

Memphis Press-Scimitar, Friday, December 10, 1976 ShowTime 3

# 'Furry Sings the Blues'—Joni Hangs Her Head

By ROBERT WILSON  
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It's sort of like watching a good friend walk away and knowing he won't be back.  
A bulldozer crushing a rose.  
A lumpy-throated remembrance of something that was but will never be again.

Such is Joni Mitchell's sad-hearted lament of the passing of Beale Street, a tangible chunk of Americana in Memphis' own backyard that has become the victim of time's sometimes slow but inevitably deadly hand.

And the last few bars of Beale's funeral dirge still echo among the crumbling edifices and down the trash-filled gutters as "Furry Sings the Blues."

**Wilson**  
The song, from her album, "Hejira," shakes its head in dismay, turns its back on the rotting ruins and grasps at the aged arm of Furry Lewis as the last relic of a dying era.

Beale Street is gone — but not forgotten.  
On the contrary, it has gained immortality etched on a G major 7 chord.

The picture painted in this pastoral is as clear as the voice of Joni herself. She's obvious.

### In the Spotlight

ly seen the broken glass on the sidewalks, a symbol of a shattered past.

Apparently the splinters of the weather-worn boards that cover the front of most of the buildings there pricked her sensitivity and moved her to put lyrics to her sigh of disgust.

And it's all still there on Beale, just as Joni saw it — "Shine Boy," W. C. Handy "cast in bronze," the pawn shops, the New Daisy theater, "the old girl" — the old Daisy theater across the street — and "Egles the Tailor," though poetic license and rhythm shortened the name from Eggleston.

The two-block tenderloin — though unfit for human habitation — still houses what Joni calls "Diamond boys and satin dolls . . . Ghosts of darktown society."

"There'll never be another Beale Street," Furry said after hearing "his" song for the first time. "It'll never be back like it was."  
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— Staff Photos by Glenn Peterson — Staff Graphics by Bob Hendrixson

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## Joni Mitchell Sees the Legacy of Old Beale Street in Furry Lewis

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Furry, "83 years old and half-blind," smiled and hugged and kissed the album cover as the finely balanced and carefully manufactured stereo record went round and round on his \$25 portable record-player, the needle probably gouging big hunks of vinyl out of the grooves.

"Is this a white lady singin?" he asks.

Uh-huh.

Furry agrees Beale Street is gone. "Time done been and won't be no mo'," he said.

That is a truism, the grammar notwithstanding.

"But the blues'll be here as long as the world stands."

Another truism.

Furry speaks his wisdom just as he spoke it to Joni — "propped up in his bed/With his dentures and his leg removed" (few are aware that the spry

old bluesman has a wooden leg as a result of hopping a train in 1917 in Illinois) in his double-shotgun duplex on a weedy avenue north of Poplar off Dunlap.

The old man still has "an angel overseer," though her name is not Ginny.

Furry doesn't even remember Ginny. But then he didn't remember Joni Mitchell, either.

Of the hundreds and thousands of visitors he has had, how could he be expected to remember each one?

But he does remember Beale when it bustled.

"Beale Street used to be a good place, a tough place," he recalled. "But it was like in 'The Saints Go Marching In,' you had to 'be in that number.'"

Beale Street is where the famous blues composer W. C. Handy gave Furry his first "store-bought" guitar.

"I'm the only one still livin' who played with Handy," says Furry.

"I remember playin' the guitar down at PeeWee's (Saloon, where Handy, according to legend, orchestrated the "St. Louis Blues" while standing at the bar) for \$6 a week."

PeeWee's, too, bit the dust as urban renewal came to Beale Street.

Furry, are you sad about what's happened to Beale Street?

"Who wouldn't be?"

Who, indeed.

Joni certainly is, although she "doesn't give interviews" and cannot say so between quotation marks on these pages.

But her sadness comes through in her song, as she gazes in helpless horror at what "time and other thieves" have done.

But this wasn't just a theft, Joni. It was grand larceny.

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