

ACOUSTIC BLUES

AUTUMN/WINTER 1991

NO. 1

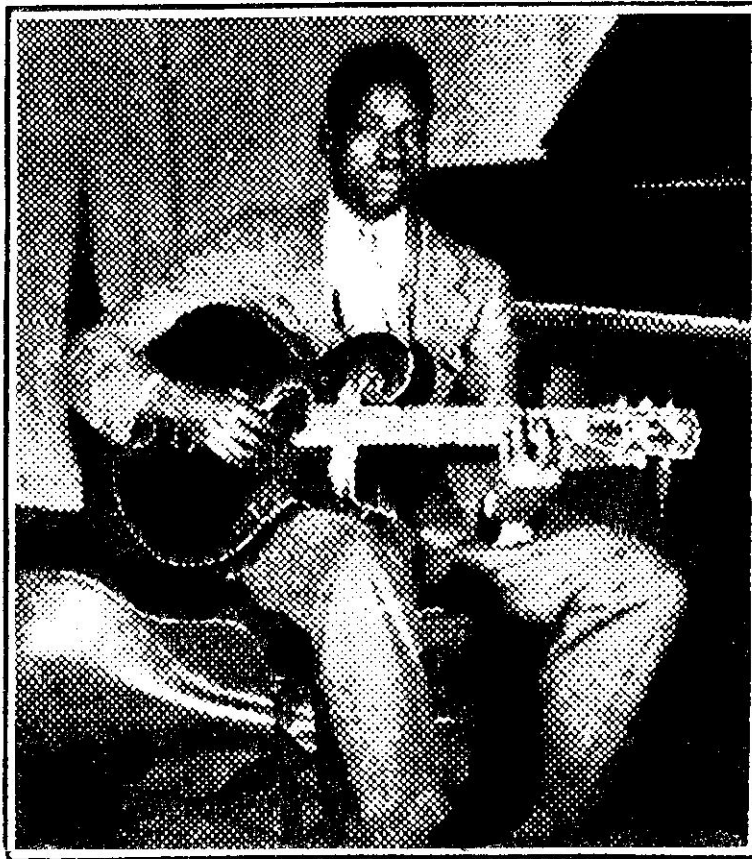
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EDITORIAL

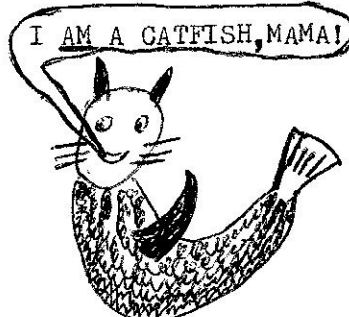
"Good mornin' Mister Blooze,
Mister Blooze I come to talk
with you". ("Waking Blues").

The above is a quote from the last verse of an obscure guitarist from his only recording, in 1928, I use these lines sung by Otis Harris as an introduction to the first issue (the first of many, I hope!) of "Acoustic Blues".

The latter style of blues always seems to be lurking somewhere in the shadow of the Chicago/Texas/West Coast electric scene. That is not to knock these styles, of which I have many examples in my collection, but with this publication I hope to redress the balance a little. I hope also to introduce to a new audience, a brand of blues they might be totally unaware of; but will like when they hear it--the country/rural blues.

To this end, the policy of "Acoustic Blues" will be to promote interest in the many fine performances around the U.K. by artists who are often little known outside a particular region or area and also the few who have achieved national, if not international, fame and status. This will include reviews of live performances and recorded ones, interviews, a gig guide, featured articles on the early blues, a reissue-review section of the latter and the coverage of acoustic blues at national blues festivals. So contributors start lookin' an-a cookin', 'cos I wanna hear from YOU!

I hope that this publication will be seen as one that can work WITH other blues mags. rather than as a competitor working against them. I ain't into competition--I just want to spread the news of the Blues!



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"BLUES AT JIM'S ACOUSTIC CAFE--COLNE FESTIVAL 1991"

There were so many acoustic acts performing for this year's Festival at Colne that in the following review it has only been possible to mention some of the highlights, also what I can remember! There were around 60 acts and only five or six were featured more than once--giving some indication of the popularity of performing acoustic blues. The standard throughout the Festival was high and the styles and instruments were varied.

Saturday--Aug.24th.

After a slight hitch, like the non-arrival of the P.A.! the Jaybirds, from Bradford, kicked off proceedings with a high standard set of blues. This included a brilliant version of The Famous Hokum Boys' "Eagle Riding Papa" from 1930. This number had the duo (Pete and Steve) singing a scat vocal in almost eerie unison to the accompaniment of their immaculate twin guitars. The audience were getting some of the cream of British rural blues right from the outset. This high standard was maintained by the ever-popular, young Sam Payne, hailing from Kidderminster, who wowed them with her beautiful, rolling piano and moaning vocals.

Sam's act is a hard one to follow but the "Hell Hound Blues" took it in their stride and kept the blues moving along with some driving numbers, featuring Rex on vocals and guitar and Richard on harp. Both London-based musicians had their feet pumping like pistons--dunno about Little Feat but this was 'boppin' feet!' "Bring it on home" sang Rex, and that's exactly what they did.

Then there was "Gypsy" Bill Williams on a steel National with some seldom-heard material. A fast version of "Evil Woman" complete with scorching bottleneck, would have made the Black Ace proud. A great rendering of Kokomo Arnold's "Busy Bootin'" and an impassioned (I was going to put inspired) vocal, acapella, of "Grinning In Your Face" followed. He had sung this last item at Redcar and some fans from that festival were present and ended up singing along with "Gypsy Bill"! Mind

"Gypsy" Bill
Williams.

at Colne,
1991.



you I preferred him solo--his version of this work song was as good as the one Son House put out in 1965--that good Bill!!

Perry Foster wound things up with a superb set featuring his sensitive slide work and raw vocals. The audience had had a great afternoon with the varied styles of the pre-war blues--and they loved it.

Sunday--Aug.25th.

By now we had acquired an excellent sound engineer, Mike Cohen, who liked to twiddle those knobs 'jas' lak a crazy man'. (Yes, you probably will, sir!).

Once again, a whole passel of performers. These included Charlie 'Bad Boy' Mitton with his guitar and featured some nice sounds and threw in some bilingual poetry (French/English) as well--THAT'S the Blues??? Anyway, glad you made it Charlie. Ian and Biff had an unusual line-up with harp, sax and guitar. Ian sang his blues with a feeling and also featured a chromatic instrument at one point, which he can really blow, man! The sax man traded blow for blow with Ian, on an instrumental the latter described as 'experimental'. With the guitar supplying a choppy rhythm of a Latin tinge, this jazz-inflected yet bluesy experiment was a complete success. And so said all of us.

Going back to Mississippi roots were "June and Kev" and two guitars that were really acoustic (no leads). Kev sang a convincing version of "Parchman Farm" while June belted out her blues with aggressive, semi-humorous asides reminiscent of Big Mama Thornton! Perry Foster did another excellent set of raw country blues and joined Z.Z. Birmingham on an item about Sheriff Brady and a grocery store which had 'goings on' out

back!

During the afternoon, sounds could be heard in the front section of Jim's cafe, near the bar. On investigating, I discovered a harp player blowing real down home sounds to the accompaniment of some rocking boogie/barrelhouse piano. Added to this was a gent of more senior years (so I'm a diplomat or what!) blowing a contraption that seemed to consist of a trumpet mouth-piece, a rubber hose lashed to an old walking stick and ending in a huge His Master's Voice-type gramophone horn!! I immediately christened it a stovepipe (re 'Stovepipe No.1':1924-27) and booked them to play on the cafe 'stage'. I gave them the name of "The Stovepipes" as the older guy had only met the others that afternoon. On stage they were joined by another member, a guitarist. The harp, guitarist, and piano player are all from a five-piece outfit called "The Coalhouse Walkers", from Hitchin, Herts. There were two Daves and a Richard. The stovepipe man, another Dave, I have no info on. The latter also featured a clarinet played 'gas-pipe' style, in a dirty-off-key tone (just right for the blues). He kept playing his clarinet in the air and then down pointing to the floor. It was hilarious to see Mike, the sound man, trying to follow these movements with an angled mike-stand. The latter looked at times like a demented preying mantis!! The audience cracked up.

Though no vocals were featured there was some superb good-time, rocking, barrelhouse-type music as well as some fine low-down blues. The crowd which had packed Jim's to capacity (they were outside as well) went wild. The Stovepipes jes' make you wanna dance.

Another successful day for the Acoustic Cafe--it's going from strength to strength.

Monday--Aug.26th.

This afternoon started off with Ken and Dave on a set of twin-harmonica instrumentals, which Perry said reminded him of the great pre-war side by harp virtuosi Jaybird Coleman and Ollis Martin, "I'm Gonna Cross The River Of Jordan Some Of These Days" from 1927. Many more goodies were to follow throughout the afternoon. These included a return of Z.Z. Birmingham on guitar and vocals, whose personality was stamped all over his blues, including a large slice of well-chosen humour. Switching to harp, he gave

the crowd a very unusual version of "John Henry", complete with spoken commentary reminiscent of Leadbelly. The audience loved it. The highly talented Sam Payne sang "Rambling On My Mind" and "Sweet Home Chicago" to the accompaniment of her sensuous blues piano and was then joined by her brother Toby (some 12 years young!) on harp for a very fine version of "The Sky Is Crying".

Following some beautifully sensitive bottleneck guitar from "Long John Slider" we were treated to yet more British blues sensitivity--Mike and Bill (of "The Hustle", from Lancaster yet!) on vocals and piano respectively, gave us some excellent sounds and were then joined by Ian (of Ian and Biff) on harp. The trio performed a version of "Key To The Highway" which was an example for all British/R'nB bands to take note of. Then halfway through Mike's great version of "Roll 'Em Pete", after a fine solo from Ian, Paul Lamb (he of the 'ruling serpents'!!), who had previously looked round the door on hearing the trio, promptly sat in for the rest of "Pete" and a couple more numbers! On "Worried Dream Blues" (a Hustle composition?) with Bill's superb piano dripping with the blues, Mike's impassioned and searing vocal plus THAT harmonica from the boss King-snake, the whole of Jim's Cafe was lifted to a level just this side of the edge of the universe. Paul Lamb did for the Blues harp what had been done by Noah Lewis, Jaybird Coleman, Will Shade, Sonny Terry, the 2 Sonny Boys and Little Walter, for that instrument--AND MORE!! 'Cos you put some of your own good stuff in there, Paul, baby--it was enough to make you pick a fight with a circular saw! The Cafe went beserk.



HellHound

Blues.

Colne, '91.



Forever ringing the changes, we were treated to a Janice Joplin number by Lyn with a fine vocal, acapella, and deservedly got a great reception from an ever appreciative audience. I'd love to hear Lyn do a blues of Ma Rainey's or Clara

Smith's. In passing, I noted quite an imbalance between male/female blues artists, over the three days. So let's hear from all you blues gals out there (check out Max's Blues Club in Lancaster)

Pete Oakley on a battered old National and "Little" Walton on harp had a hard job following this session but soon had the crowd's raucous support. Beating all over his box in Blind Boy Fuller style and also playing great slide on "Sliding Delta", Pete got some fine support from his sidekick, Little Walton. Blues of a high standard and great variety.

The return of the Hell Hound Blues included some beautiful picking from Rex on Bo Carter's "Cigaret Blues" and Lightning Hopkins' "Fast Life Woman". Richard complementing him perfectly on his harp; you would think these two had been together for years instead of a few months. They wound up with a version of Tampa Red's "Let Me Play With Your Poodle" from 1941 and also 'covered' by Hopkins.

Then hot from the main stage at the Municipal Hall we had the Hot Licks Cookies. Gypsy Dave led the trio on his National (with slide) accompanied by Graham on another steel-bodied guitar, harp, kazoo, and vocals. Supporting this line-up was the powerful, rocking double bass by a guy whose name, sadly, I did not catch. Dave announced that they refused to use any P.A. as this was the Acoustic Cafe and it was gonna damn well be acoustic--if people wanted to hear them they had better shaddup!! The audience didn't need no tellin' when they started playing. They played a style of blues rarely heard nowadays (except at Jim's Acoustic Cafe!)--what's known as hokum or 'good-time' blues. The Hot Licks Cookies included Gus Cannon's 1929 number "Walk Right In" (popularised in the U.K by the Rooftop Singers' version in 1961). The audience sang along with the chorus while the band walked right out!! Still playing their instruments (including the double-bass!) they threaded their way through the packed cafe to the equally packed street outside, and then threaded their way back again! Everybody screamed for more and the group duly obliged with a fine version of the

traditional "Hesitation Blues", sung by Graham with a mocking responsorial (what???) vocal by Gypsy Dave. Again the crowd went bananas--hokum blues rules O.K.?

Continuing this theme, we were treated to the "Stovepipes" once more. Now augmented by a singer and a sax player! They were all part of the aforementioned "Coalhouse Wlakers" and kept the joint reelin' an' a-rockin'. They were soon joined by Lindsay, the singer from the Diving Ducks, who had been playing at the Roadhouse sessions. She belted out some powerful blues--slow 'n sleazy and boogie too, including a sizzling "Stormy Weather".

And there the 1991 Colne British R 'n B Festival, at Jim's Acoustic Cafe, officially ended. Lindsay and the Stovepipes/Coalhouse Walkers maintained the high standard of blues heard over the three days. In fact each day reached new heights as the atmosphere of relaxation and enjoyment took over. Fittingly, the last day was appropriately the pinnacle--treetop tall--I mean far outta sight!! Jim's Acoustic Cafe was THE PLACE to be, at this the 2nd Great British R 'n B Festival.

At this point we had to "pack our lil' things an' go" as we had to hit the train station in time to get back to Lancaster. But even as we were leaving, another duo, the "Swamp Stompers" were putting out country blues of the first order. I only regretted we couldn't stay. But before the train we needed food and went to "Barbara's" restaurant which was the only place in Colne with reasonably priced meals (English and good too) available 'til midnight--check it out next year! During the meal, tapes are usually played, and on this occasion they let us put Perry Foster's cassette on. Turned up to full volume-- this was, for us, a fitting conclusion to a great British R 'n B Festival; Gary Hood, John Coward and all the organisers and staff, at the Colne Municipal Hall--take a bow 'cos you did good cats, I mean real good! See y'all next year.

*"Lemon's Worried Blues"

*"She's singin' 'Lemon's Worried Blues' Again"

(An appreciation of Blind Lemon Jefferson)

The early blues evolved sometime in the last decades of the 19th. century as a recognisable form. That form included the 12-bar structure as only one of many variations. The first blues singers, who were born in this period, seemed less-inclined towards the banjo of pre-blues days, favouring instead the guitar. Indeed, some guitarists included banjo-style playing on their instrument. With just their own guitar as accompaniment these blues singers used the 12-bar structure along with others of 14½-bars, 16-bars---or no bars at all.

The most celebrated of these singers came from Texas, in which state the rhythm often fluctuated in a single performance and was decorated with skilful arpeggio runs on the treble strings. That singer was Blind Lemon Jefferson. Born near the small town of Wortham in 1897, Jefferson, who was apparently born blind, very early on became a musician and an itinerant wanderer. Apart from travelling and singing in his home state (from c.1912), he also included "Mississippi/Alabama/Virginia/elsewhere into 20s;"(1), and he went north to Chicago where he "frequently worked house rent parties,...from mid-20s;"(2).

It was in the Windy City that Lemon first recorded, at the back-end of 1925 for the Paramount record label. Using the pseudonym "Deacon L.J. Bates" this initial session contained two religious numbers. But in March, 1926 he was back in the recording studio under his own name and put down the first 'hard' country blues on disc; beating both Bo Weavil Jackson and Mississippian 'Mr. Freddie' Spruell to the studio by several months. The March session was the beginning of a legacy of blues and sacred numbers amounting to over 90 sides that Lemon has left to us, recorded between 1926 and 1929, shortly before his death in a frozen Chicago street.

Blind Lemon Jefferson was not only one of the most popular blues singers, amongst his own people, but also one of the finest and most influential. Many of the lyrics he in-

-corporated into his blues were often associated with him even when he sometimes drew from traditional sources. Over 40 years after his last recordings his blues verses are remembered by the black communities in Texas and other parts of the South. His "Got The Blues" for example, from the March, 1926 session, is more often remembered by its opening lines 'Well, the blues come to Texas, lopin' like a mule'than from its given title. Similarly, "Long Lonesome Blues" is usually quoted by its 'I walked from Dallas, I walked to Wichita Falls' line. Indeed, it was recorded by Lightning Hopkins in post war years under this title. These sides featuring dazzling finger-picking, Lemon's piercing vocal(from many years of street singing), and his poetical imagery, confounded recording executives at Paramount and wowed the black blues-buying public. "His session would revolutionize the "race" record industry."(3). Many of the 'floating' verses in the blues were first heard on records sung by Blind Lemon:

'You can't always tell what a woman's got on her mind.

You think she's lovin' you, she's leavin' you all the time.'

("Got The Blues")

'I think I heard my good gal callin' my name.

She don't call so loud but she calls so nice an' plain.'

("Got The Blues")

'I'm leavin' town, mama, cryin' won't make me stay.

The more you cry, the further I'm goin' away.'

("Matchbox Blues")

Many of Lemon's verses cropped up in other singers' repertoire. In "Long Lonesome Blues" he sang:

'So cold in China, birds can hardly sing,

So cold in Chineee--birds can hardly sing.

You made me mad 'til you made me break my diamond ring.'

This influenced a Mississippi Delta guitarist, Isaiah Nettles, to belatedly 'cover' this blues in 1935 and re-titled "It's Cold In China Blues". Three years later, pianist Shorty Bob Parker cut "So Cold In

In China" with Kid Prince Moore on guitar. Other blues singers borrowed freely from Lemon's songs; Sleepy John Estes, Bukka White, Barbecue Bob, Lead-belly, Kokomo Arnold, Little Hat Jones, and Blind Willie McTell among them. Lemon's impact was felt on the white country music scene too. Russell reports "His impact was immediate and tremendous. 'Up 'til then', recalls the Kentucky mountain musician Roscoe Holcomb, 'the blues were only inside me; Blind Lemon was the first to "let out" the blues'."(4). In the late 20s and early 30s Dick Justice recorded a "Brown Skin Blues" which was "a melee of stock phrases and verses from Blind Lemon's "Black Horse Blues" and "Stocking Feet Blues","(5). Larry Hensely recorded a credible white version of "Matchbox Blues" in the same period.

Lemon's famous verse 'Standin' here wonderin' will a matchbox hold my clothes' (previously recorded by Ma Rainey) survived into the post-war years when rock-a-billy artist Carl Perkins had a hit with "Matchbox". In turn this was covered by the Beatles in the following decade. Lemon's phrase 'that's alright, mama, that's alright for you' from his "That Black Snake Moan" appears on a number of recordings, including those of the Monarch Jubilee Quartet and Big Bill Broonzy. Finally being adapted by Arthur 'Big Boy' Crudup in 1946 on his "That's Alright". Some nine years later, a white truck driver from Tupelo, MS. put an almost identical version of "That's Alright" on disc--the singer of course was Elvis Presley.

Lemon's songs covered a variety of subjects. As well as the usual women-leaving, job-seeking blues, there were also songs about prison conditions ("Lock Step Blues"), his own projected execution ("Hangman's Blues"), a rare reference to child-beating ("That Crawl-in' Baby Blues"), rough-treatment from his girl friend's father ("Bootin' Me About"), being stung/pestered by insects ("Mosquito Moan"), a request about his funeral arrangements ("See That My Grave Is Kept Clean"), begging ("Tin Cup Blues") and gambling ("Jack O'Diamonds Blues") amongst others. While his very moving song on hearing of his lover's death in the morning mail, as re-told in "Gone Dead On You Blues", is one of the masterpieces of the blues. Welding said of

Lemon's lyrics "...there is a vast amount of superior, moving folk poetry, ranging from almost wholly traditional to highly individual"(6).

Blind Lemon's songs, perhaps not surprisingly, don't often re-appear in the repertoire of acoustic blues performers in Britain. Now and again "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean" is included, sometimes under the title "One Kind Favor" which is what Lightning Hopkins called his version; and I have recently heard a performance of Lemon's "Matchbox Blues" played to the accompaniment of a slide guitar.

Blues singers such as John Lee Hooker and T-Bone Walker, Howling Wolf, Muddy Waters and B.B.King, some of whom met with Lemon Jefferson (his given name) when they were very young or just starting out, held him in awe as a bluesman. For myself, I hold him in awe because of the body of beautiful recordings he made in the late 1920s. Those recordings show that Blind Lemon Jefferson was, and is a veritable giant of not only the country blues but American folk and popular music generally.

His unique talent for the blues guarantees his immortality.

Notes

1. Harris S. p.274.
2. Ibid.
3. Calt S. & Wardlow G. p.10.
4. Russell T. p.48.
5. Ibid. p.85.
6. Welding P.

References

1. Harris Sheldon. "Blues Who's Who". Da Capo. N.Y. 1989. 1st. pub. 1979.
2. Calt Stephen & Gayle Dean Wardlow. "78 Quarterly" No.6. 1991. From "Paramount Part 4".
3. Russell Tony. "Blacks, Whites And Blues". Studio Vista. London. 1970.
4. Welding Pete. Notes to "Blind Lemon Jefferson"(x2 L.P.s). Milestone M-47022. 1974.

see p.7. for list of records.

"BLUES & BOOGIE WOOGIE AT MAX'S BLUES CLUB"

One of the finest exponents of blues, boogie/barrelhouse piano in Europe, was in the musical driving seat this September evening at the John 'O Gaunt in Lancaster. One Big Man Clayton (ex "Mr.C.") from Birmingham--Birmingham, U.K., that is!

Resplendent in a dazzling bright red beret, a souvenir from his recent French tour, the Big Man tore into some pounding piano sounds which included the 1945 classic "Chicago Breakdown" by Big Maceo. The latter is one of our man's inspirations and the way he played it Big Maceo would have been proud. There followed a rollicking version of Otis Spann's "Keep Your Hand Out Of My Pocket". Big Man Clayton made an immediate impact on the audience. Slowing things right down, they were then treated to "How Long How Long Blues" of Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell fame. His heartfelt vocal and blues-drenched pianistics made this the best post-war version I've heard since the Robert McCoy one recorded in 1963. McCoy was also from Birmingham---Alabama!

More relentless boogie rhythms followed, on a self-penned number which Steve (the Big Man's usual name) called "Flight 201", and recalled the great Texas barrelhouse pianist, Whistlin' Alex Moore on one of his Arhoolie recordings. The pace stayed hot for a personalized approach to "Sweet Home Chicago" and then slowed way back down in the alley with another self-penned blues. This number was called "Jealous Woman Blues" and featured fine, dragging blues piano including some beautifully delicate right hand that was entirely in keeping with the emotionally charged vocal. He announced he would finish the first set with 'some rock 'n roll' and belted out a raucous "Shake, Rattle & Roll"

In the interval, Steve invited some other musicians to sit in. There was George Hexman blowing some sensitive mouth-harp to the rolling blues piano of Bill Roberts. Bill is a member of "The Hustle" whose leader, Mike Ath-

-erton then took up a vocal spot and included a roaring version of "Cherry Red"/"Rock Me Mama" while Bill dug deep into the blues on the ivories. The audience by now really lapping it up.

In the second half the Big Man did a spirited "Down The Road A-Piece" and followed with a pounding "I Don't Know" complete with humorous asides in his vocal attack. By now the place was packed and as the song goes "both the doors blew back" as our hero threw in a new (for him) number "Got My Mojo Working" including Muddy's "rubber lips" effect!! Without switching tempo, Big Man Clayton then showed would-be blues pianists that he is not a man to be messed with, as he went straight into a fabulous, rocking "Pine Top's Boogie Woogie" which ended to the sounds of rapturous applause. The audience were getting something special and they knew it.

At this point, Steve invited Bill Roberts back, reflecting the respect he has for this pianist. Bill pumped out the blues while the Big Man hurled out the lyrics of "Every Day I Have The Blues" with a gospel-like intensity. Then he rejoined Bill at the piano and the pair poured out some wild 'four-handed' boogie and the crowd went mad. They yelled for more and Steve gave 'em "Blueberry Hill" with the audience singing along; including yours truly.

Big Man Clayton, that was helluva night for boogie woogie and the blues!

cont'd from p.6.

List of Recordings

- Roots RL.301. Blind Lemon Jefferson Vol I
(remastered version) also on
Document DLP-587.
- Roots RL.306. -----"----- Vol 2.
(remastered version) also on
Blues Documents BD-2082.
- Roots RL.331. -----"----- Vol 3.
- Matchbox MSE 1001 "The Remaining Titles"
(1926-29).
- Collectors' Classics CC22. Blind Lemon
Jefferson.!



GIG GUIDE

Lancashire:--MAX'S BLUES CLUB,
at John O'Gaunt, Market St., Lan-
caster. (0524-65356).

Dec.4th.--Pete Oakley.
11th.--Jet Martin.

Jan.15th.--Z.Z.Birmingham.
Feb.12th.--Ewan Blackledge.
19th./26th.--Perry Foster.

The Fat Scot, Gage St., Lancaster.
(0524-63438).
Dec.3rd.--Raphael Callaghan.
Dec.10.--Long John Slider.
17.--Gypsy Bill Williams.

Jan.7th.--Pete Oakley.
14th.--Ewan Blackledge.
21st.--The Deserters.

Cross Keys Night Club, Clitheroe.
Dec.15th.--The Jaybirds.

Mojos Night Club, Blackburn.
Dec.6th.--Roger Higgins.
27th.--Bob Greenwood.

Feb.22nd.--The Jaybirds.

The Lord Rodney, Warrington.
Feb.28th.--The Jaybirds.

Yorkshire:--Park Hotel, Bradford.
Dec.20th.--The Jaybirds.
Bradshaw Tavern Folk Club, Halifax.
(0422-244597).

Feb.2nd.--The Jaybirds.

The Spider's Web, Grimbsy.

Feb.19th.--The Jaybirds.

The Grinning Rat, Keighley.

Feb.27th.--The Jaybirds.

Kent:--Railway Hotel F.C. (0322-222553).
Dec.3rd.--Keith Christmas.

Wales:--Usk Folk Club, Gwent. (02913-
2293).

Dec.4th.--Keith Christmas + Julia Howe.

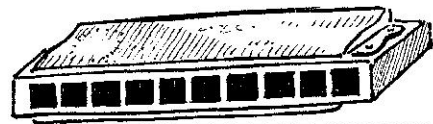
This must only be the tip of the ice-
berg of acoustic blues activity in the
U.K. so come on you singers/musicianers
and get your gig details for 1st.Mar.-
31st.May, 1992, in the post to "Acoustic
Blues" by 1st.Feb.'92 at the very latest.

Cont'd from p.7: Almost forgot--some mo'
Blind Lemon available on C.D.

Yazoo 1069: "King Of The Country Blues".
Document: "Blind Lemon Jefferson Vol.I".
(1925-26).

There is no duplication between the
listed albums. Completists/C.D. fans had
best stick with the Document reissue pro-
gramme and await the remaining volumes.
Others can do no worse than picking up
the Yazoo-great sound too.

COMING IN "ACOUSTIC BLUES" No.2. The story
of one-man bands and the blues by Ray
Stubbs--"Women's Blues" Part 2--+ live
music coverage, news, reviews, etc. etc.



"Blues From Rochdale"

by John Barker --"Long John Slider"

Since the Colne Festival, my main acoustic activities have centred on playing around the local folk clubs and starting an acoustic blues night at the "Tap and Spile" pub in Rochdale.

I'm running this at the moment as a fairly free and easy affair in order to judge reaction. It takes the format of me starting it off, and anyone else who feels like participating can either just join in or have their own spot.

I have had two sessions so far which have been both successful and encouraging. The first session featured myself, John Butterworth on mandolin, and a harmonica player called Steve. Also featured doing a solo spot were the duo of Tom O'Gorman and Paul Thomas, both on guitar/vocals.

The second session attracted the same musicians except guitarist Mick Watts replaced Tom, and John featured his mandola instead of the mandolin. An interesting addition was a local drummer (Colin Schofield), who had just called in for a drink on his night off, liked what he heard and went and got just a snare drum and brushes and sat in for the rest of the evening.

Highlights included Paul Thomas doing a spirited version of "Got My Mojo Working", the complete ensemble doing a cracking "Rolling and Tumbling" (sic), and also an unusual but very effective version of Robert Johnson's "Traveling Riverside Blues".

I am going to continue these sessions every second Thursday, and if it carries on successfully, also look to booking some artists next year.

Finally, I must say a word about the Colne Festival and what was my own personal highlight, and privilege to be able to perform a few songs in the final stages of the acoustic cafe accompanied by the remarkable Perry Foster on harmonica.---Thanks Perry, it was magic.

Sounds like a whole mess of blues over in Rochdale so why not give John's venture wholehearted support. Any singers/musicians who would like to gig at the "Tap an Spile" contact me and I'll pass on the details. Check it out!!

STOP PRESSSTOP PRESSSTOP PRESSSTOP PRESS

David Evans in Lancaster--Author of "Tommy Johnson" (1971) and "Big Road Blues" (1982), David Evans is a Professor of Music at Memphis State University. On Nov. 20th, he gave a lecture on "The General History Of The Blues" with recorded excerpts, at Lancaster Uni. His talk and music was enthusiastically received and then I took him and his wife Maurice to Max's Blues Club for the last set by Bradford duo The Jaybirds. They asked David to play some before they went back on. He then proceeded to knock out the packed bar with a rendition of Blind Lemon Jefferson's "Matchbox Blues" (see "Lemon" feature) played in Lemon's finger-picking style. It was the next best thing to the Texas blues boss being there! He followed this up with a version of "Catfish Blues" which stuck closely to the original Robert Petway recording. The insistent, almost hypnotic sounds of the Delta, had everybody rocking where they stood. 'Cos there was no place to move---mmm! mmm! David finished with, predictably, a Tommy Johnson item. His "Big Road Blues" included Johnson's pianistic guitar figure and brought the house down.

Near the end of the evening, after a consistently high standard of blues from the Jaybirds (more on them in a future issue) they invited David to join them. After a couple of numbers with three guitars, which didn't quite make it, David took over the vocal spot once more and belted out a rip-roaring version of "Bottle Up And Go" a la Tommy McClellan; the crowd roared their appreciation which

included a high crying sound from a West Indian guy which had all the hall-marks of a parakeet being electrocuted in mid-flight!! The Jaybirds wound things up and how, those cats can play! The blues is alright in Lancaster, doncha know!

"Women's Blues-Part I"

While the first style of the blues on record, the vaudeville or so-called 'classic' blues, was almost totally dominated by women singers, the rural blues from whence it came, featured only a small percentage of female recorded blues artists.

There are several reasons for this. The main one being the low-down position women were forced into by a chauvanistic, male-dominated society. Most black, working-class women were too busy cooking/cleaning for their male partners and children or working at similar jobs 'in the white folks' yard'. Although the situation is changing in both black and white western society today, the process, for many women, is moving too slowly.

The vaudeville-blues (as I prefer to call them) lasted, on record, from 1920-1926 in its hey-day but was still selling well by a few singers at the close of the decade. The latter included well-known names such as Bessie and Clara Smith (no relation), Ma Rainey and Ida Cox. Their style of blues was nearly always accompanied by a small jazz outfit and ranged from pure music-hall to the heavier blues of the two Smiths and Rainey. Indeed, it was another unrelated female singer, Mamie Smith, who made the very first blues record in 1920. Black women could, and did sing blues while doing the mindlessly, boring chores in the home and therefore only needed the accompaniment to make a record. Whereas with rural blues, which often featured a solo artist, a singer needed to be proficient on a musical instrument; usually a guitar or piano. For this requirement, much time was needed to practice and perfect a style or way of playing. Due to the task-laden existence of women, referred to above, time they did not have and so it is not surprising there were far fewer

female, rural blues singers on wax, in the pre-war era, from 1926-43. As Bessie Smith complains on her fine "Washwoman's Blues":

"All day long I'm slavin', all day long I'm bustin' suds. (x2)
Gee, my hands are tired, washin' out these dirty duds."

"Sorry I do washin', just to make my livelihood. (x2)
Oh! a washwoman's life, it ain't a bit of good."(1).

Her preference is working for whites, where she can coast a little in her tasks and take some food from their larder.

"Rather be a scullion, cookin' in some white folks' yard.(x2)
I could-a eat a-plenty, wouldn't have to work so hard."(2).

While in 1927, Susie Edwards as the female half of 'Butterbeans & Susie' a famous vaudeville duo, establishes her own identity. Her partner complains of her coming home "leapin' drunk" and turning her back on him when she gets into bed. "Who keepin' you out so late?" he wants to know. Susie sings:

"Now I wouldn't answer your question if I know I had to die.
So don't keep askin', 'cos I don't want to lie.
You can't make me tell you, so it's no use to try.
Furthermore, t'ain't none of your doggone business."

On 'Butterbeans'(Joe Edwards) insistence accompanied by violent threats, Susie tells him like it is:

"I got tired of stayin' home, just sittin' there a-watchin' the clock."
Butterbeans(spoken): "Now what's wrong with that?" (typical!)
"Some time, t'was after four p.m., when you put your key in my lock. When I was a good woman, you done everything you could,
To make me think I'se nothin' but an old chunk of wood.
Now I'm doin' what I please, you can tell the neighborhood,
What I do ain't none of your doggone business."(3).

The following year, 1928, teen-ager

Moanin' Bernice Edwards from Texas, accompanied her rich vocals on piano while adopting an 'anything you can do, I can do better' theme:

"I'm gonna get just like you, papa, I'm gonna get me five or six men.(x2)
An' if that don't do, I'm gonna get me eight or ten."

"'Cos I'm a long, tall mama, do just what I wanna do.
I'm a long, tall mama, I can do just what I wanna do.
I have stayed? to be a mistreater, baby, just like you."

But in the end she gets heartily sick of this situation:

"Now, when you used to need help, right on me you would call,
When you used to need help, right on me you'd call.
But now you a dirty mistreater, an' I can't use you at all."(4)

But this self-assertiveness in the younger generation of women blues singers, in the 1920s and 30s did not just manifest itself due to a 'dirty mistreater'. A restlessness pervaded them (as with male singers) and sometimes even with a reasonably 'normal' home-life they still had to leave. Bernice Edwards, unusually, supplied her own instrumental backing, in her case some fine rolling piano; Mattie Delaney played a guitar and was from the Mississippi Delta:

"My mother said, six months before I was born.(x2)
She was gonna have a girl-child, wouldn't never stay at home."

"I feel like cryin', ain't got no tears to spare.(x2)
I had a happy home, an' I wouldn't stay there."(5)

References

1. "Washwoman's Blues". Bessie Smith. 24/8/28. New York City.
2. Ibid.
3. "'Tain't None Of Your Business". Butterbeans & Susie. 25/9/27. N.Y.C.
4. "Long Tall Mama". Moanin' Bernice Edwards. c.-/2/28. Chicago.

5. "Down The Big Road Blues". Mattie Delaney. c.21/2/30. Memphis, TN.

In Part 2—Violence in women's blues(taking it and dishing it out!).



Perry Foster
at
Colne, 1991

Album Reviews

"Rhythm Rascals" Radio Tone 1990.

KEEP IT CLEAN/ROLL & TUMBLE BLUES/
KING EDWARD RAG/OUA OUA/CAT'S WHISKERS/
THROW YOU BACK IN JAIL/JOHN THE REVEL-
ATOR/S'MATTER WITH THE MILL?/COLD WIND
BLOWIN'/HAWIIAN COWBOY.

This album, as a glance at the titles will show, is not just blues. Therein lies its weakness. Not because of the material necessarily, but also the unfortunate overlap between styles. "Keep It Clean" for example, has a bit of light-hearted banter before introducing a tight rhythm on guitar and washboard. Bob's chuckles and comments are in keeping with the song, a sexual Charlie Jordan item, but the whole effect is rather spoiled by the very Hawaiian pedal steel guitar. "Cowboy" might be of interest to country music fans, but is too 'sweet' for the blues.

But on the plus side we have Bob Greenwood's original "Cold Wind Blowin'" which features beautiful slide, sounding a bit like Oscar Woods at times. Bob employs Robert Johnson's "Walking Blues" motif but slowed right down with Pete Cooke's sympathetic support on double bass. The rollicking "Jail" is not far behind this great performance; with Bob belting out the lyric with gusto to the driving accompaniment of his National and Pete's superb washboard playing. While "King Edward" stands comparison with Blind Willie McTell's version from 1940. There is more great slide on the traditional "Roll And Tumble", shame it has a fade-

-out ending though.

While I enjoyed this album and would love to see this performance in a live programme, I look forward to future recordings which concentrate more on blues; especially self-penned items of the calibre of "Cold Wind Blowin'".

"Great Blues Guitarists String Dazzlers"
Various Artists 1924-40. Columbia 46789 4

One in the excellent Roots 'N Blues series which has been 'treated' to that marvellous Cedar sound, Blues and guitar fans can look forward to some real goodies in this collection. The speed, accuracy and fantastic drive of the two opening instrumentals by Lonnie Johnson and Eddie Lang has to be heard to be believed. The duo are featured on another of the remaining five non-vocal tracks (out of 20), which is titled "Bullfrog Moan". They really capture the mood of the bullfrog straddling a log in some dank, stur-turgid swamp. Lang, masquerading as "Blind Willie Dunn" supplying the bullfrog's 'moan' on the bass strings while Johnson provides the blues runs on his fluid 12-string guitar.

Blind Willie McTell is in great form on "Georgia Rag" and "Warm It Up To Me". Big Bill Broonzy continues the fast tempo with the flat-picking classic "How You Want It Done?" from 1932. Then there is some incredible slide from the great Blind Willie Johnson on "Nobody's Fault But Mine" and Tampa Red's solo "Denver Blues".

Blind Lemon Jefferson's superb "Black Snake Moan" is included and so is a previously unissued and untitled blues from East Coast guitarist Sylvester Weaver. One suggested title has been "Me And My Tapeworm"-very apt considering the lyrics!! A youthful Josh White has 2 tracks. "Little Brother Blues" from his first session in 1932 being particularly violent. 'Little Brother' refers to his razor and he vows that after he has "massacred" New York he will be Chicago bound! His "Prodigal Son" made 3 years

later, is not the Robert Wilkins' classic but is a fine blues in its own right. The latter part of this song points to it as being a precursor of St. Louis Jimmy's "Going Down Slow", some six years later; to be popularised by the great Howling Wolf in post-war years.

There are many other blues of great quality in this collection and coupled with the brilliant sound and extensive sleeve notes by Pete Welding, make this tape highly recommended. Also available on C.D.

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Letters/Articles are welcome but please include s.a.e. ACOUSTIC BLUES No.2 due 1st.March,1992. See ya!



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