I was just this naïve 19-year-old kid when I moved to Tuscaloosa. I came from Eutaw, Alabama, a really fucked up old antebellum town about 30 miles away. I enrolled in the University of Alabama, but dropped out two consecutive semesters in a row. I was going to be an English major, but I hadn't been there 15 minutes before I started to play with Johnny Shines.

When I moved to Tuscaloosa, they had little concerts at the University in the basement of this building – a folk series that Johnny Shines and Fred McDowell played. I come to find out that Johnny Shines was living in Tuscaloosa, so I approached him and said, "I'm interested in blues. Do you give lessons?" He gave me directions to his house, so I borrowed a car, went over there, met him and his wife, and started hanging around. He started off showing me Delta blues technique, mostly right-hand exercises separating thumb and fingerpicking. He'd say, "Practice this and if you can do it next week, I'll show you something else." As we were going like that, I started to realize this fingerpicking music is virtuoso stuff. He saw I could play chords, so he said, "Hey, you play bass?" I said, "No." He said, "Alright, so you're going to have be rhythm guitar." I said, "Why? He said, "Well I'm starting a band and you're going to be in it." I said, "Yes sir." It was called The Stars of Alabama, but I don't know why it was called that because we didn't even play that song. Anyways, that's how I got onto the juke circuit.

The first gig I ever played with Johnny was New Year's 1971 going into '72. Club 61 was a cinderblock building outside of Tuscaloosa, a little place off the highway where you'd pull into some trees. No advertisement, no sign at all. The gig went from midnight until dawn, about six hours, and I guess the idea was to ring out the old year, ring in the new. We get there, set up, and start playing. The place is completely packed, all African-American audience, people getting sloppy drunk except for a couple of band members and a couple of fans that came along. We took some breaks, but it was an interminable gig. You kind of lose track of time. There were no windows. We get through the gig and the floor is like a quarter-inch deep with spilled beer, but it's dawn now and we realize they're cooking breakfast. So at 6 a.m. on the first of January, there's this unforgettable smell of stale beer and bacon and I'm thinking, "I have *made* it."

Over six or eight months, we played a lot of these gigs, but in that scene the musicians were just an adjunct to a party that was gonna happen anyway. It never felt like, "Hey everybody! Johnny Shines is coming to play tonight. Let's go see Johnny Shines!" in the sense of a concert.

In the vaudeville days, if you had someone who was going to be the headliner, you didn't just start with that. There were a series of run-ups to the main act. Our show was like that. The band would play a whole set of R&B cover tunes before Mr. Shines ever came up. Once Johnny came up though, it was his show. We didn't really play Delta blues in the band. If you go back and listen to those records from the 30s, early 40s maybe, that bass drum-rhythm guitar sound hadn't been invented yet. That came about in Chicago in the 1950s and we played like that.

On the band gigs, Johnny always played electric. For a while he played this double cut-away Gibson 335, but just as often he'd use this incredibly cheap Teisco Japanese guitar that had like four pick-ups. Man, he had a tone like a jaguar when he was playing that. He was screaming. It

was like, “Is this Pharoah Sanders here?!” There’s a lot of jazz information to his chording. It wasn’t like Lightnin’ Hopkins or John Lee Hooker playing the same song over and over again with variants. Johnny was different than that and Robert Johnson also. Neither of those cats were really strumming chords and singing words like a folk singer. The music was single lines in an almost Baroque sense. Johnny’s thing was fingerpicking, even when he played electric. He always used these metal banjo picks. When he played electric, he could have this really fierce tone because it wasn’t fingers or plectrum, but metal on metal. I never could get any good with metal picks, but for him they were second nature.

You never knew exactly who would be playing from each gig to the next. The core of the band was me, a drummer, a guy who played bass that was a little bit of a hell-raiser, and then this lead guitarist. Johnny always played lead once we brought him up. There was a keyboard player who played a Hammond B-3 organ that weighed a ton. Sometimes, especially when we played Mississippi, we would have like 10 people on a gig that paid like a hundred bucks, so everyone’s making about ten bucks. It’d be like, “Johnny, why we got so many people in the group?” “Well, we got a show.” Occasionally we’d have a fourth guitarist. There was a comedian named Icky, who always dressed very dapper and dabbled in explicitly foul-mouthed humor: “Goddamn, I gotta get me some pussy.” But the audience loved it and this cat was a pro. Think Redd Foxx or someone like that in the old days. There might be these go-go dancers wearing gold-lamé hot pants and halter tops. You would think they were sisters because they looked so much alike, except that one of them was a guy. And then we had this singer named Candy Martin who would wear these kinds of chiffon bikini robe outfit and she weighed like 280 lbs. It was pretty darn close to a John Waters scenario.

Johnny usually had two or three white guys in the band, but it was mostly black gigs. Nobody ever gave us trouble for being white guys in their joint. In fact it was more accepted and ignored in the manner of hired help. In that regard, it was a really beautiful experience. Especially because in Alabama, this was only the beginning of the end of Jim Crow. For instance, I was technically underage when I joined the band, as was a buddy of mine who played drums. So Johnny wrote to both of our parents asking for a letter basically saying, “Yes Mr. Shines, you have my permission for my son to be riding around with you in the middle of the night.” Because yes, the Civil Rights movement had happened and certain degrees of segregation and misuse of authority were technically illegal. However, when you’re on a two-lane road in the middle of the night and the cops pull you over, if they wanted to make trouble they could and would, and Johnny didn’t want trouble with the law. He thought about stuff like that ahead of time. He wasn’t just blindly messing around with a bunch of stupid white cops.

Besides Tuscaloosa, we played in places like Meridian, MIssissippi, and Fayette, Alabama. We’d pull into town and head to the black section. You’d pass a nice-looking club and they’d go, “No that’s not it.” Then you’d pass another place with a bit worse of a sign and no, that’s not it. Finally you’d get to a place that actually didn’t look like it could have a musical performance in it at all. Of course, that was it.

Club 61 had this little sign written in very crude handwriting on this little piece of paper – ballpoint pen writing. It read something like “You are a very nice person. Come in and have a good time. Keep your knives and guns in your pocket.” None of the gigs ever had what we’d call bouncers, but nobody ever got out a knife or gun. Despite the roughness of the whole milieu, these were actually people that were there to have a good time. Redneck bars of an equal sort, country-western bars, man I was afraid to go in those places because white culture on the lower end of the spectrum was much more violence-prone.

We did have this one scene. We played down in Union Town, maybe 40 miles outside of Tuscaloosa. It was pared down to just the band for a black teenage sock-hop fashion show. It was great and I’m thinking, “Wow, this was an uncharacteristically easy gig – just a few sets. It’s 11:30 and we’re done.” Then Johnny says, “Well, we’ve got this other gig.”

We pack up and follow this other car out of town. It’s after midnight and we get to the middle of this hay field. There’s a tiny ‘60s style ranch house with a speakeasy in the basement run by a very nice woman. Bar at one end, small dance floor. Everyone was 110% shit-faced already and I am not getting a good feeling. It had nothing to do with me being a white guy in a black place, I just realized this place is at a boiling point.

We’ve got some big speaker cabinets set-up in there already, so I go out to get my guitar. I come back in and as I lean over to set my guitar down, this bottle smashes on the wall behind me. In that split second it goes from being a very crowded party scene to this huge brawl that’s broken out. It’s kind of comical in retrospect: a confined space, like 20 or 30 people in there with fists swinging, bodies shoving, glass flying every which way. I immediately jumped behind my speaker cabinet. There’s this rotund woman there already and she says, “Well there’s room for us both.” She was right. In the midst of this mayhem I kind of peek around the corner of the amp. (And this is taking longer to tell than it took to happen. No kidding, this thing just exploded.) All of the sudden the crowd parts and I realize I’m looking at this guy’s teeth through his cheek. He has been laid open. As quickly as it started, this thing just stops. As if by magic, the room is empty. Meanwhile the lady whose house it was, who was extremely nice, was saying, “I feel bad you came here.” Needless to say, that gig did not happen. You could tell that normally it was a very beautiful little speakeasy scene there, but on this night, I don’t know what got into this thing. Well, actually I do know, it was a whole lot of whiskey.

At this point it was getting to be springtime. Though I was inexperienced in the juke house scene, I could tell that as the weather heats up, it was only going to get more crazy. I spoke with Johnny and said, “I got a feeling that if I keep playing these joints, I’m gonna caught in the crossfire. I don’t want to, but I’m going to have to leave this band because I’m concerned about getting hurt.” And this is classic Johnny Shines. He says, “And it ain’t gonna have nothing to do with you.” Not like, “Yeah, you might get hurt.” It was more like, “Yeah, you probably will get hurt and it ain’t gonna have anything to do with you.” He was completely understanding.

I didn’t really play with Johnny again for quite some time, although we stayed in contact.

In the late 1980s I was playing in this New York-based band called Curlew. Once we played a gig in Erie, Pennsylvania and I come to find out the organizer of that gig, John Vanco, was a big Johnny Shines fan. So I got Johnny a gig. Johnny would have played Delta-style solo, but he'd had this stroke. He told me about it. Johnny was big on hunting and he was out in the woods by himself when he had the stroke. He said, "Yeah, I knew I had trouble cause my arm went limp, so I just leaned up against my gun and held myself upright. Finally, I walked out of the woods and went to the hospital." Johnny was so immensely strong of character and determination. I mean, this guy survived a stroke in the middle of the woods. It didn't affect his singing or his mind at all, but it did affect his playing.

So what happened is *we* played a "solo" Johnny Shines gig. He could still play slide, but his right hand was affected and the articulation wasn't there. Thankfully, I'd still been practicing what Johnny had shown me all those years ago, so I could play pretty close to how Johnny wanted to sound when he played solo. We did a couple of gigs that way, one in Memphis and one in Erie.

For the gig in Erie, I think we flew into Pittsburgh and John Vanco picked us up. We're driving through this evergreen forest of pine and Johnny's looking at the trees. At a certain point he says, "Y'all don't eat much squirrels round here, do ya?" And John says, "Eat squirrels?" But I knew what Johnny was saying because squirrels don't hang out in those kinds of trees, they hang out in hardwoods. It was a funny thing because Johnny would bring in these elements of a whole life. I mean, listen, Johnny Shines had been eating squirrels his entire life, so it was a completely natural conversational question to him. To two white guys it came across differently. Growing up in rural Alabama, I ate squirrel a couple times when I was a kid and frankly, I don't like it. Kind of okay if you put it in a stew, but it's got an icky, greasy thing to it. Johnny didn't think it was icky or greasy at all.

One day I get this phone call that Johnny is in the hospital, so I say I'll go see him. I go down to Tuscaloosa and he didn't look bad, but he was in a hospital bed. We're talking about this and that. And then I say, "We'll I'll see you later Johnny." "Yeah okay, see you soon." A day or so later, I get a call: "Johnny's dying." Well, at least I got to see him one last time. Then it's his daughter Carroline, who says, "We need for you to be a pallbearer." And I said "Alright." I did it.

Some of the other pallbearers were J.K. Terrell and Mack McCrackin from The Stars of Alabama, as well as music historian Peter Guralnick. Snooky Pryor was there, but he wasn't a pallbearer.

First we went to the wake. I don't know if you've ever been to an African-American funeral, but they're very ceremonial. This big AME church was packed. The funeral lasted two hours and it was wrenching. Finally they closed the coffin and we carried him out there.

Family gets in one limo, pallbearers into another and we follow the hearse. The church is on the other side of town from the cemetery, which is way out in the sticks. We had to take this long four-lane road around Tuscaloosa, and at one point I look back and the cars are just all the way out of sight. There must have been 100 cars in that procession.

We get to the cemetery and we're gonna put him in the ground, say a few words, and that's it. Even now there isn't marble headstone. There's just one of those little metal markers that the funeral home provides that says John Ned Shines, birthdate, death date, and maybe has a design of guitar. Even now, it's just an obscure grave in a rural cemetery outside Tuscaloosa. *The* Johnny Shines.

Johnny didn't really fit the mold of a rural black, ex-farmhand kind of character. Unlike the caricature of those Delta players, Johnny had gone to school and been educated. He was not only literate, he was highly articulate. It gave him a dignified air. He didn't come across as an entertainer. He didn't flash a smile and ask "Y'all having a good time?!" – that kind of stuff. He was more officious, more self-assured of his talents. Onstage, he was workmanlike, the consummate professional.

He must have already been in his late 50s or early 60s when we met, but he never really looked old. His hair was gray, but he never seemed aged about the face or the body or in the way he carried himself. He was strong as an ox. And while he was genteel in way, he would tell me these stories from when he was living either down in the Delta or up in Chicago. I realized that as a white guy, I can kind of romanticize the blues life. But having grown up in rural Alabama with a bunch of black people in these small towns, I *know* that was a rough life, especially when he was a teenager and even in Chicago. Not only because of the economic situation they were in, but if you crossed a white person you could have a bad, bad problem. He was never resentful of white people. He was exceptionally open-minded, the kind not to hold a grudge. But at the same time, he was living some pretty crazy stuff. We call it a lifestyle, but that implies that you have a choice. It was more of a life situation. He told me some stories.

Down in Mississippi when Johnny was rambling round, he got involved in a card game. This guy playing was sitting on a bench next to someone fast asleep. All of a sudden the card player jumps up and says, "No wonder I ain't havin' no damn luck," took out a pistol and shot the sleeping man in the head. When Johnny told me this, I said "Oh shit" and Johnny goes, "That's what I said! Damn near jumped out of my skin."

There was that side to poverty and when mixed with a lot of whiskey, it makes punk nihilism sound like a hospital or a nursing home. He'd tell me these stories very matter of factly. That whole generation grew up and lived in a milieu that is hard for us to picture as anything resembling normalcy, but for them it was all too real. He was lucky to make it as long as he did.

When we had the gig in Memphis, we were driving down Beale Street and there was this little alcove sitting back between these two buildings where a cute little girl was selling flowers. As

we drove by, Johnny did a double-take and said, “Wait a minute. Did you see that place? One night, two of them had me cornered in there. One of them had a knife, but I had a brickbat. That knife didn’t do them no good.” To be so genteel and soft-spoken, he lived a life that is hard to imagine. Not only would we not have been there, we wouldn’t have survived it if we had.

I was really lucky playing with Johnny because, aside for one or two white gigs, we were exclusively playing juke houses – cinderblock buildings on the edge of town or literally out in the middle of nowhere. It was rare enough for a white individual to be inside that scene at all, let alone be innocuous. I never saw anyone change their behavior because a couple of white people were there, so I like to think I really saw how that whole scene actually worked.

We did this gig in Fayette, Alabama. It was literally a shack in the middle of the field. I think it might have normally been used for storage, but it was just this rough wood-planked building. We get out there after dark. It’s the middle of winter and for Alabama, it was seriously cold. As we’re loading in, you could see the car headlights approaching the field through the gaps in the wall. It was really not even a solid building. That was very typical.

You could think that the juke house scene was defined by disadvantaged poor black people doing what they could to get by and playing gigs in these terrible places. But that’s not what was happening. What *was* happening was this was a major celebratory situation without white people, which in itself was a cause for major celebration. The notion that the juke house was a miserable scene is completely getting it wrong. It was a victoriously liberated situation and probably always was. I was very lucky to be a white, middle-class guy who got to experience first-hand the last period when these places existed, and it was thanks to Mr. Shines.

I don’t think that particular scene exists anymore. About two months ago, I thought I’d see if I could find Club 61, where we played that very first gig. I cruised down old Highway 11 and I recognized it immediately: the way it’s got a little mound of dirt, not really a road, but a pull-off area into some trees where the club was. Now, the club itself is just a pile of cinder blocks, maybe one wall was partly standing. It doesn’t look like it burned. It just looks like it fell down from neglect. I thought, “This is like coming back to Jericho.” It felt almost like sacred ruins.

- Davey Williams, 2017