Questions: (Willie)

1. What is your hometown? Roland Fork, MS, in the deep delta.
2. If you could move to another city, would you? Yes,
3. If so, what city? Maybe Victoria, B.C.
4. What neighborhood do you live in? I live in Southaven, MS now
5. How long have you lived in Memphis? Since 1971
6. How would you describe the City of Memphis in three words? Funky, brilliant, and searching.
7. What were your first impressions of Memphis? I was really blown away as a small town kid. I was really blown away by the hustle and bustle of the stores. I had never seen that many people in one place before and I still get that feeling when I go downtown to Memphis.
8. What is your current impression of Memphis? I think Memphis is one of the most authentic places on the planet.
9. Do you feel Memphis has improved while you have lived here? I think Memphis has improved in the sense of building for the people who want to be here. And I know that sounds convoluted but I think that, like, for instance all the apartments that have been built down off south main, you know that area of town. The way that Midtown has grown like that. It is not exactly how I would have populated those areas , but those are the people who are available. Somebody was talking about Overton Square the other day , they called it Broverton Square, because all the bros… you go up there, there really are a lot of east Memphis and Germantown and Collierville young people who are kind of, you know, bro culture. I used to sniff at that, but those are the people who are here now. And we do have to cater to people who want to live here. There are so many generations of Memphians who would not come close to living downtown. But those folks will.
10. What is your funniest story about living in Memphis? I probably have 500 great stories about living in Memphis, but the one that comes to mind right now is when I first moved to Memphis, I was 21 years old. And my first job was driving a liquor delivery truck. And it was the perfect job for a young 21 year old idiot. And I got to drive all over this city. And I learned the city like the back of my hand. Because back then there were 210 liquor stores in Memphis. And so I got to know all of those neighborhoods. And I still know Memphis like the back of my hand. The best story though is I used to have to go pick up guys who hung around the parking lots of liquor stores to come help us unload boxcars of liquor. And there was this one guy I got to know, James, and James hung out in the parking lot of T & F liquors, which is Trigg and Florida over in south Memphis. He hung out in that parking lot. I got to know him and I would go over and he would be one of the guys that I would pick up for day laborer. And so one day we were unloading a boxcar of Jack Daniels half pints . You know 48 half pint bottles and you know they are very heavy and so we were doing that, unloading at it for a few hours. James leaped out of the boxcar door, he just disappeared. I thought what are you doing? I ran over to the door and I said ‘are you alright?’ And he said “look what I found” and he had a toad. And he said, “Oh, I am praying this thing has a luck number.” So he turns the frog over and right under the frog’s mouth there was a perfect “7”. And he proceeded to tell me that toads had lucky numbers if you could find one with a lucky number then you could win at the dog track. So long story short, James and I cashed our checks at the west Memphis dog track that night, this was in 1972, spent all our money betting on number 7 all night and never won a race. So that’s Memphis. That’s my Memphis. An addendum to that story. A few months ago I was packing up; I was leaving my building in downtown Memphis for the last time. So I was packing my things up and I found a note that James had written his girlfriend, Velma. And she hung out at the parking lot of Thomas liquors in north Memphis. And it said “Velma, I love you.” And he was not a great writer but he said “please give my friend Willie your number. I love you, James.” And I never found her so I kept the note since 1972 and I still have the note from James. I don’t know what happened to James or Velma. It was one of those Memphis… one of those Memphis things that ties me to Memphis. And that tie will never be broken.
11. If you could change something about Memphis, what would it be? I would get rid of the people and the situations that keep us divided, mainly racially. I would get rid of all that. Because it is the biggest shell game in the world. You know we are so capable of doing the greatest things in the world. And that’s why we are not organized in the arts like Nashville is. So all those things that keep us spinning around in the same hole. If I could get rid of those things that separate us.
12. This web site only captures a snapshot in time. What would you like someone twenty years from now who reads this to know about you? I think I would want somebody to know that I’ve always kept an eye to the future because so much of my work has dealt with things in the past and people who have made those marks for us, whether by photograph , or by writing, or films or whatever, and so I always keep that in mind so I want people to know that I loved Memphis and I loved Memphis enough to keep documenting things of our time because I think that people by having lots to look at and to listen to they’re going to be able to come to some real conclusions about who we were.
13. What is your favorite thing about Memphis? I like the way that Memphians really don’t care about how people do it in other places. People used to say, “well, that’s not how they do it in New York, that’s not how they do it in LA, or something,.” There are very few places that are like that. New Orleans is like that but certainly Memphis is one of those places. They are here doing is kind of the Memphis way. And I like that, whether it is right or wrong. You know they are not pretending in any way. I always think about what my daughter Savannah went to Los Angeles years ago. She had this dream to go live and work in Los Angeles. She went there, and this is about 7 or 8 years ago. And she had been there about a month and she said, “I gotta tell you, LA people are different from Memphis people in this way: they act like they think cool people act. They are acting like that.” She said, “Memphis people are just cool.” You know we are not looking to somebody else to say here is how I should behave, here is how I should react to things. Just Memphis people have that kinda cool.