Black Liberations Movement Mosaic

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Oral History Interview

with

Mr. Johnny Lewis

By Atandi Anyona and Max Paschall

Clarksdale, Mississippi, USA

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Interview with Mr. Johnny Lewis

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Atandi Anyona: My name is Atandi and I am from Dickinson College and I am interviewing Mr. Johnny Lewis. I hope you give us the permission to record the interview?

Johnny Lewis: Yes.

Atandi Anyona: Thank you. Ok, first I want to ask you to give us a brief history of your life like where you were born and thing like that.

Johnny Lewis: I was born in Magee, Mississippi, Simpson County, which is about 42 miles south of Jackson Mississippi, the capital city. I went to elementary school and high school there and came here to Clarksdale in 1957 as a freshman at the community college. Graduated in 1959, went back to Jackson State, and in 1961, I graduated from Jackson State and came back to Clarksdale in August of 1961 as a teacher of English at the local high school, Higgins High

School at that time. And I worked at Higgins until 1970. The schools integrated and Higgins closed down as a high school and became a junior high school and we all went to Clarksdale High. I worked at Clarksdale High for two years, and then I left there and went to the community college and worked one year there. And in 1972, June of that year, I left the teaching profession full time and went to Southland Management Corporation, where I have been until this day. But I did remain in the teaching profession for several years after that as a part-time instructor at the junior college or community college. And presently, as I said, I am managing a hundred unit federally subsidized housing complex, and basically that's what I have been doing up until this time. I have had the opportunity to work in the Civil Rights Movement. As a school teacher, it was almost unheard of for teachers, at that time, to be involved in the Civil Rights Movement (CRM). We were not allowed to do so. If it were found out that we were involved in any kind of movement like that, we would be fired. Ah, many of us however did participate. Even when we filled our contracts out every year, on the contracts they required you to list the names of the organizations to which you belonged, and many of us never would put on there, or none of us would put on that contract that we were members of the NAACP, but most of us were secretly. Secretly we paid our dues and secretly we attended meetings and did what we felt we had to do to assist the organization.

Atandi Anyona: And how was growing up during the segregation years, before 1970, how was life then?

Johnny Lewis: Uh, I grew up, as I said, in South-Central Mississippi, and it was no different there than here, because in Mississippi at that time, everything was segregated. Uh, as a boy growing up, I was taught by my parents, "what my place was". I knew that there were certain

things that you didn't do, you didn't say. There were certain places you didn't go because it was just taboo. For instance, if you were on the street, and a group of whites were approaching you, you got off the street and let them pass by and then you got back on the street to go where you were going. Uh, my part of the state, as I said before, was no different from any other place in Mississippi. Uh, we went to segregated schools; our schools were the worst schools one could think of. The few books we did have, when we got them, they were books that had been discarded by the white schools because many times when you looked at the front of the books where the names were and the years that they had been used, you saw the names of the people who had used them. And that kind of thing. Sometimes there would be four or five names in there which meant that that book had been used four or five years ago by those different students.

Atandi Anyona: And did you yourself directly experience racism?

Johnny Lewis: Oh, of course. Of course. I hope when you say racism that you really mean the things which I have already spoken of, or is there some particular incident? Now as far as particular incident of my having been attacked or anything like that by somebody, no. I never was because as I said as a young boy, I was taught by my parents, "my place" and I knew "my place" and I stayed in "my place," and when I got old enough to do what I could do to correct the situation or to help out in the correction of the situation, I did just that.

Atandi Anyona: And in your teaching profession, in your teaching English, what kind of things did you actually teach your students?

Johnny Lewis: Basically I taught them grammar. How to write; how to speak. I taught also literature; I taught them American literature, I taught them English lit. All the basic classics of

American and English lit. We studied American authors. We studied authors like Longfellow, William Faulkner, Emerson, and Carl Sandburg, any of your major American authors. As far as English authors are concerned, we studied Milton, Shakespeare; same things any other high schools would have been teaching at that time.

Atandi Anyona: And did they ever allow you to use any African American writers?

Johnny Lewis: Absolutely not! Absolutely not! We were required basically to teach from the text books that we were issued. And those textbooks were selected by the board of education, and the board of education selected those books that had nothing whatsoever in them about blacks. As a matter of fact, even as a college student, it was not until I got to be in my maybe sophomore, junior, senior years that I really learned about our Mississippi black writers, because throughout high school, we had heard none of that. By the time I was out of school, this was in the 60s, and many black writers had been published, and it was kind of common place by now to read or to have books by black poets. Black poets were very popular during that time and many of my students on their own would exchange poems and writers and things like that. But to say that in the classroom, teaching this, you couldn't do that. No.

Atandi Anyona: And was the CRM, let's say in Coahoma County, were there a lot of CRM activities?

Johnny Lewis: Yes! By all means. I can recall many. This is something we did in later years. And when I say we, I have reference to Black people in general, and even teachers were involved in this. The movements that we used were protests; we launched protests against the stores downtown and the businesses around town where blacks did a lot of shopping or trading but had

no blacks in employment except in menial jobs. We protested and picketed those stores, even boycotted them. And it was not uncommon for us to have marches down town. I have seen many a Saturday, all of the citizens, black citizens in the town, were asked to come out and join a protest movement. We would march over town. Now, we had to get permits from the city, approval, to march, and they would say where you could and could not go. And we stayed within those bounds but we made it known that we were dissatisfied with the situations that were going on. I can recall after I left the teaching profession, in 1972, I became deeply involved in the NAACP in this county. As a matter of fact I served as the chairman of the Political Action Committee of the local branch and it was during that time that I, along with several members of the grouped, filed a law suit against the city in federal court to enjoin the city from holding another election until such time that we changed the form of government to where more blacks could get elected according to the population of the city. And at that particular time, we were operating under a form a government called ‘at large’ system. And the law suit that we filed required them to go to a ‘ward system;’ and the only way you could get elected in a ward system is if you live in the ward. And then from that, we had to come together and negotiate the number of people in the ward and draw the lines for the wards and all of that, based on the population of the citizens. And in so doing, we ended up with three predominantly black wards, two of which could actually be won outright by blacks because they had predominant black populations. But in a third ward there was, maybe 54% black voting age population which means that if black people actually went out and voted, they could win that ward, but we haven’t been able to win that third ward yet. However, the mayor is the only one that is elected at large. So, from that action, we have been able to elect two African Americans to the board as commissioners and an African American as mayor. So out of a board of five, we have three African Americans on the board.

Atandi Anyona: And how would you say the transition between segregation and desegregation how was that here?

Johnny Lewis: The transition from segregation to desegregation? I would say it has gone fairly well. But now, when I say fairly well, we must be realistic. Uhh, we still have a long ways to go when it comes to actual integration. We are desegregated but we are not truly integrated, and surely you know what I mean by that. Uh, nobody tells me anymore that I can't go in this restaurant down town or I can't go in this place. But then I know that even today there are people that want me there. They don't want to associate with me, you know. This town has come a long way. I have seen this town grow as far as race relation is concerned, but then I know there will always be those among us who will have problems with race, and I don't think it is only the other side. There are some among my race who don't particularly care for the other side, so it's a two way street I think. But all in all, I can say Clarksdale is on its way, has some distance to go, but is still travelling forward.

Atandi Anyona: Was there a lot of migration by the whites from Clarksdale once desegregation came into being?

Johnny Lewis: Yes. Yes, there has always been what we call here in the South 'white flight'. There is no difference here than anywhere else. When these kinds of things take place, many of the white go. For instance in the school system, when we integrated the schools, most, well not most, but many of the white students left the school system and today our school system, I would think is better than 70% black. Private schools popped up all around us and they are in existence today.

Atandi Anyona: Was the economy affected very much here in Clarksdale?

Johnny Lewis: Yes. That is why…well any time people begin to leave your city or your county, naturally that does something to your tax base and when your tax base decreases, that means your support for schools and things like that disappears or decreases also with it. So, very definitely that has had an effect on the city and the county in general.

Atandi Anyona: Have there been any moves towards counteracting that negative impact?

Johnny Lewis: Yes…yes. Many of our factories have left. I'm not even sure that we can blame that totally on integration, because that is more or less a national thing; factories all over this country have pulled up and moved out of many cities and towns across America, but a number of things are going on in this town now and in this county to try and bring in new ones. We are constantly searching for new industry which seems hard to come by. Now we are looking at the possibility of a biodiesel factory coming to town, with this being the delta and all of this rich delta land for growing things. We think that the growth of corn and soy beans and things out of which we can make diesel fuels and stuff would do great things. And just here recently in our local paper, I saw where we are hopefully going to get a biodiesel plant.

Atandi Anyona: What about Head Start? How has that functioned here?

Johnny Lewis: Head Start (HS). Incidentally, HS is one of the major employers here in this county and Coahoma county is the…well let's say it is one of the first counties to have head start. Coahoma county, and a county, I believe in the state of Minnesota it may have been, are the two places where Head Start originated. They were used as a pilot program, and since that time it has been HS that has really helped this county. I would think that it helped this county more in

moving toward integration than any other movement because through the HS program, or with the HS program came other federal grants, and one of them was Community Development Grants (CDG). And in those CDG people were hired to be community organizers, and those community organizers organized people in the various communities where these HS centers were and got them registered and started them voting and from that, that is how we end up today in this county with the Chief law enforcement officer, the Sheriff, Black, uh, the chief of police in this town black, the, well we just recently fired the chief of the fire department who was black, and we hired a white guy, but, you know, those positions had once been all white with maybe one token black here and there that no longer exists. So, with HS came, I think really the upward movement of the black race in this county.

Atandi Anyona: Are there a lot of white folk involved in HS or is it just majority black?

Johnny Lewis: Absolutely, its majority black. And that's not because blacks discriminate. Incidentally, I served on the board of directors of Coahoma Opportunities Incorporated, which is the Community Action Agency that operates HS activities in this county. And, the absence of whites is not because they are discriminated against; we are an Equal Employment Opportunity agency and we could not operate with the federal government any other way, you know. And if they don't come it's just because they don't choose to. When we have vacancies, we advertise them and white people just don't come. As far as participation on the part of children, if I am not mistaken, in the Blackburn HS center, we may have two white children there. But all the rest are blacks, and there might be a very few Hispanics.

Atandi Anyona: I know you've had your involvement in the blues and Blues Museum, how has Blues Tourism affected the economy of Clarksdale?

Johnny Lewis: Yes, I have had some involvement with the blues and I am a board member of the Delta Blues Museum. Trust me, it is the Delta Blues that has been one of the big, I might even say, huge things that has happened in bringing tourists into town and is really helping to pick up the economy in this area. As I said, in our serving on the board, each month we get a report on the number of people who came through the museum, from what state they came, and the number of countries from which they came. And I would say that on an average, in each month, we would have somewhere in the neighborhood of 30-35 states, 600-800 people come through from the states, and on an average of 15-20 foreign countries from which people come through the museum, and that's on a monthly basis. And during the month of April when we have the Juke Joint Festival, uh, Jee weez, the town is just crawling with people from all over the world and the same thing holds true during the month of August when we have the Sunflower River Blues and Gospel Festival, uh, people come from everywhere. And just coming up in the next week or so when Helena Arkansas, right across the bridge from us here, 35 miles away, will be holding what used to be called the King Biscuit Blues Festival, but now they call it the Arkansas Blues and Gospel Heritage Festival. They had to change their name because of some legal problems. But anyway, that festival draws quite a few people into our town, because anytime they come there, they are gonna want to come to Clarksdale to see the museum and to go to the juke joints which are here.

Atandi Anyona: And how did you actually get involved in the blues museum? How did you end up there?

Johnny Lewis: Well, I was appointed by my commissioner; city commissioner from this ward. You see, that's the goodness of the ward system. I never would have been a member of that

board, prior to changing that form of government. That just helps to bring more and more people into the operations of the city or things that go on in the city. But I was appointed to the board by my commissioner. He is in his second term, and as long as he is in office and I keep him satisfied, he keeps appointing me. We are in ward three, so his appointment is for a three year, so when he appoints me, that's a three-year term that I will serve. So, I am in my second term. I think this is the last year. This coming spring will be the end of my second three-year term.

Atandi Anyona: And have you been involved in it since it was in the library or when it was…?

Johnny Lewis: Well, to tell you the truth, I was involved in the museum before it was even a museum. The man who started the museum, Sid Graves, was the librarian. He was a blue lover, I was a blues lover. He started….I used to go down to the library. Now this was before we [blacks] were even allowed to go to Carnegie Library where it is right now. We had a little branch of it over on highway 61 in our neighborhood, called Myrtle Hall Branch Library, and Sid had a corner set-up in a room, and he had some blues albums there. I would go in and listen to some of them and I even took him some John Lee Hooker down there, and he would play them. And then the thing started to grow; they moved it out of that corner 'coz it took up more space than they had, and they moved it down to the main library and put it in a room there which was larger. And soon it outgrew that, and that's why the city bought the building that it is in now, uh, which is the old train depot. They bought that building and then moved the museum out of the library into the depot. That was the beginning of the board of directors; the board of trustees, they are called. But anyway, I was appointed by my commissioner to serve on that board. So that's how I got in. I have been involved in that from the very beginning but in a small way, you know.

Atandi Anyona: You say you like blues very much, right?

Johnny Lewis: Oh yes! I love the blues. I grew up around the blues. In my part of Mississippi, down in South Central Mississippi, I lived in sawmill quarters. You know what the word "quarter" means? Well the word quarters is an area that is kind of set apart from; in other words, if you got, say, fifteen houses in this section of town, they would call that a quarter and there was a sawmill in the area where I lived, and they called that the sawmill quarters. Well, there was another area of town which was called Goodwater. They called that the Goodwater quarters. So in my quarters, there was a juke joint. Now juke joints were what we would call a café. Well, there was a house there where somebody cooked fish sandwiches and sold drinks, and maybe had a juke box sitting in there, and in those days they did not call them juke boxes, they called them sea birds [laugh]. Yeah, and you go in and….oh, I used to sit down on my back door steps and listen to the music coming out of there and that is what I was hearing and just fell in love with it. I learned to sing some of those songs, yeah!

Atandi Anyona: And how important was blues to the black folks?

Johnny Lewis: Ah, very. You see blues was black people's way of expressing themselves. The poet sits down with his pen in hand and he pens a poem. The black man with the blues, the blues player, sits down with his guitar or his harmonica, whatever the instrument, or if he has no instrument, and he pens a song or plays a song, or sings a song and it's a way of expressing a feeling that he has, of letting go of some emotion that he has. Somebody, I don't know who it was, I have heard this phrase and I'm sure isn't original with me. I've heard somebody say that "the blues ain't nothing but a good man feeling bad", and he tells his story about what makes him feel bad. So the blues expresses inner feelings.Yeah.

Atandi Anyona: And how did the blues come to be in controversy with the church?

Johnny Lewis: Well, if you stop and think about it now; the people who sing the blues are the people who go to church. They are in church on….let's say it this way, they work all the week, Monday through Friday and sometimes Saturday too till noon. That used to be the thing. And then that Saturday afternoon, they went out and had fun, and then Sunday morning they got up and went to church. Now the songs that they sang in church, many times those blues singers, would take those same songs but change the lyrics to them and sing a blues song. When you are talking about a Sunday morning, 'I love the Lord. He heard my cry,' the blues men may take that and say,' I love my baby,' you know, and put some more words in it to make it fit the same musical pattern. And the hurt that one has of a lost love, what do we do when we hurt? We cry out to God, and the blues man cries out to that lost lover, the only difference. One is to somebody, the other one is to something greater than we.

Atandi Anyona: Now jumping over to gospel music, what effect do you think that had in the civil rights movement?

Johnny Lewis: Oh, man! Gospel music and the civil rights movement go hand in hand because it's gospel music that gives you spirit and inspiration. When you hear some of the songs that the people sang during the civil rights movement you just know that they are seeking the inspiration and spirit from God for guidance and that's the only way you'll make it, you know. I can recall, and I know you know, you probably don't, but there is a black woman from years back by the name of Mahalia Jackson; one of those gospel singers, had such a big voice, I mean uh, one of the most melodious voices one would ever want to hear and it was somebody like her who would get up in one of those civil rights rallies and sing one of those good old spirituals, you know

[breaks into song] Soon I will be done, With the troubles of this world. [Laughs] boy that would get you going; that would get the spirits up and people would be ready to go out and march.

Atandi Anyona: And is the church still playing the same role of pushing people?

Johnny Lewis: Uh, it depends on the church. And one would have to say that when you go back and look at the role that the church played at the height of the CRM, uh, there was something that was missing from our lives- from black people's lives- that was "freedom, liberty" those words that our constitution guarantees us and that kind of thing. It was missing. So at that time, people were fighting for those things and the church was where they gathered and held their rallies and things. And you know one of the songs they sang was that "We shall overcome someday." Well, today, many of the blacks feel that we have overcome. When we look at what I got on my chest- 'Barack Obama- Change we can believe in;' Martin Luther King had a dream, Barack Obama answer to that dream. So, many feel that we have already overcome. Not true! Not So! We have come a long way, but we still have some distance to go. In yesterday's paper, there was a cartoon on the editorial page, and it had Martin Luther King Jr. up on the mountain top and he had a paper in his hand, a newspaper, and on the newspaper were the captions 'I Have a Dream' and it had this squirmy little figure of Barack Obama climbing up the mountain and Martin was reaching down trying to give him a hand, you know. In other words, he is almost there but he hasn't made it yet. So that's where we are. We have come a long way, but we still haven't gotten to the mountain top.

Atandi Anyona: How did you feel, or how are you feeling right now since the election of Obama?

Johnny Lewis: Ecstatic! [Laughs] Ecstatic man! I don't know how…I find myself pinching myself sometimes and I say it's like my wife and my sister-in-law were talking this afternoon and my sister-in-law said, "I still can't believe it. I still feel like am dreaming, like it's not true, you know." And I told her that I am still in that predicament too because it's just hard to believe. I never thought that I would see this day in my lifetime; in the next couple of weeks I will be 72 years old and I never thought I would see this day. Never did. My mother in law is 95 years old and the night that he won, my wife and her sister were hollaring and shouting and going on, and she asked them, "What's the matter?" And they said, "A black man won the president of the United States." And today, they asked her, we call her mama Lee, and they said, "Mama Lee, who is the president of the United States?" And she said, "Ya'll said a black man won." [Laughs]. So, we are all ecstatic. We just don't know how to thank God enough.

Atandi Anyona: And what effect do you think this will have, especially on the African Americans?

Johnny Lewis: Well, I think that today, the black kids, children can say today, if I work hard, if I do the things that I am supposed to do, and get if I myself in a position, I can be anything I want to be. Somebody said that a black man could do just about anything but he could never be president. I heard that many a time. But now that glass ceiling has been broken. So, I think that can have a tremendous impact on young blacks who are coming along. Yeah.

Max Paschall: You were talking about juke joints earlier, I guess, how would you describe weekends there? How would you describe Saturday nights at a juke joint?

Johnny Lewis: Well, Saturday night at a juke joint, as we said earlier, this was the opportunity for the field worker or sawmill workers, whatever kind of work they did, this was an opportunity for them to go out and let off some steam, so to speak. And, it was a good time. That was what they went to have- a good time. They would dance, drink some corn liquor, and if you rubbed somebody wrong, you got a good fight. So that was the kind of life that the juke joints were all about, but the main thing was a place to have a good time, do some dancing and listen to some good music.

Max Paschall: How often was there some live music there?

Johnny Lewis: Uh, not too often. In most of the juke joints, there was juke boxes and you listen to the recorded music of some of the blues singers, but on certain occasions they would have live bands. Now here in the delta, it's different because there were a number of blues players here who played in all of the local juke joints in the county. You start to name or think about some of the blues players that came up around here, you go all the way back to folk like Willie Dickson, you go all the way back to folk like Son house, Old Baptist preacher from right over hear Lyon Mississippi. You go back to people like Robert Johnson, from up in Robinson vile Mississippi, who played all up and down in this delta right here in Clarksdale. You talk about folk like Muddy Waters from right out there on Stovall Plantation. You talk about folk like Howling Wolf; well, Howling Wolf played here, but he was not from here, but there were people all up and down this delta who were good blues musicians back in those days that played. In Coahoma County- John Lee Hooker, one of the best. And the guitar, that was their music; acoustic guitar.

Max Paschall: How would you describe a juke joint on a Saturday night?

Johnny Lewis: Festive. Very festive, jubilant, all of those words. It was just a good time. Can you imagine…well I don't know if you've…..you have to have been a part of the lifestyle to understand. In other words, if you've been "pen down" all week long in the cotton fields, out in the hot sun, and then on Saturday evening you got a chance to come out of the field, wash some of the dirt and dust off of you, if you cared about cleanliness- many of us didn't. We went to the jukes just like we were, you know. Then you go, and you go to have a good time, and that was the kind of atmosphere you had at those juke joints. I can recall back in the 1950s when I first came to Clarksdale, on a Saturday evening; let's say from 3.30 to 4 o'clock in the evening all the way up to 10.30 or 11pm, you know, they would start closing everything down. You had to get off the streets. But it would be just like this[using his fingers to indicate density of the crowd], on Issa Quena and Yazoo and 4th Street. And you go round on Yazoo, and that was where most of the Jukes were. And on 4th Street, every door you pass, you can hear the blues being played, and people dancing, shooting pool, shooting dice, having a good time.

Max Paschall: Do you remember any stories from juke joints or experiences you had?

Johnny Lewis: Not really stories from juke joints. To tell you the truth, I have never been that much of a juke joint goer. I have been in juke joints. I was more of a professional person and I didn't frequent juke joints that much. Uh, as I told you, I got my love for the blues by listening to the blues coming from the juke joints in my neighborhood where I grew up. Now as a teenage boy, there was a café in the area where the teens would hang out, but it was owned by a preacher, and we would go there, we played the juke box and danced and things like that. But it was nothing like the "juke joints." [Laughs]. They were totally different. So I really did not experience the true juke joints life that most of the people talk about. And then too a lot of what

you may read, is what people tell you. You know, you read some of the things that people tell you, it's just hype, legend. It's just some myth; much of it is. But I truly know that juke joints existed and people frequented them, and they fought in juke joints and those kinds of things. People died in juke joints. But I never witnessed any of that cause I never frequented that kind of place, you know, juke joints.

Max Paschall: Do you know what kind of people usually went to juke joints?

Johnny Lewis: Uh, same kind of people I was telling you about; people who…field workers, uh, these kinds of folk. Folk that…you got…people from all walks. You got different kinds of people. I mean black people were no different from anybody else. There were certain people who wouldn't set their feet inside juke joints. And then there were those who were there any time the door was open. You know what I'm saying? And then there were those who just every now and then they say I just wanna go out and have a good time, and that's where they went, because that's the only place they could go.

Max Paschall: So do you compare them to pool halls now?

Johnny Lewis: No. No. Absolutely not! Juke joints were of a different class.

Max Paschall: So there is no modern equivalent?

Johnny Lewis: Uh, yeah. Today there is a modern equivalent of a juke joint. Some place like Redds; that's a juke joint. Uh, where else? Well, they are closed right now. Big T, this guy I was telling you about, was somebody you guys may get a chance to talk to, Big T had a club. That was a juke joint. Uh, Ground Zero acts as a juke joint, but it's upscale; a bit upscale. There are very few juke joints now, but I would imagine out in the county places like Friars Point,

Coahoma, Jonestown, Lula, you probably can find one or two still going, but I don't think you will find much live music going on there.

Max Paschall: Have you heard about the Hot Spot in Jonestown?

Johnny Lewis: Uh, I've heard about it, yeah. I've heard about it. [Laughs] I've heard about Da Spot in Jonestown but I would think that the kind of people that would hand out at the Hot Spot in Jonestown would be, more or less, upper teenagers and younger people, but not older people. You know, now I've never been in the Hot Spot, so I wouldn't know its clientele, but I would just think that that would be the clientele that they would have; let's say from whatever it is, age 21. Is that the age that you gotta go in? But I would imagine that some of those boys around Jonestown 18, 19 years old, they are in there and I would think they would be more or less a hip hop generation, kind of joint rather than a true juke joint. That's just my thinking; I don't know what they do up there because I've never been. I don't even know where it is [Laughs].

Max Paschall: Do you recall the first time you experienced the blues?

Johnny Lewis: No. No. Only thing I can tell you is that I can remember as a boy sitting on the back door step, and I would see the men and the women going to and from the juke joint. In those days there were no cars, everybody was walking. And when they would open the door to the juke, that music would just blare out of there. And I can remember hearing a song like [breaks into song] Going to Chicago, Sorry I can't take you. (Laughs) I remember hearing stuff like that, you know, coming out of there. And then when the door closed, you could still hear the lyrics but they were not as loud as when they opened the door. And then in the summer time,

when the windows were up and the doors were wide open, they would be blasting, yeah. I can recall that, but the first time I experienced blues, no, I can't.

Max Paschall: How were people dressed when they went in?

Johnny Lewis: Uh, casually. Causally. And what was casual in those days, like my overalls down there, all faded out overalls, some with patches on them, those flopped down hats. That was our attire; and that was casual dress (laughs). Uh, that was our casual dress and definitely not our Sunday best because we saved that for Sunday morning, you know, for church. And when Sunday came we put that old suit on, that clean white shirt if we had one and we went to church all decked out, neck tie tied, shoes shined, if we had some Sunday shoes, and most of us did, you know. We had that outfit that we wore, and sometimes, you know, you out grow those [laughs] and the pants up to here [indicates above the ankles and laughs], you know what I mean. And the shoes too tight, and as soon as you come out of the church, you pull them shoes off trying to free yourself. Yeah, that's real. That's what life was like.

Max Paschall: Do you remember the first time you met a bluesman?

Johnny Lewis: Uh, yes. When you say the first time I met a bluesman, I met bluesmen all day every day. You know, in my life, it's not uncommon to see a bluesman. Every man you meet with my skin is a bluesman. He has a blues story to tell. Now if you mean renowned bluesmen that performed and recorded, that a different kind of thing. I guess it must have been maybe at age sixteen or seventeen. I had an uncle who lived in New Orleans Louisiana. He ran, he owned a hotel and that hotel was a black hotel. You would have to know that being in New Orleans. And whenever stars came to town, that's where they stayed. Every summer I would leave my

home town and go to New Orleans and work for him to make school money for, you know, next year. And I got a chance to see and meet folks like BB King, because they stayed there. I met James Brown and Fats Domino who lived in New Orleans at that time. Have you ever heard of Fats Domino? He was not a blues player; he was more or less a rhythm and blues player. But anyway, folk like them I met when I was there. Now, as far as Muddy Waters, Jimmy Reed, all of those guys I saw them when I was in college. I saw BB King in college 'coz they played the black college circuit, yeah.

Max Paschall: In our interviews, you know, we've been talking to people, and obviously there are of course there are thousands of recorded lynching's or white on black violence, but at the same time there were a lot of disappearances or attacks that went unreported. Did you ever hear about any of these things?

Johnny Lewis: Oh, did I ever! Uh, in my hometown there was, let's say it this way, my grandmother, as I said, would always teach me 'my place' and she would always tell me what the white folks will do to you if you don't stay in your place. And she'd tell me stories about guys who said something to a white man- said something back to a white man- or did something to a white man, and what they did to them- how the mobs came and took them out of their house. In my lifetime, there was a man whom the mob came and got him out of his house at night and killed him. They found his body some weeks later. So, I mean, that wasn't anything special, that was common place. I mean, that's what they did.

Max Paschall: People would disappear often here?

Johnny Lewis: Uh, not here. I can't say what happened here before, but since I have been here, no. Since I have been in this, what I'm speaking of is what happened down in South Central Mississippi where I am from. But now, I can't say to you that I know of anybody, you know, who disappeared like that here. No. But I did in Magee. Yeah, and that is one incident, but I heard my grandmother tell me many a story about such things, though, yeah.

Max Paschall: That kind of inhumanity, I mean, what kind of residual effects does it have? And do you still feel the effects of it?

Johnny Lewis: Uh, yeah. Of course I do. Anybody, I don't think you can find any black person who grew up during the time that I grew up, that would tell you that that kind of thing didn't have or doesn't have a residual effect on you. It does. Uh, when I look around me today however, and see how much better things are and I see my grandson who is twelve years old, and know that he knows nothing whatsoever about this kind of thing, it makes me feel good inside, because he will never experience or know what I experienced or heard about. Take people my grandmother's age. They experienced things that I never experienced and the degradation that I faced here. I knew what it was like not to go over to that water fountain that said "Whites Only." I knew what it meant not to go to that bathroom that over the door "White Men Only;" "Colored Men." I knew what it meant to be colored; and that was being nice to me when they said "colored". Coz most times they didn't; they used the "N" word. Yeah. I've been called that many a time.

Max Paschall: What kinds of things did your grandparents have to go through? Did they ever tell you stories?

Johnny Lewis: Of course. Of course. Beatings, children sold away from them.

Max Paschall: They were slaves?

Johnny Lewis: My grandparents' parents were slaves. Or if they were not slaves, they were on some plantations where the conditions were just as bad. They got beaten, even on the plantations that they were supposedly sharecropping. They didn't own anything, "the man" owned them. And by "the man," I mean the person who owned the farm on which they stayed. These were… I mean the stories are out there and they are real. There is no myth about how my people were treated. It's real. I've known sharecroppers who raised cotton, made bales, and bales and bales of cotton, and then at the end of the year, "the man" tells them that they didn't make enough to clear the expenses, and they still owed him, and he would give them a few dollars and say "Well, maybe this will tide you over. You can come up to the commissary and you can get you some food, and maybe next year you may come out better." You know, that's the kind of thing my people went through.

Max Paschall: Did you hear stories from your family or relatives from slavery or reconstruction or, you know, older times?

Johnny Lewis: Did, I ever hear about…..I didn't quite understand you.

Max Paschall: Slavery or Reconstruction?

Johnny Lewis: Slavery or reconstruction?

Max Paschall: Yes, that time period.

Johnny Lewis: Uh, I heard all kinds of stories about slavery and, you know, I've heard stories, I've read stories, I've seen stories in movies and things like that. And reconstruction period, well I've read and heard about that period of time when blacks began to try and make it in this society after slavery was ended, but it wasn't…..the ending of slavery was the beginning of Jim Crowism. Ain't too much difference.

Max Paschall: How did Jim Crow affect personal relationships among blacks?

Johnny Lewis: Among blacks?

Max Paschall: Mh.

Johnny Lewis: Jim Crowism, how did it affect relationships among blacks? Now, I don't know how Jim Crowism could affect my relationship with another black because Jim Crowism was the laws and things that were set up that discriminated against blacks. And it affected all of us black people the same and it didn't cause any effect on the relationship between us, as black people. It had a massive effect on the relationship between us and white people because white people used those Jim Crow laws to keep us separated from them. Yeah.

Max Paschall: How do you think Coahoma County has become more industrialized and modernized since 1960s? Or more connected with the outside world?

Johnny Lewis: In connection with?

Max Paschall: Or more connected with the outside world?

Johnny Lewis: Well, since the 1960s, as I told you I came to this county in 1957. When I came here, there were factories already here; there were a number of major factories that hired large

numbers of employees, and many blacks were working at those factories. However, cotton was still king, and more people were still on the farm….cotton was still king at that time and I can recall as a student, getting on the bus and going home for the Christmas holidays seeing people out in the field picking cotton. So you know cotton was still prevalent at that time and this was back in the late 1950s. Your question was how has Coahoma become?

Max Paschall: Industrialized, modernized or more connected with the outside world.

Johnny Lewis: Uh, as I said, when I first came here, Coahoma County or Clarksdale in general, already had a number of factories and since that time, however, many of those factories are no longer here. So, as far as being connected with the outside world, Coahoma County has had some of you major factories, for instance: Wonder Bread, you know, that is nationwide, BF Goodrich Tires were made here, and they are still in town. So, they are nationwide. Archie Daniel Midlands, "supermarket for the world," as it is referred to, was here. So, they've had their share of factories over the years that connected them and gave them good relationship with the outside world. But, here, in recent years, we have lost many of those factories. As a matter of fact, Wonder Bread isn't here anymore, Archie Daniels isn't here anymore, however, BF Goodrich is still here; we still…we don't make tires here anymore, we just make inner tubes, yeah.

Max Paschall: Why did they leave?

Johnny Lewis: Uh, why do most factories leave? You know. They left because the company here moved to Mexico, lower wages, and Wonder Bread transferred out to Memphis and they

merged into the plant that was in Memphis. Many of the workers however were given an opportunity to transfer to Memphis with the company; some of them did. Many of them did. Few of them remained.

Max Paschall: Have you seen culture and traditions here be affected by, I guess, increased access by the rest of the world?

Johnny Lewis: Culture? Yes. Yes. Being affected by the rest of the world? Of course. And I would think that's because many of them are interested in the blues. The blues brings many people into Clarksdale. Many of the people who come into Clarksdale because of the blues are interested in other kinds of music and cultural activities. And because of that, they are influenced to bring whatever it is they are gifted in to our city and put on shows and things like that. We've had that happen quite often.

Max Paschall: Do you see that positive or negative?

Johnny Lewis: I think it is positive. Quite positive. Because any time we can connect with other cultures, I'll give you a good example of what I am saying: in the city of Notodden, Norway, there is a blues festival that goes on every year the same week our festival goes on, and that city has become our sister city. And every year when our festival is going on, their city fathers, two of their cities fathers, and somebody from their blues festival will come to Clarksdale, and the same thing happens from our city. Someone from Clarksdale, goes to Norway. I've never gone, but each year one of our board members, or two of our board members, will go, and two of our city commissioners will go. The year I was scheduled to go I didn't make it 'coz I didn't like to fly (laughs). But, I think it's very helpful to have those relationships with the outside world.

Max Paschall: You know, of course, about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa?

Johnny Lewis: I beg your pardon.

Max Paschall: You know, of course, about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa? The court that went around after the end of apartheid and heard stories of injustice?

Johnny Lewis: Mmmhhhh

Max Paschall: Do you think that would be…..what do you think would happen if that existed for Mississippi…and try to get, maybe, the crimes of Jim Crow out into the open and spread a little bit of closure to people?

Johnny Lewis: Mhhhh. I'm familiar with that. I can't remember its name, but I do remember those people, and they forgave all of the people that were involved and some of the policemen got up and told all...I'm very much familiar with that, but I have not studied and I don't know any details about it, no more than one or two things that I have seen on the TV concerning it. Uh, to tell you the truth, I don't honestly believe there can never be true reconciliation until such thing happens. I honestly think that unless we sit down, and I say this in this city (and say it wherever I go and to whomever I speak on this subject), we will never solve the race problem until we are able to sit down across the table or side by side with one another and admit that we got a race problem, and that I got prejudices hung up inside of me just like the white man has prejudices hung up inside of him. And until we sit down and get to the bottom of these things, we will never solve our racial problem.

Max Paschall: How would you define the racial problems that exist here right now?

Johnny Lewis: About the same as it is all over the United States. No different here than it is in New York, Chicago, Boston, anywhere you wanna go, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh. No different here. You got whites here, who hate black folks, and if you ask them why, about the only thing that they can tell you is "because they are black." You know, many people ain't done nothing to them. And you got black people here who hate white people, and if you ask them why, they will answer you, "Because they are white." There is that inner thing. But now, those may be few. Then you got people who are genuinely not afraid and love one another regardless of the color of their skin. I've got people, white people, that I call my friends, they call me their friends. See the wood on this wall? A white friend of mine whose wife's parents owned a plantation that had about six of those plantation shacks on it out there. He gave me one of those shacks and I dismantled the wood off of the outside of it and put it on these walls, trying to create that rusty cotton patch look. Yeah. I call that my friend. He is a white boy. We water skied together, we hunted, fished together. We did lots of things together: my friend. I saw his wife just yesterday out at Walmart, I didn't even see her until I heard somebody say, "Hi Johnnie Lewis" I looked around and it was Teresa, yeah.

Max Paschall: What do you think about the Mississippi flag?

Johnny Lewis: Ummhhh. I think it needs to be taken down, all of them, gathered up, put into a big pile, and give me the gasoline and a torch to stick to them. That's what I think about the Mississippi flag.

Max Paschall: What would you think would be a good alternative?

Johnny Lewis: I think a good alternative to the Mississippi flag would be to take the confederate battle stars and stripes out of there and put us a big, beautiful magnolia blossom up in there. Since we are the magnolia state. That's what I think. I think that would be quite representative of this state.

Max Paschall: Why do you think so many people want to keep the flag?

Johnny Lewis: Well, I've heard their rationale, if you wanna call it that, for holding on to that flag the way it is, and what they say is that they want to keep it because it is a part of their heritage. But then, what is their heritage, what I see in that flag reminds me of what that flag represents, or what it represented, and that was slavery, Jim Crowism, lynchings, and killings of my people. So when I see what they call their heritage, I call my hell. So, that's why I have the hatred that I have for that flag.

Max Paschall: Why do you think, other than obviously the economics, why do you think whites did that to black people even after slavery? Why was Jim Crow in existent, do you think?

Johnny Lewis: That's a hard question to answer. Other than hatred, I can't think of any other reason. Why does a man see a black man, say two or three white guys, riding along the road, and see a black man that they don't even know, and they run him down, and tie a chain to him, hook it behind a pickup truck and drag him for miles down the road to his death? I don't know why they do that. Why would they do that other than hatred for that man because of the pigment of the skin? Why would they? I don't know, other than hatred. I don't know!

Max Paschall: Can you think of any cause behind that hatred?

Johnny Lewis: Maybe it's because their forefathers died trying to keep slavery in existence. That's the heritage now of which they talk. That's the heritage that they represent. Their forefathers died trying to keep slavery in existence, and I guess they hate because it didn't materialize. Slavery was outlawed anyway. I guess. Now, I'm no psychiatrist or psychologist, I can't look into their minds and say why they hate. That's just my way of thinking.

Max Paschall: What do you think of Ole' Miss?

Johnny Lewis: Umhhh. Pardon me? Ole' Miss, isn't that what you just said, Ole' Miss? That's a slavery word, phrase. Know where that comes from? That's what they called the mistress of the plantation. The owner, they called him Ole' Massa, and Ole' Miss is what they called the wife of the master. So, all of that came from slavery. Look at the mascot, the rebels, the nickname, the Ole' Miss Rebels. Listen to their fight song. [Hums the song]…"look away, look away, in Dixie land." Dixie, (laughs) that's their fight song.

Max Paschall: No!

Johnny Lewis: Yes! Are you kidding me? That's their fight song today! The band strikes it up any time there is a play on the football field, you know a highlight play. Everybody goes to cheering and the band strikes up. That's what they play; that's their fight song.

Max Paschall: How do you feel when you hear that?

Johnny Lewis: Just like I feel when somebody calls me the "N" word. That's how I feel. When I see the flag, when I see my state flag with that confederate flag up in the corner of it, I feel the same way I feel when I hear the "N" word. That's how I feel!

Max Paschall: Are you up for a couple of more questions?

Johnny Lewis: Laughs.

Max Paschall: Do you experience resistance to Jim Crow?

Johnny Lewis: Resistance to Jim Crow? Uh, perhaps in 196-…maybe 65, right after the Civil Rights Act was signed into law, several teachers and I, after school was out and just the teachers were left at the school, and when lunch time came, we decided we were going to go to the restaurants on the highway rather than go over to the black restaurant. So we went to one. Prior to that they had had no blacks come in there. So that was my first real experience at going against say Jim Crow. When I say first experience, I had been involved in the CRM as a college kid, but, you know, went to rallies that were held. I went to a state supported college. In state supported colleges, the kids could not or were restricted from participating in anything like that. The state would cut off the schools funds. That was one of the things they held over the schools' head; keep your kids from participating. But being in Jackson Mississippi, there was a private college on the north side of Jackson called Tugaloo College and at Tugaloo, those students were very much involved. They are the ones who went and sat in at the library and got arrested and all of that, in downtown Jackson. But we participated any way with them without, you know, it being known, we gave them any kind of support we could. So now, I did that kind of thing as a student, and then here as a teacher, we all joined, we started out with going into these restaurants and places like that that had been all white. Then we started to join protest marches down town and everything. So, we had our share of.

Max Paschall: Do you think that even before the civil rights that there were other forms of resistance that took place? Then you can say things like language and culture can themselves be used as resistance?

Johnny Lewis: Oh yeah. Jee wheez. Listen to the songs that people sang. Listen to the poems they wrote, you know, things like that. Those were resistance. Those were songs of resistance or works of resistance against Jim Crow. Yeah.

Max Paschall: And in day to day life?

Johnny Lewis: I beg your pardon.

Max Paschall: And in day to day life, things that you or your parents or your family would do?

Johnny Lewis: Uh, can't think of anything right offhand, no more than going about your daily job, you know. Doing what you did. But maybe not in a resistive way, so, no. No. Not really.

Max Paschall: Um, were there any attempts to organize blacks before the Civil Rights movement or SNNC?

Johnny Lewis: Before the Civil Rights Movement, black people were organized all over the United States. Do you realize when the NAACP was organized? February 1909. Black people have been organized for years against slavery, Jim Crowism, and what have you.

Max Paschall: But in the delta?

Johnny Lewis: But in the delta? Yes. Very much so. Uh, not myself, but in 1953. Aaron E. Henry started a chapter of the NAACP here in Coahoma County, and this was a….now Aaron had been a student out at the high school at the junior college, and one of his teachers, introduced him to

the NAACP at that time. This was back in the early ‘50s and he started a youth group of the NAACP when he was in high school, and then after that, he graduated from high school, went into the army for a few years and came back out. And in 1953, he organized the first branch of the Coahoma County, Clarksdale NAACP.

Max Paschall: Were most people introduced to the NAACP through their teachers.

Johnny Lewis: No. I wouldn’t think so. No. Absolutely not. Most of them were introduced to the NAACP by other members of the NAACP, you know. Because as I said earlier, most teachers were not allowed to openly admit to being members of the NAACP, although most of the teachers were members, but they kept it under rap, so to speak.

Max Paschall: Did you ever introduce anybody?

Johnny Lewis: Oh, did I ever? Sure. As a matter of fact, a young man, I’m sure…I hope y’all got him on your list. His name is Samuel Erby. You were supposed to talk to him while you are here. He was one of the young men that came up through our ranks as a youth of the NAACP and he led a group of students on a protest at Clarksdale High. This was back in the early ‘60s or right after the Civil Rights Act and all that was signed. Yeah, so we introduced quite a few students to the NAACP.

Max Paschall: What do you remember about freedom summer?

Johnny Lewis: Freedom summer?

Max Paschall: 64

Johnny Lewis: 64?

Max Paschall: Of the students of up north coming down and helping to register people?

Johnny Lewis: At that time I was working. Freedom summer I was running a playground for the city. The city had summer playgrounds on most of the school campuses and I was running one of the playgrounds. And I recall all of the kids of your hue who came down coupled with the kids of my hue, and they went throughout this county getting people registered to vote and things like that. They lived in the homes with blacks while they were down here. This man, Aaron Henry, of whom I spoke, was responsible for their being here; he was also the president of the state of Mississippi NAACP. He was the state president and county president. And he remained the president of the state and county NAACP until his health got so bad that he couldn't go. And that was maybe like in the early'80. Back in the '80s he passed. But anyway, he had been a state representative from this district. So, ah, that's the kind of thing the NAACP was involved in, and I know you are probably aware that he, Fannie Lou Hamer, and a group led a delegation to Washington DC to the Democratic National Convention and they challenged the Mississippi delegation for seats at the convention and won. Then after that convention, Mississippi became a two-party democratic party. The Regular Party and the Freedom Party. It was called the Democratic Freedom Party, and we set up an office, and when I say we, I was by this time fully involved, working with Aaron in the NAACP and we set up an office on Issaquena Avenue called Mississippi Democratic Freedom Party. And that party stayed in existence for several years. We had a chair and co-chair of the party, and right now in this county we have a chair and co-chair of the Democratic Party.

Max Paschall: Did you know Mr. Henry before he went to the NAACP?

Johnny Lewis: Did I ever know him? I knew him; I had known Mr. Henry since ’57. When I first came to Clarksdale. He had the 4th Street Drug Store; he was a pharmacist by trade, and he had a drug store and all the teenagers used to hang out at the drug store. You know, you go in, sit down, order some ice cream, or you order a cherry coke and some naps, listen to some music. You know, that was the hang out for teenagers. And that was the first time I learned Aaron Henry. I really became active in the NAACP after I left the teaching profession because I had no strings holding me back then, you know, to take my livelihood away from me so that I couldn’t feed my family (laughs). And the job that I had now, it had nothing to do with the school system and that kind of thing, and I was free to live out my desires, and that’s when I really got involved heavily.

Max Paschall: Did you notice a difference in Mr. Henry after he came back from the National Convention?

Johnny Lewis: No, not any different because Aaron always was the same, and that’s one thing I like about Aaron. Aaron was dogged in what he did, and he never got angry, you know what I mean. These are his words, he used to say when we would go negotiate a situation with the “powers that be,” he would say to them, [imitating Aaron Henry’s voice] “We didn’t come here looking for no fight, but we damn sure we ain’t running from one.” He was that kind of person. He was outspoken, straight out, I mean he stuck to his guns but he did not raise no lot of hell or anything like that; he told you where he was coming from and he stuck with that.

Max Paschall: During your years in activism, who did you look up to?

Johnny Lewis: Aaron. I looked up to Aaron. I always looked up to Aaron because he was the one

that I was close to and the one that helped to mould all of us around this town. Now, folks like Martin would come to town, or Ben Hooks, or Jesse Jackson, all of those guys were doing their thing in other parts of the country while Aaron was the one doing his thing here. And in the state of Mississippi, from time to time, they would bring those other guys into town, and all of them were part of our click; that's who we were around. I met Martin personally, I've met Jesse. I've graced the stage with Jesse Jackson. I've graced the stage with Ben Hooks and all the big boys. As a matter of fact, I introduced—no I didn't introduce him. Another guy ….I introduced a guy that introduced Jesse, yeah. But I've…. I had my opportunity to be around a lot of guys but the one I looked up to was Aaron.

Max Paschall: How would you describe him as a person other than what you said earlier?

Johnny Lewis: Well, very smart when it came to the law. Very smart in the law. Very powerful when it came to contacts. I've seen Aaron pick up the telephone and call Washington, and call the Capital, and call the congressman or senator's office and they'd say, "Well, the senator is so and so…..," and he'd say, " Well, tell him Aaron Henry is on the phone," and he'd talk to him. For instance, Hubert Humphrey; have you ever heard that name?

Max Paschall: Oh yeah.

Johnny Lewis: I've seen him, Aaron. I sat right across the table from him just like we are sitting here, and he picked up the phone and call Humphrey's office and, "Well would you tell him Aaron Henry, Clarksdale Mississippi, wants to talk to him." That's just the way he talked (referring to the deep voice). And in a few seconds or saw, he is talking to the senator.

Max Paschall: Mmhhh

Johnny Lewis:That's right. There isn't a president; there wasn't a president that I can recall that he did not have a relationship with. John F. Kennedy, pictures to prove it in his office, shaking hands just like you and I here, talking across the desk from him- pictures to show for it. Lyndon Johnson, Jimmy Carter; I never will forget one of the men at the press chided him for calling Jimmy Carter "Jimmy." I don't care how good a friend he is with Jimmy Carter; just because he knows him that well he should still give him respect, 'coz he's the president. And Aaron's response was, "Hell, he's friend." (Laughs). He was a great man! Aaron was tough!

Max Paschall: What were you trying to achieve in your personal activism; what were your goals for the African American community?

Johnny Lewis: What you see in my chest: The dream that martin had, the reality we are living today. That's what I'm trying to achieve: Equal Rights. The same that somebody asked Medger's brother; I know you know the name Medger. He had a brother named Charles. Charles is down in Jackson or Fayette, Mississippi, right now. And if somebody asked him, after Medger was dead, you know, Charles became very active in the movement. And one of the reporters, just like you are interviewing me, was interviewing him and he asked him, "Charles, what do y'all want?" He said, "What y'all got. No more no less. We want the same thing y'all got. And that's freedom. The rights to choose like you all do. We don't want no more." That's what I was looking for. What belongs to me; my God given rights. My civil rights. That's all I ever wanted. I ain't wanted to live next door to nobody. I just wanted to be free. If I wanted to do that, I wanted to be free to do that if that's what I wanted. Live anywhere I wanna live and not be treated any different from anybody else.

Max Paschall: So do you think that those goals have been achieved?

Johnny Lewis: We are working on them. They are not totally achieved, but boy, how did that little old poem go? Lord I ain't all that I wanna be, And I ain't all that I oughtta be, But I'm a whole lot better than I used to be (laughs). So that's how it is with this rights thing. It ain't all that it ought to be, and it ain't all that I want it to be, but men it's a whole lot better than it used to be (laughs)!

Max Paschall: Is there anything else you would want to say?

Johnny Lewis: No. I've said it (laughs). If you don't have any more questions, I don't have any more to say.

[End of Interview]