



Gene 'Birdlegg' Pittman, 2013. Courtesy Dialtone Records.

## *From The Vaults.....*

# Gene 'Birdlegg' Pittman

*By Mike Stephenson*

When the name 'Birdlegg' came up in Scott Bock's interview with Dialtone boss Eddie Stout, a look in our archive of as yet unpublished interviews turned up this 2004 interview with the harmonica player by Mike Stephenson in Belgium. Pittman also has a new CD, 'Birdlegg', out on Dialtone.

**I** was born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 10th May, 1947. Not much went on with my life until I went to school and after high school I waited for like nine years before I went to college. I went to college and found out I didn't like it because it was too much like high school so I walked by a music store one day and bought a harmonica, simple as that. I was 26 then. I had never had a music lesson, never played music but I always wanted to play. I was into all kinds of music at first but my early years, my very early years, like when I was less than ten years old, that's all we had was blues. This was before rock and roll. Where I came from, they didn't play blues on the radio stations, they played mostly country and there were jazz stations - but then along came Chuck Berry and Little Richard. So I went to New York City - New York is only two hundred miles from Harrisburg. So I took a bus to New York because I wanted to meet people and I just lucked out and I met this woman from Berkley and we, you know, sparks flew and we hung out and she started telling me about all my favourite musicians.

By this time I was really into the blues and Taj Mahal who lived in the Bay area. John Lee Hooker lived in the Bay area, so I moved there. I gathered my stuff up, jumped on a Greyhound bus and went to Oakland, California, this was in 1975.

I moved to Oakland for the music and the woman. So I went there and she set me up - and then dropped me, but I had enough sense to think she may have dropped me but the music will never drop me. So I just got heavily involved with the music scene. There are a lot of newspapers on the west coast that advertise different types of music being played and they always had a blues section.

So I found out where the blues clubs were so I just went to these blues clubs and I told them I was a blues player which I hardly was. I was only playing harmonica a year so I knew nothing and I just

proceeded to learn. I met Sonny Rhodes, Cool Papa Sadler, Jimmy McCracklin, Lowell Fulson, Percy Mayfield, J.J. Malone, Troyce Key and Charlie Banks.

The first blues person I met was this guy named Barsallar, he was the brother of blues player Johnny Talbot. Barsallar is never going to be anything more than he is, but he is a genius but he don't know he is, so he was the first blues person I played with.

He had a little band that I saw him playing with at a basketball court, he had set up on a basketball court and I told him I played harmonica. I had just learned my changes, nobody taught me, I had to do all that myself, so I had learnt them and I was going out to play and I went out to play and I've been meeting people ever since.

I met Sonny Rhodes at Deluxe Inn - it was an after hours club. There was this football player who used to play on the Raiders, took a liking to me and one night he said: "I'm going to take you to a real blues club" and he took me to this club where J.J. Malone, L.C. Robinson, Cool Papa, Sonny Rhodes was playing. Sonny introduced me as a young black man who plays harmonica. At the time I didn't understand the significance of it, so I was offended. I never wanted to be a black harmonica player, I wanted to be a harmonica player but as it turned out, at that time I was the only black person playing harmonica in the Bay Area.

### **COOL PAPA TOOK ME UNDER HIS WING**

So to him that was very significant and they took me under their wing and Cool Papa especially took me under his wing. I played with him for thirteen years, even after I formed The Tight Fit Blues Band in 1980. I still played with him up until 1993. Cool Papa was a guitar and bass player but he was really known for his song writing. I made him a promise before he died that I would keep his music alive, so I perform some of his numbers onstage.

The first time I went to Eli's Mile High club was in 1977 and there was a guy called Roscoe playing. He had a band called Roscoe and The Rockets and I got up on the stage and played my harmonica with him



Gene 'Birdlegg' Pittman, 2013. Courtesy Dialtone Records.

and he said: "If you want to play your harmonica, first of all you go home and you practice". He just hurt my feelings and I thought that they would think I am going to quit music. I had quit everything in my life and I'm not quitting this and I went home and I worked and worked, and two weeks later I went back and I played and Roscoe said: "Well I see you went home and practised, that's what I'm talking about". He was a real old guy, he must have been sixty or seventy when I met him. He and his band were a bunch of old guys and I was in my twenties so these guys were like ancient you know. They were playing Eli's and it wasn't that popular then, you could go there and find a seat anywhere. I met Eli of course and I was living across the street from Eli's when Eli got shot. His girlfriend is the one that killed him about his wife. The wife didn't kill him about the girlfriend, the girlfriend killed him about the wife. It was nothing to hear shots at Eli's, so I didn't think anything was wrong with Eli.

#### TROYCE KEY WAS A JIVE ASS WHITE BOY

Then along comes J.J. Malone, Troyce Key, Charlie Banks, C.A. Carr and Richard Milton who played drums. Troyce said to me: "I'm going to borrow some money from my father and I'm going to try and open Eli's". I couldn't stand Troyce Key, I thought he was a jive ass white boy riding on the coat tails of these black musicians who were great. But he did, he actually opened Eli's and he put so much heart into it that I said to myself that I shouldn't be so hard on this guy. He made that club into something, he made it international. You couldn't even go to the bathroom without seeing something about Eli's. So we all started playing back there again. Sonny Rhodes came back, he played on Wednesday nights. Beverly Stauber and Eddie Ray played on Thursday nights.

I used to go to the jam sessions at Eli's, I was never in the bands but there were times when I got hired to play. I didn't lead my own band until 1980. You see harmonica players are the first ones to get fired. They are the last hired, first fired, we are the second class citizens of the blues business and plus not many people hire harmonica players so if you wait for someone to hire you you're finished. So this woman named Monica Dupont who was a singer gave me some advice, she said "Birdlegg if you are ever going to get a chance to play, it's you that has to get the gigs, nobody's going to hire you. You get the gigs and you hire them, it may not be fair but that's what's happening."

I have recorded with Sugar Pie DeSanto. I went in the studio with her, she's one of my heroes. We have a respect for each other's energy. I like her because she reminds me of my ma, to tell you the truth, because she had such incredible energy too, which she's passed to me. I did some recordings with Cool Papa but I still don't know whatever happened to them. I don't like the studio, I love the stage.

Me and Omar The Magnificent (Dave Alexander) worked together. You see, I'm the type of person because I went to school, because I learned how to do research, because I learnt how to go to school with white people, with Indian people and Asian people, I know you can't hate one group of people. Once you hate one group of people, you meet somebody in that group that's alright. So I learnt that bitterness will kill you, it won't kill your enemy. So I learnt to be aware of injustice without hating people. Omar had too much hatred.

I got picked up by the Mississippi Delta Blues Band and I played with them - that was the first band. The second one was the best Mississippi Delta Blues Band. In 1984 we went to Iceland, Norway and Sweden. The second band had myself, Joe Louis Walker and Eddie Ray - it was like the tightest, best band although there were

some band frictions. Joe didn't get along with Eddie Ray and vice versa. Joe Louis and myself worked really hard in making the band work. I went with the Mississippi Delta Blues Band three times. One of the things about the Mississippi Delta Blues Band, you may criticise it, but it was like a training camp for people who wanted to be real bluesmen.

My influences on the harp are Taj Mahal, he's an incredible harmonica player, he plays like Sonny Boy. The thing I like about Sonny Boy, (Rice Miller), was the way he played his own fields, the way he answered himself and didn't go off time. Also, what I liked about his blues, his blues wasn't all sad. When I do stuff like 'Ninety Nine', I do a lot of his songs and I write in that style, I don't write sad blues, I write like dance blues, I write things that make people laugh because I don't want to make the world cry. By the time I moved out to the West Coast, Paul Butterfield and Michael Bloomfield was still alive. I never was much into Paul Butterfield because I'm not into the Little Walter strict style of harmonica playing.

#### PEOPLE SAY I SHOULD GET A DAY JOB

Music has been a full time thing for me. Let me tell you, when I left school I left the day job too. I have spent years and years living with women who liked my music but didn't like me, and women saying "O.K. it's time to go". I'd go and stay with friends, sleep on their couches. I've basically been homeless for about twenty years but I always knew what I wanted. People would say that I should get a day job but I didn't want that. I watched my parents, I watched my grandfather, work all these years for people and when they got broke down they were cast aside.

I'm working on an album right now, we've just got out of the studio and we are going back in. Steve Gannon out of England is on the recordings, so is Frank Goldwasser, Bobby Webb, R.J. Coleman, Jackie Rogers and Miss Dee, who is a singer. She does background vocals on 'Meet Me On The Corner' and 'I'm Gone'. My first album that's out is called 'Meet Me On The Corner'. (Released in 2005).

The next album is going to be called 'Birdlegg And The Tight Fit Blues Band Down On San Pablo Avenue'. They are on Tight Fit Records, that's my own label. I'm not looking for a record company because everyone I know that's been with a record company has been dissatisfied and I don't want anyone changing my music. I see my job as to keep the blues going. I see it as keeping the music of J.J. Malone, Cool Papa, Lowell Fulson, is to keep that music alive especially for the black community. I'm trying to bring back black people into the blues and I have a strong African/American following on the West coast. I go into schools and play and teach in the schools. I do seminars on the blues. I'm tired about white people telling the world about black music, that's second hand, you can get it first hand from me.

The biggest kick of my life is doing this album with Sugar Pie. Jimmy McCracklin was directing me and he was so cool. This guy sweats blues and I'm like a student that day. He produced that album, he's a master. If I live to be his age, that's what I want to be. I've played with Lowell Fulson, I've done a couple of festivals with him. I've done gigs with him. He reminded me of Jimmy Reed. He couldn't play as well as he wrote songs, but he could write the hell out of a tune, but others would play it better than him.



Gene 'Birdlegg' Pittman, Belgium, 2004. Photo: Mike Stephenson.