

## Pressing Out Diamonds

by Michael "Hawkeye" Herman

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I love the music of the Rev. Robert Wilkins, (b. 1/16/96, Hernando, MS - d. 5/26/87, Memphis, TN). I especially enjoy his songs "Prodigal Son" and "No Way To Get Along." I have performed those two tunes for well over 30 years. (The song Prodigal Son is based on a parable Jesus tells in the New Testament book of Luke, chapter 15, v.11-32, The Lost Son or Prodigal Son. Check it out in your New Testament Bible. It won't take but a few minutes to read.)

I became a friend of Rev. Wilkins granddaughter, Lane Wilkins, who lives in Memphis, a number of years ago. She heard me perform the song Prodigal Son at a club in Memphis. After my performance she introduced herself and we became good friends. We talked a great deal about her grandfather ... and you will be happy to know that the Wilkins family received a "righteous settlement" (\$\$\$) from the Rolling Stones for their having placed the song, Prodigal Son, on the Stone's album Beggar's Banquet ... and for having wrongfully taken credit (Jagger/Richards) for writing the song.

Rev. Wilkins played blues music in his early recording days ... but later became a "sanctified singer/preacher" and would only perform gospel/sacred music.

Lane told me about how, years ago (in the early 1950s) her Reverend grandpa would load up the car with family members on Saturdays, put .50 cents worth of gas in the car, and drive out to the small towns outside of Memphis in Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee, to perform gospel music and "witness" on the streets for passersby, hoping to get donations enough to get enough gas to make it back to Memphis that night. They would usually bring only hard-boiled eggs and lemonade to eat on such all day musical gospel missions. Lane told me that other members of her family played music with her granddaddy in these street gospel sessions, and that she was given a tambourine at the age of three, in order to join in on the music making. She also stated to me that that was the best way and most common way (in Black culture) to get a child involved in music in the church, and otherwise ... by starting them out on the tambourine, so that from the beginning they know where the beat is ... and after that, maybe they can apply that sense of tempo to learning another instrument.

About a year after meeting Lane Wilkins in Memphis, I had an assignment to write about the 'meaning of the blues' for a blues music magazine ... I wrote to Lane and asked her if she could share any thoughts she might have on the subject ... or any thoughts her grandpa may have shared with her about blues music and its origins and

'meaning."

Below you will find the message she sent back to me ... it is beautiful, and I have quoted it a number of times in articles I have written on blues history and origins ... I have titled her letter, "Pressing Out Diamonds."

I hope you enjoy the letter as much as the music of her grandpa.

Truly,

Hawkeye

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Dear Hawkeye,

My grandfather, Robert Timothy Wilkins, Sr., was not a Delta bluesman, so his music had a hill sound to that is so popular around Oxford, Mississippi.

Towards the end of his life, my grandfather talked about his music and what it meant to him. Once he said, "Baby - God gave each Negro a compensation, something like a payment for slavery. This gift from God is a soulful thing and deals with what the Negro got inside himself. You see, after so many years of pressing down hard on the colored man, a person (the one being pressed upon) gets something like a diamond. Now that diamond is hard, but it is still the most highly dollared paid for stone in the world. Every Negro got one of them diamonds on the inside. The only problem is that they just don't know that much about mining.

The blues is what happened when Negroes starting 'mining' for their special gift from God. And the blues takes on different shapes for different Negro's. Some of them sing the blues, others play the blues, some paints the blues, and still others dance the blues right off of their feet like ol' Bojangles. You know you I'm talking bout. Find your diamond and you will find your blues."

I then asked him about white people and the blues. He laughed and said, "See that's another thing folks don't understand. Sometimes them white boys who done been to my house, the blues just leaps right out of their eyes. I can see the mean daddies with their drinking and woman chasing. I can see the fat back, biscuits, and sorghum syrup. I see their hard times. They got the blues cause somebody, usually their kin folks done pressed down on them and made a diamond. But some of them, I listen to their music and guitar playing, and I know they ain't been pressed on a day in their lives. Ain't got nothing but some grit inside. Don't know nothing about no suffering."

Yours Truly,

Lane Wilkins

p.s.

I hope this helps. I am a worker of the words and not the magician with the steel six strings that you are and my grandfather was. Tell me, just between you and I, have you ever been pressed on so hard until a diamond popped right out of your heart?

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