

SMOKY BABE

the lost Dr. Oster recordings



way back in
the country
blues



Robert "Smoky Babe" Brown
& Sally Jenkins Dotson
Scotlandville, La. 1960-61
photo: Harry Oster



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Today it is hard to find anyone at all who remembers Robert Brown, the powerful Mississippi-born guitar player and singer known to a few blues fans as Smoky Babe. In fact, so far we have found only one: harmonica man Lazy Lester. "He was just a little street guitar player," Lester recalls. "Hung around the drinking tree on Bradley Road where everybody would come, drink wine, play guitar, play harmonica, sing and just have fun. That's how I knew him."

In February 1960, Lester was renting a room in the Scotlandville, Louisiana home of Miss Sally Jenkins, a popular hangout for musicians, when folklorist Harry Oster of L.S.U. stopped by with a tape recorder and that little street guitar player Lester recognized from under the drinking tree. Smoky Babe was not then, nor would he ever be, well known on the Baton Rouge music scene. Unlike Lester, Lightnin' Slim, Silas Hogan, Slim Harpo, and others, Smoky was not among the local artists whose Excello records were at that moment defining Louisiana blues. But Dr. Oster was looking to document outstanding unrecorded rural musicians, and Smoky more than fit that bill.

What little we know of Smoky's life comes mostly from the brief biographical sketch on the back of his first two LPs: *Hot Blues* (Folk-Lyric 118), and *Hottest Brand Goin'* (Bluesville 1063), both of which include songs cut that day at Sally's. Oster writes:

Smoky Babe (Robert Brown) was born in 1927 in Itta Bena, Mississippi, a farming area some fifty miles from Clarksdale... His background consists of... a few months of school, early years as a sharecropper on a plantation raising cotton, corn, and garden vegetables, frequent moves to other plantations when the crops petered out or he "didn't get paid right," a spell in city slums while working on a "hot truck" (a carrier of hot steel) in the mill at Bessemer, Alabama, a period as loader at the French Market in New Orleans while at the same time in the evenings he worked gigs in colored night clubs where he played for dimes, quarters, and half-dollars dancers tossed to the stage, dismal months working on the Mississippi near Baton Rouge

cleaning barges, and later a post as grease monkey and mechanic at a filling station in Scotlandville, Louisiana.

And Scotlandville is where he was living in 1960 when he showed up for a party at Mabel Lee Williams' house and met the professor with the tape recorder. Oster continues: *Smoky, who lives a short distance from Mabel Lee Williams, swaggered in -- a muscular wiry man of about 5'8", wearing a hat tilted at a rakish angle. His guitar was in pawn so I loaned him mine. As soon as he had played a few bars, rich, full resonant, and excitingly rhythmic, I knew that here was an outstanding blues man.*

Oster's introduction to the Baton Rouge black community came through Mabel Lee's brother, Robert Pete Williams, the distinctive guitarist and singer he had recorded over many months the previous year at Angola State Penitentiary. When they met in January 1959, Williams was three years into a life sentence for murder. By December, he was out on restricted parole, possibly through the lobbying efforts of Oster and others. After a full pardon in 1964, he would become active on the blues revival circuit, playing at festivals, folk clubs, and college campuses around the country, while making further records for Harry and others. But in 1960, Williams was working on a farm in the nearby town of Denham Springs when he took Harry to meet his friends in Scotlandville. The connection was paramount for Oster, leading not only to Smoky, but also to several others, most notably the astonishing fiddler Butch Cage and his longtime partner Willie B. Thomas.

Scotlandville, or Scotland as it's known locally, is a predominantly black neighborhood that sits along Scenic Highway in the shadow of the oil refineries of East Baton Rouge. "It was basically a country in the city community," former Louisiana State Folklorist Nick Spitzer explains. "They were definitely agrarians who had come to town, and it was a place of BBQ and church suppers and blues honky tonks, and some were a little rough."

Guitarist Harvey Knox remembers the scene: "Everywhere you looked they had bars. Wishadell's Dream Club used to have bands. Anderson's bar used to have bands. In The Hole used to have bands. That was a little bitty place,

but it used to have bands. Tropicana had bands. That was a big old place right around the corner from Miss Sally Jenkins. They had a liquor store downstairs and a nice nightclub upstairs."

Bradley's Grocery, Field's Grocery, Whitfield's, the Dew Drop, the Green Parrot, and the Black Cat were a handful of other clubs happening at the time. Asked which of all these spots a street guy like Smoky might have played, Harvey says probably a small place like In The Hole. "That was kind of geared up for real small groups, like two or three pieces."

Yet it is unknown whether Smoky ever played out around Baton Rouge for money, on his own or otherwise. Lester remembers seeing him at the bars now and then, but only as a customer. "I'm going to be honest, at the time when Slim Harpo and Silas Hogan and I were out doing those gigs, he wasn't ever there unless we played on Bradley Road at Field's Grocery or something like that. That's just about the onliest club that he would come to. When we was in walking distance from him, he would show up."

In August 1961, Oster drove Smoky north to visit his mother in Vance, Mississippi, fifty miles past Itta Bena off Highway 49. Annie Brown, Smoky promised, played a better guitar than her son. The record man was more than interested. Twice along the way his '55 DeSoto broke down, and twice Smoky used his mechanic's skills to get the car rolling again. Finally they arrived at Annie's vine-covered country shack, as Harry wrote in his 1969 book *Living Country Blues*, a "rickety unpainted little building with sheets from Sunday rotogravure newspaper magazines stuck on the walls for decoration and for protection against the elements."

Over the next two days, in the company of family and friends, they made what would be their final recordings together. Annie, suffering from arthritis, could no longer play guitar. But she did sing a few children's songs and reveal a little more about her youngest son. Robert, she tells Harry, bought his first guitar at age ten with money he earned selling garden seeds. "Wasn't nothing but a little old thing, and that boy kept on whamin' on it 'til he found some music in it, I reckon." At ten, he was playing for white suppers. By eleven, they were coming to get him

to play dances. "I was singing behind somebody's record was already out about "Shoo, Shoo Boogie," Smoky explains. "That's been a long time ago," says Annie.

Between February 1960 and August '61, Oster recorded Smoky Babe on some twenty occasions, releasing thirty total songs on three LPs. Most of what he captured on tape went unissued. In 1963, Harry left Louisiana to teach folklore at the University of Iowa. It is unknown what contact, if any, he had with Smoky after that. We do know that unlike Robert Pete Williams and many other rural performers at that time, Smoky never made it to the blues revival stage. Oster, who brought Butch Cage and Willie Thomas to the 1960 Newport Folk Festival, would have represented his best shot at meeting that new audience. Presuming, of course, that is what Smoky would have wanted.

In 1970, having turned his attention increasingly toward teaching and away from making records, Harry Oster sold his Folk-Lyric label to Chris Strachwitz, owner and founder of Arhoolie Records. Over the next three decades, Strachwitz reissued many of the original Folk-Lyric titles and added to the catalog, in some cases with Oster's assistance. In Arhoolie's Smoky Babe file, one letter exists, dated September 16, 1972 and posted to the artist's last known address. No reply ever came. It is believed that he died in Scotlandville the following year.

Upon Harry's death in 2001, his widow Caroline shipped what was understood to be the balance of his tapes. Nowhere in the pile were the unissued Smoky Babe recordings. Recently, in the early stages of preparing a box set of Harry's work, we noticed that many other known recordings of his were missing from our collection, and reached out again to Caroline to see if any had been overlooked. The following week, a shipment of boxes arrived filled with tapes dating back to Harry's Louisiana days. Among this last batch were several reels of Smoky Babe containing many unissued recordings as strong as anything previously available. This record represents what we feel is the best of those long lost performances.

Recordings made
by Dr. Harry Oster in
Scotlandville, LA, and
Vance, MS,

February 1960-August 1961.

All Songs by Robert Brown
© Tradition Music Co. (BMG)
(except #15 'Terraplane Blues'
by Robert Johnson)

Edited and Produced by Chris
Strachwitz & Adam Machado
Post-production audio by
Nino Moschella, Bird & Egg
recording studio

Thanks to Scott Barretta,
Peggy Carter and East
Baton Rouge Parish Library,
Bob Eagle, Teddy (Lloyd)
Johnson, Harvey Knox, Eric
LeBlanc, Lazy Lester, Caroline
and Aaron Oster, Nick
Spitzer, James Terry.

Cover/Design by JC Garrett

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El Cerrito, CA 94530
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1. Boss Man Blues
2. Backyard Boogie
3. Bad Luck and Trouble
4. Diggin' My Potatoes
5. What's Wrong With You
6. Chicago Bound
7. If I Had Listened to What My Mama Say
8. On Mr. Walter's Farm
9. I'm Goin' Home on the Morning Train
10. I'm Goin' Away Baby
11. Way Back in the Country Blues
12. Shake, Shake Mattie
13. I'm Wild About You, Black Gal
14. Arkansas Blues
15. Terraplane Blues
16. Goin' Home Blues
17. Boogie Gal



Previously unpublished
snapshots taken by
Harry Oster in the
1960s and found in his
file on Smoky Babe.
Persons and locations
unknown.



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