
Kokomo Arnold

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(This article was originally written in French. We would like to say a special thank you to Clare Jenkins for translating it).

Kokomo Arnold is high up on the list of 'Bottleneck'/'Slide' guitarists. However, despite being one of the blues giants of immense talent, not much has been written about him. In 1959 Jacques Demetre and the late Marcel Chauvard succeeded in interviewing Kokomo which later appeared in *Jazz Hot* no. 154 May 1960. It is from that interview that some of the extracts quoted in this article have been taken.

I am a native of Georgia. I was born on February 15th 1901 in Lovejoy, a little village south of Atlanta. Yes I was a farmer, but at the same time I used to play the guitar a bit, with my cousin John Wiggs. He gave me my musical inspiration.

In 1919 Kokomo left his home for Buffalo, later moving on to Pittsburgh and Gary, where he worked as a labourer in the steel works. It has been surmised that Kokomo travelled a great deal between 1919 and 1929, even suggested that he crossed the Atlantic to Spain. This hypothesis being based on such a seasick journey in "Big Ship Blues" recorded in 1937. Be that as it may, we know for sure that he found his way to Chicago in 1929, which was to be his base, even though from there he moved around a lot.

In 1930 Kokomo was in Memphis to cut a disc for Victor using the pseudonym Giffiddle Jim. These two sides, "Paddlin' Blues" and "Rainy Night Blues", are among the gems of recorded blues. First and foremost they are instrumental showpieces highlighting Arnold's very personal skill and technique. With his guitar placed flat on his knees, his left hand plucks the strings with speed and dexterity, whilst his right slides a blade over the strings of the neck. Exaggerating the use of this primitive bottleneck for the melody line, he accompanies it with a flourish, creating an irresistible swing.

I never wanted to make records. The first time I was dragged by force into the studio. No, I've always preferred a quiet, simple life, far removed from the vanities and tumult of this world.

We can quickly sympathise with this sentiment when we learn that at the time of his first disc he had a lucrative little business in bootleg alcohol; the last thing he needed was publicity.

In December 1933 prohibition came to an end and the following year saw the real beginning of Kokomo's recording career and musical life. It was guitarist Joe McCoy who persuaded record producer Mayo Williams to record Kokomo once again and on September 10th 1934 four tracks were cut for Decca in Chicago. Two of them, "Milkcow Blues" and "Original Kokomo Blues" on Decca 7026, were to be one of the company's biggest sellers. These two Decca recordings were musically quite different from those made for Victor four years earlier.

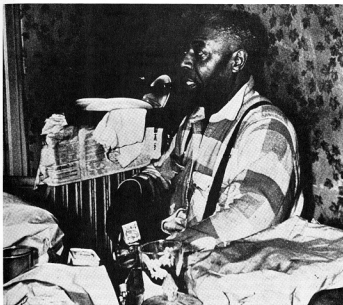
"Paddlin' Blues" and "Rainy Night Blues" (available on Yazoo L 1012) are the work of a young **guitarist**-singer who makes much of his phenomenal instrumental technique and attaches little importance to his singing. Everything is in the overflowing vitality of the guitar playing.



By contrast, "Old Original Kokomo" and "Milkcow Blues", like the majority of his later recordings, are less aggressive. In those four years he, to a certain degree, matured becoming a **singer**-guitarist, placing as much importance on the vocal aspect as on the instrumental accompaniment. His harsh falsetto voice has a pronounced vibrato and when playing solo guitar he can be heard to give a throaty growl.

With the success of his first record for Decca, James 'Kokomo' Arnold became a star; at least in the eyes of his own people. At some point he met the pianist-guitarist Peetie Wheatstraw (real name William Bunch). Together they performed in Chicago and the surrounding neighbourhood, making the occasional trips to Pittsburgh where they enlivened dances. On May 22nd 1936 the duo accompanied singers Mary Johnson (ex-wife of Lonnie Johnson) and Alice Moore, on their respective records for Decca. All in all, Kokomo's recording career only lasted between 1934 and 1938, that is, if we don't count his Guitfiddle Jim recording in 1930. In the course of those four years, about 120 tracks were cut; 90 in Kokomo's name, the rest as partner to Peetie on his recordings. Arnold's records are all very much alike; perhaps too much so to hear them all in succession, without their becoming monotonous. As Paul Oliver has already pointed out, most of his recordings are modelled on the first "Milkcow Blues".

This being so, let's look at those which are different from the magnificent "Milkcow"; - "Let Your Money Talk" (1) follows the old eight bar English ballad, which, however, isn't strictly adhered to by Kokomo. "The Twelves" (2) is a very personal version of the "Dirty Dozens" (two partners swapping insults about their families).



Vulgar though this blues may be, it is probably the best disc of Kokomo as a guitarist since his *Victor* recording. "Shake That Thing" (3) is a nice little pornographic blues, which doesn't leave much to the imagination. "Set Down Gal" (2) is a magnificent Kokomo/Wheatstraw piece about an adulterous woman; the back door man who is afraid that her husband will find out about the affair. "Big Ship Blues" (2) is an evocative blues about seasickness.

It is difficult to know for certain why Kokomo stopped recording in 1938. Some say that it was because his blues all became to sound so much alike, whilst others put it down to a disagreement between Kokomo and *Decca* over the fees and royalties he was paid. Whatever the reason, Kokomo Arnold gave up music in 1941 and sank into oblivion, that is, until 1959 when Jacques Demetre and Marcel Chauvard visited the States and located him in Chicago working in a factory. He was far from pleased at hearing the word 'blues' mentioned.

Look, if I was still a musician I would have to worry about where I was going to play this evening. Here I'm sure of having enough to live on and I can happily forget the past. The past is over, what's the point of trying to bring it back?

The report of this discovery appeared in *Jazz Hot* and *Jazz Journal*. Critics, impresarios, record companies once more showed interest in the bluesman. Kokomo was nobody's fool. He preferred working in the factory, going fishing and amusing the neighbourhood children. His method of maintaining this tranquillity was by asking exorbitant prices from all who suggested he returned to music or question him about his past. This way, Kokomo Arnold managed to isolate himself from the blues and people soon stopped talking about him. However, he did reputedly record something for Willie Dixon (which was never released!) but not long after Kokomo died of a heart attack in Chicago on November 8th 1969. We shall never know if that one recording session for Willie Dixon was an isolated incident or whether it was that Kokomo was thinking of making a comeback.

Today, certain blues artists are favoured by the critics, for example, Robert Johnson, Elmore James, *Excelllo* stars, whilst others, no less talented, have been completely neglected. This is the case with Tampa Red, to name but one; it is also the case of James 'Kokomo' Arnold, to whom the specialist magazines gave the most meagre of obituaries.

What a pity that Kokomo should have refused to give interviews. Having worked with and known so many bluesmen, his reminiscences would have been most valuable. As for his own biography it is, alas, very incomplete.

What did he do between 1919 and 1930? Was it not until 1933 that he came to Chicago, having lived in Cairo, Carruthersville and Memphis? Did he revisit the south after the success of "Milkcow Blues"/"Old Original Kokomo Blues"? All these hypotheses of Bob Groom (*Blues World* 19) will remain unanswered.

It is also a pity that Kokomo Arnold didn't want to play again, though one cannot blame him for it. Perhaps he no longer had the blues and therefore felt that he had nothing more to express in song. Whatever the reasons, it is often better to remember a musician as he was at, his best, rather than as a sad relic living on his past glories.

It is difficult to define Kokomo Arnold's style. He originally came from Georgia but his music bore very little resemblance to the Georgia stylings of artists like Barbecue Bob and Blind Willie McTell. He seems to have combined the elements of a Georgia up-bringing, frequent trips to Mississippi (where he was obviously exposed to the incisive energetic music of the region) and the city blues of Chicago to create his own personal style. He had no real disciples but nonetheless did in one way or another influence a number of bluesmen, the best known being Robert Johnson.

The discs which Kokomo Arnold has left us, are of varying musical quality, but to listen to the occasional 'Arnold' blues one is almost certainly assured of pure musical joy.

- RECORDS:** (1) *Blues Classics* BC-4
(2) *Matchbox* SDR-163
(3) *Collector's Classics* CC-25