

Blues Legacy of Phil Wiggins

by Jeff Place

When one thinks of country blues, the usual thought is of the music of the Mississippi Delta. While many wonderful blues men and women have come out of the Delta over the last century, there has been a wonderful parallel style that exists on the East Coast of the United States, “East Coast blues,” or more recently called “[Piedmont Blues](#)”. The Piedmont is a geographic region that exists up and down the East Coast between the coastal tidewater region and the Appalachian Mountains. It includes the cities of Atlanta, Charlotte, Washington, D.C. and Baltimore. In the twentieth century many African Americans left the racial climate of the south and moved north to eastern cities like Washington. There were defense jobs in Washington and Baltimore to be had. Some of the great early East Coast blues musicians were [Blind Blake](#) from Florida, [Willie McTell](#) from Atlanta, [Blind Boy Fuller](#) and [Sonny Terry](#) from Durham, and [Brownie McGhee](#) from Knoxville.

[Phil Wiggins](#) was born in Washington, D.C. in May of 1954. There was music in the house, his father, a government worker with the Department of the Interior, played piano. The Piedmont blues scene has always been strong, and still is, around Washington. In the 9th grade he discovered the harmonica and shortly thereafter met his first musical partner, Flora Molton, a street evangelist who played on an F Street corner in the shopping district. He began to play harmonica with Molton.

From 1972 to 1976, he accompanied Molton at the then Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife. The festival was a D.C. institution and an obvious training ground for the young harmonica player. He was able to meet some of the blues greats, [Johnny Shines](#), [Sam Chatmon](#), and others. During this time, he also got to know a blues pianist, [Big Chief Ellis](#), and began to sit in with his band, the Barrelhouse Rockers, and he was eventually asked to join. The guitarist in the band was [John Cephas](#), who worked at the National Guard Armory. In 1977, Ellis moved home while Cephas and Wiggins paired up to continue on their own.

They became the best Piedmont guitar-harmonica duo on the scene, following in the footsteps of the great Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee. John Cephas was a master of

the Piedmont Blues guitar and sang in a smooth baritone voice. Phil played along with him and went into blistering harmonica solos between verses often gaining the rapt attention of the audience. They became darlings of the folk festival circuit with attendees going out of their way to catch their set. For years at the Smithsonian they would make the tent rock with their version of Jimmy Reed's "Baby, What You Want Me to Do." Their festival appearances also took them to Europe as part of the American Folk Blues Festival. Where many of their songs were covers, they wrote some of their own. During the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s, Phil wrote "Butt Naked Blues" to address the scourge.

They recorded a number of albums for L&R, Flying Fish, Alligator, and others. In the 1980s, they began to tour internationally for the State Department as ambassadors of the blues. In 1988, the Smithsonian sent them to festivals in Moscow and Kiev as part of the Soviet glasnost period. All in all, they toured every continent but Antarctica. Cephas and Wiggins were also very important to the new D.C. Blues Society during this period, helping encourage other younger players in the area.

All in all Cephas and Wiggins toured as a duo for over thirty years. Busy as their schedule was, they always made time to come back to play at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival whenever they were invited. In 1989, John Cephas received a National Heritage Fellowship. In 2003, they played a wonderful set at the Smithsonian as part of an evening concert honoring Heritage Fellows. Their 2008 album, *Richmond Blues*, was released by Smithsonian Folkways. Cephas passed away in 2009, leaving Phil to carry on without him.

Phil has continued to perform. He has also been taking the time to pass his knowledge down. He has been teaching at the Augusta Heritage Center for over 20 years, helping create their yearly Blues Week. He teaches at the annual Port Townsend Acoustic Blues Workshop, serving, for a while, as their artistic director. Forty plus years in, he is now among the older statesmen of the country blues.

His post-Cephas years have found him collaborating with other musicians, including the late Nat Reese, Corey Harris, and his blues string band, the Chesapeake Sheiks. In recent years, he has lent his energy to the John Cephas Piedmont Blues Festival in Bowling Green, Virginia. Organized by Jay Johnson, it is a festival to honor Cephas but also to help promote and publicize the Piedmont Blues and all its practitioners.

In 2017, Phil Wiggins received his own NEA National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. The award honors national treasures in the American folk arts but also individuals who have dedicated their lives to sharing their craft with

others, helping to ensure that their work lives on. Phil Wiggins still has years ahead of him and, no doubt, more wonderful projects on the way. It will be fun to see the work that's yet to come.

***Jeff Place** serves as curator and senior archivist at Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. He has been nominated for four GRAMMY Awards and eleven Indie Awards, winning two GRAMMYS and five Indies. He was one of the producers and writers of the acclaimed 1997 edition of the Anthology of American Folk Music and The Best of Broadside, 1962-1988 (2000).*