



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Transcript of interview with Jesse Howard

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# Transcript

## Preface

### Tape-recorded Interview with Jesse Howard

#### at his Home and Studio in Fulton, Missouri

November 1, 1981

Willem Volkersz, Interviewer

#### Editor's Note:

This transcript is from a series of recordings made by Willem Volkersz over a number of years. They are not formal interviews, but rather records of conversations, often taped during photo-taking tours of the artist's studios or home collections.

The naive/visionary artists in these interviews have unique verbal mannerisms, many of which are difficult or impossible to transcribe accurately into written form. Thus, for grasping certain nuances of speech, researchers will find it advantageous to listen to the original tapes.

Our intent in transcribing these interviews was nonetheless to translate as accurately as possible the spoken word into a comprehensible written form, making changes to clarify but not to interpret. Thus the speaker's grammar is unedited. For example, "them" for "those," "theirselves," and "gotta" were all transcribed as heard. On the other hand, certain changes were made for clarity: " 'cause," was transcribed as "because," " 'fore" as "before," " 'yo" as "your," etc.

Other editorial notations are as follows: Bracketed words are of two types. Those with "[—Ed.]" or "[—WV]" are inserted by the transcriber, editor, or Volkersz. Other bracketed words indicate uncertainty: Two or more words or phrases indicate possible alternatives; "[unintelligible]" and "\_\_\_\_" indicate words that are garbled or incomprehensible on the tape, the former being a much longer phrase than the latter; "[noise]" is self-explanatory.

The original format for this document is Microsoft Word 365 version 1908. Some formatting has been lost in web presentation.

## Interview

**JH:** Jesse Howard

**WV:** Willem Volkersz

**[Tape 4, side A; Volkersz' No. H7-1] [30-minute tape side]**

JH: . . .last June.

WV: Well, that's unbelievable. I don't believe you.

JH: (laughs) I had a wonderful, wonderful father and mother.

WV: I know you did.

JH: They were wonderful. Shamrock, Missouri, right down there, is where I was born, about 30, 40 miles from here. And these people don't recognize me as a citizen of this United States. Old Fulton's the dirtiest place this side of. . . What am I going to say next?

WV: I don't know.

JH: This side of the Gaza Strip in Egypt. (chuckles) I like to tell them, you know.

WV: And you keep on telling them.

JH: The people right here won't even speak to you over the fence. These people won't even speak to you across the road. That tells who they are, you know.

WV: That's really sad.

JH: Their action, you know, speaks louder than words. Actions, every time. Then right here on this hellified. . . Hellcats, I'd call them, hellcats. Some of these hellcats, they only weigh 200 pounds.

WV: (laughs)

JH: They don't like to hear me speak at all. (chuckles)

WV: Is that one of your dogs?

JH: Huh?

WV: Is that one of your dogs?

JH: No, that's my neighbor's dog.

WV: [To dog:] Hi, buddy.

JH: My dog thinks more of me than my neighbors.

WV: (laughs)

JH: Supposed to be neighbors. They're not neighbors. [To dog:] Come to see me every day, don't you? Huh?

WV: They know you like them.

JH: Well, they know who their friend is, yes. What was that other piece you showed me?

WV: Well, uh, this?

JH: Right. Yes.

WV: You know what that is?

*[Interruption in taping?]*

JH: . . .never even look at you. You can't say, "Howdy," "Hello," or nothing else." I don't know why.

WV: Huh.

JH: Well, I put up all these buildings by myself. Every one of them. By myself.

WV: Where did you get the lumber to put them up with?

JH: Well, I had a team. I had a good team, you know. And where I built my barn, over there, I had some good horses, you know, and cows. And I actually milked good milk and carried it up and down these streets to poor people. Gave it to them—by the gallon! Gallon.

WV: Huh.

JH: And they don't think anything about me yet today. Not a thing.

WV: So you farmed this piece right here?

JH: Huh?

WV: Did you farm this piece right here? Was this part of your farm?

JH: Now, yes. Yes. That don't look like I'd run a mowing machine over the whole thing, does it?

WV: (laughs) Be hard to do now.

JH: You see those two big trees out there?

WV: Yep.

JH: (coughs) I learn a little something pret near every time I speak. I didn't know it, you know, but God created the Heaven and the Earth, he made man and female, didn't he, of everything. Everything! Everything! He didn't leave nothing out!

WV: Right, I know it.

JH: One of those trees is a male, and the other one's a female. Which one's which.

WV: I can't tell.

JH: (laughs) I c'n tell you people, I just love you.

WV: Good.

JH: I just love you people. I've got it wrote right over here. Right out there, on those places: "He who hateth a brother. . . He who hateth his brother is a murderer." Did you ever see that in the Bible?

Matt McCoy (MM): Yeah.

JH: Why don't they hate it?

MM: I don't know. I couldn't tell you.

JH: Why don't they hate it?

MM: I don't know.

JH: I don't know, either. I can't tell you. But all this work up here—my yoke, that arch—that's all new work.

WV: I noticed that some of these signs right here are new.

JH: Yeah, those are new.

WV: I know. They're wonderful.

JH: Nobody even come up here and speak to me.

WV: Well, you keep on telling them.

JH: The judges, or any of them. Won't even come up here to speak to me. The lawyers, none of them, preachers. Preachers won't come up here. (chuckles) Did you ever hear of anything like it?

WV: Never.

JH: Yes, I was born in a true Christian home, myself. And my father and mother were true Christians. The Bible says, "Teach a child in the way he shall go, and he'll never depart from it." Now, you might, you know, start down this road, and see you're on the wrong road. . . Now what I'm going to say?

WV: I'm not sure yet.

JH: You see you're on the wrong road—that's the road to Fulton.

WV: Right.

JH: And you see that road won't take you to Fulton. What're you going to do? What are you going to say?

WV: Turn around.

JH: "You're a fool if you don't turn back."

WV: Exactly. Exactly.

JH: Isn't that right?

MM: That's right.

JH: Oh, I'm so glad to talk to you people.

WV: Well, we've always very much appreciated your work, Jesse.

JH: Huh?

WV: We've always very much appreciated what you've done, your work. You remember when we brought you to Kansas City?

JH: Huh?

WV: You remember when we brought you to Kansas City for the show?

JH: That's right.

WV: Remember the big cake? Do you remember that?

JH: Yes, [unintelligible]

WV: I drove you back that day.

JH: You did?

WV: I drove you back.

JH: I remember all of that, you know.

WV: Wonderful.

JH: And I. . . My work is pret near all on the Bible. Pret near all of it. And I represented these people that's all invited to the big supper. And they all made excuses. Do you remember that?

WV: Uh huh.

JH: What excuses did they make? Huh?

WV: Ahh, I'm not sure. What was it.

JH: One of 'em had bought five yoke of oxen, and he had to stay at home and tend to them. Another one had married a woman, and he couldn't leave her. (all laugh) Yes, they couldn't leave them. Let's see. Do you remember that ox yoke that I had up there?

WV: Yes, I do.

JH: You do. Well, it's out here in my shed today.

WV: Oh, really, yeah, yeah.

JH: Yeah, [unintelligible] What was that \_\_\_\_?

WV: What was what?

JH: What other excuse was it he'd \_\_\_\_\_. He'd bought a piece of land, wasn't it?

WV: I don't know.

JH: He had to stay at home, plainly.

WV: I see.

JH: You remember when I graced the table? [now back talking about the Kansas City trip—Ed.]

WV: [shakes head?]

JH: You don't? (chuckles)

WV: You tell us.

JH: You don't remember when I graced the table, then. Ah, that was one of the greatest days pret near of my

life. I been used to thanks, you know, my father and mother and all. And we all ought to be thankful what we have to eat.

WV: Right.

JH: All of us. Every one of us. I kind of take 'em on surprise. You don't remember that? I said, "Oh, Lord, look down upon us with an almighty twist, and send us potatoes as big as your fist."

WV: (laughs) That's a good one.

JH: Well, that was the thanks that I said, you know. That's a wonderful grace. Oh, I'm still painting some of these signs, still painting 'em.

WV: Good for you. Good for you.

JH: And I want to show you some work over here.

WV: It'd be wonderful if we could. Are you up to it?

JH: How?

WV: Can you do it?

JH: Yes, I'll have to change a little. . .

WV: I don't want you to get too tired.

JH: Huh?

WV: I don't want you to get too tired.

JH: Get what?

WV: Don't get too tired.

*[Interruption in taping]*

JH: You see, I. . . [Interruption] . . .you know.

WV: We'd like to.

JH: And I just pret near sold out of pret near everything.

WV: Huh. I'd very much love. . . Both Matt and I would love to have something of yours, if that's possible.

JH: And. . . I'll fix you up a sign here. Well, here's some signs you see that I made for my windmills.

WV: Oh, right.

JH: That's supposed to be a tail, on the tail.

WV: Um hmm.

JH: See, the wind, I claim this: The wind's showing my work every direction.

WV/MM: (laughs) Right. Good idea.

JH: And this piece had been laying here. . . It's printed on both sides, I think it is.

WV: Right.

JH: Been laying here on this porch here for all years, pret near. It was in the Chicago fire. You know what that man gave me for that little piece of work?

WV: What was that?

JH: Sixty dollars.

WV: Isn't that wonderful?

JH: Just the other day.

WV: That's wonderful.

JH: And here's this piece, *The Monkey's Viewpoint of Life*. You know, some people think we spring from a monkey? Pull it out there.

WV: Yeah, I'd like to see it.

JH: Some people's fool enough to think we sprang from a monkey or something else.

WV: Ohh, boy.

MM: Oh, yeah.

WV: Oh, that's wonderful.

JH: I meet a lot of people I don't meet and talk with, you know.

WV: Right.

JH: But he [the \$60 purchaser?—Ed.] was here and went back, I think, from Kansas City is where he's from.

WV: Huh.

JH: No. He's one of these big show people. And he sent me a card with this writing on it. Just a card. Now that's my writing, and all.

WV: Uh huh. I think that's wonderful. Could we take that to Kansas City with us, and give you some money for it?

JH: (chuckles) I just refuse to sell a lot of this stuff.

WV: But you would let that one go, wouldn't you? (chuckles) Would you let that one go to Kansas City?

JH: \_\_\_\_ up in Kansas City. (laughs)

WV: I would very much like to buy that from you.

JH: Well, you know, it takes a whole lot of studying.

WV: I know.

JH: A whole lot of studying, how to put this in words to make a meaning. You catch it?

WV: Sure. Yeah.

JH: How to do all that.

WV: I understand.

JH: And as I've said, it takes so much time, you know, and I've had this, as I've said. . . Oh, I can't think of that fellow's name to save my life. You see, I helped the Peacock boys put this great threshing bee show on.

WV: I remember.

JH: For years and years. And all Fulton here is the dirtiest hole in the world.

WV: You had some of your own wagons in that show, too, didn't you?

JH: Huh?

WV: You had some of your own wagons in that show, too.

JH: Yes.

WV: I remember seeing a little wagon in your shed one time, that said it was made of little odd pieces made by Jesse Howard. A little wagon.

JH: (chuckles)

WV: I remember seeing that in your shed one time.

JH: Well, I had that out here, and a woman just taking it in.

WV: Huh.

JH: Here's a piece of my daughter's what I call artwork, you know. She's a carver. Had a dog's head on here and somebody stole it.

WV: Oh, no.

JH: And I've had \$2,000 worth of my stuff stole. And she had this piece—I've forgotten now what she had on that—a little piece of plaster of Paris, and it all fell off.

WV: Did she make this horse's head?

JH: Yes. She drew that, and this.

WV: This here? She paints, too.

JH: And the rest of this work is mine. And this is my work way back [under].

WV: Fish inside the fish inside the fish.

JH: And glutton, you know, I don't know how many gluttons we've got.

WV: A lot.

MM: A lot. (laughs)

JH: And I drew a lot of work on. . .

WV: [To MM:] You see these little shoe soles here?

MM: Uh huh.

JH: I drew a number of fish, you know, that says where, in the Bible, "Where you first cast the hook, you'll catch a fish with money in his mouth." Is that a piece of money? (chuckles)

MM: Yes, it sure is, it sure is.

WV: That's a dime.

JH: Oh, I don't know. I've had a thousand dollars' worth of my stuff stole from me.

WV: Well, we'll give you some money for it.

JH: Huh?

WV: We'll give you some money for it. That'll be better.

JH: Yes, I think. . .

*[Interruption in taping]*

JH: . . .and another black dog, they pitched them off here at my house. And the black dog went on in a day or two. This little dog stayed with me. I didn't know who it belonged to.

WV: Uh huh.

JH: And I didn't abuse it or anything. Didn't even feed it. Thought it might belong, a little pet to somebody. But anyway, it kept staying here. And I'd taken it down to the Gazette office, and had a picture of her put in the paper. And nobody calls for them, you know. You can do that way with a horse or a cow or anybody—anything that comes to your place—and nobody claims it, that gives you a clear title.

WV: \_\_\_\_\_. Yeah.



JH: Right there. And this little dog, you know, kept staying, and she raised up. . . All of her pups was intelligent, smart, and, well, I had a little batch of puppies. And the \_\_\_\_\_ down here in the Palace Hotel, at that time. I used to go down there and talk to them. They can give you some information from all over the whole country!

WV: Huh.

JH: These people can, you know. And I had the little old pup wrapped up, and I got pretty well acquainted with him, you know. I said, "Well, I hear you're going to have a birthday." "Yes, yes." I gave him the pup, you know, just handed it to him. (chuckles) And you know, he kept that pup, and raised it, and taught it to go out and get his mail.

WV: Oh, to get the mail? Oh, that's great.

JH: Yessir, I just saved that little puppy, you know—dog, I mean; his mother—she'd have these puppies, you know, and I'd drag them away from her. Kind of cruel and mean in a way. I'd drag them away from her, you know, and watch her to go out there and pick that pup up. (chuckles) Pick that pup up and put it back in its bed.

WV: Oh.

JH: And I'd say, "Queen." Like you people walking out there. "Queen. Tell these people 'Howdy'. 'Wow, wow'." [imitating barking—WV] Stay around there and visit with me a little while, you know, and go to leave, and I'd say, "Queenie! Tell these people goodbye. 'Wow, Wow'." Knew just as well what I said to her as you do today. And stayed with me ten, twelve years, I guess, something like that.

WV: Great dog.

JH: And I wrapped her up in a sheet. . . She's buried right down yonder under that big yellow tree.

WV: Oh, I see. I see.

JH: She had some wonderful puppies. And these people don't think nothing of me, no more than a hog or a dog. You just watch them, and prove it.

*[Interruption in taping]*

JH: . . . \_\_\_\_\_ right. And there's some other work here.

WV: Yeah, I remember these from before. "Seventh Heaven." Oh, that's great. Look at this.

WV: (laughs) Who painted this one?

JH: My daughter.

WV: Oh, your daughter, right? Your daughter, Pearl. Yeah.

MM: Yeah.

JH: Yes.

WV: That's wonderful.

JH: There's some more work. She quit me. She lives way down here in. . .

*[Interruption in taping]*

JH: . . . shoulder of people. Now I still said, myself, there isn't another man like me in the world. I do say it. Now here's another piece. That's more work that I can't do.

WV: Right, glass.

JH: That's real artwork.

WV: Yeah, that's beautiful.

JH: Picture of an eagle.

WV: Yeah, these are very nice. I really like these. When did you do, how long ago did you do these?

JH: How's that?

WV: When did you do them? A long time ago?

JH: No, I haven't did this one a very short time ago.

Mrs. Maude Howard (MH): He did, \_\_\_\_ last winter he did those.

WV: Oh, I see.

JH: This is it here. This is a piece of an old wagon. Big wagon. This piece right here. And of course, I just put this in here to. . .

WV: Right. I understand.

JH: See, this is an old corn planter plate.

WV: Ah hah.

JH: I got the old corn planter over across the road there today. But how did it happen to find that, just fit that hole? (chuckles) A little blacksmith and everything, you know. I've got a [horse—WV] shoe here. . . I've got a shoe here from Chicago.

WV: Oh, yeah. It's from Chicago, Illinois. That's quite a shoe, isn't it?

JH: And a fellow brought me a shoe, here, from Texas.

WV: Oh really?

JH: You see, it's on here somewhere, I think it is.

MH: That one, I think. That black shoe there.

WV: Yeah, it says Chicago.

JH: That shoe, Chicago. The other shoe here is from Texas. They brought that up here just the other day. That's the shoe from Texas. (chuckles)

WV: Texas, \_\_\_\_\_. Yeah, it's written on here. That's an interesting shoe. They're all very different.

JH: Huh?

WV: They're all different.

JH: All different.

WV: That looks nice with these \_\_\_\_\_.

JH: I've turned these shoes, what they call turning them. Do you know what turning them is?

WV: Pardon?

JH: Do you know what turning a shoe is? Fitting it and turning it?

WV: I don't know anything about that, no.

JH: That's when you turn these corks down, you see.

WV: Um hmm.

JH: And of course fits the shoe to the horse's foot. That's off a little \_\_\_\_ horse, little \_\_\_\_, a little horse. I bought him when he was just a young colt like. And then I kept him to twenty-some years old. I had him, bed down to where he couldn't get up, and I had him put out of his misery right over here in this barn of mine. Just a short time back. They sold him for a saddle horse.

WV: [aside to Mrs. Howard] \_\_\_\_ years.

MH: [unintelligible]

JH: And he couldn't saddle, you know. All he knew, they just put a saddle on him and they were going to ride him. He didn't know any gates, you see, or anything. And he kicked my daughter, broke her little jaw all to pieces.

WV: Hmm.

MH: Well, he was a western pony. [she and WV continue talking, while JH continues talking to MM.—Ed.]

JH: I don't know why he did it. Had an old mare, that had a colt, you know, and I don't guess he liked that, all out there looking at him, and he broke her little jaw all to pieces. I'll get in here and [unintelligible]

MH: . . .and she run down in the pasture \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ off of a little colt, and she run right under that horse's feet, and he was there and \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_ next to her stomach. It was nearly dusk, and she just started past, right past Teddy. He didn't know what it was, and he just flattened her, and struck her right here and broke her. . . She's always had to wear a plate now. She's kept those teeth in, though the other day she's having difficulty; they're about to give way. They put in a little extra plate, you know.

WV: This is your daughter?

MH: Yeah, my daughter.

WV: Oh, boy.

MH: Knocked four out here and four here, and drove two of them in behind the. . .

WV: Oh, no.

MH: . . .nose and broke the jawbone here and broke the jawbone there.

WV: Oh, no.

MH: They first took her to Calloway Hospital, and now they're battling about the Calloway Hospital building a new one here, you know and. . .

#### **[Tape 4, side B; Volkorsz' No. H7-1 (cont.)]**

[Note that there is no break in the original recording—WV]

MH: . . .I said, "My goodness, how I [unintelligible] they \_\_\_\_\_ that man so much \_\_\_\_\_—when they first started the whole place. And what he \_\_\_\_\_! People think, well, they got to go to Columbia or to Jeff. But we need a hospital here.

WV: Yeah, sure. You can't go that far all the time.

MH: Nope. And the third we've voted on. They voted it down twice, now it's coming up the third time.

WV: I noticed the signs in town.

MH: Yes, all the way. I hope it goes through. Some people say, "Well, I don't know." \_\_\_\_\_.

WV: Do you have a chance to go out and vote?

MH: Oh. Yeah, I have a friend come by.

WV: Oh, that's wonderful. Good. Go out there and. . .

*[Interruption in taping]*

JH: He [\_\_\_\_\_—Ed.] came here from Mississippi, I believe it was and brought some great, big watermelon with him. You know, you've heard of me being a big watermelon raiser, haven't you?

WV: Right, I remember that.

JH: Yeah, and he and his wife, they got fussing, I guess, and she left him. He stayed around here for a year, and I got well acquainted with him, you know. He was a only man, manhood, you know, that ever lived in this house right here. Ever. And he did me a whole lot of favors, and we worked together like men should. But

anyway, he left his wife—or she left him, I don't know which way it was—and, as I said, he stayed here for a year or so, raised a little watermelon while he was here. Got pretty well acquainted with him, you know, backwards and forth, just across the road. He had a car, you know, to go different places. But anyway, they finally split, and he left here. He went out east somewhere. I don't know just where he went. I think he married again. And he sure always had one arm.

WV: Huh.

JH: Now he was in Pearl Harbor.

WV: I see.

JH: And \_\_\_\_ they split up, or something like that, and he killed himself.

WV: And he gave this to you?

JH: And he gave me that coat.

WV: [Reading a sign:] "On July 3, 1956, exact time, 8:46 p.m., a large firecracker or small bomb was thrown on my porch and some of the fragments went through the window. They were. . ."

MM: Aiming.

WV: . . . aiming at my head. I saw the lights of a car and heard it stop. I just had gone to bed. I got up to see what was taking place and just as I had my head in the window to see what was going on. . ."

JH: That was \_\_\_\_ my head. The \_\_\_\_.

WV: ". . . whatever this was exploded, I will say in less than six inches of my head. They made their getaway as quick as you ever heard of anyone getting away." "Carbon copy."

*[Interruption in taping]*

JH: [strikes anvil]

WV: Strike that again.

JH: This be \_\_\_\_ [only, lonely] place.

MM: Yep.

WV: Hey, Jesse, do that again. We want to get it on the tape recorder.

JH: Huh?

WV: Do it some more.

JH: [strikes anvil again] Do what?

WV: Can you do that some more? We can get it on the tape recorder. Do that again.

JH: [strikes anvil and a bell rhythmically]

WV: (chuckles)

*[Interruption in taping]*

JH: I reckon. In 1885.

WV: Ninety-six years ago.

JH: That's right, that's right. These fellows have a [cruise] I want to put on here. [unintelligible] Williamsburg. Now this, as I say, will be put \_\_\_\_ of my gate, that was in my yard. They're no help for nothing. I don't get any help from anybody.

WV: Have to do it all by yourself.

JH: All by myself. That piece right there, \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_ judges—lawyers and everything. Why, it's been wrote for years.

WV: Yep, 1973.

JH: Yes.

WV: Eight years ago.

JH: \_\_\_\_\_ there \_\_\_\_\_ these Fultonites. They ain't worth shit, old owl shit. Old owl shit's the stinkiest shit ever was.

WV: (laughs)

JH: And that's what Fulton's made of.

WV: [Reading:] "Kinfolks have failed and my familiar friends have forgotten me."

Male voice: \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_?

JH: No. [rings bell] The old Fairview Church bell. Four miles southeast of Calloway.

*[End of interview]*