

Mance Lipscomb: A Life Well-Spent

By Tim Wilton

One of the most well-known examples of life beginning after sixty is that of Anna Mary Robertson Moses. At seventy-six years of age, she took up painting as a hobby, and by the time of her death in 1976 at age 101, “Grandma” Moses had won international acclaim and a permanent place in the history of American art.

Other well-known late-in-life achievers include Winston Churchill who, at 65, became Prime Minister of Great Britain; Harlan “Colonel” Sanders was in his sixties when he started franchising his Kentucky Fried Chicken; and composer Giuseppe Verdi was 78 when he wrote *Falstaff*, to name only a few. And there are countless more stories of men and women whose greatness was recognized late in life—long after the age our youth-driven culture now traditionally holds as the best years of our lives.

One such story is that of Mance Lipscomb who, after being “discovered” at the tender age of 65, would go on to influence many icons of the folk and blues revival movements of the sixties and seventies, including Bob Dylan, The Byrds, Eric Clapton, Taj Mahal and others.

Bowdie Glenn (a derivation of Beau de Glenn) Lipscomb was born on April 9, 1895 to Navasota sharecropper Charles Lipscomb and his half-Choctaw wife Jane. Charles had been a slave in Alabama and was given the surname Lipscomb when he was sold to a Texas family with that name. A talented fiddle player who played at the local Saturday night dance and at area suppers with his banjo playing brother, Charles passed on his love of music to Mance, who was given his first guitar when he was eleven years old by his mother. Incidentally, the name “Mance” was adopted by the young Bowdie Glenn to honor a deceased family friend whose first name was Emancipation.

By age fourteen Mance was playing guitar alongside his father at dances and suppers, cutting his musical teeth on a wide variety of musical styles. When he was a teen, Mance had almost given up music for religion, but after being continually criticized for playing the “devil’s music” by the elders of

his church, he decided to stick with music. Nevertheless, spirituals and hymns would always remain a part of his songbook. By eighteen, Mance had met and married a local girl named Elnora, and had become an in-demand player at dances and supper parties throughout Grimes County, where he would perform marathon sets that lasted until the early dawn hours. These dances and suppers were critical to Mance's development as a "songster."

In the Deep South during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, according to music historians, African-American music was steeped in the songster tradition, which predated the blues (which would eventually become the region's dominant music genre a few decades later). In essence, a songster was a musician that would incorporate a wide variety of material and styles, and usually had a large repertoire of songs that was both original and passed down by others. The music was generally common to both black and white audiences in the South, and would include ballads, waltzes, blues, rags, polkas, boogies and slow drags. A songster would also know the popular songs of the day, as well as gospel hymns, secular pieces and children's songs. A songster was the "radio" in the days before radio existed. And Mance, whose repertoire would go on to include more than 350 songs that spanned two centuries, stubbornly refused to be called a blues musician, but rather a songster.

Although Mance enjoyed great popularity in and around Navasota, he hardly ever ventured beyond the county line. His playing prowess did however catch the attention of performers that often traveled through the area. For example, Mance picked up pointers from fellow Texan and legendary blues singer Blind Lemon Jefferson; and anecdotal evidence suggests that in 1922, country music pioneer (and former Kerrville resident) Jimmie Rodgers had asked him to go on the road and tour with him. Mance politely turned down the invitation and remained in the Navasota area, helping Elnora raise their son, Mance, Jr., their three adopted children, and eventually many grandchildren.

Like his neighbors, Mance was a simple but hard-working man who earned what little he could tending cotton fields as a tenant farmer for an assortment of landlords, the most notorious being Tom Moore, already the subject of a local topical ballad, *Tom Moore's Farm*. And like his neighbors, Mance and his family were exploited, mistreated and oppressed by these landlords—especially Tom

Moore. In *A Well-Spent Life*, a 1971 documentary about Mance made by filmmaker Les Blank, the songster characterized the attitude of white farm owners of the time in these terms: “Mule die, they buy another one; nigger die, they hire another one.”

Things came to a head for Mance when, in 1956, he attacked one of Moore’s foremen for mistreating his wife and mother. To avoid jail—or even worse, a noose-carrying lynch mob—Mance left Grimes County for Houston, where he found work at a lumberyard, and also played nights at various bars where he often competed with Sam “Lightnin’” Hopkins for what few gigs there were. Incidentally, Mance had met Hopkins before in Galveston in 1938. Talent-wise, both Lipscomb and Hopkins were cut from the same musical fabric.

However, Hopkins was a full-time bluesman/traveler, and did not have the same repertoire of diverse material as Lipscomb. Simply put, Lipscomb was a songster. Nevertheless, Hopkins enjoyed much more financial success than Mance could ever imagine for himself, thanks largely to Mance’s insistence of staying in and around Navasota for nearly all of his life.

In 1958, Mance moved back to Navasota, and with the earnings he had saved from the lumberyard, as well as compensation he had been given for an on-the-job accident, he was finally able to buy some land and build a house that he and Elnora would call their own for the rest of their lives. No longer having to work the cotton fields, Mance got a job working as a foreman of a highway construction crew in Grimes County, and he continued playing his signature marathon sets at local dances and an occasional bar.

In 1960, Houston folklorist Mack McCormick and San Francisco-based music historian Chris Strachwitz had been trying to track down Hopkins, whom they had heard was in the area, when they were introduced to Mance at a job site. Since Hopkins was no longer in the area—after all, he was a traveling bluesman—they readily agreed to listen to Mance. Impressed by what they had heard McCormick and Strachwitz quickly set up a rudimentary recording studio in the kitchen of Mance’s home and then recorded more than fifty of his songs in a single sitting. This session would produce the songs that would make up the very first album ever released on Strachwitz’s newly formed California-

based record label, the influential Arhoolie Records—*Mance Lipscomb: Texas Songster and Sharecropper*. Despite the album's title, the 65 year-old Mance abhorred the label "sharecropper." A proud man, Mance preferred being called a tenant farmer, just like he preferred being called a songster rather than a blues man.

The album generated a huge amount of interest in Mance's music among both blues and folk music fans, resulting in his performing on stage at the Texas Heritage Festival in Houston later on that same year and then again in 1961. And thanks to his California connections via Arhoolie Records, Mance performed at the Berkeley Folk Festival in 1961 alongside Pete Seeger, Jean Ritchie and Sam Hinton before more than 40,000 people. He would return to play Berkeley again the next two years.

Meanwhile, Mance continued recording songs for Arhoolie throughout the mid-sixties while largely staying close to Elnora and their Navasota home. Arhoolie released his second album, *Texas Songster, Volume 2*, in 1961. Volumes 2 through 4 of the *Texas Songster* series were released between 1962 and 1964. Arhoolie also released his *You'll Never Find Another Man Like Mance* in late '64. And although none of these albums were major sellers, they were influential in introducing to younger listeners the older, nearly forgotten forms of African-American folk music that was prevalent throughout the rural South around the turn of the century.

By the late sixties though, resurgence in the blues had ignited and Mance became an even more in-demand performer at festivals across America. He performed at the Festival of American Folk Life, held on the National Mall in Washington D.C. in 1968 and 1970; the Ann Arbor Blues Festival in 1970; and the Monterrey Jazz Festival in 1973.

Mance's popularity at festivals was largely due to not only his intricate guitar playing and vast repertoire of songs, but also his laid back style of telling stories to the audience between each song, almost like a loving grandfather telling his grandchildren stories that had been passed down to him when he was a child, except this grandfather could play guitar better than just about anybody else in the world. Some historians attributed Mance's habit of telling stories in between songs as a way to keep the audience's attention, just like he probably had to do when he played the often boisterously

loud suppers back in Navasota when he was younger. Either way, his easy going style was very popular to festival goers and kept him in high demand as a performer.

In fact, Frank Sinatra became so impressed with Mance that he signed the songster to his Reprise record label in 1970, and *Trouble in Mind* was the result. Two years later, he was featured in a French documentary on American blues, *Out of the Blacks into the Blues*.

Despite his popularity, Mance never became wealthy from his albums or performances. By the early seventies, Mance began suffering from heart trouble, and he gradually “retired” from the stage. In 1973, Mance teamed up with author A. Glenn Myers to write *Out of the Bottoms and into the Big City*, which was posthumously released in 1979 by publisher Possum Heard Diversions. His autobiography, *I Say Me for a Parable: The Oral Autobiography of Mance Lipscomb*, is the result of a long series of interviews with Texas author Glen Alyn. It was published posthumously by Norton in 1993 and later won a Music Book of the Year award from ASCAP.

Sadly, after years of declining health, Mance passed away in a Navasota hospital on January 30, 1976. He was 81. Although he was near penniless when he died, Mance left behind a remarkable legacy of music and words that are still treasured by listeners and music historians alike today.

For a close-up look at Mance’s playing abilities, be sure to go online at www.YouTube.com and key in his name. *I Say Me for a Parable: The Oral Autobiography of Mance Lipscomb* is available at Amazon.com, and if you are in Austin, be sure to check out the Lipscomb-Myers Collection, housed in the Barker Texas History Center at the University of Texas.