



Interview with Pork Chop Willie

Author: Catherine A. Mulligan — Published: Aug 10, 2009 at 11:48 am

On any given night of the week, Banjo Jim's contribution to the boisterous vibe of New York City's Lower East Side is the hurly-burly magic of truly American music, from Appalachian folk, to bluegrass, to the blues. One of the regular acts at the bar on 9th Street and Avenue C is Pork Chop Willie, a local band that plays an under-recognized brand of the blues from the North Mississippi Hill Country.

Pork Chop Willie is the pairing of Bill "Pork Chop Willie" Hammer on guitar and vocals and Melissa "Railroad Nails" Tong on fiddle. They play in New York with drummer David Sokol and bassist "Dangerous" Dave Wnorowski. (The rhythm section for their frequent performances in Mississippi is comprised of Kinney Kimbrough on drums and Eric Deaton on bass.)

The blues originated in the Mississippi Delta with its rich soil and large plantations, where slaves and later itinerant black farmers created the blues out of an acoustic blend of work songs, chants, and rhythmic ballads. In the hills to the north-east of the Delta, a pared down style emerged, heavy on rhythm and influenced by a regional fife and drum tradition. The North Hill Country blues gained a wider audience following the release in the 1990s of recordings by masters such as R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough. Although it is a sound one does not find often in New York City, Pork Chop Willie brings it to Banjo Jim's on the first Friday of every month, thanks to Bill Hammer's passion for the music.

Hammer had already learned to pick a guitar and even play harmonica in the style of Bob Dylan when he came to the blues as a college student exploring the dollar bins at a record store. In his first blues record, a Lightnin' Hopkins album, he found a visceral mode of expression well suited for a young student in search of definition and an outlet. As Hopkins himself sang, the "blues is a feeling," and this was true for Bill Hammer from the start.

He came to Manhattan as a young professional and pursued his devotion to music even as he carved out a career in the hard charging realm of the New York City legal community. He found a studio that kept instruments on site and fostered young musicians, including amateurs like Hammer. He learned the electric guitar there and started playing in a Chicago blues band. Somewhere along the way, Hammer picked up the nickname "Pork Chop Willie," since he wasn't bold enough to count himself among the blues' many heavyweight "T-Bones" such as T-Bone Walker.

As focused as he was on his legal career, Hammer would listen to live blues acts regularly as a release. He says the blues are ideal "at the end of the day when you want to connect with your feelings." He happened upon Mississippi musician Jimbo Mathus, founder of Squirrel Nut Zippers, playing North Hill Country blues at a New York City club. Hammer says this of the music: "It grabbed me, and I realized, 'this is what I want to play'."

Hammer stayed until the end of the set and introduced himself to Mathus, explaining his interest in the North Hill Country style. In the egalitarian spirit of the blues, Mathus gave Hammer his personal cell phone number and offered to meet him for a lesson. The next day, Mathus surprised Hammer by answering his own phone, and the two met for the lesson at the Midtown apartment of a friend of Mathus'. Hammer subsequently devoted his musical development to the North Hill Country style, studying with Mathus and Eric Deaton, and volunteering at the North Mississippi Hill Country Picnic for the opportunity to meet and play with his musical heroes of the form.

continued on following page...



Asked about the technical difference between playing North Hill Country blues and the styles of other regions, Hammer says these tunes stay on one chord as opposed to the twelve bar progressions typical of other forms of the blues. He credits Junior Kimbrough with this description: "If I finds another chord, I saves it for another song." It is this simplicity that gives the form its raw emotion. That night at his first Jimbo Mathus show, Hammer found himself wondering when the chord was going to change: "Then, I thought, okay, this is kind of cool. Then, after awhile, you find yourself rolling around in the dirt with the spirit inside of you."

In 2008, Hammer met Melissa Tong, a professional violinist in the classical music world, and seized on an idea. "I knew there was a tradition of traveling string bands in the South, and I wondered how [North Hill Country music] would sound with a fiddle." He approached Tong with the idea. She says, "He gave me an R.L. [Burnside] CD, and I kind of freaked out." Although she had no training in the blues, Tong is a believer in the power of the "cross-pollination of genres." She observes of the North Hill Country sound, "I never realized how expressive one chord could be."

With Tong on board, Hammer says, "Pork Chop Willie became bigger than just one man." They formed the eponymous band and focused on the challenge of incorporating the fiddle into the North Hill Country rhythms, a rarity in both New York and Mississippi. At a recent show at Banjo Jim's, Pork Chop Willie proves they are "figuring it out" just fine.

The self-styled "friendly neighborhood bar" offers live music in a setting with swirly red walls, tin foil decorations, and array of wacky bric-a-brac that make Banjo Jim's feel like a comfortable rumpus room, perfect for the blues. Hammer takes the floor wearing a porkpie hat and exchanging collegial jibes with his bandmates. He tells us that Tong was given the sobriquet "Railroad Nails" after standing her ground in a "tussle" over a 24-ounce can of Budweiser in a tough Mississippi juke joint.

The set is a mix of originals written by Hammer and traditional North Hill Country standards. At the beginning of each song, Hammer's guitar sets the pace, familiarizing us with that song's one chord, which the fiddle will later echo. When they enter, Wnorowski's bass and Sokol's drums provide a strong undercurrent for Hammer's nasal tenor.

There is something gritty and naughty about the blues, and Tong is grinning like being naughty never gets old as her fiddle solos riff on the lyrical themes of love and loss. We hear the call-and-response tradition in songs like "All Night Long" in which the guitar's call is met by the fiddle's response. The guitar solo provides that weird bittersweet soaring feeling attendant on falling in love, and the fiddle responds with the frenetic drive that underscores passion. The blues truly is like the song lyric, "white lightnin' done gone to my head."

Hammer was right about this music. The repetition of the guitar breaks open the soul, so the fiddle can get in the cracks as the rhythm section fills up the belly. It is insistent music that demands attention from the core. It is just what New York City needs.

Article Author: Catherine A. Mulligan

Catherine is a purveyor of hope and believer in little miracles who envisions her life, even in the worst of times, as a buena vida social club, The Flamingo Room.

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