

# The Music

"Who is Hacksaw? Who is Hacksaw?!" pianist Willie Love asked of Robert Lockwood, Jr., at the Hole-in-the-Wall in Helena, Arkansas, circa 1940. "Who is Hacksaw?!" asked recordist/producer Gene Rosenthal of Big Joe Williams en route to Memphis in 1969. No doubt this same question will be asked over-and-over again when news of this artist's talent reaches the blues world of the 1990's.

## What a hit he would be today!

Although you won't find his name in the established blues "bibles," or in the vocabularies of even the most avid blues fans, Richard "Hacksaw" Harney is an exemplar of the superb instrumental artistry active in rural America—much of which never found its way onto record. His talent, virtuosity and flair rank him with the likes of Robert Johnson, Blind Blake, Reverend Gary Davis and Blind Willie Johnson. And yet, if it were not for these Adelphi/Blues Vault tapes, he would be a blues equivalent of Buddy Bolden, the unrecorded giant whose mysterious legend enlivens early jazz lore.

Hacksaw's work illustrates and reinforces the oft-told tales of Delta artists like Honeyboy Edwards and Johnny Shines who related that Robert Johnson and the others who played for cash on the tiny Delta street corners did not confine themselves to blues material. Tin pan alley, pop tunes and well-known ballads of the day were all grist for the bluesman's musical mill. These Hacksaw tracks demonstrate this versatility with uncanny swing and grace.

"Ragtime Blues," an instrumental in G, makes elegant use of bass-lines that counter a harmonic structure in the ragtime tradition. The bass-melody part here is also indicative of the dance music that the artist played throughout his career.

"12 Pound Rag #2," an inventive blues instrumental in A, combines an amalgam of complex lines intertwined with occasional diminished chords cruising atop a walking bass and occasionally interpolated with bass-string solos. Like a jazzman, Harney repeats motifs and lines effectively, including an interesting use of tremolo, slightly reminiscent of Lonnie Johnson.

"Five Foot Two" in C provides marvelous instrumental breaks with Hacksaw's typical up-tempo approach.

In "Adelphi Ramble" in G, Harney creates a mandolin effect with his use of tremolo in the single-note solos. Particularly effective is the juxtaposition of bass-lines, bass solos, tremoled high-end solos and strummed chords. This keyboard-like technique makes Harney's work unique.

"Laughing Pallet," in F, is an inspired rag motored by a chain-of-fifths progression and peppered by a few well-chosen diminished chords. Tapping on the guitar creates a more demonstrable rhythmic effect and heightens the variety.

"Little Rock Blues," an instrumental 12-bar blues in G, demonstrates the artist's mastery of the genre. All elements of traditional blues are here, and his inventive nature makes each chorus a creative adventure, a mixture of harmony, rhythm and melody.

"Home Skeen Ball," a bluesy rag in C, uses the typical ragtime

progressions with traces of Blind Blake that also include the artist's piano style imposed on the guitar.

"Sweet Man" in A minor could be characterized as an eclectic minor ballad that joins such elements as ragtime, gentle pre-blues, folk songs and balladry.

"Oh Red," a typical rag in G major, is one of the smoothest performances in this collection. He echoes the melody one octave higher on the treble strings, an effect that lends charm to the rough-hewn quality of his voice. In certain of the solos (he plays a total of ten, counting the introduction,) he provides a middle strata of rhythmic-harmony that harkens to his pianistic abilities.

"The Delta Eagle" in D is a five and one-half minute instrumental. Neither rag nor blues, it is perhaps a typically-styled dance number. Like "Sweet Man," it is another sectional number with an effective, ambitious design. One hears at the end a brilliant and exceptional instance of rhythm and melody joined contrapuntally. Perhaps this performance demonstrates how he assimilated his brother's guitar part.

I hope that this album will soon be a treasure in every blues lover's and guitarist's collection, so that no one need ask "Who is Hacksaw?" ever again.

-Larry Hoffman

## - C R E D I T S -

Original Analog Recordings, February, 1972:  
Engineered and produced by Gene Rosenthal at Adelphi Studios,  
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Post Production, 1996:  
Produced by Dan Doyle and Gene Rosenthal.  
Analog to Digital Conversion: Larry Packer, Uncle Punchy Studios,  
Silver Spring, Maryland.  
Digital Editing and Mastering: Larry Packer and Gene Rosenthal,  
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Layout, Design and Tinting: Frederick Marsh  
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Nick Perl, "Big Joe" Williams, Mrs. Van Hunt and Dewey Corley.



# Richard "Hacksaw" Harney

Richard 'Hacksaw' Harney was born on July 16, 1902, to Mary Howard and Dick Harney of Money, Mississippi (Leflore County.) His mother died shortly after the birth of his youngest brother, and Richard was raised in nearby Greenwood, and in Marvel, Arkansas, with his eight brothers and two sisters. The father, a native of Alabama, had a broad based background in music as a young man. As he matured, he became heavily involved with the church, serving as a deacon, and gave up secular music. Nonetheless, he taught his sons the violin, mandolin, guitar, piano, organ and bass-violin and how to play together, allowing them to perform on street corners for pocket change. But the boys were never permitted to practice their instruments in the house, so we may assume that the Harney barn was a very jumping place indeed.

Young Richard began his career as a street musician at age twelve, generally playing behind his oldest brother Joe. As Steve LaVere recalls, "He earned the name 'Hacksaw' during a short-lived but infamous boxing career." Hack traveled a great deal during his youth, keeping body and soul together through a variety of means, including farming and, most interestingly, playing string bass in a Cincinnati jazz band in the early 1920's. When he returned to the Delta area, he and brother Maylon worked out a guitar duet act, and in 1927, the duo, known as "Pet and Can" (family nicknames) recorded two sides for Columbia, accompanying Walter "Pat" Rhodes, blues vocalist and accordion player. Days later, the brothers encountered singer Pearl Dickson on a Memphis street corner. Dickson was suffering from a bout of the poverty blues at the time, so the Harneys worked up two numbers with her. They returned to Columbia's temporary studio and convinced the talent scouts to record them. As Dickson later told LaVere, one of the sides, Little Rock Blues was "descriptive of her mental state at that time. She claimed she had set out to visit Little Rock until she could run up on some means of earning a living. Evidently, she didn't have to go too far."

In line with their father's fears about "the Devil's music," brother Maylon was knifed to death in a Delta juke joint before the two achieved wider recognition. After Hacksaw described the event to Gene Rosenthal some forty years later, Rosenthal asked, "So what did you do then?" Hacksaw replied matter-of-factly, "Well, then I had to learn how to play both parts," a challenge which he more than met, as these recordings attest.

Although the Delta of the 20's and 30's was relatively isolated, the itinerant lifestyle of the musician meant that he was exposed to the playing of others, through radio, jukebox or personal encounter. Hacksaw's unique style does not reflect the influence of any single performer, but he told LaVere that Blind Lemon Jefferson and Charlie Patton were favorites and he met both men. The records of Blind Blake were also influential. In Larry Hoffman's interview for *Living Blues*, Robert Lockwood, Jr., said that Hacksaw and Robert Johnson were well acquainted and sometimes played for each other. "I really think that Hacksaw was a big influence with Robert. He just played the guitar very well. He played the guitar very, very well. ...He [Hacksaw] was the only somebody who could compete with Robert." However, the most interesting and revealing anecdote about a fellow musician comes from LaVere who recalls Hacksaw's description of "a musician of fantastic legend named 'Wrestle' whose guitar was so well played that it would play without him having to touch it! In the middle of a piece, he could lay it down and it would finish the number itself." Hacksaw admitted that he had never actually witnessed this miraculous accomplishment, but he seemed willing to believe that such a feat was possible.

A speech impediment and attendant shyness are likely responsible for Hacksaw's failure to garner public recognition during his youth. While he continued to play various instruments for his own enjoyment and that of his friends, he supported himself by learning to repair, rebuild and tune pianos, based first in Clarksdale and later in Jackson. He maintained a regular circuit through Memphis and the Delta region, always neatly dressed and carrying the tools of his trade in a small black box, lettered with the words "PIANO TUNING." In the inevitable encounters with other musicians during his travels, Hacksaw would often ask if he might sit in or play a song or two of his for the others. His shyness and lisping speech would sometimes evoke ridicule from other players, but once given an opportunity to do his thing, Hacksaw could outplay anyone. As Lockwood recalled for *Living Blues*, "Hacksaw pissed a whole lot of folks off with how well he played." Thus, over the years he became the musician's musician in the Delta.







In September of 1969, when the Adelphi Records film and recording crew began their blues odyssey in Chicago under the guidance of Big Joe Williams, they met and heard some of the finest guitar players alive, men like Johnny Shines, Honeyboy Edwards and Big Joe himself. After each performance, the visitors would remark on the talent of the artist, and Big Joe would say, "You ain't heard nothing yet. Wait 'til you meet Hacksaw." In St. Louis, they were impressed by Henry Townsend and Memphis Minnie's niece and nephew, George and Ethel McCoy. Again, Big Joe would "warn" them about Hacksaw. "Man, Hacksaw could cut that guy in a minute." They expected to encounter Hack in Memphis, but no one had seen him lately. The story was the same throughout the Delta. "Hacksaw hasn't been through here in a while." The searchers began to lose hope of meeting this musical giant.

As luck would have it, Dewey Corley, one of the surviving members of the Beale Street Jug Band, and Mrs. Van Hunt, blues singer and acknowledged "den mother" of Beale Street, caught sight of Hacksaw making his piano tuning rounds through Memphis. They told him about the visitors who were looking for him. They were off in the Delta with Big Joe, but they would be back in a couple of days. According to Rosenthal, Mrs. Hunt held onto Hacksaw until the Adelphi group returned, and, mercifully, that first encounter with this legendary guitarist is recorded on film. A shy, elderly black man, in a room full of old friends and new ones, hesitantly picks up a borrowed guitar and begins to play a stunningly complex song. When he finishes, the respectful silence is finally broken by a member of the crew asking for the name of the song. "Sweet Man," and after a pause Hacksaw says, "I haven't played guitar in 20 years. I used to be good." This remark elicits a storm of protest from the audience, some of whom begin to heap friendly abuse on the man. Warmed up and amused, Hacksaw then delivers a few more excellent numbers.

Some of the material from that initial, informal recording session was included in a double LP compilation released by Adelphi in 1971,

entitled "Memphis Blues Again." Then, in August 1971, Hacksaw found himself hosting workshops and performing on-stage at Wolftrap Farm Park, as a key participant in the Smithsonian Institution's 33rd Annual National Folk Festival. In December of that year, he appeared in the River City Blues Festival at the Ellis Auditorium in Memphis, a memorable event put together by LaVere and recorded by Adelphi. In addition to Hacksaw, the featured artists included Bukka White, Houston Stackhouse, Mississippi Fred McDowell, Sleepy John Estes, Furry Lewis and other blues legends. These venues were a far cry from the dusky little Delta "jooks" where Hacksaw might ask the regulars for permission to play a song or two, where his quiet manner might be mistaken for an absence of talent by the typically raucous bluesman, that is, until he took command of the instrument.

Over the holiday season in 1971, Hacksaw suffered a minor stroke, the result of previously undetected high blood pressure. He fought his way back from disability in short order and toured during early 1972 with his King Biscuit Boy pal Houston Stackhouse. "Hack 'n' Stack," as the duo was known, appeared at the country's major universities in Illinois, New York and Massachusetts, astounding large audiences with their incredible talent and winning the love of the crowds with their modesty and lack of affectation.

Although making only a modest dent in the marketplace, Adelphi's "Memphis Blues Again" album made a significant impression on serious guitarists of the day, and when Hacksaw made his first "rediscovery" tour stop in New York City in February of 1972, he was the house-guest of two promising young guitar players—Woody Mann and Roy Book Binder. Both men remember Hacksaw with awe and affection. As Woody Mann recalls, "The guy was truly an original voice on the guitar - from his touch to his ideas. What stands out in my mind is the unexpected musical surprises in his tunes, the freshness of his sound." Roommate Roy recalls that, "He was, after Reverend Gary Davis, the first Real Guitar Player we met. He could do anything!"

In early 1973, Hacksaw's health began to fail, and he was forced to discontinue personal appearances on the road; that same year, on Christmas morning, Richard "Hacksaw" Harney passed away.

-Denise Tapp