

## Notes From a Collaborator: Bill Farrow

*Bill Farrow is a folk and blues guitarist who accompanied Mable Hillery on her 1967 UK Tour. Although Farrow enjoyed a successful run in the television and film industry, he never gave up his musical impulses and continues as an active performer and recording artist.*

I was 24 years old when I began playing with Mable Hillery. There were very few blues guitarists around at that time in England, and Mabel was a bit down in the dumps because every guitarist introduced to her didn't suit her. But we became good mates. Janet Kerr, a friend of Hedy West, telephoned me to meet up with Mable because she knew I could play that style. I believe that Hedy and Mable had met at one of the Newport Folk Festivals. I took a look at Mable's repertoire and began to play "Kansas City Blues" in my Brownie McGhee style, and she immediately sat up and joined in. From that moment on, she knew that was what she wanted and she was delighted (so was I). Two days later we were playing in Liverpool, at the Liverpool Spinner's Club.

I can't remember how many gigs we played together, but we spent over a month at various venues in Liverpool, Hull, Manchester, Birmingham, and London – the Bluebell, the Jug of Punch, Cecil Sharp House, the Rising Sun, the Surbiton Folk Club. One that really comes to mind is the folk blues club at the Manchester Sports Guild. In the basement, the main act was Champion Jack Dupree, supported by Savoy Brown's Blues Band. We were the added surprise. It went down very well. Mable was marvellous *and* Champion Jack was one of my heroes. Mable went down a storm at every venue we played.

In every club we performed as a duo, but in The Bluebell Club in Hull I had to leave three-quarters of the way through our set to get a train back home to my day job in London. I had kindly been given a month off to play for Mable. It wouldn't happen these days. I was heartbroken to have to leave. We carried on performing after that, but most of the venues were in or around London.

Joe Lustig, an American wheeler-dealer type of man who later became Mel Brook's personal manager, arranged our TV performances. He appeared to know everyone and was very influential and pushy (thank God). He was also the instigator of Mable's album. We did a test recording at Tepee recording studios, and afterwards we went for a drink in a pub. That's when Bessie Smith's name came up, and I think it gave Joe the idea of hiring a jazz band.

Mable and I only learned on the morning of the session that the Brian Green Jazz Band was going to play for her. We had never played with a full band, and we were both very worried about the outcome. I had to run through each song for the band to get the right keys and to keep them as near to Mable's arrangements as possible. Mable kept singing *above* the band, which didn't do her voice a lot of good. But the band was only booked for half a day, and then they left. Jon Mark (Marianne Faithfull's guitarist) and some other musicians came in, and a different feel came about. Four other songs were recorded but were not put on the album. The album was done in one day as Mable had to go back to the U.S.A.

She would always say, "Do not get too fiddly." Just keep the rhythm. She sang with such feeling and didn't need "fiddly stuff." Her voice was much sweeter when she was singing live with just a guitarist, or on her own. I can only recall one club where there was even a PA system. She came across so much better without the PA. The quality of her voice was amazing and she was well received everywhere she went. They loved her stories, her games, her personality, and, of course, her wonderful voice. She gave them an education on her way of life and the blues.

I recall how amazed she was at the colour of grass in England: "So very green." She didn't say much about her life in America, but when we were walking along the streets or at the railway stations, she was always concerned that people were looking at us because she was black and I was white. I had to reassure her that it did not matter one jot in England –

whatever your race was or what colour you were. She found it hard to accept that no one thought it odd.

I was not aware until after she died that she had played and sang with Muddy Waters and Brownie McGhee and all the other greats. She told me she knew Brownie McGhee, but nothing else. I was only 24, and I would have been terrified to play with her had I known the extent of her activities and politics. The one song I can recall her singing, in the car or walking along the road or wherever – it always amused me – was the Lovin' Spoonful's "Nashville Cats."

She came across as a very sweet, warm-natured person and we got on so well from that first moment when she heard me play and relaxed with me and realised that I adored blues (and her). Though sometimes she would tell me off if I made every song into blues. She would say, "Nope – this is a folk song, not a blues."

We only stayed in touch for a while. Christmas cards and a few letters were exchanged, and when I got married in 1968 she wrote to us wishing us well. My wife Marie knew her too, of course, and was very fond of her. We really don't know what her life was like in America. My wife and I had a child, and I was gigging on my own, and our lives moved on.

But it was a wonderful experience to play guitar for her. She became a friend, and I got to play on TV and at many packed venues. I gained confidence and became very well known locally in the folk clubs. I did many radio broadcasts, and am still gigging to this day. I stayed in show business, wrote many songs, and recorded them. I've written and produced 12 radio comedies, and I also spent 26 years in the TV and film industry working as an extra. I spent 23 of those years in the program *EastEnders*. I retired from the film game two years ago but I'm still gigging – with a skiffle and blues band, a party-type band, and solo. So it's been fun and I've been lucky.

But I look back with such affection to those wonderful days. Meeting Mable and playing with Mable was a huge part of my life. I am so grateful.