married one of them. Elnora Kemps. They had their first child in 1914 and named him Mance Lipscomb, Jr. Mance became Daddy Mance. As the years came and went along, Mance became the patriarch for a tribe of sisters, mothers, a couple brothers, and nearly two dozen great grandchildren. He became a good-timing family man. His identity began to emerge: a responsible head of his family, a highly talented musician, an excellent farmer, and a man who developed and expressed his spiritual values on his own terms.

In his teens and twenties, Mance sought out players whose music moved him and his neighbors. Some became legendary, others were never discovered. Like thousands of exceptional Southern musicians, the "undiscovered" reputations lingered on after their deaths only in the memories of those who heard them, for they were never recorded in any medium other than the human ear. People like Sam Collins, a redheaded white skinned Negro who played the first strains of guitar music Mance heard when he was eight years old and still going by Bodyglin. Or like Richard Dean and Hamp Walker, circus carnival and black minstrel musicians from Navasota, who would go on the road for six months and return to Navasota for six months. Dean taught Mance *Shorty George*, while Hamp Walker taught him *Buckdance* and *She Flagged a Mule to Ride*. Or Mance's fellow Navasota musician Isom Willis, or T Lipscomb, Mance's nephew who had a big loud songster's voice and who died of diabetes long before the first recording device entered the Lipscomb precinct.

Then Mance had a series of encounters with music legends. Around the first World War, an itinerant musician would often appear on the streets of Navasota. He'd always ask for someone to tune his guitar for him. Mance soon became the chosen one. This fellow played an unusual style of guitar, tuning it up to sound like a chord when it wasn't fretted, and

sliding objects like metal pipes and glass bottle-necks across the strings. He went by the name of Blind Willie Johnson. His stylized slide technique on songs like *God Moves on the Water* and *Motherless Children Sees a Hard Time When Their Mother Is Dead* influenced generations of black slide players, who in turn have influenced the slide techniques of white and black blues and pop music of today.

From 1917 to 1921 (except one year when the crop was real good in



Photo by Stefan Grossman

Navasota), Mance went up to the Dallas area to pick cotton in the fall. There he heard about a real songster who played under a live oak tree on the Houston & Texas Central tracks, down on Deep Ellum street in Dallas. His name was Blind Lemon Jefferson, from Wortham. Lemon was an imposing figure who managed to make fools out of hecklers and especially people who thought they could out-play him. Mance hung back in the audience, soaking every note in through his ears, recording them in that brain that could take them back to Navasota and play them back from the memory of a single hearing. Mance especially liked Lemon's versions of *Out and Down* and *See To My Grave Kept Clean*. He played them for nearly sixty years.

By the 1920's, Victrolas had crept into Navasota. With them came the voices and innovative instrumentation of Memphis Minnie and her *Bumble Bee*, Bessie Smith's *Careless Love*, their accompanists and the other Smith women. Mance took what he liked and incorporated it into his expanding repertoire.

One famous yodeler who picked up a lot of blues notes and structure was pretty popular by then. Jimmie Rodgers

passed through Navasota on one of his tours, and heard Mance Lipscomb play. He asked Mance to go on tour with him, but Mance declined. He had too many family responsibilities. Going on the road was risky, and a family that had no man as the head of household could be little else than day laborers in the sharecropper economy.

Along with the reels, breakdowns and joke songs learned from his father, Mance would convert the styles of Jefferson, Johnson and the carnival players to his solid dancing style. It incorporated a steady bass drone that also acted as a drum and room for melodic leads on the high strings, with syncopation and counterpoint splashed throughout. Mance began to convert work songs and field songs into danceable music. *Captain, Captain* was learned from an itinerant ex-convict who worked for his mother. Mance brought it in from the fields and offered it on the Saturday Night Supper dance floors. Following Blind Willie Johnson's example, he set to guitar spirituals learned from his mother and from the church. *Mother Had a Sick Child* and *When Your Lamps Go Out* followed suit with *Jack a Diamonds Is a Hard Card To Play*, all rendered in a haunting and willowy slide delivery accomplished through the wriggle of a pocket knife. Mance played them all for the gamblers, dancers, eaters, children and the ladies. At times he'd slip in children's songs, too. Playing from around eight at night til sometimes as late as church time on Sunday, Mance was making good money at \$1.50 a night — plus tips from the gamblers when they thought Mance brought them good luck.

The Saturday Night Supper, or Saturday Night Dance, was the weekly blowout for the African American community. It combined food, song, dance, alcohol, gambling, gossip, sex



Photo by Tom Copi

— mixing it up in the varieties of your choice into an extended evening of triumphant revelry. A place where men and women could blow off the steam of five and a half days of sweat and taking in back talk. This secular meeting started a little before dark, and often spilled over into church time on Sunday. It was the one and only social function besides weddings and funerals — and those were the domain of the deacons and preachers and angels of the chorus, anyway. The competition and animosity between bluesman and preacher — both performers in their own right — is summed up in the couplet, “If you wanta make a preacher laugh, change a dollar and give him half. Your last time you ever gonna dog me round.”

The Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression came and went. All Mance and his neighbors experienced was “De Pressure”, the annual agrarian working cycle dictated by the seasons. A weekly cycle of five and a half days of work from “Caint ta Caint”, an annual cycle that left most families either breaking even or more in debt by the end of the year, and a life cycle in which Mance cleared \$500 one year (in the 40’s), and all the rest he either broke even or lost money. When the Great Depression came to Navasota blacks, it looked about the same as always as far as they were concerned. Just a little less sugar and a little less coffee.

Livers through the twenties, thirties and forties experienced a great expansion of the rural migrations into the cities. Navasota African Americans began to show up in numbers in Houston and Galveston. When the docks in California became nearly empty of white workers, Mance’s brother Ralph moved along with hundreds of Navasotans to fill the comparatively lucrative spaces in Los Angeles. Ralph never returned. It is likely some of these people moved to New York and Chicago as well. What most of them carried with them was the brilliant shadow of Mance’s reputation. Though he was still invisible to the white world at large, Mance’s neighbors did not wait to be told of his prominence by the media. Since the 1930’s Mance had been recognized as “the ace man in his precinct”. His prowess at the Saturday Night Suppers was unmatched from Hempstead to Navasota, to Bryan to Washington-on-the-Brazos.

Lightnin Hopkins was playing down in Galveston one

evening in 1938 while Mance was visiting his youngest brother and sister, Willie and Lillie, the twins Mance called Coon and Pie. Though Mance and Lightnin had heard of each other for years, this was their first face-to-face encounter. Since it was Lightnin's gig, Mance gave him the stage and didn't even play a note.

The 30's and 40's saw the advent of juke joints into Navasota, places like "The Big Wheel" and "Nolan's Place" over in Washington County. Radio crept into some of the black neighborhoods as well. Mance began to hear tunes like Big Bill Broonzy's *Key to the Highway* through the juke joint doors. By this time, Mance was a regular on Friday nights for white dances. They payed better and quit sooner. \$7.50 a night, and he'd usually be home by two or three A.M. When the Draft came to Navasota, Mance's bossman took him in and registered him in the critical field of farming so he wouldn't lose him to the US Army.

Mance always said he was a mama's child. He couldn't lie to her — well, not much, anyways. When she took sick, Mance and his family took care of her for years. That was long before Medicaid. They just looked after her as best as they could. When Coon and Pie took her to Galveston in 1950, Mance was nearly sick about it. He figured rightly if she'd have still been with them when their house set fire a few months later, she'd have burned up along with every other stitch they had, save for a pair of overhauls hanging on the clothes line, their night clothes, and some gasoline for the tractors stored across the road in the crib. Elnora ran back into the flames and saved her granddaughter Ruby. Elnora's false teeth money burnt up. After that, she decided she didn't need teeth after all, even after Mance began to play around the country and could have bought her some.

By now, the Lipscombs had farmed in three counties: Brazos, Grimes, and Washington. Mance started with his mother on the Quinn place in Brazos County. They lived with Elnora's mother Annie in Navasota from 1913 to 1925. By then, Mance had moved across the fence to work for Walter Mobley, a man who treated Mance well enough for Mance to stick with him until Mobley quit the farming business in 1949. He died a few years later. They moved to Mobley's land holdings near White Switch in Brazos County from 1925 to 1932,



Photo by Bill Records

then over to Mobley's place near Courtney in Grimes County from 1933 to 1939. During this time, Mance farmed, played music, and employed his third grade education for a time as a "counter", the man who kept track of how many bales of cotton each worker had picked. There were many years when Mance was Mobley's chauffeur. They would drive frequently to Ft. Worth, where Mobley would buy mules by the boxcar load at the auction barns in the stockyards. Many of those sales were likely auctioneered by the famous muletrader Ray Lum.

Their last stint with Mobley was in the Lott Bottoms (Mobley had married a Lott girl; the Lotts were one of the twelve prominent white families known as "The Old Guard") in Washington County, from 1940 to 1949. When Mobley quit farming, he gave Mance ownership of Mance's working team of mules and farming implements. This brought Mance up one important economic notch. The lowest class of agricultural worker was a day laborer, one who worked for a day's wages or for how much cotton they could pick during the fall harvest season. When a man had a family and demonstrated his dependability, he was given a home, tools, seed, and animals. In return, he worked for "halvers": he kept half and the landowner got half of everything his sharecropper grew. If he owned his own team of mules and his plowing and cultivating equipment, he could work for "thirds and fourths". Then, the landowner provided housing and seed, and took in

compensation every third bale of cotton and every fourth bushel of corn.

In 1950, Mance moved his family and his mules over to the Johnny Sommers farm on the Bluffs of Washington County. There, Mr. Sommers forced Mance to give up his mules and convert to farming with a tractor. The noise and speed of this machine signalled the end of an era. For thousands of years Blacks had used song to establish their work rhythms and bring pleasure into their labors. Tractors broke up the teams of laborers, and their noisy engines made it impossible to sing over. The worksong tradition that gave birth to the blues was gone.

In 1956, Mance and Elnora decided they'd had all the country life and poor and unpredictable wages they could stomach. In the dead of night, they hightailed it to Houston. By this time, Lightnin Hopkins had recorded several albums, some of which had reached Europe and created a sensation. When Sam Charters and Chris Strachwitz scoured Houston in search of a similar talent, Mance was playing guitar behind an old-time fiddler named Bill. They overlooked Lipscomb.

But somebody else hadn't. Shirley Dimmick hailed from the Louisiana-Texas border region. After growing up on black music her parents told her not to go hear, she became the first white woman blues singer to tour with an all-black band. Getting around in the late 40's and 50's, she preceded Peggy Lee. About the time Elnora was pulling her granddaughter Ruby out of the fire in 1951, Shirley was in New York, talking to one of the members of Count Basie's Orchestra. After learning she'd spent time in Texas, he told her if she really wanted to hear what the blues was all about, go listen to a guy named Mance Lipscomb. She could find him in Navasota.

She surely did. On several occasions, all before Mance packed up and moved to Houston. One night, she was at some country juke joint where Mance was playing in an impromptu string and brass band composed of his guitar, a piano, harmonica, and gutbucket. As usual, she got to hear them all night for practically nothing but the time invested. Thirty years after Jimmie Rodgers, Shirley was the second white person outside of Navasota to recognize Mance's talent. In the 60's, she gave a longhaired white girl voice and blues lessons in Austin, and likely got her together with Mance Lipscomb.

Her name was Janis Joplin.

Meanwhile, after an accident at the lumberyard where Mance worked, he was able to get a legal settlement. He returned to Navasota in 1958 with his \$1,700 share. With that, they bought a two and a half acre horse lot for taxes from Mance's Uncle Jim and Aunt Mary Oliver. They became landowners on the outskirts of Navasota. By 1961, they had built a house out of salvaged lumber. For the first time in their lives, they were living in their own home.

Something happened in that transition year of 1960, between rent house and owned home. Chris Strachwitz, on a mission from California to record Lightnin Hopkins and anyone else he could find, came to Houston just when John Lomax, Jr. had taken Lightnin to Berkeley to play at a music festival. Strachwitz connected up with Mack McCormick, and the two decided to hunt down Tom Moore, the protagonist of the field song *Tom Moore's Blues* which Lightnin recorded in the 50's, and which Mance had first set to music in the 40's out on Tom Moore's Farm in Brazos County. They ended up meeting Tom Moore in Navasota. After asking the question over and over again from Waller to Navasota, "Any good guitar pickers around here?" and receiving the same answer, they wound up on Mance's front porch when he came in from a day's work cutting grass along the highways. That evening, they recorded over two albums of material in Mance's living room — on the first take — with Mance using an acoustic Harmony guitar owned by Strachwitz. They were looking for an acoustic guitar player, not an electrified one. Mance obliged them, playing flawlessly on a guitar he'd never played before that night.



Photo by Tom Copi

Strachwitz returned to Berkeley, and launched his record label by producing Mance Lipscomb's first record album. Arhoolie is a field shout, a work song — part of what the blues came out of. Barry Olivier invited Mance to the 1961 Berkeley Folk Festival, along with Pete Seeger, Jean Ritchie, Sam Hinton and others. His appearance before a sellout crowd launched a thirteen-year career that began at 66, after retirement age. From 1961 to January of 1974, Lipscomb went on to play at every major folk and blues festival he had time for. He influenced a generation of musicians who spilled over into the folk, blues, country-western and pop genres. We'll get more into that in a minute.

But who really “discovered” Mance? Was it the thousands of adoring white fans who first heard Mance in Berkeley in 1961? Was it Chris Strachwitz who launched his Arhoolie record label with his and Mance's first release? Was it Mack McCormick who convinced Strachwitz of what a rare musical find they'd just recorded, after Chris expressed his disappointment that Mance's music was not as rough and raw as his favorite blues singer Lightnin Hopkins? Was it Shirley Dimmick who crossed the racial barriers in the early 1950's to hear him in his hometown? Was it the musician in Count Basie's Orchestra who turned her on to him?

Was it the hundreds of Navasota blacks who migrated to the cities and sang Mance's praises on the streets and in the musical establishments there? Was it his fellow African Americans who stayed and came to hear Mance for decades at the Saturday Night Suppers he provided the cohesiveness for, with his stunning ability to listen and watch his dancers while simultaneously playing the hell out of his guitar? Or was it Mance himself, who at some point discovered how talented he was, and allowed himself to develop that talent to the degree of mastery?

Or was it the hundreds of thousands who discovered Mance at music gigs from 1961 to 1973, in a dirt floor garage off some side-street Dallas house with a garage-sale sign scrawled out in front advertising his presence, at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, the Ann Arbor Blues Festival, or somewhere in between? Was it the dozens of musicians who discovered him in the 60's and sought to emulate part of what they heard and felt, musicians who went on to impact

regional and world music as well as those who didn't? Or was it the thousands in Europe and elsewhere who uncovered Mance's recordings on the Arhoolie labels or that single album put out by Warner Bros. Reprise, or the blues anthology from Vanguard? Did discovery come when a scrubby hippy musician discovered Mance at the Kerrville Folk Festival in 1972, after much of the world had already discovered his music, or when that hippy decided to record the humanity and master storyteller that he recognized in Mance Lipscomb and turn it into a book? Or does discovery come today when people pick up *I SAY ME FOR A PARABLE* and read it, watch Mance on this video, watch him on the Les Blank/Skip Gerson documentary, or hear him on radio or an Arhoolie CD?

I say discovery is just a matter of point of view. Because when you first encounter something dazzling that shifts the way you live your life, it's your discovery and yours alone. Maybe a better word to look at is recognition. As did the African-American population to a large extent, Mance Lipscomb remained invisible to the dominant white culture until 1961. The first civil rights legislation since Reconstruction was not passed until 1956, the year Mance fled from Navasota to Houston. Its passage was facilitated by a fellow Texan named Lyndon Baines Johnson. That's when "this Negro problem" was politically recognized and acknowledged by the mainstream. Martin Luther King and millions of others of all colors marched through that gate during the 1960's up through this moment. What does it take to recognize somebody, first as a human being and second as a rare talent? Do we have to have a media blitz to convince us of somebody's worthiness or greatness, or do those faculties of discernment exist within each of us, independent of consensus? Talent is one thing, its discovery quite another. Character is one thing, recognition quite another.

In 1972, Mance told me to go hear Buddy Guy and Jr. Wells. He said Guy was the best guitar player in the younger generation, bar none. Mance noted Buddy's ability to play in a spectrum of styles. He heard him playing about as hard in his style as Mance played in his. In the 60's, a young guitar player named Jimi Hendrix privately acknowledged Buddy Guy as his inspiration. All Lipscomb and Hendrix needed were

their own ears, perceptions, and their ability to discern to tell them Buddy Guy was worth listening to. A find. Now, nearly thirty years later, Buddy Guy has been “discovered” by the world. His latest album has won the Grammy award, and his oral autobiography has just been reviewed in the New York Times. So, when was Buddy Guy “discovered” exactly, and by whom? Who is worth listening to, and being with, and who decides?

From 1961 to 1974, lots of folks decided to hire Mance and come listen to him play. At the Ash Grove in Los Angeles, the Rubaiyat in Dallas, clubs in Boston and New York, Cabal and Freight & Salvage in Berkeley, the Berkeley Blues Festival, Miami Blues Festival, Ann Arbor Blues Festival, the Eureka Springs Bluegrass Festival. The list goes on and on. John Jr. and Mimi Lomax took a liking to him soon after his Berkeley appearance. They and Ed Badeaux (former editor of Sing Out! Magazine) brought him to Houston in 1962. They remained steadfast friends until John Jr.’s death in the early 70’s. Mance played over a hundred universities: U. Texas, Winfield and Lawrence, Kansas, UC Santa Barbara, UC Berkeley, UCLA. He ranged over 24 states: Texas, Arkansas, Kansas, Oklahoma, Florida, Massachusetts, New York, Washington, Oregon, California. . . . Mance appeared 54 times in Austin alone, places like the Vulcan Gas Company, Armadillo World Headquarters, Toad Hall, Castle Creek, Saxon Pub (that was his last gig in January of 1974). Dr. Roger Abrahams was one of the first to introduce him to the UT Austin crowd. Dick Waterman became his East Coast booking agent while Waterman was booking Bonnie Raitt. Sandy Getz booked Mance on the West Coast.. Unlike Lightnin Hopkins, Mance never had an agent that booked him exclusively.

When the phone would ring and Mance would hear the words “Can you come play?”, off he’d go. Whether it was for a thousand dollars or just for the fun of it. Mance always said he played just as hard for one person as he did for a thousand. I’ve personally witnessed him do just that. Whether it was me or someone else in his bedroom, playing at Doc Bowman’s parties to return Doc’s favor of making his dentures with the gold guitar in the bridge and the gold stars in five teeth, or playing at a festival before wall to wall people. In the late 60’s, Mance went up to the Northwest for a tour.

He got very sick there, and likely had his first stroke. When he came through the chain link gate, Elnora said he wasn't even sure where he was. Mance took several months to recover, then off he went again.

He never let people know that he was anything less than a rock against the wind. He liked to stay with people rather than sleep in a hotel. Even though often times his hosts would sleep til two in the afternoon, assuming Mance would get up and help himself to anything in the house. Mance never did. He'd always wait for his hosts to arise, even though he was almost always awake by 7 A.M. And he'd never complain about how he was treated or ignored. He was honored that people would invite him into their homes. It likely healed a festering wound from his past.

This way of carrying himself, this way of unassuming grace, this way of gentlemanliness won Mance thousands of fans and altered the lives of many of them. Here was a man who lived what he spoke, a musician who walked his talk. A true folksinger who sang his "True Story Songs" from his heart and from his life experience. The songs go deep into the listener because they come from deep within Lipscomb. Many a musician was influenced musically, lyrically, experientially, or all three by Mance's way of being in the world.

Along the way, Mance had some star pupils and hundreds of unrecognized students. Bob Dylan and Joan Baez followed Mance around in the early 60's. Dylan's lyrics profited immensely from his careful listening to the basic blues couplets. In 1993, Dylan returned to those roots. Taj Mahal and Ry Cooder played together for awhile, and both were Mance's



Photo by Bill Records

students. Mance backed up Janis Joplin when she was first getting on stage at Threadgill's in Austin. Early in their careers, Big Brother & the Holding Company, Jefferson Airplane, and the Grateful Dead shared equal billing with or opened for Mance Lipscomb. Stefan Grossman sought out the blues masters, spending most of his time with fellow hometown Rev. Gary Davis in New York. Mance was one of Grossman's "weekend" teachers.

Guy Clark hung out with Mance in his early years in Houston, long before Jerry Jeff Walker recorded "Desperado" and "LA Freeway". Guy's guitar picking and lyrics bear Mance's mark. Through yet another of his famous stoned wild eyes, Townes Van Zandt remembers watching a cockroach crawl out of Mance's guitar, down into his boot, and back up into the guitar again. Townes reflected that when he should have been listening to one of the great blues masters, he was watching a damn cockroach. Lucinda Williams was going to Navasota to see Mance and spending time with him in Austin when she was developing her bluesy style and working it out while playing for tips on the Drag and singing for next to nothing in local Austin clubs. Mason Williams heard Mance when fellow Texan Mason was penning his "Them Poems" and writing for the Smothers Brothers. On his first album, Leon Redbone's rendition of *Shine on Harvest Moon* sounds like a cleaned up carbon copy of Mance's version. Similar to Mance's choice of spectral musical styles, Mance's influence was by no means limited to blues musicians. He even spent a couple days on Frank Sinatra's yacht serenading him and his lady friend who looked a lot like Mia Farrow. Country-western musician Bill Neely took a liking to Mance early on. During the 60's and early 70's, they spent many an all-nighter on Neely's porch, playing music and trading licks to the occasional rolling of the trains nearly through his back yard located by the tracks just northeast of Austin's Hyde Park. Often sitting up after Lipscomb's gig or after Neely backed up Ken Threadgill at his legendary gas station and bar on N. Lamar, where Threadgill and Lipscomb encouraged Janis Joplin in her early days.

Mance got a ride on the "star crane" in front of Grauman's Chinese Restaurant, so his footprints resided in the cement sidewalk of the stars with the likes of Hoot Gibson, Cary



Mance with songster Bill Neely (Photo by Bill Records)

Grant, and Marilyn Monroe. Mance was listed in “Who’s Who in America”. LBJ first became Lipscomb’s fan at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. After his retirement from the Presidency, one of the long-eared Texan’s last public appearances was when he, his family and UT football coach Darrell Royal came to hear Mance at the first Kerrville Folk Festival in 1972.

Lesser known talents were among the crowd of students Mance shared his music with. People like John Vandiver, Mary Egan & Cleve Hattersley, Kurt Van Sickle, the Mississippi Leghounds, Billy Bean. . . . Ask around. You may know somebody who heard or learned from Mance. Either personally or somewhere in the media.

Mance shared the stage with Buddy Guy & Jr. Wells, Doc Watson, Earl Scruggs, Arlo Guthrie, Robert Shaw, Ramblin Jack Elliott, Muddy Waters, Howlin Wolf, J. B. Hutto, Mississippi Fred McDowell, Mississippi John Hurt, and scores of others. Woody Guthrie’s wife brought Mance in to play one song at her husband’s posthumous birthday party, and he played Lemon’s *See To My Grave Kept Clean* over Blind Lemon Jefferson’s gravemarker. On January 30, 1974, Mance took sick with single and then double pneumonia, combined with a stroke. He recovered enough to walk on stage when Taj Mahal came to Armadillo World Headquarters on May 24 to play for his benefit. It raised over \$3,000, enough to pay off Mance’s remaining hospital bills. On January 30, 1976, he

died at 6:30 P.M. in the Navasota Hospital. The jig was up. His wife Elnora survived him by just over two years, about the difference between their ages.

What survives now is Mance Lipscomb's legacy. He developed his style when blues was really taking form. He worked into his repertoire songs that form the elements of the blues, songs that came into existence in the 19th century. He was influenced by some of the blues giants, then he influenced a whole generation of musicians in the 60's. He gained the respect of his fellow musicians, including Muddy Waters, Howlin Wolf, and Doc Watson. His students will take us and the next generation into the 21st century. Mance Lipscomb is a gateway between our musical past and future. Like a lot of other innovative African American musicians who made us richer for their contributions to our culture. They fused together a musical style that has gained worldwide appeal. It was created out of their life experience, a clash and then a melding of African and European musical traditions.

Now those innovators, those earliest "bluesmen" and their way of life — they're all gone. Many are forgotten. Like Mance said, "They left a lot a thangs undone when they misst, Blind Lemon. Leadbelly. An other players like me an, Mississippi John Hurt. Freddie MacDowell. Let them die. Without them in history."

Glen Alyn — January 6, 1994

*Glen Alyn authored **I SAY ME FOR A PARABLE: The Oral Autobiography of Mance Lipscomb, Texas Bluesman**, as told to & compiled by Glen Alyn (W. W. Norton & Co., Inc.: New York, 1993. 508 pages; ISBN 0-393-03500-X. \$28.00 USA — \$36.50 Canada). "What Glen Alyn has done," said Dr. Lawrence Goodwyn, Professor of History at Duke University, "with love and insight, is to assemble Mance Lipscomb's rural east Texas heritage and the universal meaning of his music into a single shining, comprehensible whole. The result is an organic piece of American counterpoint: the triumph and tragedy imbedded in our racial past and a vibrant musical idiom that grew out of both." The book was 21 years between conception in 1972 and publication in 1993. It is 90% in Mance Lipscomb's own spoken words, with one "Go-along" in his wife Elnora's spoken words. The book intro and all twelve Go-along introductions are in Glen Alyn's written words. Taj Mahal wrote the Foreword. Gerald Howard was the editor and Dr. Don Carleton was the academic editor.*

DISCOGRAPHY & BIBLIOGRAPHY

TEXAS SONGSTER (Arhoolie CD 306)

YOU GOT TO REAP WHAT YOU SOW (Arhoolie CD 398)

TEXAS BLUES by Stefan Grossman (Oak Publications): This guitar instruction book features an excerpt from *I SAY ME FOR A PARABLE* (edited by Don Gardner) and eight arrangements by Mance as well as others by Blind Lemon Jefferson, Lightnin Hopkins, Blind Willie Johnson, Little Hat Jones and others.



Mance with his wife Elnora (photo by Bill Records)

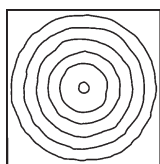


"Mance Lipscomb was a sage, a songster, a responsible elder, a self-made man... He played so many types of music in his own style with powerful conviction... Tilting his head back, closing his eyes, and thumping that Harmony Sovereign, Mance brought the past to the present and turned the present into story, into song and into life."

— Taj Mahal

Mance Lipscomb (1895-1976), the son of a former slave, lived almost his whole life in Navasota, Texas, supporting himself and his family by tenant farming. But he was also a guitar player and songster who played blues and rags for his neighbors at local Saturday night parties. In 1960 Mance was "discovered" by Chris Strachwitz of Arhoolie Records and Mack McCormick. Within a short period of time Mance was recording albums and performing at festivals, concert halls and clubs around the country. This video presents a rare television concert recorded in Texas for KLRU TV in 1969. It shows the panorama and genius of Mance's music.

Tunes include: So Different Blues, Take Me Back, Going Down Slow, Keep On Trucking, Alcohol Blues, Angel Child, Silver City, Night Time Is The Right Time, Key To The Highway, You Got To See Your Mama Every Night, Mama Don't Allow, Long Way To Tipperary, Baby, You Don't Have To Go, When The Saints Go Marching In, Motherless Children and I Want To Do Something For You



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