Hello, America
The Life and Work of Willie French Lowery

interviewed by Michael C. Taylor

Willie Lowery (here, in 2009) has led a dual musical life as both a southern musician and an Indian musician. Photograph courtesy of UNC’s Center for the Study of the American South.
Willie Lowery has led a dual musical life (with, of course, much overlap) as both a southern musician and an Indian musician. As a southern musician coming of age in the 1950s and ’60s, Willie engaged with music in ways that mark the experiences of many southern musicians; these common experiences, which include musical blending of white, African American, and Indian genres, and an emphasis on place and space in tones, timbres, and lyrical content, recall the work of other southern artists such as Link Wray, Arthur Alexander, Doug Sahm, and Levon Helm. In the late 1960s and early 1970s Willie frequently shared the stage with white southern rockers such as the Allman Brothers, testament to his membership in a fraternity of musicians bound together through the emergent genre of southern rock.

At the same time, Willie’s Lumbee-centric work throughout the 1970s, ’80s, ’90s, and beyond, while thoroughly informed by a variety of southern musical genres, was highly Indian in intention and representation. His status as a conspicuously visible Native performer (he worked with Floyd Red Crow Westerman, Ulali, and Pura Fé, among others), educator, and activist demonstrates a dedication to Lumbee cultural politics that has made him a celebrity throughout Native communities in North Carolina. In truth, these dual musical identities are as entwined as the kudzu and the oak; the only place we might begin to pry them apart is on paper. However, there is no better forum to explore these issues than in conversation with Willie, preferably over a hot cup of coffee and slice of freshly baked cake.

Willie French Lowery occupies a singular place in the musical history of North Carolina. He was born on May 13, 1944, and grew up in a poor farming family in Robeson County, the largest county in North Carolina and home to the state’s sizeable Lumbee population. Following the death of his mother, Margie Revels Lowery, when he was still a child, the Lowery Family moved from the countryside to the town of Shannon, just outside Red Springs. As Willie recalls, “To me, with 300 people, [Shannon] was a city.” This region of Robeson County—home to whites, African Americans, and Indians—was rife with volatile racial tension. “It was prejudiced as hell is what it boiled down to,” explains Willie. “Everybody there was prejudiced. It was a mess.”

From an early age, Willie was inspired by music. He remembers, “I could hear music in my head as I was plowing the old mule.” When his sister Alice married a man who owned a guitar, Willie began his musical education (often on the sly, as his sister’s husband “didn’t like for anyone to play the guitar”). He proved a quick study, and was soon entertaining his classmates at the Cherokee School. It was this encouragement from fellow students—classmates that had, incidentally, laughed at him for missing classes to pick cotton during harvest time—that fed him the “energy” and the “drive . . . to be something, to do something.” Willie’s
father, Lorenzo, cut hair on the side, and his ad hoc barbershop (operated out of the Lowery home) offered Willie yet another forum in which to develop his musical skills; noticing the reception his son was garnering from customers waiting to get a trim, Willie’s father exhorted him to “play that guitar for those people there.”

Willie’s first professional job as a musician was playing guitar “for the ‘hootchie-cootchie’ women” in a traveling carnival. He showed a knack early on for complex harmonic structure and, following his tenure with the carnival, began to develop his theory and skills as an arranger under the tutelage of local African American bandleader José Sapp. While Willie’s proclivity for augmented chords and blue notes heralded coming sea changes in popular American music, they were not always welcomed in the gospel performances in which he occasionally participated. “D major seven was unheard of back then in gospel music,” Willie recalls. “[The common sentiment was] when you were playing gospel, you were playing a real song.”

By the time he was in his late teens, Willie had formed a group called the Three Hearts. A close-harmony vocal trio, they played in local pack houses and barns. It was on this circuit that Willie met Clyde Jones, the leader of a band called the Tarheel Rockers. The two musicians struck up a friendship, and the Three Hearts and Tarheel Rockers toured regionally together. When the Tarheel Rockers left...
Robeson County for the greener pastures of Baltimore, Willie made plans to join them, and when Clyde Jones quit the Rockers, Willie filled his spot as the de facto leader of the group.

Since leaving North Carolina for the first time, Willie Lowery has led a dizzying musical life, from working as a bandleader for former Drifter Clyde McPhatter to founding the bands Plant and See and Lumbee, whose albums, released in 1969 and 1970, respectively, fetch upwards of $100 for original copies. Along the way, he mingled with Paul McCartney and Eric Burdon, impersonated 1960s also-rans The Royal Guardsmen, wrote jingles for Ban deodorant, was asked to join the Oak Ridge Boys, and had a regional hit with his song “Streets of Gold.” In 1976, Willie composed several songs for *Strike At The Wind!*, a musical theatre production about Lumbee freedom fighter Henry Berry Lowry, and in 1979, he released the classic *Proud To Be A Lumbee*; these projects marked his emerging role as a Lumbee advocate and activist, and added a distinctly political hue to his music. For well over four decades, Willie has employed his music as an instrument of change among Indians in North Carolina and has used his popularity to address crucial issues of identity and representation among Native people.

Willie French Lowery in his own words . . .

**EARLY MUSICAL INFLUENCES**

Well, what influenced me a lot was seeing a guitar. Period. Because we grew up a very poor family. We didn’t have guitars and stuff like that. But I could always hear music in my head as I was plowing the old mule. I could hear music, like I could hear Sam Cooke and people like that. I could actually hear them in my mind. I could hear the arrangements of their songs as I was doing that. My sister married a guy who had a guitar. You know, you have to have that resource somewhere. His name was Wilbert. The problem was he didn’t like for anybody to play his guitar. But every so often, he’d let me pick it up and deal with it. And I just have this memory of looking at his hands and seeing him on the guitar; I was probably eight, nine, ten years old, maybe a little older when I first looked at the idea of possibly playing. And so it all began there.

Wilbert told me, “If you’re going to learn to play guitar, you have to learn to play this.” [Plays a riff on his guitar] I said, “OK, what’s the name of it?” [Laughs] He called it “Step It Up and Go” [a blues standard widely associated with Piedmont blues musician Blind Boy Fuller, who scored a hit with it in the late-1930s]. That was the name of the song. And so it went from that, you know. That was my first song that I tried to learn on guitar. And I thought it was very complicated. But then again, it gave me an idea of each note. He told me to learn the notes, but
that came later when I met up with another guy called José Sapp. José Sapp was an old black arranger; after I grew up quite a bit I started listening to some of the things he said. He was an arranger for movies and I thought that was interesting. And he sort of took me under his wing.

I joined a carnival [in the early 1960s]. I want to make it look like I’m not a carnival boy, but I joined a carnival, and that’s where I met José. And he said, “Come and play with us,” because he liked the way I played. [Plays a funky R&B riff] I had that feel he liked; he liked that feel. And so he said, “I know you can’t do these arrangements I gave you, but you can play anyway.”

I got a job playing for the “hootchie-kootchie” women! We’d play stuff like [sings a striptease-type song]. And [Sapp] played trumpet, so he’d play the lead lines and I’d play [plays chordal accompaniment on his guitar while singing the horn lines]. He also showed me chords and told me what the names of them were. So I started my learning process. I could learn real fast, I could see somebody sing a couple times and I had it down. I can’t do that now, not as well, but I can do some things like that.

The city [I grew up in] consisted of probably—let’s say 300 people. It was Shannon, North Carolina. That’s right outside of Red Springs . . . I grew up right outside of Shannon, on a farm. I had eleven people in my family. My mother died when I was real young, so we moved to Shannon from out in the country. To me, with 300 people, it was a city. And I found an interest in music and singing and gospel; not a lot of gospel because they wouldn’t let me play [plays a slow arrangement of “Amazing Grace” with several blue notes and augmented chords]. They
wanted [plays a straight version of “Amazing Grace”]. And I never could feel it unless it had the chord change. D major seven was unheard of back then in gospel music. You were playing a “real” song when you were playing a gospel song. When you added that major seventh in there it threw them off a little bit. I got discouraged about that, so I quit and started playing what I wanted to play, which was Sam Cooke and all that stuff.

[There was a community of musicians there that would support R&B and secular music but not outwardly. It was hidden, singing in barns and pack houses and stuff like that. That would’ve been . . . oh, that’s the question. I would say 1950s, 1960s.

[Shannon] was mostly Indian. Ownership of buildings was probably white, but the town itself and the outlying surroundings was a lot of Indian people. Of course, Red Springs was a very racial town. People were prejudiced as hell is what it boiled down to.

[You couldn’t go into a restaurant out there in Shannon unless you were on the one side and blacks were on the other side and Indians . . . it was a tri-racial problem, you know? It’s hard to explain now. Everybody there was prejudiced. The Indians were prejudiced, the whites were prejudiced . . .

[We lived in a place on the other side of Red Springs. That’s where I really started my music thing. That’s where I met Wilbert, who was married to my sister. We picked cotton. There was a school over there called Cherokee School where I went to school. My daddy was a farmer, so we had to stay out of school a lot, and we had to pick cotton right up to the school. The kids would laugh at me because I was out there picking cotton and they were at school playing. I could see them from a distance. And my Dad saw the problems I was having with that, and he said, “Go on down to the other end and work down there and you’ll be all right.” So I did. [Starts to cry] So he told me, “Go down and pick cotton down there, and they won’t bother you.” He could see the problems.

So I met Wilbert, my brother-in-law. He let me play his guitar, and I learned a lot of chords off of him. Then I went and took my guitar to school and at first the kids stood off. Then I started playing and they came from everywhere . . . And that fed me the energy and gave a desire to be something. To do something. And I did.

**THE THREE HEARTS, THE TARHEEL ROCKERS, AND MAKING IT IN BALTIMORE**

My daddy cut hair on the side too. He’d have people come over to get their hair cut. By accident I had Wilbert’s guitar, and a bunch of other people were sitting in the other room trying to get a haircut. And I started playing, and my dad saw that they were paying attention, and he thought, “Hmmm.” It was the only compliment I ever had from him, his saying, “Play that guitar for these people here.” And
when I did, I had a built-in audience, and I guess that sort of triggered that time of music. It’s hard for me to think back to those days without getting emotional.

So, I got happy too, because that led me into my career in music. In the early 1960s I formed a group called the Three Hearts. Perfect harmony. We had perfect harmony. Nobody could mess up in that group. Three parts and we had to have it just right. [Plays a rendition of “Michael Row the Boat Ashore”] Bits and pieces! That’s one of them.

So, me and the Three Hearts—I was around seventeen maybe—I had a friend named Clyde Jones. Clyde Jones was a musician who lived in the same area, and he had a group called the Tarheel Rockers. I went to see them and Clyde loved what I was doing, and so he let us join him. He had a band already, so we just started playing with the Tarheel Rockers.

At times we were one band, and at others we would do our thing and they would do theirs. But they were the only band that I knew of at that point, and it was a tremendous situation, because it gave us a place to play in the pack house, and we started playing. And the Tarheel Rockers and the Three Hearts toured a little right there, we did the schools and stuff like that.

[At the shows there wasn’t] so much dancing as sitting and listening. Because we got out of hand if we got to dancing. People fighting. And we couldn’t have liquor. Then the Tarheel Rockers went to Baltimore. Just—poof!—they were gone. The whole band, except the Three Hearts. So, I told my daddy that I wanted to go to Baltimore.

And he said, “Those boys are just making it look good, but they’re having a rough time playing music in Baltimore.” And we were farming, and my daddy knew that I wanted to go, and he said, “Well, suit yourself, but the grass is always greener.” So I decided to go to Baltimore.

Clyde Jones decided to quit in Baltimore, and [the remaining members of the Tarheel Rockers] came down and got me. They came and got me and asked me whether I would come and play with them, because Clyde had quit. And Clyde came to me and said, “Keep going.” [Starts to cry] And so I did, and left the Three Hearts.

But it worked out fine in the long run. I miss my daddy, and what I was so emotional about right there was [I was remembering that] we were gathering a crop at the same time, cotton and stuff like that. And so I came back to get what few clothes I had to go, and it was raining. And I looked out across the field and there was a wagon with all the sheets of cotton tied over the top except one. And for a great many years, a lot of years, I sort of blamed myself, and I didn’t realize how much until we’re talking right now.

But I was very disappointed in myself for doing that, because he couldn’t put that one sheet of cotton . . . and you know, it was raining, and I knew he wanted . . . and he died right after that. And I punished myself for that for a lot of years. I did all of what I did, I guess, for that reason. I was the person that should have
put that sheet of cotton up. And it made me write songs, it made me do everything else that I’ve done in my life. It was based on that one thing and I didn’t know it for a lot of years.

Also, I had an inferiority complex. I was playing at the Las Vegas-level, and I was scared to death when I looked out there and saw all those people, and José Sapp told me, he said, “Willie, look out there. You see those people?” He said, “I want you to remember this. I want you to remember that those people came to see you. You didn’t come to see them. And so go out there and do your best.” And I did. And that’s how I broke down the shell, the bubble I was in.

Then I got tired of playing Baltimore. People getting cut and shot, it just wasn’t my cup of tea, you know. I did some dangerous things to do what I had to do. At that point [Baltimore was the biggest city I’d been to]. [I]t was huge.

Well, I had a band, and I fit right in there. As a matter of fact, I taught them there . . . People always pick me for that, for leadership. See, I was strong and dominating. You couldn’t tell that about me now probably because I feel very weak at times myself with Parkinson’s, but I was very dominating. I had to have things my way because I had this vision of how I wanted it done, and so I’d jump on it that way. Baltimore offered me that opportunity to do anything like that that I wanted, and so I stayed in Baltimore for maybe three years, off and on. But that was a long time for me.

You wouldn’t have believed [the kind of places we were playing]. Now, this is after the hootchie-kootchie stuff. I thought that was the cake top, you know, running away from school and home, joining a carnival, but then I got there, and

“We did some serious stuff there when we went to England. We went to Germany, up in the mountains somewhere that the military got us to go. But Clyde would get so drunk, and we’d be at these places and I’d have to carry him out, literally put him on my shoulder.” Willie Lowery at the mixing board.
we got a job playing a place called Cicero’s, right close to Johns Hopkins. Cicero was the guy’s name, and that was the name of the club. He liked me and he liked everything I was doing, so I went to work there. That first night, I set up and got the band ready and we started playing and one by one people kept coming in and I said, “Man, this is gonna be something.” One by one they kept coming in. The only thing is they had short hair and were good-looking guys. That’s the only way I could interpret it. It winds up it’s a lesbian club! [Laughs] Everybody in there was gay. On top of that, we had all the Indians that had migrated from North Carolina to work in the car plant they had there and sheetrock and whatever, they came in, so they were sitting over here, and the lesbians were over there. I didn’t know what to expect, you know, and we played there and the lesbians stayed on their side and the Indians stayed on their side. I played there for quite a long time, and enjoyed every minute of it.

We turned the name of the group from the Tarheel Rockers to the Sparks. And then they said, “No, we really don’t like the Sparks,” and I said, “OK, we’re the Sharks.”

“Oh yeah! That’s it!”

So we went from the Sparks to the Sharks. What a difference.

There was a drummer that was a white guy. There was piano, bass, drums, guitar, and we had a singer that would come in every so often and sing with us. [W]e were doing “Stand By Me,” and we had one song that was original, but I didn’t put any value on that. There was so much music I was enjoying at the time. “Stand By Me,” James Brown. We did a lot of James Brown, we did the Everly Brothers, we did anything with a harmony, anything with a harmony we’d jump on it in three-part harmony. We sang in back seats of cars—I played guitar and we sang three-part harmony.

I’d see guys come from down here in the cotton fields. I could tell, you know. And I’d point them out, and they would listen to me and leave those people [the gay bar patrons] alone. I’d say, “You’re helping us out by buying liquor,” and they didn’t bother anybody. But it was strange. Nobody filtered over hardly ever, but there was a couple times there were fights in there and one of them would get knocked out.

I used that whole hardcore feeling when I’d go to New York City and go to the Bronx; I had no idea it was considered a bad place to be because I always came from a bad place to be, and I wasn’t afraid of them. I looked at them like, “You little scumbag,” and they left me alone. If I had known the dangers I was in going to all these places—even Queens back then was a rough place to be. And so I moved from Baltimore back home and formed a group, Corporate Image.

Well, [being Indian in Baltimore] was still tough on me because that inferiority complex was all in my people’s faces when I’d see them. The trouble they’d get into was a result of the way we had to be, in the small school and all that, it was just a
mess. And that lingered over into them moving away. They were running from it, but it was there.

And they clung together, all the Indian people. Nobody came down there and messed with them, they sort of stuck together. It was tough, but then again it was great because it was my first [musical] group that I had. So that lasted for about three years, and then I came back to North Carolina in the late 1960s, and I joined up with a group called the Corporate Image.

**Caught Between New York and North Carolina**

[North Carolina] was my refuge, my place of comfort. It could bring me direction. I’d come back to find my direction and get back into the idea of “Willie, you ain’t no better than you were before, but keep on trying.” And I actually heard voices; every so often—not outward, nothing weird—I’d hear a voice say, “That’s the right thing to do.” So I joined that group and they were sort of like the Beatles. [But] we were playing before the Beatles.

[L]ater on I moved back close to Shannon. It took a lot of years for me to be able to do that. When I came back I got in with a group—actually they were called the Hudson Dusters—and when we went to sign with MGM, the guy said, “We can’t sign you with that name,” because the Hudson Dusters was a football team or something . . . I tried to sign with that name with MGM and they wouldn’t accept it, and the guy from the mafia—he had to be from the mafia, if anyone ever
was, this guy was—said, “Hey kid, you can’t call it [the Hudson Dusters]. Let me think. Corporate Image. That’s the name you need.”

That’s the way I remember it. He was so kind as to give us that name. We signed with MGM; we recorded “No Milk Today” and “Not Fade Away.” [Then] Herman’s Hermits recorded “No Milk Today,” and they dropped our version. They might’ve been [on MGM, too], because we kept running into them. We recorded at Bell Sound Studios [, which] was down on the main street of New York, Times Square.

So Allen Lorber was our producer, and he thought we were the greatest thing since the Beatles. And we were doing good, but we couldn’t get a record. Everything we recorded, someone else would record it. So he called us and said, “Come here, kid. I want you to do me some commercials.” So we started recording commercials. We recorded, “Ban won’t wear off/as the day wears on/ won’t wear off/Ban won’t wear off/as the day wears on/ as the day wears on/Ban keeps your armpits . . .” [Laughs] That kind of thing. I wrote that [jingle] and a couple more. We just couldn’t find anywhere to work.

We lived in New York. Matter of fact, we lived in Times Square. We would be there sometimes and I’d see kids coming from down here, going to the Paramount Hotel to stay overnight because that was a place centrally located right in the middle of things, and that’s where we did most of our things. And the owner of the motel saw we were sort of struggling, and he said, “You all don’t have to pay nothing. I just want you to play one time for me.” We came to play and he was busy, and he said, “You play, go ahead, you’ll be alright.” So we got a place to stay for free. That was a miracle, because later on we had problem after problem after problem.

We played for this agency that had more balls than anybody I ever saw. They said, “You all record a version of the song ‘Snoopy Versus the Red Baron’ [then a hit for the group the Royal Guardsmen] and impersonate the band live.” I called it “The German Song.” It was about a plane crash in Germany. We had to go that far to make a living. The real band couldn’t show up—somebody said they were sick, but they were having drug problems—and the agency lent us a Cadillac and we did the show.

We were given a tape. Back then, we learned it in an hour. We had to have the song down and walk out there and play it, because the agency said they’d pay us this huge amount of money. We never did make no huge amount of money, but we did get on stage as the Royal Guardsmen. And people were asking for autographs and our lead singer was very bold, he’d jump on you in a heartbeat if you said anything about the group Corporate Image, and he had a problem with the whole thing. So we didn’t do but one of those, and we got out of that.

Well, all this was before the Beatles, so everything that I would do was in the vein of “Unchained Melody” and stuff by The Platters, which was one of the hottest groups in the world. People would lay down with it and wake up to it.
Proud to Be a Lumbee “sold real good. It was a regional hit and also in Virginia and up north that way. It got lots of airplay. I did real good on that.”

Guitarist Miriam Oxendine (below) played on the album with Willie Lowery (above). Proud to Be a Lumbee photographs courtesy of the Willie French Lowery Publishing Company, BMI.
... I was [Clyde McPhatter’s] guitar man. Right before the Corporate Image, I was coming back from [a McPhatter tour in] England in the mid-1960s.

I got up with him through this agency. Ron Peters and Don Perry used to be my managers, and they were booking people to come to Fort Bragg to play. I went and put a group together because I knew [McPhatter] was coming. I’d done this before in Baltimore, and in New York I put groups together for people. So I put together a little group that went there and backed him up. And that bounced to this, and to that, and finally [Clyde] told my manager he’d like for me to go with him and play in England. And I think, if I’m not mistaken, he left and went back to Baltimore or New York, somewhere, and then he came back and I took him up on his offer. I was still young and not ready for a lot of things.

Oh man. I met Paul McCartney. I met José Feliciano. Can you guess who was on the guest list to be at the club [in London]? José Feliciano, the Dave Clark Five, the Animals, the Beatles. Eric Burdon, he went around reading poems. Paul McCartney and his fiancée [were there]; she announced that night that they were going to be married. I don’t know that for sure, but I heard it through the grapevine. I wanted to meet [Paul McCartney], so Clyde said, “Paul!” And he walks over and sits down at the table with us, and I remember I said the dumbest thing in the world. Clyde said, “This is my guitarist Willie Lowery,” and I said, “Hi there, I’m one of your fans.” That bothered me for years. And he said, “I’m glad that you’re my fan.” I don’t know if he even said that much, but he said something.

But José Feliciano was having his first showcase; he showcased that night. And all of them loved José Feliciano. They thought he was the greatest thing since the Beatles, and the Beatles were there!

If it hadn’t been for Clyde McPhatter, I’d have had a stroke probably. I was straight out of the cotton-patch style of living into all this glamour, flying on the airplane. I’d guess I was around eighteen, maybe, when I was with Clyde. I was about eighteen years old. I was young and crazy to do that. My Dad said that I’d have it rough being out there by myself, but I had insight as far as where as I was going.

Now [Clyde] was responsible for putting together another black group called the Drifters. I came after he got out of the Drifters and toured with him. We did some serious stuff there when we went to England. We went to Germany, up in the mountains someplace that the military got us to go. But Clyde would get so drunk, and we’d be at these places and I’d have to carry him out, literally put him on my shoulder. I was not a big man, but I was strong as a horse. I’d come off the farm and I was strong, plus I’d taken karate, and I was physically in great shape. I would carry him out of the place. I’d say, “Clyde, what the hell did you do before I joined you? How did you get from A to B?” I just got tired of him drinking....
I was required by the agency to have him to these places . . . All that load was dumped on me, and I didn’t get around too swift. So I got out of that group.

After Clyde McPhatter was the Corporate Image. And I went in and produced jingles, but I couldn’t get any pay right away. So I went to see the guy at the agency. I depended on him. He was like, “Bring the phone over here.” I’d never been in a situation where people were so afraid of one man. He said, “Dial me this number.” And he called this union called AFM [American Federation of Musicians]; we joined that union and after joining the royalties started pouring in. For a while there I was probably making more than the whole time I did while I was in groups, just by walking in and singing a few songs. They liked me because I could write them real fast. “Gimme a subject, I’ll write a song!” So I did that.
Then I quit Corporate Image and I had my own group called Plant and See, which later became Lumbee. And that was one that I stirred more stuff up with.

**PLANT AND SEE**

Plant and See was the first group that I got, and we were signed to a label out of New York called White Whale in 1969. Charlie Koppelman was the first person we talked to. Charlie Koppelman had a company called Commonwealth United, which was a big organization. It had branches where it reached out and did different things. Later on, he ended up at ABC.

So they signed us to a company called White Whale. That company recorded the Plant and See album, and it's out there today. Somebody else is making the money.

[Plant and See] was a totally different group [than Corporate Image, which] was when I went back to Fayetteville and regrouped. Plant and See went to California and had a great time. We recorded there and did the whole nine yards of press releases and stuff like that there in California. Ted Fagan, I think that was his name, was the owner of the company. So the producer of Plant and See, Joe Wizart, signed himself to Columbia; his contract ran out, and he just took off. Here we are sitting in California with a half-finished album, so we came back to New York City and stayed there for awhile and said, “No, this isn’t going to get it,” so we went to Philadelphia. Bond Records. That’s where Lumbee came from. I got rid of the bass player and added two more people, which made up Lumbee, and that’s where we recorded, out of Philadelphia. [In 1970] we made “Overdose” in Philadelphia.

[In Hollywood, California . . . we did have something weird happen! We drove in there, pulled right underneath the motel, had a place waiting for us. We walked inside to sign in and the van is gone, with every bit of our equipment. Everything was gone. I’m telling you, man. And I had a guitar that I wouldn’t have given . . . oh man. You couldn’t have bought it off of me.

Well, the company bought us some new equipment and we flew back to New York City and started recording the Plant and See album.

**LUMBEE**

We came back to North Carolina and stayed for a while and reformed the group Lumbee, and then we left and went to Philadelphia. That’s after White Whale and all that. I was the only Lumbee in the group. They [called it] that because I wrote all the songs, maybe. I don’t know why. But that’s where we started performing with the Allman Joys, except they were called the Allman Brothers.

[The Allman Brothers were in Philadelphia around the same time, but they weren’t playing with us. The group Plant and See toured with them in New York
City at Trudy Heller’s [local music impresario who ran an eponymous club in Greenwich Village]. And then we wound up merging with them again. We merged with them again when we started doing tours here in North Carolina. “Streets of Gold” was the first hit. And Plant and See’s hit was “Henrietta.” That came out on the Plant and See album.

The companies looked at me more like I was [the leader of the group]—although I didn’t do it myself, because I looked at it like, “Hey, I need all of you guys.” You know. And me and one other guy stayed together twelve years because of that loyalty we had for one another. And listen to this: we had a three-piece group that we formed after we gave up the idea of making it big time. We moved back to Fayetteville and formed the group again as a three-piece [version of] Lumbee, and we started touring . . .

Matter of fact, a group called the Oak Ridge Boys . . . came into town [at that time]. They came in and we sat down and talked and they said, “Willie, we’d like for you to play.” I was on their bus. They stopped by where I was playing; they got the number from a girl that knew I was playing there and they were playing in Fayetteville at that same time, and that’s how they pulled it together somehow. So I went in the bus and we sat down and started talking and they told me they wanted me to go with them. I said, “What do you mean, just to play?” And he said, “No, we want you to front the group.” They were going right then to start recording in Philadelphia. And I listened to the songs—that’s it, I listened to the songs—four of them, on the bus, and they said that’s what they were going to record. Well I didn’t like the songs. I didn’t like any of the songs they had. And I never did hear them. They never did come out. And I told them, “I have a group that I’m sort of loyal to. We’ve been together for years.” So I went out of their bus and that was it. That was something that happened in the midst of all that.

And I thought that was sort of crazy. We knew each other, but I didn’t know them that well. They’d been around forever, but they couldn’t see to get a record going. They must’ve thought, “[Willie] would be helpful for us.” That was something that I totally forgot about until now.

[The three-piece version of Lumbee] started playing [locally]. Then I had children, you know. I settled down and had them. And that’s where I stayed and did clubs in the surrounding areas. I did a lot of schools, and Strike at the Wind! I just got involved with the community and did my music on a low level. And I had several requests to do stuff, but I couldn’t see leaving my family. And then my family left me in a way. They didn’t leave me; it’s just that our marriage didn’t work. But my boys and my children, we always got along. Somebody told me if you make it with that . . .

The mistake you make is turning your back on your children, not your wife, because your wife’s old enough to make her mind up.
We had an organization called Center for the Arts in Pembroke, [North Carolina], and so I started working as Director of Creative Arts in that building. I got the job based on my experience, not my academics or anything. It was based on that. And so I did clubs and whatever it took to make a living, and I did well. As a matter of fact, I made money . . . After the end of the year I made more money, probably, playing as a solo artist, because I was hitting $1,000, $2,000 just doing thirty-minute shows, you know. So I was doing quite well. You know, I was born not to try and pursue my dreams, just work, work, work, slave, work.

[*Proud to Be a Lumbee*] sold real good. It was a regional hit and also in Virginia and up north that way. It got lots of airplay. I did real good on that. Back then BMI and ASCAP would look after you, that’s what they were for. But I did well and . . . I’m still making money off of *Strike at the Wind!* I make money off of “Streets of Gold.” “Henrietta,” I don’t get too much about that, but I’m going to certainly find out. I can call BMI and they’ll see what the airplay will be if I had. They have a way of doing that. Used to be they had to go for a week and log it; they’d log, like, fifteen minutes, and if they played your song in fifteen minutes, it’d be fifteen minutes worth of royalties. Which is pennies, but pennies add up.
Rock Kershaw was the general manager of [Strike at the Wind!]. I had just come home and I needed something to get involved with in Pembroke, so I went to Pembroke and asked around, you know, checked out job possibilities. And I got up with Rock Kershaw, and he knew all the other people there that I knew. So he was getting ready to do it, and he introduced me to [playwright] Randy Umberger. He might be retired, but he’s still living here. He still does a lot of plays. He’s like me, he’s hung up.

Well, we tried to approach Paul Green [Pulitzer Prize-winning North Carolina playwright and author of the outdoor symphonic drama The Lost Colony]. Paul Green was the writer of several plays, and when we couldn’t get him, he recommended Randy Umberger. Randy Umberger studied under him for a while, which made it great, because his experiences helped us out with putting it together. Then we got a director from this college in Laurinburg. We got him to produce the thing.

[Umberger] was hired to write the play even before I got there. And so Rock Kershaw was the general manager, and he heard what I was doing and he’s a very creative kind of person himself. He wasn’t from here. He was an art teacher at [Pembroke]. He set aside a year’s leave of absence . . . to work with us and our plays and whatever. And my role was they got me to do the music, and I did a presentation of the way I think it should go . . . And they just freaked out. They loved it. Because you instantly could say, “This song here’s called ‘Brown Skin.’” Putting the baby to sleep, you know, rocking? And I’d play the song.

I got a script, like everybody else. I got a script and it just called for a song here and a song there and a song here, and it had the lyrics to the ones I didn’t write. For instance, I didn’t write a song called “Oh Perfect Love.” That’s a hymn from the Methodist hymn book. But the thing is that it’s a . . . what do you call it when it’s old?

How many times have I used this word and can’t think of it now? That’s Parkinson’s for you. Now I know what it is. OK. Public domain. OK, the songs were in the public domain. I’d never heard the song, I just saw the words on it and put it down and it came out beautiful. It came out beautiful because it had nothing to do with the old version except the words. [Sings original melody of “Oh Perfect Love”] But mine went [sings his version of the melody]:

“Oh perfect Love, all human thoughts transcending,
Lowly we kneel in prayer before Thy throne,
That theirs may be the love which knows no ending.”

So that’s the way I wrote that. And the rest of them, except “In the Pines.” And “In the Pines” has been recorded several times, and everybody’s had a dif-
“All you needed to do was put together an organization and people flocked, trying to get their kids into Center for the Arts. We got funded through this organization out of Washington [D.C.]—got over a quarter of a million dollars to do this over a six-year period.” Willie Lowery and Center for the Arts children on the Capitol steps, courtesy of Willie Lowery.
ferent arrangement. So I copyrighted my arrangement way before any of these other ones. You can look it up in the computer and see.

[As Strike at the Wind! has played for years and years], I’ve experienced working with a lot of directors. A lot of directors. Because I directed the music for many years. Then I’d drop it and go on the road and play, you know. And let it run its season. But, you know, I made royalties. It’s something.

[I]t’s sort of intermixed. While I was doing one project, I was also doing another project. And so when I got bored with this one, I’d move to the other one. By doing that, Strike at the Wind! came out of it. It worked sort of hand-in-hand. Center for the Arts was happening, and Strike at the Wind! a seasonal kind of thing. So we’d go out on tours, use the buses and go places and play. It was the most perfect situation I’ve ever been in, as far as having the money to do what you feel like doing, and being helpful for the kids. And we had people that went on to the School of the Arts in Winston-Salem as a result of being there. There were several kids that left here and went into other things.

THE INFLUENCE OF LOWERY’S LUMBEE IDENTITY ON HIS MUSIC

Well, first of all, we had no music. There was sort of no competition at all, singing about Lumbee people. So I had to have a funnel, kind of, to get me known. So that’s why I went in that direction. And it was very highly appreciated. More so now than even back then, because the older people that liked it [then] tell their children about it. There’s a lot of people that worked on that, like the Center for the Arts nonprofit organization. Janie Maynor Locklear was in charge of it, you know, spearheading that. I was an employee. I directed the Creative Arts. If people wrote songs, I helped them with it, that kind of thing.

I knew about a lot of things they didn’t know. Our people didn’t know about recording and all that stuff. That was when it was analog though. Digital, I couldn’t do that. I wouldn’t even try right now.

[Proud To Be a Lumbee has become such an anthem of the Lumbee community that] nobody’s challenged me in that way, you know? Nobody’s come back and said, “Let’s pile something on top of it.” Because you have to write the songs. We’ve got any amount of singers, any amount of dancers, we’ve got all of that. We just didn’t have any creativity flowing. Somebody to walk in and say, “Let’s write this song and put it together and see what it sounds like.” And probably the greatest time of my life was spent in Pembroke doing music for my own people.

[When] I was doing that album, I was doing something else, like playing live and stuff. So I didn’t have time to think about what the aftereffects would be. I was too busy. And I had a better mind than I’ve got now, so I could memorize like crazy. I could go on and find a project, and overnight I could write songs and
I could record them, put them on a small cassette I had. That’s all we needed. Put it down, and then start from there. Then I had all my resources, the kids and the Center for the Arts.

[When I came back, kids] were the ones I was playing for. I went into schools and I played for fourth grade on up to high school. The way I would do it is that we’d send out a letter telling the principal or the organization there that handled the Indian material. I’d get with them . . .

But it started out that life [of activism and education], playing in the school. [Lumbee community leaders] Janie Maynor Locklear, Helen Shearback, Ken Maynor, Adolph Dial, people like that. We had our little clique going, you know, where everybody would get together and brainstorm and things would be so open to doing it. All you needed to do was put together an organization and people flocked, trying to get their kids into Center for the Arts. We picked the kids up after school. When we got funded through this organization out of Washington [D.C.]—I’ve forgotten the name of the organization that funded us, but it was a nonprofit that furnished money for people that wanted to do stuff like that, minorities. And we got money that way. We got over a quarter of a million dollars to do this over a six-year period. And we did some incredible projects. I mean we did Fiddler on the Roof, Oklahoma, we wrote our own plays. It was a delightful kind of thing, moving the kids out of school and putting them in the Center for the Arts, and what we did after that [is] we made it a sister to Strike at the Wind! We took the kids that we’d trained there and we moved them right over to Strike at the Wind! So it was a bounce-off of everything.

And most of this without knowing this was happening so widely until we started busing the kids in vans that we got. And then we realized we were pulling them all the way from Red Springs to Lumberton, Laurinburg, and bringing them in right after school closed.

**HENRY BERRY LOWRY**

[Henry Berry Lowry, a pioneer in the fight for the civil rights and tribal self-determination of the Lumbee and Tuscarora peoples] was the king of the kings. [H]e was identified all over Robeson County, and North Carolina, period, as our hero. Back then he was the Indian Robin Hood. He would announce to people that he was coming by their house and nobody messed with him because he was protected by the people. His brother and father were killed — the same kind of thing as Jesse James, the same story, just about. Some people say that he got his story from Henry Berry . . . because he was living during the same time period. But actually it was Henry Berry. Actually his name was Henry Lowry.

[My work on Proud to Be a Lumbee and Strike at the Wind!] really did [help to pass on the story of Henry Berry Lowry]. And, like I said, the kids that were in the
Center for the Arts were used in the performance. They bounced from there to *Strike at the Wind!* which would need professional actors and actresses. Well, we had some kids, we could identify who was good and who was bad. And so that was their graduation day, to be in *Strike at the Wind!* and they loved it. They loved it. Because at that time we didn’t have a whole lot of people pushing the idea that we do have a culture. We always looked at it like we don’t have a culture. I guess in some people’s eyes we didn’t. We got questioned a lot from our funders about doing more Indian stuff. So we’re sitting there going, “Do more Indian?”

My own people looked at it wrong because they had feathers in their hair and powwows and stuff. It’s the culture, but our culture exceeds that, I think. It gets more into how we talk, how we lived our lifestyle, and the beauty of how we were raised. This was overlooked in our culture, but our culture—the way we talk and everything—it went right into that. And so not knowingly, we tapped right on that . . . And people were loving it, because their kids got a chance to get on stage and they loved it. And that was back when it was hard to be able to do that, you know? There was a lot of very talented kids. So that’s basically why we were doing what we were doing.

Well, it was very controversial because of the nature of what it was saying. It raised awareness about things that people in Lumberton didn’t even want to talk about. Our culture. Our existence. Our presence and our being there, period, was a fight and a struggle. That’s where Henry Berry came in.
[Some Lumbee music may not conform to popular notions of Indian culture.] Well, Indian music [to me is, simply] if it’s played by Indians and it’s music.

NOTES

This interview is excerpted from several interviews that I conducted with Willie Lowery on September 22, October 6 and 23, and November 17, 2008, at his home in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where he lives with his wife, acclaimed Lumbee scholar Malinda Maynor Lowery, and their eighteen-month-old daughter Lydia. At times our conversations were slow going; Willie suffers from Parkinson’s disease and often struggles to remember names and dates. Nevertheless, he remains a powerful, wry, and enthusiastic artist, and I was fortunate to spend time with him. I humbly and sincerely thank Willie, Malinda, and Lydia Lowery for allowing me to come into their home to visit with them.

Sound Recordings and Recommended Reading

Marcia Herndon, Native American Music (Darby, PA: Norwood Editions, 1980).