BSCC-HAMILTON BLACK HISTORY PROGRAM

Rev. Jones has packed house singing, laughing

■ Diversity celebrated with award-winning blues historian

By **KATHRYN HIRSCHFELD**
Staff Writer

HAMILTON - A blues historian and musician from Detroit, Mich., who has roots in Alabama, "brought down the house," on Thursday, Feb. 25, during Bevill State Community College-Hamilton's annual Black History Program.

Rev. Robert B. Jones Sr. had the entire audience at the Bevill Center laughing and singing along with him on a musical journey that explored the "tree, branches and roots" of modern music that grew out of gospel and country blues folk songs from many years ago.

During Jones' introduction by Bevill State Diversity Committee Chair Donna Swinney, who is also the director of Upward Bound, she noted that Jones has been performing for nearly 30 years as "a singer, songwriter, storyteller, pastor and self-taught award-winning multi-instrumentalist."

During his show at Bevill, Jones used most of the instruments he can play, which include guitar, harmonica, mandolin, banjo and fiddle. He also demonstrated his wide range of musical styles and his gifted mimicry of other musicians in manner, speech and performance.

Jones said his grandmother, who was born in Alabama, brought home a record when he was 10 years old that changed his life.

"She was excited because it came from 'down South,'" he said. "The record had guitar player Brownie McGhee and harmonica player Sonny Terry playing something called blues, but it wasn't the B.B. King type of electric blues, it was this country blues."

Jones then sang "Gone But Not Forgotten," while accompanying himself on the guitar and harmonica.

He explained that while other kids around him were listening to The Temptations and The Supremes, he was listening to country blues.

"That's when I realized that country blues had roots," he said. "If you ask yourself a question about anything you love, that simple question is, 'Where does it come from?'

"And that question starts to open up and you become a student of music or the arts or whatever it is that you love."

Jones said his question about the origin of country blues took him back in time.

He began his musical journey, continually mixing in chords and lyrics as he spoke, and asked the audience to imagine themselves standing outside of an old, weatherbeaten Methodist Church in the 1850s.

"They're singing 'Amazing Grace,'" he said. "And every note of the song being sung lands on the beat of the music. You go down the road a little ways, and there's another church service. This one is being held at a barn or under the trees.

"This was called 'the invisible church' and it was frequented by those who were enslaved in 1850. And it might be the same song, 'Amazing Grace,' but it comes out a little differently.

"It's sang in a different way and not on the beat of the music. What changes that song so much between the churches and gives us our shared cultures?" he asked.

Jones explained that music, when it's not written down, is constantly changing. He said music that's written down becomes "classical" and is sang the same way generation after generation. In places where the music is not written down, but is passed down because there were no song books, he said the music changes a little each time.

Using different voices to provide examples of father to son to grandson, and then across the country to an accent from a Kentucky girl, Jones sang the first verses to 'Amazing Grace.'

"Your father sang it like this," he said. "You decide that's not fancy enough and you sing it like this. Then someone's granddaughter named Aretha sings it like Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa aaaaaaaaaaaaammmmmmmmmaaaaaaaaaazzzzzzzzziiiiiinnnnnnggggggggggrace.

"And that's just the first two words as sung by Aretha Franklin. So, not only have you heard 'Amazing Grace,' you've experienced the folk process. If you don't write the song down, the song keeps changing. And a lot of the great music of our culture is not necessarily the music that was written down."

Jones explained that people would also make instruments to help them get a job done, such as chopping a tree into firewood.

He demonstrated by making a few notes on a set of quills, which he explained is one of the oldest instruments known to humankind. To accompany the quills, persons would use paddles, putting bottle caps on one side and washers on the other side.

"You would use the same kind of paddle as you'd use to get something hot out of the fireplace, stir a pot of boiling laundry or to relate to your children in less enlightened times," he joked.

'The tree trunk is the blues'

"American music is like a tree out in the middle of the forest and all the branches of the tree are the music you listen to, such as R & B, rap, gospel, country and pop," Jones said. "If you follow that tree into the truck, the tree trunk is the blues. And then up underneath that tree is the roots--our roots.

"And if you think about where our music comes from, you see it's always a borrowing or sharing, and sometimes a stealing, of each other's music that helps to create American music."

Selecting an instrument from those onstage, Jones picked up a banjo

"This banjo belonged to a great musician, the late Dean Crowe, who worked with a quartet, called 'Bill Jones and the Bluegrass Travelers,'" Jones said. "He was the father of Mrs. Swinney."

He noted that current banjos were developed over the last 200 years, originally being created by African Americans using gourds. He then selected another instrument, a gourd banjo.

"What you do is, you find a gourd and stretch a skin across it and you've got a drum," Jones said. "If you put strings on it, you've got a banjo like this one created by one of the contemporary artists in this community, Missy Miles."

Jones then used the banjo, which was commissioned by Donna Swinney for her husband, Rob, to play the "call and refrain" song, "Wade in the Water," where lyrics are called out and then repeated by others in the audience.

He said songs were used in slave times to deliver messages, like getting in the water so as not to be tracked by dogs, and crossing rivers to "The Promised Land" to escape from slavery.

Jones has written a few songs to share some of his own family history with his son and daughter. In "Will Cunningham," the lyrics tell a story told to Jones by his grandmother about her father, a veteran of World War I who lived in Conechu County.

Jones said Cunningham had a favorite scripture "for whenever times got mean and it was Second Kings, Chapter 6, around verse 17."

The song explains how "the Lord said to open our eyes because we never stand alone" and how, in 1925, an evil white man slapped Cunningham for no reason, with the veteran giving the man a taste of his fist in return.

Jones' ancestor only survived death by a posse through the intervention of his employer, Boss Mac Bennon, who was also a white man and "with shotgun in hand, dared anyone to harm his hardest-working man."

Jones noted in his song that "all white men weren't the same," before continuing his dialogue on the subject.

"The fact of the matter is, there are always people of conscience and people of character who are willing to fight against injustice anywhere," he said. "You have to find those people and celebrate them whenever and wherever you find them."

Country changed by music

Jones explained that America changed its views on race, in part, because the country saw the injustice. But he noted, sometimes the country also changed in unusual ways and for unusual reasons, such as music.

He noted that in the 1920s, with the popularity of the phonograph record, "music that had been made in Mississippi could be heard in New York for the first time."

He said "Boogie Woogie" piano players emerged, playing only five notes and three chords.

"And those five notes and three chords helped to make American popular music," he said, playing a piece from "Cannonball Blues."

Jones said that by the time the 1930s and the Great Depression rolled around, those same five notes and three chords were still being played by those same Boogie Woogie piano players, but up north in black churches.

"But they didn't call it 'Church Boogie Woogie,' they called it gospel," he said, strumming and singing, "This little light of mine. I'm gonna let it shine. This little light of mine. I'm gonna let it shine," as the audience began clapping.

Around 1935, Jones said a style called bluegrass became popular, "which has the blues" in it.

Moving to 1948, he said Ray Charles was "taking gospel back into the clubs" and ran out of music one night, telling his band to "just do what I say." Jones then led the audience in singing "What'd I Say," explaining that those same five notes and three chords became what's known as Rhythm and Blues or R&B.

Jones then moved to 1953, nothing that persons had not only phonograph records, but also radios and televisions. He received a big laugh from both the high school students and the older audience members when he noted there were only three stations.

"So just about everybody is watching the same things at the same time," he said.

Jones said that one night a show host announced "We have a really good show for you tonight" (Ed Sullivan) and a young man from Tupelo, Miss., stepped out and began using three chords and five notes.

"One for the money, two for the show, three to get ready, now go cat go. But don't you step on my blue suede shoes," Jones sang, rolling his hips as the audience roared with laughter.

"Thank you very much," Jones said, before asking, "Who was that guy?" When the audience yelled, "Elvis," Jones asked, "Elvis was the kind of what?" After they replied, "Rock and Roll," Jones noted that there is a black king of Rock and Roll who is still alive and lives in St. Louis--Chuck Berry.

Jones said Chuck Berry "sort of stole Bill Monroe's lick" and put it on an electric guitar and played the blues really fast, creating even another new sound.

Jones sang, "Deep down in Louisiana close to New Orleans, way back up in the woods among the evergreens, there stood a log cabin made of earth and wood, where lived a country boy named

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Blues history lesson
Whether sharing music history by singing (top photo) or through the spoken word (bottom photo), Rev. Robert B. Jones Sr., of Detroit, Mich., gave an outstanding performance on Feb. 25 during Bevill State Community College-Hamilton's Black History Program.

Jones

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Johnny B. Goode."

He noted, "So strangely enough, you cannot have rock and roll without the blues. You can't have the blues without gospel music, you can't have gospel without the spiritual and so on. You can't have one without the other. So things started to come together in an interesting way."

Jones said students were segregated during dances in gyms in the 1960s, but "tore down the roof" dancing when they heard the five notes coming out of Detroit that open the song "My Girl" by The Temptations.

"It's sometimes hard for us to put aside our preconceived notions," he said, "But if you really like somebody's music, it's really hard to hate that person. So you start to come together. And this music was also happening at the same time when Rev. (Martin Luther) King and Dr. (Ralph David) Abernathy and all those people were marching."

Jones said he also likes being able to create new songs from old-style music.

"You can tell stories that were never told before, using the old music," he explained. Providing an example, Jones sang "Arnesia's Song," which he'd written for his 24-year-old daughter, Arnesia, about her great-grandmother of the same name "who he hears in the laughter of his daughter" and who learned her mothering ways by caring for children for whom she was barely older than.

Jones also explained how, in the 1940s, Vera Hall was talked into recording "Another Man Done Gone," after saying she didn't sing the blues. He also used the same music from that tune to sing a new song he'd written, "Another Young Man Gone," about a young black man being shot 16 times "and they could not name his crime."

Remix of 1928 song

Jones said he feels that the idea of diversity, the music we listen to and enjoy and our shared culture, are among the best things about the land we live in.

"Some people tolerate diversity," he said. "I like to celebrate diversity. It is really what brings us together and makes us who we are."

He concluded his presentation with a song recorded in 1928 called "The Death Letter Blues." Jones first performed part of the song as recorded in 1928, repeating each lyric twice.

Looking at his watch and noting the short time remaining, Jones said he would now modernize the song, singing each verse only once and speeding up the tempo while fading the music out.

"In which case, this becomes 1928 Death Letter Blues--2016 The Remix," he joked, beginning with singing and ending with rapid rap lyrics and mannerisms that had the audience laughing, clapping and giving him a standing ovation.

More information on Jones can be found at www.revrobertjones.com.

For those wishing to see him in person, Jones will be performing at the 6th Annual Front Porch Storytelling Festival at the University of North Alabama in Florence on May 20-21. Tickets and more information are available at www.una.edu.

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Banjo player and maker
Donna and Rob Swinney (left) are shown on Feb. 25 at the Bevill Center with Rev. Robert B. Jones Sr., (center) and artist Missy Miles, who made the gourd banjo Jones is holding and which he played during his performance. Donna Swinney is the chair of Bevill State Community College-Hamilton's diversity committee.