

Sleepy John Estes/Brownsville, TN./from talk-2.19.09/D-13/10.17.09

BROWNSVILLE

BY DAVID LUBIN

PROLOGUE

I grew up in an upper middle class suburb just north of Chicago. My grandparents opened a delicatessen there. I lived with them and my mother in a small apartment...the only kid in my school that didn't live in a house or have a father...he was long gone somewhere in California.

During World War Two my grandfather showed me some photographs of relatives in Poland murdered in gas chambers and firing squads. It seemed unreal to me then...difficult to understand until an American Nazi Party member came into the deli screaming at my Grandfather calling him a "kyke" and a "dirty Jew" as I hid behind the counter. I was scared...my Grandfather screaming at the guy to get out of the store.

At that time, Jew's couldn't buy property in the town...the real estate agents used the word, "restricted" on their for sale signs. Sometimes my friends would sneak me into the local country club to go swimming because no Jews were allowed in there either. I always wondered how anyone would ever know what I was...did I look Jewish? What does Jewish look like? Most people thought I was Italian. I didn't understand the concept of race as it had to do with me. I was white just like everyone else who lived in town. Later, I read about slavery in school and would hear terrible stories of violence in the South on the radio. How could a persons skin color or even the shape of ones eyes or religion or how they talked and what they ate cause so much hatred in people?

My mother remarried when I was fourteen and we moved to Chicago...changed high schools after one semester and they also changed my last name to Blumenthal from Lubin which felt to me like an ill-fitting coat. (In 1972 I legally changed it back to Lubin.) My mother tried to make me call my step-father "Dad" which I never could. I'm sure he hated me for that along with my constant confrontations at the dinner table over his use of "Shvartzer"...Yiddish for "black person" used in a disparaging way. He and others in his family and some in mine too arrogantly looked down at blacks...even to gentiles. I could never understand that intolerance given the history of persecution against Jews.

When I was sixteen I was learning to drive by taking my step-father to the south side of Chicago into an all black neighborhood where he owned a liquor store and bar and an apartment building that he had converted to smaller apartments...typical at that time in order to make more money from poor families needing cheaper apartments. The area was dreary...crowded, with a lot of crime...jobless men hanging out drinking...no parks for kids to play in. As we drove he'd talk about Blacks as something less than human. He refused to acknowledge his racism. We'd argue all the time. He was doing business there because he could make a lot of money and that created in me a disgust for his attitude of being rich as life's primary goal no matter how that was accomplished.

In high school I was studying the history of segregation in the South but then I had seen it for myself in Chicago too...in the not so subtle "segregated" housing projects and neighborhoods. I thought about the Declaration Of Independence...those inalienable rights for all citizens which had no meaning for many people living in the North and the South...that word..."Citizen".

One evening I was watching a documentary by Edward R. Murrow on T.V. called "The Harvest

of Shame"...about the terrible conditions under which migrant workers were living in Florida. It was a very powerful and inspiring film. Around the same time I had read a newspaper article with photographs of a "Tent City" in Somerville, TN. It was about tenant farmers evicted from their homes for registering to vote. They were living in tents supplied by the N.A.A.C.P. on land donated by a black farmer who owned his property.

A few weeks later I received a large commission check from work. I thought to myself...I could do a documentary something like that migrant film. It would be about the migration of African Americans from the South to the North. I'd call it "Citizen South-Citizen North." The project began like a dream of doing something meaningful but then took on a reality for me. I had no experience in journalism. I was not officially involved in the Civil Rights Movement. I had no associations with any political groups at that time. I just wanted to see for myself what was going on. Maybe other people would find some benefit from seeing a film like that ...maybe even my stepfather. I'd begin by going to Tennessee first to look around.

I didn't know anything about the technology of film making. I had never made a film before...not even a home movie. I had never been to the South. I wasn't a photographer either but was lucky to find Lars Svanberg, an excellent still photographer from Sweden who was studying at the Institute of Design in Chicago. He had never shot a film before either but agreed to help me for the experience and we'd figure out how to put it together later. I covered all our expenses. We charged ahead in blissful ignorance.

#### BROWNSVILLE, TENNESSEE:

A few weeks later we took off by train to Memphis for a couple of days on a scouting trip. We rented an old car and visited "Tent City" and then contacted the local chapter of the N.A.A.C.P. in Brownsville, a town just outside of Memphis to try to get some help and information. As we walked around town we found the experience of actually seeing the "Colored Only" signs at the public bathrooms and drinking fountains frightening and depressing. We immediately decided to go back to Chicago to rent the film equipment and get back as soon as possible. We drove back down about a week later in my exotic looking English car...a small Austin which I realized was not a smart idea because it attracted a lot of attention. Not only that, a short time later the muffler cracked when I hit a pot hole on a dirt road and the car sounded like a Harley Davidson motorcycle.

Someone from the N.A.A.C.P. in Brownsville had found us a place to stay with a black family on a farm a couple of miles from the town center. The head of the family was leading the voter registration drive in Haywood County. It was the Fall and the landscape was tinted in a sepia brown color. We found the house...it was large and old and looked like it belonged in another century on that rolling countryside. The air was sweet from the corn, cotton, and sorghum harvest. There was a mill on the farm pulled by a mule and we watched the process of making syrup and then were given a couple of jars to take back home with us when we left. It was delicious with the big breakfasts the family served us...hot cakes and fresh bacon and eggs with that syrup. Our hosts were warm and generous, treating us to real southern hospitality. It was a big family. They had 18 kids who seemed like they were happy most of the time. We saw them running around laughing and screaming and I'm thinking that this was some kind of paradise compared to the projects I had seen in Chicago. The reality though was that most of these kids would end up going to the big cities anyway because there wasn't enough work for them on the farms and not much in town either. We we're hearing that story often besides what we could see later of the pain, anger and frustration coming from years of segregation.

On a Sunday we were invited to go to the New Hope Baptist Church not far from the farm. At the end of the service the Minister asked Lars and I to stand up while he told the congregation that we were there to let folks up North know what was happening. After he

finished talking the congregation stood up and applauded. We felt embarrassed by the attention...after all we weren't representing any media organizations. In fact, at this point, we weren't sure what the film should be about anymore. The voter registration drive was important and very volatile. The reality of life there was vibrant with change. In my mind, the project was becoming more complex and beyond our capabilities. Nevertheless, we kept going.

We always had this idea of wanting to find some local musicians for our sound track...Gospel and perhaps a local blues musician. After the service we asked some people if they knew of anyone that could help us and someone suggested a man named Sleepy John Estes, a blind blues singer and song writer who played often in the area. We asked our host if he knew how to find his place and he said he did and would take us there after Sunday dinner. They served us barbecued goat, corn bread, sweet potatoes, greens and apple pie and then we got a concert from the entire family singing gospel songs; they sometimes traveled around the county performing at local churches.

It was getting late in the afternoon and we were anxious to film before we lost the light. We jammed our equipment into the tiny Austin and took off down a dirt road making turns from one to another through fields and run-down shacks until we finally stopped in front of one that was in particularly bad shape. There were other houses nearby too and some of the people were looking us over pretty good as we got out of the car. Well...Lars was short and skinny and blond and he was wearing a fancy looking leather vest. Me...I was dressed in one of those preppy college looking crew neck sweater's and pressed khaki pants and leather loafers and then, of course, there we were driving that weird little car. No wonder they were staring at us...this wasn't exactly a tourist stop.

We carefully walked up the porch steps avoiding the missing ones and the broken boards. Most of the wood was in some state of rot. We knocked on the screen door and after a few long moments Sleepy John Estes came out. Tall and thin wearing dark glasses and dressed in overalls with a straw hat on, he recognized our host's voice who then told him what we were doing and asked if he'd let us photograph him and tape some music for our film. He invited us to come inside so we could talk.

We sat down at a table in his kitchen. He was silent for a long time. In the meantime I'm looking around the house. In another room I saw a dark outline of a woman, I think his wife. She was in a rocking chair moving back and forth very fast staring straight ahead. We were told later she was a "little crazy." She was completely oblivious to our presence. Then I noticed there were large holes in the kitchen floor...the wall was covered with old newspapers. Lars and I agreed later that we'd never forget the weight of that moment while waiting for John to speak.

Finally John agreed to perform but he didn't want to play at his house...wanted to go over to his neighbors porch and play there. As I remember they had electricity...I presumed his wasn't working and he needed it for his amps. All he asked from us was a bottle of moonshine whiskey. He said he'd needed that for his voice. As we walked over to the house I gave one of his friends some money to buy a couple of bottles. Then we began setting up the camera. In the meantime and during the whole trip Lars was taking still photographs along with shooting film.

It was getting late and we had to move quickly before we lost the light. John sat down and began tuning his guitar while a friend attached his old amps and positioned them. His guitar was missing the base E string and he had a pencil tied to the bridge that substituted for a capo. His friend came back with the bottles and John took a couple of long drinks and then it was passed around to other people who were gathering in the yard. The word must have gotten around that John was going to sing...it was going to be a party.

The scene was surreal as the light began to fade. John began by singing "Rats In My

Kitchen" and as I was listening to the lyrics felt like I was sitting right there in that room in his house. By that time there must have been thirty or forty people standing around us in a semi-circle rocking and swaying to the music.

The light was almost gone and we shot all we could. It was difficult to see anyone clearly then...only the porch light was on. The party was getting louder as we packed up our gear to leave. We thanked John for performing but I'm not sure if he heard us or cared one way or another. He kept playing and drinking as we slowly drove out to the road.

The next day we said our goodbye's to the family thanking them for their help and generosity and drove out into a long, straight stretch of gravel road. At some point we noticed we were being followed by a couple of white guys in a pick-up truck and then became aware that they were slowly closing in on our tail. I had a sudden feeling that we needed to get out of there fast. I jammed the accelerator to the floor sending up a cloud of dust and a deafening roar and kept an eye on the rear view mirror as we gained some distance on the truck. We finally hit the on-ramp for the Interstate to Chicago and saw the truck dropping back. We simultaneously let out a long sigh of relief. We looked at each other realizing at that moment that we had just spent a few days in a potentially very dangerous situation.

#### EPILOGUE:

A few weeks later in Chicago, I was walking down the street and noticed the record store I'd been to before that specialized in Blues music. I walked in and asked the owner, Bob Koester, of Delmark Records whether he had ever heard of Sleepy John Estes. He did one of those silent movie double takes and then went on to say that he was popular in the forties...ripped off by the record companies and then he completely dropped out of sight. I told him about the trip and that I had some tapes he could listen to...that I'd bring them in the next day.

The next time I saw John was several months later at a folk club in Chicago called The Gate Of Horn. Bob had gone down to Brownsville soon after talking to me and brought John back to Chicago to record him. He began to get gigs all over the States...in clubs, folk festivals and universities including trips to Europe and Asia. Between sets I went up to where John was sitting on the stage and told him who I was. He smiled and said, "Oh yeah, I remember you..."and smiled again and I took his hand to shake it...then went back to my table and he began the next set with "Rats In My Kitchen".

It was fortunate that Lars took a lot of those still shots. The camera we had rented had light leaks that ruined most of the footage...a result of our lack of experience for not testing the camera properly before we left. We tried to save some parts of the film while using most of the stills. We had to put something together in order for me to raise money to complete the project. I took it around to a few organizations and business people but I failed to get any funding.

Lars eventually went back to Sweden. When my marriage dissolved, for a long time the box with the film and photographs sat in an apartment and then I learned they had all been thrown away. Forty-six years later after many attempts to find Lars and get copies of the photographs, I finally made contact through the Internet with his daughter Sanna who had all of her father's negatives. Unfortunately Lars had passed away a few years before. On July 16, 2008 Sanna and I met in California and we spent some time together talking about that trip to the South. We also discussed a video project that could replace the lost film which she's working on now along with a memoir about her father.

Sleepy John Estes died in 1977 in Brownsville, Tennessee. He is acknowledged as one of the all time great blues song writer's and performer's. And..."Tent City" was to become

emblematic of the fight for the right to vote for all our citizens. The Voting Rights Act was passed 3 years after our trip. Barak Obama was less than one year old when we were down there. Looking back, I think somehow our project worked out O.K. after all. We found Sleepy John and later I located the pictures. Seeing these powerful and beautiful photographs again I can't help but think that Lars would have been pleased too.

2009- Brownsville:

I made a contact through the Brownsville Chamber of Commerce with John Ashworth who had helped to create a history museum in town and who was planning a Black History Month event in the local community center. I sent him the photographs with a brief message of the trip in '62 and he invited me to speak and show the photos. I accepted his invitation and flew to Memphis in Feb., 2009.

Driving through Brownsville was like a dream revisited...the landscape seemed like it never had changed. John was a gracious host and full of information and enthusiasm for the cultural history of the area. After growing up there, he had recently retired in Brownsville after a career in the Army and then as an executive with Eastern Airlines. He and his wife Charlotta welcomed me as if I was part of their family. John set me up at Carol's B & B which was above her soul food restaurant...the place seemed always packed with people both black and white.

I gave my talk at the community center, the gym at the old high school. John showed a video that we had put together the night before with Lars's photographs and the music of Sleepy John in the background. Afterwards, I talked with many people, some of whom had retired there after careers spent in larger cities in the South and the North. A few were teachers...a couple of them worked in New York City...there was a retired policeman from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. They grew up in town and left for college and for better opportunities away from segregated Brownsville. Some worked in Memphis and other cities in the State too. However, nobody was able to recognize the people in the pictures. I had forgotten the name of the family we had stayed with and thought maybe someone might remember who they were but no one did.

It was surprising that even though many in attendance knew about Sleepy John, most of the kids didn't. They weren't even that familiar with the history of the '60's which was one of the reasons John had organized the event and why he had invited me. Also, blues music is not played on the local radio station very often. The kids...like most everywhere else in the country were into rap and pop.

Before we left the building a man came up to me and introduced himself as Sleepy John's son. He was dressed in working clothes and looked like he had had a few drinks.

"What happened to all that money he made...I ain't got none of it," he said.

I didn't know how to answer him except to tell him I didn't know...that I had never talked or seen his father again except to say hello once at a club in Chicago. Later John Ashworth told me that he was a handyman around town and drank a lot. Lyle Reed, who was very active during the civil rights movement there was trying to help him but the case was very complicated as another of John's family members were also claiming royalties. It was sad to see him in such bad shape.

The next day John had scheduled a tour around the area so I could re-visit the locations we had filmed in. He took his laptop with the video in case we had the opportunity to show someone who might recognize the family but at this point I wasn't sure if I'd ever find out. Then we went to the New Hope Baptist Church to look around. The church had been rebuilt but I did recognize the landscape. There was nobody around but we planned to be back there Sunday for the service.

As we were driving around the area John stopped at a cannery store not far from the church. He wanted to show me the place...a tradition there where folks would bring in their fruits and vegetables for canning. The man who owned the place was there working. John knew him and then pulled out his laptop to show him the video...see if he could recognize anyone.

"That's my brother!," he said looking at one of the pictures in the video. "Yeah...that's my brother all right...there are the kids and his wife...they had 18 kids."

"Was he involved in the voter registration drive?," I asked.

"Oh yeah...he was the leader."

Mystery solved...James Turner was his name...that's who we stayed with.

"Are the kids around?"

"Oh yeah...several of them live in town."

He looked in his address book and gave John a phone number.

"This is Eugene's number."

"I know him," said John..."I know where he lives...I'll call him on my cell right now." And he did and we drove right over there.

Eugene Turner is an investment counselor for an insurance company and lives in a large ranch style house in town. He welcomed us and was very curious about the video. He called his older brother James who lived nearby and asked him to come over to the house too. He's a retired auto parts manager. John set up the video and I anxiously watched for their reaction.

"That's My Dad!," they both exclaimed.

"Hey...that's me," said James..."and my dog. Oh...I remember you and that skinny blonde haired guy. Yes! You guys made us kids run out in the field looking happy and having fun." Oh, I thought to myself...I set that up trying to prove a point that was pointless.

"Yeah...we were wondering what you guys were up too." I laughed...they did too. We had a great talk. I asked them about their brothers and sisters. "Did you all get along?"

"Oh yeah...we're a close family...most of us live around here still. My Dad passed a couple a years ago...then my Mom. They talked about segregation at that time...the schools they went to...moving from one house to another because of their Dad's work on the voter registration drive. It was very moving to hear their stories but they seemed content with their life now. They loved the town and the landscape...enjoyed fishing in the lakes and being with their families. Eugene was very optimistic about the economy and both were excited about Barak Obama...proud that he was President.

The next morning John and I drove to the New Hope Baptist Church for the Sunday service. John introduced me to a few folks he knew and then to the Pastor, Dr. Charles Thomas. He welcomed me and we talked about my visit in '62 and then we took our seats. I was expecting the pastor to begin but then realized that a lay preacher would start and so stepping up to the podium was a very tall and athletic looking man perhaps in his early fifties. He began with statements that were echoed by the congregation which were lyrical with his voice alternating between growls, shouts and whispers. It was an extraordinary performance that vibrated through the church seemingly raising it off of its foundations. He finished by slowing down the tempo while backing off the platform as

the congregation repeated his phrases.

I talked with him briefly after the service. It so happened that the evening before I had watched a documentary on African American basketball players during the time of segregation; the integration of southern university teams and the desegregation of the N.B.A. I like basketball so that was on my mind when I asked him if he had ever played. He said he had in college and then was drafted by the Detroit Pistons but never played with them. I didn't pursue that further. He did say that he was a Recreational Director at a nearby state prison for the last 20 years which he called his "God's work." I had the feeling he was good at it...working with young people...I could feel the energy and integrity of his mission.

Pastor Thomas then took the podium. He began by acknowledging events of the week...anniversaries of family members who had passed away...birthdays...my presence there with John and announcing the showing of the video after his sermon. He was eloquent, thoughtful and then the intensity of his sermon began to rise and kept rising and rising...his body almost leaving the floor. My first impression of him was that he looked like a university professor...soft spoken and then to see him literally take flight was impressive.

John set up the video and gave an introduction to the material and also commented on our finding James Turner and some members of his family. The reactions of the congregation were interesting to me. Again, most of the young people didn't know anything about Sleepy John Estes nor much about the history of segregation in their community. The older people did though. They responded very enthusiastically to the images in the video and talked about that time when they were kids...the same age as the young people in the church that morning. One woman who I guessed was in her eighties admonished the kids who were sitting in the choir about the need for them to get an education and what she had to do to get one. She said she had walked several miles each morning to get to school. There were no buses. The black schools were far away from town. Then she'd walk back home in the afternoons to help in the cotton fields. This is what the Turner family kids did too. They were out there till dark picking cotton. I felt embarrassed by my manipulating that shot on the farm. This wasn't a Shangri-La as I intended to demonstrate with my comparison to the Chicago housing projects.

The morning of the next day before I was to leave, John Ashworth had set up a radio interview with Lyle Reed, the former judge, on his local radio show in which I went over some of the things I had talked about at the Black History event. After we were off the air, there was a woman in the lobby waiting to talk to me. She had been listening and drove right over to the station which was in the middle of the town. Her name was Mamie Turner and she was one of the daughters of James Turner. She was very young in 1962...maybe was in one of the pictures being held by her mother. She was warm and appreciative of my visit and we talked for a long time. I thanked her for coming over and what that experience with her family had meant to me. At that moment a sense of genuine gratitude came over me...that a circle was finally closed...that I had intimately witnessed a kind of revolution in my own lifetime.

This how I met Sleepy John Estes. His soulful music has endured through the oppression of segregation and discrimination and through his recordings remain as a permanent reflection of a man's unique voice crying out its stories of hardship and joy. I feel privileged to have met him.

And that's my story about Brownsville.

<http://www.delmark.com/rhythm.estes.htm>, [www.delmark.com/](http://www.delmark.com/)

