



Recording Blaze at the Outhouse: Live at the Austin Outhouse (... and not there)

By Lost John Casner

I met Blaze Foley in November of 1980, a week after moving to Austin. I took a demo tape to Spellman's, a music bar and restaurant on W. Fifth St., looking for a gig in my new hometown. Rob, the owner and manager, played my tape through the house system to the sparse after-lunch crowd...

After negotiating a Sunday night gig a few weeks out, I was approached by Bobby Martinez, who had been sitting and listening with 2 other fellows in the beer garden. He said he and his friends had been enjoying the music and asked me to join them in the beer garden. Bobby then introduced me to Townes Van Zandt and Blaze Foley, who were drinking Kamchatka Vodka and having way too much fun for so early in the afternoon. Townes and Blaze were very encouraging and provided me with several leads where singer/songwriters could find work in Austin, including sending me to see Chuck Lamb at the Bentwood Tavern (soon to be renamed the Austin Outhouse). Blaze and I became friends, playing at the same clubs and occasionally sitting in at each other's gigs. Blaze's shows at places like Spellman's, the Outhouse, AusTex Lounge, Hole In The Wall, Taco Flats, and similar venues were like attending a songwriters anonymous meeting (though many of the songwriters in the crowd were hardly anonymous). Usually there more singers and songwriters than civilians in the crowd when Blaze was playing. You never knew who you might show up and sit in. Blaze always shared his stage with his friends and fellow songwriters.

Blaze came up with the idea to record two nights at the Outhouse. He wanted to catalogue as many of his songs as possible on tape for demos and was hoping for

a deal with Heartland Records to release a live album in Europe. Heartland had released several of Townes' records in Europe. Townes' manager, Harold Eggers was reportedly talking to the folks at Heartland for Blaze. Blaze approached me to handle the recording because I was his friend, had a 4-track recorder, and a passable PA. And we agreed to split any profit from the cassette sale so Blaze didn't need to worry about any upfront money. We scheduled December 27 and 28, 1988 with Chuck for the recording at the Outhouse.

Blaze took the opportunity to invite several friends, including Rich Minus, Sarah Elizabeth Campbell, and Carlene Jones to play guest sets. That way his friends might also end up with demo recordings, at no additional expense on their end. The weather that week was cold and rainy, and Blaze had a bit of a head cold. As we were setting up the first night, I realized with some apprehension that Blaze did not bring a guitar. Townes had purchased Blaze a nylon string Takamine with pickups after cashing his first royalty check for Willie and Merle's recording of "Pancho and Lefty." When I asked Blaze where his guitar was, he informed me the Takamine was in the pawn shop. Not to worry. Blaze didn't sweat the small stuff. His good friend Tony di Roadie would bring a guitar. Roadie's steel stringed acoustic had no pickup, requiring the use

of a microphone. I used an Electrovoice PL76 omnidirectional condenser mic for his guitar, the same as for his vocals. The PL76 was a great vocal mic, but also very sensitive and its omnidirectional reception pattern picked up everything in the room. If I had known Blaze wasn't going to have his Takamine, I would have brought a directional mike for his guitar. The omnidirectional mic for Blaze's guitar accounts for much of the "Outhouse ambiance" on the tape, including sounds from the cash register, the tip jar, squeaky bar stools, the ladies room door opening and closing, and intermittent harmony from and interplay with the audience. In hindsight, not having his Takamine turned out to be a blessing in disguise. And the blond Takamine and corresponding pawn ticket would become the center piece of an oft-repeated Townes story. Townes, on several occasions, told the "story" of getting some friends together with a backhoe and digging up Blaze's coffin from the Live Oak Cemetery to retrieve the pawn ticket in the dark of night. Townes never let the facts interfere with a good story and the location of that Takamine remains a mystery.

Recording at the Outhouse:

Blaze did most of the two nights solo, occasionally inviting Ed Bradfield (bartender and night manager) or his friend Roadie to join him on harmonica. Ed always kept his harmonicas in a fishing tackle box parked behind the bar, just in case. Blaze's good friend and frequent musical collaborator Pat Mears, at the time married to Mickey White, Townes' guitar player, sang harmony on Cold Cold World. Champ Hood came ostensibly to play with Sarah Elizabeth. Champ had performed with Blaze many times before and sat in for a couple of songs with Blaze after Sarah's set. Champ played a fiddle borrowed from Conrad Deisler of the Lounge Lizards, who was also in attendance. On the recording from Rich Minus' set, Blaze can be heard singing harmony and whistling a lead break while sitting at the bar during "I'm Gonna Die With My Dreams On."

The crowds both nights were pretty good for weeknight shows at the Outhouse, not packed to overflowing, but the seating area was full, enthusiastic, and included many of his friends. Between songs he chatted with friends, told jokes, talked about politics, and frequently shared his appreciation for pot. At one point, a person unfamiliar with Blaze was giving him advice on how to speak into the microphone when he was talking. The conversation went back and forth for a while, but Blaze kept it friendly, using his subtle sarcasm to make jokes without offending the fellow. Blaze's attorney and sometimes agent, Peggy Underwood was in the crowd. Peggy was responsible for getting "If I Could Only Fly" to Willie and Merle through her friendship with Willie's daughter, Lana Nelson. Peggy had previously passed along "Pancho and Lefty" to Willie through the same



conduit. Blaze told the story of he and Townes getting arrested in Alabama during the recording of Blaze's self-titled 1984 Vital Records album and Peggy joined the conversation telling how she had arranged for the release of both Townes and Blaze from jail. Toward the end of the first night, Blaze had several conversations with Maggie Montgomery and there are times where you can hear Maggie singing harmony with Blaze from the audience. Blaze rambled on about what he thought was the world's greatest great love affair, the romance between Kermit the Frog and Miss Piggy of Sesame Street fame. He riffed about Ma and Pa Kettle, again focusing on the subject of "real love." On several occasions, he alluded to getting kicked out of the Kerrville Folk Festival and his feud with Rod Kennedy, the festival's founder and longtime director.

Re-Recording and Overdubs in the Garage Studio:

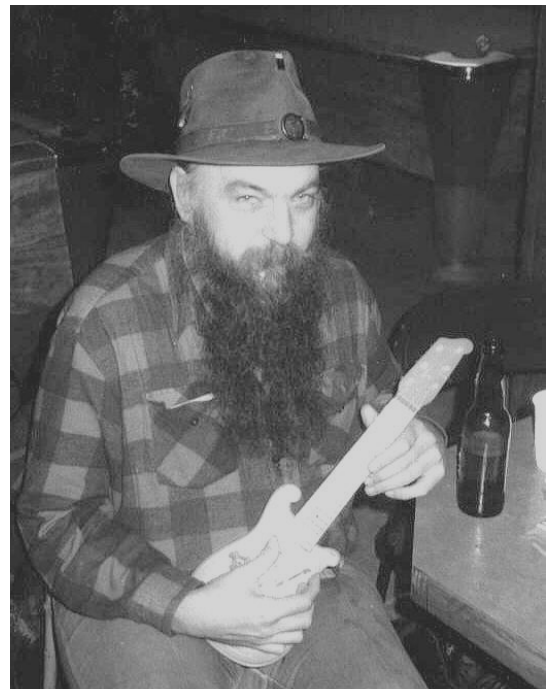
During the first week of January 1989, after reviewing the recording from both nights, we re-recorded Oh Darlin' and Oooh Love in my garage studio (Blaze played one of my guitars this time, a 1950's Gibson ES 125 full bodied electric). Blaze wasn't satisfied with his live performance on those two songs and wanted to re-record them. We overdubbed several tracks recorded at the Outhouse with Blaze and Sarah Elizabeth adding harmony tracks and additional accompaniment. Blaze's harmony lines on "Our Little Town" and "Clay Pigeons are particularly outstanding and show off his harmonizing talent, honed during his younger days with his family's gospel singing group. While Ed Bradfield accompanied Blaze on several songs during the recording at the Outhouse, he overdubbed a few more in the garage studio. David

Waddell recorded bass tracks for a few songs, and I added some piano. While Blaze was recording his harmony track for "Clay Pigeons," David Waddell asked him how he was going to title the album, since it now included harmony and music tracks added later and two songs recorded entirely in the studio. Blaze replied, "Live at the Austin Outhouse... and not there." He said this just as I was punching in his mic to add his harmony part. The live mic picked up "and not there," now embedded into his harmony track at the beginning of "Clay Pigeons." We decided to leave it in the track, as an inside joke, wondering if the mysterious stray line might have people asking later about its hidden meaning.

While recording these additional parts to Blaze's songs, "Sayra" added a harmony part and I added a little keyboard to one of her songs. "Geraldine and Ruthie Mae" is a beautiful, bittersweet song about two elderly women, homeless in the harsh winter of the big city, who made it through each day with only the care and support of each other and their "borrowed" shopping cart. As we were reviewing the overdubs on Sarah's song, I thought I was hearing distortion or some sort of electronic hum in the headphones. I started checking the board and meters, wiggling wires, trying to find the unwanted noise. I looked over at Blaze and identified the source. He was sitting on an empty beer case, holding his head between his knees, sobbing loudly, moved to tears by Sarah Elizabeth's story of the elderly homeless women scavenging through trash cans, pushing their shopping cart down a snow covered city alley. Blaze frequently commented on the plight of the homeless and would suggest possible strategies to provide shelter and comfort for the dispossessed. He asked once why people couldn't sleep in the Capital Metro buses parked each night in long empty rows at the transit center. Blaze was particularly interested in the folks who built a make-shift floating shanty in 1988 on Town Lake (since renamed Lady Bird Lake). The city had recently passed a camping ban to prevent people who were homeless from camping in public locations, but a group of activists proclaimed the ban only applied to surfaces that were on the ground and did not apply to the lake. They tied off their "houseboat" near the Congress Avenue bridge with a goose named Homer on board as a mascot, using the stunt to protest the city's new camping ban and generate publicity regarding the growing number of folks experiencing homelessness in Austin. During the several months they resided on their floating campground, they gave frequent interviews with the press and local radio stations. They were arrested on a couple of occasions and the homemade "houseboat" was eventually removed. Blaze appreciated both the activism and performance art of the folks involved.

Blaze always enjoyed interacting with kids, asking them questions, and engaging them in conversations.

My three-year-old twin sons, Aaron and Travis, always looked forward to Blaze's visits to the studio that January. Blaze would bring them presents each time he came, usually pieces of his "marker and cardboard" artwork. On one of his visits, he forgot to bring any of his artwork. As usual, Aaron and Travis ran out to the studio to see their friend Blaze. When Blaze greeted them, he apologized for not bringing any of his artwork. Then he patted his pants' pocket, smiled, pulled out a set of finger picks and handed them to his young friends as impromptu presents. As we prepared for the tape release, I took several photos of Blaze. The shot we ended up using as the cover for the cassette case was a picture of Blaze sitting at a table at the Outhouse, holding one of my sons' toy guitars, a Kermit the Frog model.

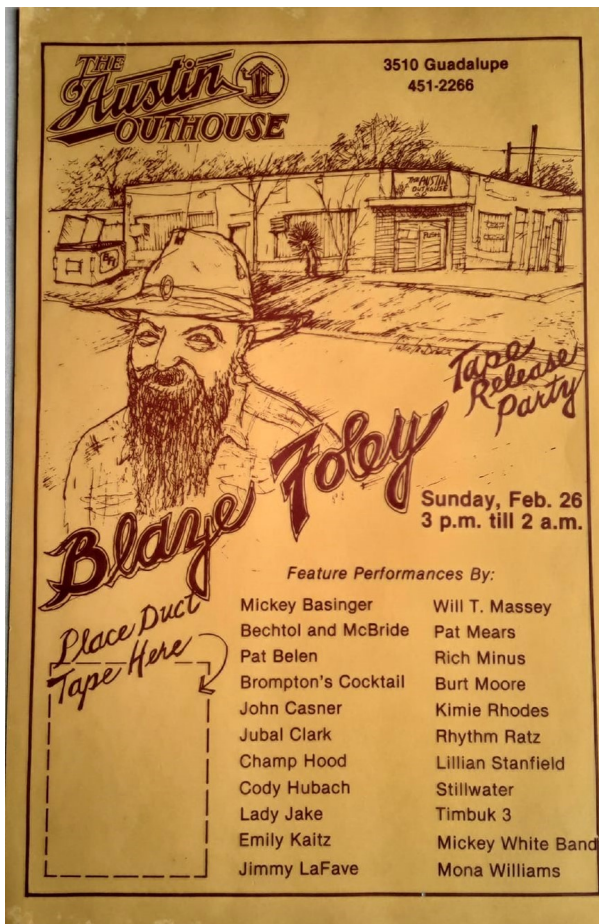


Mixing, Editing, & Mastering:

We whittled the 4 hours of Blaze material down to about 115 minutes, so as to fit on a single 120 minute cassette and planned for a tape release party at the Outhouse in February. Our intention was to have 50 tapes duplicated and packaged, hoping to sell enough to cover the cost of the recording. When discussing how much to charge for the cassettes, Blaze decided he wanted to charge \$5 and donate \$1 from each tape sale to the Austin homeless shelter. On January 25, 1989, I took the final mix to him at the Hole in the Wall for his review and approval. He was opening for his friends Pat McDonald and Barbara K of Timbuk 3 at the Hole In The Wall. They had recently scored big with "The Future's So Bright I Gotta Wear Shades" on the radio. The duo was billing themselves as Fred & Wilma (from the '60's Flintstone's cartoon) so the small club would not be overwhelmed by Timbuk 3 fans after

their recent hit record. When I mentioned I was going out to see Blaze, Aaron and Travis insisted on going with me. Blaze was in the middle of his set when we arrived. Before starting "Oval Room", Blaze introduced Aaron and Travis and invited them up on stage to sing the chorus with him. Aaron and Travis walked on stage with Blaze, but the crowd and the stage lights were a little too intimidating and they could only stand next to Blaze, frozen with stage fright, unable to sing a word.

Blaze approved the final mix, which was mixed down using legendary KUT DJ Larry Monroe's reel to reel recorder. Larry was an early supporter of Blaze and one of the few Austin deejays who played Blaze's earlier recordings before his death. We scheduled the tape release party for Sunday February 26, 1989 at the Outhouse and ordered 50 cassette copies to be duped and packaged. Several of Blaze's friends were lined up to perform at the release party, including Timbuk 3, Kimmie Rhodes, Jubal Clark, Cody Hubach, Champ Hood, Jimmy LaFave, Pat Mears, Mickey White, and Rich Minus.



On the evening of January 31, around 6:00 PM, I received a call from Chuck Lamb at the Outhouse. He told me Blaze was arguing with several folks at the bar and he was worried it was going to get physical. This was the regular Jeopardy crowd he was messing with. A group of guys gathered each evening to watch Jeopardy and the evening news. Apparently during a story on the

national news from the middle east, someone at the bar made a comment about "ragheads." This caused Blaze to respond with an anti-racist rant and his point of view regarding middle east politics. Chuck was calling because he wanted me to come to the Outhouse and get Blaze out of the bar. I told Chuck the twins were just getting into the bathtub, it was my night to give them their bath, and I would not be able to come down to the bar. I asked him to put Blaze on the line. Chuck handed Blaze the phone and I did my best to convince Blaze it was in his best interest to leave before things got worse. I told him the people he was arguing with were regulars who came to bar every night and were some of Chuck's best customers, including a guy who played with Chuck on the Outhouse softball team. I reminded him the cassettes had been ordered, the posters had been printed, the guest performers were lined up, and we were all set for his tape release. And getting into a fight with Chuck's regular customers could put the whole project in jeopardy. Blaze did leave the Outhouse, heading down Guadalupe Street to the Hole In The Wall and then on to Jubal Clark's apartment in South Austin where Blaze had been staying. That was my last conversation with Blaze.

Tape Release February 26, 1989:

The following afternoon after work, I took a press release for the tape release party to Chuck at the Outhouse, only to find he had been shot that morning by his friend Concho's son and died at the hospital following surgery. Ironically, the person who informed me Blaze had been killed was one of the guys Blaze had been arguing with the night before. My initial inclination was to cancel the tape release party, but Peggy Underwood, and several close friends of Blaze, including Pat Mears and Roadie insisted that Blaze would want to go ahead with the tape release and besides, now the money from the release party could help pay funeral expenses. I called the production company handling the tape duplication and packaging and increased the run from 50 to 250 cassettes and added a line on the inside of the tape insert: Blaze Foley: 1949-1989. The tape release party was held as scheduled on February 26 with an overflow crowd at Outhouse, full of tears, but lots of love (and duct tape) for Blaze.

NOTE: Originally prepared for Carmen and Kai Nees, authors of "Blaze Foley: Misfit to Legend," to provide background info for their new book on Blaze.