

Just Off Beale: Henry Speller in Memphis

By Hunter Braithwaite



Henry Speller, *Untitled (Man with Two Women)*, ca. 1983-1988; 18 by 24 inches. (All images courtesy Institute 193 (1B), New York.)

In a 1978 field recording made in the Memphis living room of artist and musician Henry Speller, the harmonica player Coy “Hot Shot” Love growls into the tape: *You got me way down here in Rolling Fork, you treat me like a dog.* He could be talking about his friend Speller’s upbringing. Speller was born in 1903 in Panther Burn, Mississippi, a few miles outside of Rolling Fork. He grew up sharecropping, generally being treated like a dog. Once, a doctor offered to take him away and educate him, but his mother refused, needing his help on the farm. From then on it was stringing up telegraph lines, working on the levee in Vicksburg. He had a couple kids from a couple marriages, and worked a farm between Highway 61 and the train tracks. In 1941, the promise of a



Henry Speller, *Untitled (Two Women with Man in Hat)*. ca. 1983-1988: 24 by 18 inches.

wartime job brought him north to Memphis. That job didn't materialize, so he started off as a junk man, reselling pieces of coal that had fallen off passing freight trains. He played guitar, he drew.

Much less is known about Coy. Born in 1914 in Clarksdale, Mississippi, he was a sign painter by trade. We know this because he rode his bicycle around town with signs on it that said he was a sign painter. In 1954, he recorded a single 45 with Sam Phillips for Sun Records, "Wolf Call Boogie" backed with "Harmonica Jam." The A-side is a gamboling harmonica tune with hoots and big-hearted insults. If Coy was out in the streets and in the bars shouting at women—and with the nine children he left behind when he died in 1980, he likely was—then Henry Speller was up on his porch, drawing them as they walked by.

These drawings, many of which are on view in the exhibition *Mother Wit* at Institute 193

(1B) through November 2, are *sui generis* depictions of the gaudy lights of Memphis, as seen from the shadows just beyond Beale. Speller drew biblical scenes and architectural studies, as well as patiently rendered boats and train cars, but he will be remembered for these sex workers and hustlers, scam artists and bluesmen.

Early on, these subjects were portrayed in crayon or colored pencil on copy paper, reams of which Speller had dug out of the trash. It's like Genet's *Notre Dame des Fleurs*, written in jail on the only paper he had at his disposal: grocery bags. That book was written for the express purpose of masturbation, or so Genet said. Certain viewers have commented that the drawings are similarly masturbatory. Makes sense. The fuck-me pumps, the rouge and jewels. Together, the figures comprise a mail-order catalogue of come-hither or get-out poses. Blouses are both patterned and transparent, revealing breasts that lie flat while protruded out perpendicularly from the chest. The vagina—styled with a Friar Tuck ring of pubic hair—sticks straight out as well. While it's doubtful that even the horniest of these served an erotic function, they bring up the question of audience. Who are these for? Sources say that he pinned them up on the front porch of his house.

Though Speller eschews both traditional anatomical representation and placement, the drawings adeptly present a series of social codes involving sex, music, and fashion—Saturday night sociology. Later, Henry's figures would be set against a backdrop of dense color and pattern, but these early ones, without any armature of scene and setting—it's just them and the moldering copy paper. Still, you've got to imagine them

on the move. Platform shoes in profile, painted fingernails flicking in the wind, these people aren't holding still for Henry, or for us.

Institute 193 will be releasing the 1978 recording to accompany the show. Recorded by folk archivist Jerry Pevahouse, the tape rolls on all afternoon. The beauty of a field recording is the 1:1 temporal ratio shared by the musician and the listener: the time spent recording is equal to the time spent listening. Only the moment spent flipping the record invites the essential mystery of all recorded music: what happened between then and now?

With these reel-to-reel setups, you really feel like you're in the room. Here is the Lomaxian tradition of blues in the wild, in its natural habitat, as opposed to the commercial records made by Black singers who had been transported to Chicago and Port Washington, Wisconsin—the home of Paramount, where Charley Patton, Son House, and Blind Lemon Jefferson recorded—given whiskey, told to sing into the horn, and sent home. This is more a record of a place mapped by sounds than an audio recording. What place is that? Memphis—just off Beale, but not quite McLemore.



Henry Speller, Untitled (Man with Woman in See Through Dress), ca. 1983-1988; 24 by 18 inches.

This essay is adapted from the liner notes of Drawings and Songs, a limited-edition record released as an audio supplement to the 2017 exhibition of the same name at Tops Gallery in Memphis, Tennessee.

Henry Speller: *Mother Wit is on view at Institute 193 (1B) in New York through November 2. This exhibition will be followed by the release of 244 Butler Avenue, an album with music and dialogue by Henry Speller, his wife and fellow artist Georgia Speller, and artist and musician Coy Love, in December.*