

Interviewee: Kenneth Bell aka Little Joe Bell

Interviewer: Norie Guthrie

Date of Interview: 2019-08-22

Identifier: wrc14943

Norie Guthrie: My name is Norie Guthrie from the Woods and Research Center Fondren Library at Rice University. I am interviewing Kenneth Bell aka Little Joe Bell. Today is Thursday, August 22nd, 2019. Let's start with your father. Can you tell me about his early life?

Kenneth Bell: Well, you know my father, um, he was ambitious about playing music when he was a little boy, and he started off playing the accordion, uh, with, uh, my grand, with, with his father. And, uh, so, somehow, he picked up a guitar. I don't know where he got it from. Yeah. I never found out, but he picked up a guitar and he, he, uh, fell in love with it, and he, uh, began to play it. And people like well man this guy sounds pretty good on a guitar, and, uh, the word got out. People start, um, wanting him to, um, come sit in and play in their band. And, uh, finally he was able to, uh, get some, uh, what, gigs, if you will, and, uh, that led to, uh, him having some, uh, uh, big guy, big-name guys calling him. Like, uh, like he told me he said he played, he, he auditioned for Little, Little Richard. I know that he and Grady Gaines, saxophone player, renowned saxophone player played together and, uh, also they kind of grew up in the same neighborhood. And, uh, last but not least, what made him almost famous was the fact that he got a chance to play in the band with T-Bone Walker. And most people, especially the ones who were blues musicians they are familiar with T-Bone Walker. And, uh –

Norie Guthrie: Can you tell me a little bit more about T-Bone Walker?

Kenneth Bell: Well, uh, like I said, T-Bone Walker kind of wherever my dad played and, and thought look, look this dude, this guy can play his guitar pretty good. So, he would, uh, go out and sit in with him at first. And he got better, and better and so T-Bone Walker hired him as his, uh, second guitar player, and he earned the title of Little T-Bone Walker. And, uh, for, after a while he felt like it wasn't enough money in the music business, so he got out of the business and went to work full time, and, uh, from my understanding, to take care of us six kids and my mother. And, uh, at that time, shortly after that, these guys that he played with careers took off, and unfortunately it left him behind. And so, they, they, they didn't, you know, he didn't get the attention and recognition I thought that he should a got.

Norie Guthrie: So, where was your father born?

Kenneth Bell: He was born in a little town called, um, Raywood, Texas. And some people may not know about it. Some might. It's just right outside of Crosby, Texas, uh, Liberty, Ames, Dayton, and Raywood. All those towns are within 5 miles apart; something to, something to that, that effect.

Norie Guthrie: What did, um, what did his parents, uh, do for a living?

Kenneth Bell: Well, my grandmother, his, his mother and, and his dad I think they, uh, worked on a farm and, uh, my, my, uh, grandmother was a housekeeper. And my grandpa was, I understand he was a farmer.

Norie Guthrie: When did, when did they re-, did the whole family relocate to Houston or did your dad just move to Houston later on?

Kenneth Bell: I'm sorry?

Norie Guthrie: I said did the whole family move to Houston or –

Kenneth Bell: Oh, no, no, no.

Norie Guthrie: – did your, did, did your, did your dad?

Kenneth Bell: Just my dad and my mom. They just felt like, you know, there was enough, wasn't enough to do in Raywood, Texas for them and so they moved to Houston which is where I was born.

Norie Guthrie: About when did they move to Houston?

Kenneth Bell: Uh, they moved to Houston before any of the kids were born so I'm gonna say my brother was born in 1951. So, they might have moved to Houston in '40, in '48, '49.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Kenneth Bell: 1948, 1949.

Norie Guthrie: Where did they move to in the city?

Kenneth Bell: They moved to, uh, Kashmere Gardens. Lot of people call it Fifth Ward, and, uh, uh, Liberty Garden. We saw, pretty much Jensen Drive all pretty much the same. Which is, in my opinion, was not the best place in the neighborhood and in the world that we moved to, I mean in Houston to move to.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. But it was, um, so, they – just so I can understand his life a little bit better – so was it after he moved to Houston that he started his music or was that about the time he kind of started to drift away from music?

Kenneth Bell: Yeah. No. He, uh, started the music in the little town called Raywood. He had gotten kind of into, uh, music, um, while, before they moved to Houston. And, uh, you know, when they moved to Houston, he, uh, got pretty good at it. And he would go to work and, uh, leave work and go to the gigs. You know he had, he had, yeah, he'd leave. He had to a place downtown where he worked in one of those buildings downtown. Back in the, in the '50s they had a shower in the building, and he could take a shower –

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Kenneth Bell: – and bring a set of clothes and go, go to the gig later on that evening.

Norie Guthrie: So, um, what kind of jobs did he have when he, uh, when he was doing both music and working?

Kenneth Bell: I'm sorry you said?

Norie Guthrie: What kind of jobs did he have? So, you said he was working downtown so what kind of, what job was he working at downtown?

Kenneth Bell: He was working at, um, Palais Royal.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Kenneth Bell: Palais Royal. Uh, if I'm not mistaken it's still, it still exists. So, today is 2019, it still, it still exists. And, uh, he was the, uh, he was the janitor at Palais, Palais Royal.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. Okay.

Kenneth Bell: And, you know, Palais Royal is a, it was well known for fashion, women fashion clothes, and they sold men clothes. But he would get my, my sisters their school clothes from his job at Palais Royal, and he was the janitor there.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Kenneth Bell: Okay.

Norie Guthrie: All right, so, he would, so he would go into Palais Royal. He'd bring his, I assume he'd bring his nice clothes with him.

Kenneth Bell: He'd bring his, he'd bring his, his, his working – what do you call – go to work in his work clothes.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Kenneth Bell: And bring his dress clothes to work and changes clothes at work and go to the gig from work.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Kenneth Bell: Yeah.

Norie Guthrie: Um, what were some of the places where he played?

Kenneth Bell: You know he played at places like, you know, you have to be close to 70 to remember some of these places. He played at a place called the, uh, the, uh, Whispering Pine, Club Delisa [?], Eldorado, uh, Matinee, to name a few.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Kenneth Bell: And that's the only ones I can think of right now.

Norie Guthrie: Did you ever go into any of those clubs?

Kenneth Bell: Did I did go? Yeah. I made, matter a fact I was, uh, you know, I had the same ambition as he had, had ambition he had. When I was a kid I was like, you know, I, I liked the music. You know? And, uh, they would take me to the shows with them. And they would call me Little Joe Bell as well. And I would, uh, play a little guitar and a little, a little bass, and from that point they would play some James Brown. And I'm, I had to be about 11 years old. I would do the James Brown on the, on the floor, and people would throw a lot of change on the floor. And so, I made a little money for, for the gig. The gig was only paying like \$6.00 a night. My dad was making \$6.00. Had a cigar box that you put 35 cents in the cigar box. And I used to wonder how do you know you're putting 35 cents in the box cause they didn't really look at the money; they just – 35 cents. You drop it in the little slot on the cigar box. And I was making \$10-12 doing the James Brown cause the people would throw money on the stage or on the floor. The floor was kind of shiny and slippery, and I would slide and do things on the, uh, on the dance floor. And, uh, that's, that's, that was my take when, when I was little, when I was a little kid with, with the, with the guys in the band.

Norie Guthrie: Did you enjoy doing that or did you –

Kenneth Bell: Yeah. Well, you know, it, it, it, it has, it had a positive effect. I'm like man these people, these people are, are clapping and, and, and, and they excited about what I'm doing. You know, like I'm just trying to make lunch money. Yeah.

Norie Guthrie: That's really cute. So, you, um, so you started to go in there around 11 and you would do that. Did you go to him, to his gigs when you were younger than that or did you, did you go with him to gigs when you were younger? Like younger than 11.

Kenneth Bell: Yeah. But he, he would take me. If it wasn't, if it wasn't a school day. Most of the time it was on a holiday, uh, during the, um, the, uh, spring break, –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Kenneth Bell: – uh, during the weekend. But if it was a school day no I did not, I had to be asleep by 8:00 o'clock for school the next day.

Norie Guthrie: And then, um, when did you start to want to play the guitar?

Kenneth Bell: Well you know I played guitar and, uh, I kind of didn't like it. I wanted to do some other things for, for a while. In my early 20s and probably late 20s to early 30s I played the guitar. And, uh, from what I could tell guys wasn't doing too well financially so I got into the insurance business and did pretty good selling insurance. When I got into the, when I got serious with the music business is when my dad be-, start, started to become ill and couldn't play. And I'm like well somebody's gotta pick up the torch if he can't play. And so, I felt like I need to try to get him to go ahead and um teach me the stuff cause, you know, we know, we never know when we're, we're gonna, gonna leave here. So, by him being getting ill I'm like man if something happened to my dad, and I don't want, none, none of the kids don't have his music it's gonna be a shame. So, I picked up the guitar and, uh, probably unlike a lot of other musicians I had the, I had the, uh, the, uh, luxury, if you will, of getting somebody to teach me who had something to do when that, with, with, with, with the start of this, this blues thing. My dad was playing blues back when it all, when it was in its early stages. So, I got that. And also, I felt like well you know I need to, uh, continue this family tradition, and so I played the guitar. They would call and they would ask for my dad. He said no I can't play on my hands on the, my hands are not working like they used to. And I say they asked for Joe Bell and, uh, people say I was, I tell ya what, I'll send my son. And he can play a little bit. Just show him what you need to do and he, he'll, he'll do it. So, they started calling and say, you know, Joe Bell don't play, speaking of my dad but his son does. His son plays. And so, they used to call him and asking for me by my name which is Kenneth. They ask for, hey, is Little Joe Bell there? Tell him we got, we, we got a gig tonight. We, we'd like for him to do this gig with us tonight, and so I would go do gigs like that.

Norie Guthrie: How old were you when you started to, to do that, to kind of learn his craft?

Kenneth Bell: Well, you know, when I really got serious with music, to be honest with you, professionally was probably, I was probably about 30, 31, 32.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Kenneth Bell: And that's when I really got serious. I could play a little bit but just getting, sitting down and practicing day and night and day and night and having your next, next-door neighbor knock on your door and say hey listen you, you're ruining my sleep. Turn that music down. Practicing, practicing, practicing because I knew if I was gonna get this music I had to put a lot of time into it because they did back in the days.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Kenneth Bell: I don't know how they do today but back then those guys put a lot of practice, practice, practice, practice. Yeah.

Norie Guthrie: Can you show me something that, that your father taught you how to do?

Kenneth Bell: Sure.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah?

Kenneth Bell: Sure. [Kenneth Bell sings and plays guitar to “Woman You Must Be Crazy.”]

Woman you must be crazy.
You don't know what you wanna do.
Woman you must be crazy.
You don't know what you wanna do.
You mean to tell me you're gonna leave me?
After all I've done for you.

Norie Guthrie: So, you talked about your father getting hurt. Did he have like arthritis in his hands or did he get injured on the job?

Kenneth Bell: Well, that, you know, when you use your hands for manual labor it has a tendency to destroy your fingers, and, you know, when you can't, you can't quite get the movement and the friction, the movement that you want out of your hands so you lose the ability to play as well as you used to.

Norie Guthrie: Did you, and is it, you sold insurance, so you never really had that experience as your dad did. You didn't have to worry about your hands –

Kenneth Bell: No, no, no. I tried to stay away from the jobs that, that would destroy your fingers.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. All right. So, can you tell me, you told me a little bit about your early life. So, you were born in Houston –

Kenneth Bell: Mm hmm.

Norie Guthrie: – you said. And then you would go around with your dad and did insurance. So, um, let's see, what were some of the first, um, places that you played?

Kenneth Bell: You know, I played, uh, a lot of places around town that were just, uh, fly-by-night, they here today and gone tomorrow. And you know, a lot of the names, you know, um, uh, and it, you know, that's where you get your experience from. You don't make a lot of money and play, play these clubs, you play these clubs that's not real in it, really not into the live entertainment but they give you a gig because they wanna try it to see how it works. And, uh, they've tried other things and it, nothing worked so they close up. I played a lot of those, but you have to do, that's what they call in the music business paying your dues. You have to do that to get to, to the places where the guys playing at that's, that's doing a little, a lot better.

Norie Guthrie: Do you – and it doesn't – do you remember any of the names of those places? Cause anything that you remember is stuff that we can draw on later.

Kenneth Bell: Yeah. I can. Well, you know, I played at, uh, at, uh, Club Morocco which is right around the corner from where I live. I played at a place called B&B's on, uh, on, on Scott Street. I played at a couple of places on Dowling, and I don't, I don't recall the name of 'em. And, uh,

just played a lot, uh, uh, them places in the backyard. And what, but I, but I did play at a church called Metropolitan for about 10 years. I played there for about 10 years.

Norie Guthrie: Well, but how was that a different ex, was that a different experience then playing in a club?

Kenneth Bell: Well, you know, hmm, during that time I had developed the skill of being able to play a song that you don't, if, if you've never played before but you can play it because of your connection to other songs that's familiar. And the people that I was playing with was, uh, playing songs out of a music book. They could read the music. So, they would tell each other, uh, the, the, uh, the keyboard player would tell the organist go to play such and such. They wouldn't tell me because I couldn't read the, the music out of the book but I could play by ear. So, they, they left, they left me, uh, out when the song started to play according to what I hear, and I did pretty good at that. Yeah. A lot of the songs that I played, cause, cause a lot of songs we used to rehearse too. A lot of the songs, uh, we would rehearse before we played it on Sundays but for the, for the times that they did a song that we didn't rehearse on, I had to just play what I felt.

Norie Guthrie: So, would you see your role as kind of sometimes providing a flourish to the song, like kind of adding a little bit of extra?

Kenneth Bell: Well, yeah.

Norie Guthrie: In interpreting.

Kenneth Bell: Well, most musicians they do, they do add, you know, um, you know, that's another phase that you get into when you learn music. Rather than just playing the song, uh, straight if you will, then people would add a little of their own personalized touch to it. Yeah.

Norie Guthrie: So, what would you say were some of your favorite places to play?

Kenneth Bell: Well, some of my favorite places to play was, um, I played at the, um, Chicago Blues Festival. I did that one year. Friend of mine moved to Chicago that were living here. We played together. He moved to Chicago, and he called me. He says hey Joe, uh, do this thing in, in, in the Chicago Blues Festival. He says, uh, shoot I would like to have you come by and play with us, and so I did that, the Blues Festival. I enjoyed that. Um, we have a place in town that's familiar with a lot of the, uh, the better musicians that play on the, that play better than some of the other ones called The Big Easy. I play there. Uh, the Hideaway. Uh, Emmett's. Uh, uh to name a few. And then play on some, some of the other venues that, that don't always have a band on a regular basis. These places I just named they play music on a regular basis; 7 nights a week. But there are some other places that play, uh, every 2 – 3 months, you know, here, here and there.

Norie Guthrie: Um, to go back to some of those places that you talked about going with your father to like, um, I think you mentioned the Eldorado Ballroom, uh, Club Matinee.

Kenneth Bell: Matinee?

Norie Guthrie: Yeah. Could you describe those places? What were they like on the inside?

Kenneth Bell: You know, those places, you know, they have some pictures here, here and there. People look up. The people have some of the grandkids have kept after the, the people who were here cause all the people who were doing that here that, during that time they, they're all gone. But when you go into those places, you know, they, it would be everybody is having a good time. They enjoying themselves. Very friendly. But it's always one or two people in there that's acting up. And so, you just look around and you'll find that person. But the bar, the, uh, the owner or the bartender would escort them out the door and, and other than that it would be fine.

Norie Guthrie: So, did these places have kind of big stages, small stages? Um, where they, uh, –

Kenneth Bell: Well they had –

Norie Guthrie: – it was kind of, like an intimate space where –

Kenneth Bell: – they had, no, they had a medium-sized stage. And, but the people would dance close to the stage and then, then, then, then, uh, they would get a little happy and then get on the stage. But as long as they didn't get too far carried away the people didn't, didn't mind.

Norie Guthrie: And when I met you originally it was at the Silver Slipper.

Kenneth Bell: Silver Slipper.

Norie Guthrie: Is that a place that you play at every once in a while?

Kenneth Bell: Every once in a while.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Kenneth Bell: Uh, they call me because I go there. You know it's, it's not far from where I live at. So, every Saturday night there's a live there, and I make it my business, uh, as a musician, if there's a live band and if you're not playing somewhere, you're probably going to be there. So, it, my take is if I'm not playing then I'm there. So, I'm there on Saturdays. They're playing, and I'm familiar with it, you know, because a, a lot of bands, I mean I hope I'm not giving up any secrets, but a lot of bands play 80 percent of the same show just about every week. They might change 20 percent of it, but 80 percent of the show is the same. So, by me being there quite often on a regular basis I could, I'm hearing these songs. So, they're like hey Joe can you, can you sit in with us tonight or our bass player can't, can't make it tonight. And because I've been there and heard these songs and pretty much have familiarized myself with the show then, then I can do it. So, without a lot of rehearsal because a lot of times you don't have time for rehearsing. If, um, if you got time, if a guy tells well, I'm going to be, I'm not gonna be there this weekend. He's not going to be there this weekend then they'll call a practice. But if something happen at the spare of the moment then there is no practice. You got to come in and start playing. Yeah.

Norie Guthrie: Do you find that to be something that's kind of hard of being able to just jump into a group?

Kenneth Bell: Well, you know, it is hard. It's hard for the simple reason if you're not, if you're not, if you've never been exposed to that then it's hard. It's scary. It's hard. And you're looking around at the audience and they're looking at you and it's like you're in a, you're in a mysterious place because the audience is like this, this guy what, somebody is not on. Something – they don't know how to play but they know what they're hearing is good or bad. So, they're looking around and saying well something is not right, and the guy is trying to kind of camouflage, try to keep his self from being exposed. And if you, you know, that's a, that's a horrible feeling but what happens is once you've been exposed to that which I have been so it's not, there's no big deal, it becomes no big deal. If someone kicks off a song and you telling them I don't know the song but they're gonna play it anyway, and so they're saying, in so many words they're saying well look we're going to play this song and we're going to get by with three pieces which meaning you're not going to be playing cause you don't know it, or we're going to get by with you trying to play the song. All right, you, you make the call. So, you know, you, you been exposed to it you'll try it. You, you'll do something on it. And most of it, most of it is similar and most of the songs that they play, you know, very seldom a song comes up that you don't know. Everybody knows the same songs.

Norie Guthrie: Maybe also the way the songs are constructed it makes it easy even if you don't know the song.

Kenneth Bell: Right. Right. Cause some of us is familiar me with other songs. I mean you got, uh, songs, uh, when you're playing the blues, you know, they don't, they don't tell you the name of the song. They tell you the type of music they want. So, there's no song to, to, I mean, to guide you. It's music. Play me a shuffle in G or play me a shuffle in C. A shuffle is a shuffle, and so whatever song you're gonna sing it doesn't matter. You want a shuffle. Or play me a slow blues. A slow blues is a slow blues. It's a C or a G. And so, you just play the slow blues, but you got people that don't know no better say well what, what's the name of the song. You know, you, you, if you, if you, if you are, if you, uh, um, uh, p-polished, uh, with, I mean, you know you want, you don't ask that. You just play me a slow blues. And c-, we count it off and we play slow blues.

Norie Guthrie: So, there's the shuffle. There's the slow blues. What else is something, what's a, what's another type of song that someone will tell you to play or style?

Kenneth Bell: Well, you know, well if you, if they saying, uh, we're gonna play a, we're gonna play a, a, a song but just play it, we're gonna just, we're, we're gonna play it in the key of A just stay on the 1.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Kenneth Bell: Just stay on the 1. There's no, there's no change in it. All you gotta do is stay on the 1. Shouldn't have to tell you anything else. Stay on the 1 means just stay on the key of A and

don't move. And, you know, then someone comes up all right you never heard the song before? I never heard the song before. Well just stay on the 1.

Norie Guthrie: Can you play me an example of shuffle?

Kenneth Bell: Sure. One, two, one, two, three. [Kenneth Bell plays guitar and sings "Let Your Hair Down Baby."]

Let your hair down baby
Let's have a natural ball
Let your hair down baby
Let's have a natural ball

Cause when you're not happy
It ain't no fun at all

You can't take it with you
That's one thing for sure
You can't take it with you
That's one thing for sure

There's nothing wrong with you
That a T-Bone shuffle can't cure

Kenneth Bell: He's orig-, he's just the original. I mean, you know, he, when, when you speak of blues, when you say original it does not come from who you are and how you play. If it come, it comes from how you, how you express this, how you express this through your guitar and your songs and that don't, it don't get no better than Lightnin'!

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Kenneth Bell: And he's just gifted with that. He's just born with that. This guy can make a, one guitar and a drum sound better than some guy with 5 – 10-piece band. Lighting could do that.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah. No, I...

Kenneth Bell: I listen to him right now. And it's just amazing because when he plays the guitar and when he sings the feeling –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Kenneth Bell: – of being, of being in the cotton field or being on a farm all that comes out of his, his playing and singing. All that comes out and that's what it's all about. It's about the hard times.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Kenneth Bell: And when you're singing the blues it's about the, the, the hard times that you've been through, that I've been through that made you wanna sit in the corner and cry, whatever the case may be. Now if you can do that and everybody can sit in the corner, in the corner and cry and we get the same feeling. Everybody can't play it on the guitar. See that, that's, you know, people can play the, play the blues but they can't, they, the expression is not – you can hit the same notes, everything can be the exact same but the expression. And you know what? They haven't been able to put their fingers on it. It does not come from the amplifier. It does not come from the guitar. It comes from how you – see I can turn the guitar on. I can turn all those knobs. Those knobs don't express what I feel. It comes through your fingers. If you've got the right feeling that you can express yourself it comes through your fingers. So, they can't invent nothing to replace that. See the thing about it is they got synthe-, synthesizers and all this stuff –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Kenneth Bell: – that you can put on a guitar –

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Kenneth Bell: – and it can make the guitars do a lot of stuff that you can't make it do but the truth of the matter is it, it'll get you by and it'll make people think you're doing this and doing that but when you hear the real blues there's nothing you can do about it but, but, but accept it. So, when you hear Lightnin' Hopkins and these other guys playing and some of these other guys playing who live today then there is no, there's no comparison. These guys, these guys that they've been heartbroken. I mean, I mean really heartbroken and they survived that and they, they're expressing this.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Kenneth Bell: And when you, when you been through that, you know, a lot of other people have too. But to pick up a guitar and express the way you're feeling inside on a guitar is just, you just can't, you can't, you can not match it. Can't, you can't match it. And that's what the blues it about. You know you can hit all the notes you want but if those notes don't have no feeling in 'em you're just wasting your time.

Norie Guthrie: Is your father one of those that was from the generation that could really –

Kenneth Bell: Oh, my father –

Norie Guthrie: – translate that feeling into it?

Kenneth Bell: – my father, that's, my father, you know, I, I often think about him now because, you know, I feel bad about me telling him I don't wanna play that man. You know, that's terrible. I, I grew up where my dad 80 percent of the records and music in my house T-Bone Walker. We had about 20 percent of other musicians, but everything played in my house was T-Bone Walker, and it just, it just would kill me. Now, after he got older and I got older people started telling me hey man this, this T-Bone Walker guy is, man, you know, you can't touch him, you can't touch

him. And I'm like what. My dad been trying to tell me this all these years and I didn't, I didn't realize it. But just prior be-, to his death I said wait a minute, hold up dad, hold up. I said man you got time to show me some of this stuff cause he could play it. He could play the blues. You know he could play the blues. I got people that tell me right now they say hey, Joe, man they say you was pretty tough back in the '50s and '60s. I'm like no I wasn't, that wasn't me, man. I wasn't even born. Oh. That was my dad. Oh, it was your dad. Cause people, people talk to him now, but they don't talk to him like I think they ought talk, talk about him, talk about him like, you know, you got Texas Johnny Brown mentioned in me before he passed away. Uh, I got this thing about, uh, I was in Third Ward before Lightnin' Hopkins died. Somebody said, well, you know what Lightnin'? I used to live over there. And I knocked on his door, and he goes can I help you, young man. I said yeah man. My name is Joe Bell. Joe Bell? Yeah, I know Joe Bell. Well, that's my dad. Oh, man. Really? I said, yeah man. Can you, can you play me a little something? He said man I'd be glad to. He sat on the porch and he played with us, and it just, you know, it brought tears to my eyes. Yeah. But those guys they're not around no more. And we're trying to, we're trying to keep it going for 'em, and sometimes we're not doing a good job. I mean, you know, we gotta stop because they loved the audience. They loved, they love you. They love the audience. The reason they did this is for you. Now, if you're not doing this, if we're not doing this for you then we're missing the boat. We're supposed to be doing this for you, and we're supposed to give you the best we can for whatever you pay. If it's a dollar, if it's \$10.00, if it's a \$1000 we're supposed to give you the best because, just because you don't pay but a dollar don't mean we don't give you the best. You always give, give your best. And besides, you may not have but a dollar. Anyway, that's my take on the blues.

Norie Guthrie: So, this kind of, since you've talked about your dad, can you tell me how you honor your father's memory through your performances?

Kenneth Bell: Through the way I play now? The way I play guitar now is, is, is for his, it's, uh, basically for my appreciation for what he did not only for, for me but you had to be here to know what he did for the audience. When he went out and played – I tell ya, I tell ya how, um, much love he had for playing music for the audience cause he always told me you not playing for you. You playing for you, get out the business. You're playing for the audience. When you go out there your appearance is, is for the audience. So, we were shining shoes. Please don't step on his shoes. And we just almost, you know, not, no. No please don't take, no, no. When we had, when he, cause he would take his time to shine his own shoes. When he shined his shoes if they was sitting here, I'd walk probably about 10 feet around the other way because I didn't wanna step on his shoes. But I played. Yeah, I play, I play guitar to honor what he, not, not so much for him but to honor what he told me to do. And he said always play your best and I try to do that. Play your best. I always play, play with a feeling, and, and, and, uh, I told a guy not long ago, I said, uh, said what's your name, man. He said it's Scott. Friend of mine's live in Chicago, not. I said, man, where, where'd you learn to play a guitar like that. He said what you mean, man. I said, man, you play with a feeling. And, you know, I'm, I'm like, I don't see a lot of that these days. I mean there is some out there but, but there's a lot of guys out there. But, and the guy says no, no, no, no, no. So, he plays something for me. And I said no, no, no, no. Go back and play what you played a few, for a while, just a few minutes ago. Play that again. He played it, and I'm like man you just, that's a feeling. I say any time you wanna get a feeling out of what you're doing go back and play that and then go back and try to play what you're trying to play.

Norie Guthrie: So, you kind of, you've already kind of talked to me about how the, you know, a lot of the blues generation has passed away here in Houston. Um, and you kind of, it seems like you, you feel that maybe the feeling of the blues doesn't always come through out their playing but are there some things that you do feel that have been passed on to the new generation?

Kenneth Bell: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I feel, I feel, uh, I feel like, um, that the, the, the one's that is passing, is gone, left a, a legacy. And who, and we're, and we'll, and, and we'll, uh, and the, and the guys that play blues now, which is quite a few are trying to make sure that it continue, it, it continues. The problem with that is, eh, I don't see enough young kids playing the blues. I'm not saying the blues is, is what you, you playing. It, it's just like I said, you know, if they don't pick the guitar up and start playing, you're not gonna be able to see it live anymore. The only way you're gonna be able to see it is through some kind of technology, and I wou-, that's not good, so I'd, I, I, I, uh, I recommend that these kids start trying to play the blues. Now, whether they want to make a living with it or not, I don't know. Maybe, maybe not, but I think being able to play the blues should be, you know, and I, and I tried teach some of the kids about playing the blues, but, you know, they, they, they just like we are, I am, like you are when we ke, well, well, me anyway, were kids, we felt like that was, uh, something that, you know, we could do 20, 40 years later. Uh, you don't, you don't want to wait that long. Besides, you know, these guys who left, who played the blues back then started at an early age. And so, you know, pretty soon, it's gonna be no, no live and, no, no, I mean, rock and roll, I mean, I see kids playing the rock and roll. I see all the, this technology they use and all that, see that, but I don't see anybody playing the blues. I mean, I do, but very, very, that's why I say, I don't, it's so few to almost look like it's nobody.

Norie Guthrie: So, you feel like it's, it might get lost.

Kenneth Bell: It might live-wise. Live-wise it's gonna get lost if they don't play the blues. You know, you know, because, you know, it's not, it's not as easy, as, as, as easy as you might think. Well, I'll pick up the guitar and play the blues any, any time. It's not that easy. My dad used to sing at the piano, and the piano was given to my mom through, my mom was a, uh, housekeeper, and it was given to her through one of her house, people that she housekeep, and it was in pretty good shape when we got it. You know, but we, we, my dad and my mom, we didn't have a lot of money, so he would play it, and, and he couldn't play the piano well, very well, but he could play a lot of notes, and he feel it, he play a lot of notes, you're gonna hit some of them wrong, some of them right, and he could play a guitar, play the blues, you just couldn't beat him. But he would play, and his mom and dad had passed, but they were, pictures were sitting right in front of him, he was sing, uh, uh, [Kenneth Bell sings.]

I was born by the river in a little tent,
oh, by the river my [?] whole life I spent
it's been a long, a long time coming,
but I know change gonna come.
Oh, it's been too

Uh, now he would sing that long, I remember and some other songs, and then all of a sudden, he would stop. He would stop playing, and just quiet. It's quite, just sitting there. And then, uh, then

“dad, you alright?.” He'd turn around, eyes are red and soaking wet from looking at his mom and dad. He just came to a complete stop and just sit there on the piano. Course, he had a beer. He had a beer. He had a beer, but after that intermission, **** intermission, a sentimental mission, and after that, about 15, 30 minutes and then go back to playing. He would sang, [Kenneth Bell sings.]

uh, bum ba dum,
I gotta woman way over town,
She's good to me, she's good to me
I gotta woman, way over town,
She's good to me.

And then he'd turn around and mom was in the audience, and, and he'd turn around, and she's asleep. She laying down asleep on the couch, and he'd turn around, mom, mom you heard that, yeah. You like that, yeah. [Kenneth Bell sings.]

I gotta woman, way over town,
She's good to me. She's good to me.

And he would sing, uh, [Kenneth Bell sings.]

I got, gotta woman with very big feet.
She's long, lean, and lanky,
And she got nothing to eat
She's my, she's my baby,
and I love her just the same.
I love her cause Caledon-, I love her cause Caledonia is her name.
Caledonia, eh, Caledonia, eh,
Dah, dah, dah, dah, dah dah, so hard
What makes your big ass so hard
Uh, I love you.

**** He used to do all of that.

Norie Guthrie: It sounds like he was the, he was, that he –

Kenneth Bell: He would do that.

Norie Guthrie: – he loved to entertain.

Kenneth Bell: Well, no, eh, this was after he got off the music business his hand messed up.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah.

Kenneth Bell: He had that piano. You know, on the weekends, cause he, after Sunday about 6:00, everything closed down cause he gotta go to work, and he wouldn't, he would, all right, mom, I'm ready, eh, meaning he's ready for ss-, supper.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Kenneth Bell: And she'd give him everything in the ice box, just the whole thing. Whatever's in there. There it is. But at 6:00, he's ready to perform, Friday, something Thursday, all the way up to 6:00 Sunday on that piano. And, uh, "Caledonia" he sung, uh, [Kenneth Bell sings.]

Ain't nobody here but us chickens.
Ain't nobody here at all.
We chickens trying to rest,
And you bust in and
Hobba, hobba, hobba, this is it.
Tomorrow is a busy day.
We got worms to scratch and eggs to lay.

I remember, I remember all that stuff.

Norie Guthrie: I used to play that one for my daughter.

Kenneth Bell: You did? That's what I'm saying –

Norie Guthrie: Yeah.

Kenneth Bell: – That's what I'm saying. Now, you, we talking, we talking about songs that was done, made in the 30s.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah.

Kenneth Bell: You know what I mean?

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Kenneth Bell: Now, how many people can touch them kind of songs.

Norie Guthrie: Right. No, they're, they're fun though. They're a lot of fun.

Kenneth Bell: Well, not only that, they were, they were, they were songs that had a lot of reality to 'em, and like I said, if you, if you, if you, uh, play the blues, gotta play with the feeling and/or sing songs that's got some lyrics in it. It's got real blues lyrics, you know. And, you know, these guys have gotten away from a lot of that stuff. You know, it's, it's a shame. There's some real serious songs out there, so when the people play

Caledonia, walking with my baby,

She's great big feet.
She's long, lean and lanky,
She ain't had nothing to eat,
But she's my baby,
And I love her just the same.
I love that woman cause Caledonia is her name.
And he says, Caledonia, bwamp
The band go, pop,
Caledonia, pop.
What makes your head, big ass so hard.

You know, you just can't, you can't match those songs. If you play them now, people are like, what is he singing. Never heard of that before. But that's the kinda stuff I grew up on. Matter of fact, because of this interview might help me kinda guide me back into that same direction.

Norie Guthrie: Now I was going to say, thank you so much for coming out and for doing the interview. I really appreciate it.

Kenneth Bell: Uh huh.

Norie Guthrie: Thank you for playing and everything.

Kenneth Bell: You'll find out, look look, look, find out I'm not quite as, quiet as I, as I seem to be. This guy, this guy might be too saturated with the blues.

Norie Guthrie: Oh, no, not at all. Not at all. You did a awesome job.

Kenneth Bell: Thank you.

Norie Guthrie: You did an awesome job.

Kenneth Bell: Thank you.

Norie Guthrie: Thank you.