



by Chris Bentley

Chicago, thanks to the interest in Muddy and his cohorts, is a well-dug area of research but other equally important cities in blues terms, such as Los Angeles, have been significantly ignored in the compilation of the standard discographical works. Remember that the rise of the independent record labels occurred largely on the West Coast (Gilt Edge, Globe, Big Town and Pacific, to name but a few, in the 1943–46 period) and in the New York City conurbation (Joe Davis, Lenox, Manor, Regis, in the same period), whereas it was not until 1947 that Ora-Nelle and Aristocrat were born in Chicago.

But it is in Los Angeles that the prime mover for this article rests. Given the mushrooming of indie labels during the late 1940s, spawned principally by the insatiable desire of the juke-box operators for product, it is no surprise that many entrepreneurs with an eye for a fast dollar and an ear for the new electrified music blasting out of the boxes found themselves quickly in the record business. Perhaps the best known is Art Rupe of Specialty Records fame (his fascinating story appeared in *Blues Unlimited* 104), but certainly the most colourful and belligerent of the L.A. indie operators was **John R. Fulbright**, the founder and owner of Elko Records.

Fulbright's only known and somewhat haphazard interview, conducted just over two years before his death on 12 April 1970, was written up in *Blues Unlimited* 51, whence much of the detail herein is culled. Fulbright claimed to have commenced operations in 1949, and indeed some of the sides that appeared on Elko may well have been recorded then, but it is fairly certain that his first series, the 200s (nearly everything connected with Elko, including the numbering, is utterly perverse), started in 1951, as we know from the excellent cover notes to the Ray Agee album on Mr R&B 105 that Elko 202 was cut in an Oklahoma City radio station in late 1951. The previous two issues, featuring the Watson Sisters, Doris and Tommie, are nice if unessential gospel, the main interest being their cover of the Spirit Of Memphis' then recent hit on King, 'Days Are Passed And Gone'.

J.D. Nicholson himself, despite approaching his seventieth year, is still active and gigging around the L.A. and Bakersfield areas and doubtless could add much to our sketchy knowledge of Fulbright's operations. Following the relative success of 'Black Night Is Gone' (it was to be reissued twice by Fulbright in the following three years), which was based firmly on Charles Brown's after-hours style, the first of many gaps in the Elko listing appears. It is quite likely that records were issued under these currently unfilled numbers, but given Fulbright's primitive production methods – 'I fixed me a cooling system out of a Frigidaire. I used to be able to run off sixty copies an hour, and I could make a living out of it – that's why some of my old records break so. I used to make my own plastic and sometimes it wasn't nothing but charcoal' – and his hatred of and utter refusal to get involved with distributors – 'Eddie

Ray (of Rays Records but then of Central Sales Distributors) . . . told me I was a white man trying to look like a nigger; trying to run the record business (on my own) and going round the country selling records out of my car. So I whipped his ass' – it is surprising that *any* of his 78s exist, some thirty years on.

A jump to issue 207 gives further verification to the 1951 dating for the 200 series, but more discographical uncertainty, as the TXR-44 matrix emanates from the totally obscure Top Hat record company, based at P.O. Box 7326, Los Angeles 37. The J.D. matrix follows immediately on from two Smokey Hogg cuts, issued on Top Hat 1023 and as Smokey also recorded for Fulbright (unissued – so far as we know – until released in 1976 on the P-Vine Special double album PLP 2-704 'Mr Fulbright's Blues'), it's possible that John R. had some tie-up with Top Hat; he also claimed an interest in Bob Geddins' Big Town concern, and in Duke Records before WDIA disc-jockey James Mattis sold it to Don Robey. Joe Conwright at issue 208 has a pleasant R&B record – Conwright is now dead and is best known as the alto sax player in Jimmy



McCracklin's Blues Blasters; he appears on most of the McCracklin Swing Time sides cut in L.A. for Jack Lauderdale about the same time as this Elko release.

The dual issue at number 254 is bizarre, even by Fulbright's standards. The Fulson masquerading under L.C. Robinson's name may show some tie-up with Jack Lauderdale, or may just be John R. trying to boot what was quite a sizeable hit for Swing Time. Mac Willis' 'regular' issue is a real throw-back to the 1930s piano blues; 'Pretty Woman' sounds remarkably like Joe Pullum's 'Black Girl', and 'Howling Woman' shows Mac Willis' Fort Worth, Texas, origins.

I have placed the 800 series next, in the light of Fulbright's assertion in the BU 51 interview that these were cut in 1952 or '53, but it is just as likely that the 800 series is a continuation of the 'missing' 900 numbers (allowing for an element of duplication at 8/921). Four of the Son Tillis sides were reissued on the P-Vine Special album and unissued D.C. Bender cuts from the same session may soon see the light of day on an



anthology of '50s Texas blues. 'Ten Long Years' on issue 822 is a thinly disguised version of Eddie Boyd's big hit, and, in the light of John R.'s assertion that 'Boyd got mad' after Tillis cut the song, would seem to indicate that Boyd's JOB version was still seeing sales action, and would hence date the Elko 800 series to late '52 or early '53. The Golden Stars at 824 are a fine acapella gospel quartet and these sides are long overdue for reissue on a gospel anthology. The only other record I am aware of by them (if indeed it is the same group) is on the weirdly named Pink Clouds label from about 1959. Beatrice Hill (any relation to Wilmagene Hill on Elko 202?) is another in the series of female R&B singers who J.D. Nicholson seemed to acquire, but the real killer in this series is 828. The accompanying discography accurately details the information on the label, and I can only presume that the feat was accomplished by the same sort of primitive overdubbing that the Biharis may have employed on the Boyd Gilmore session – i.e. cutting one acetate and then destroying it by playing it back 'live' in the studio. In the case of the Curry record, Fulbright would have to have done this three times, and the overall effect, some thirty years on, although weird, is not altogether unsuccessful. Curry seems to have cut one other record, and, judging by the label, a 'vanity' effort for the Currytone label (the number is 102 – has anyone seen 101?).

It's possible to place the 100 series reasonably accurately, as two of the three issues utilise 4 Star matrices. This dates them to late 1953. Jesse Thomas hailed from Logansport, Louisiana, but is still alive and active today in Shreveport. His Elko issue is a fine double-sider and 'Gonna Move' is easily available on Nighthawk LP 106. Tap Anthony's sides on 108 are R&B pieces, harking back to Louis Jordan and 109 is the first reissue of J.D. Nicholson's hit.

The 900 series seems to date from 1953/54, although issues 901 and 903 show from their matrix numbers that they were acquired from Savoy. The Rocking Brothers' cuts are rather poor instrumentals and were actually released on Savoy (1144), which, I believe, dates them to late 1953. I have not heard Elko 902 and would be grateful for a tape from any owner. Sister Christine on issue 903, although having Savoy matrix numbers, does not appear on the *Blues Research* Savoy listing, and the Savoy numbers may well be a Fulbright foul-up, as I believe this artist to

be Christine Sykes who cut for Modern about the same time and was probably an L.A. resident. 903 features a superb piano accompaniment (most probably by Christine herself) which has attracted much praise. Christine may also be the Unknown (although secular) Artist A on the P-Vine album – the piano accompaniment is virtually identical to that on Elko 903. Her second Elko release, 918, suffers only by contrast to 903, but is much the rarer of the two. 904 is another unknown (to me) gospel item which again I'd like to hear.

After another of those infernal gaps, 911 marks the recording debut of Willie Egan. A recent review of Egan's Vita album assigned this to 1949 (when Egan was just sixteen), but it more likely dates to early 1954. It is very much in the style of Amos Milburn or Little Willie Littlefield and is fully the equal of his later cuts for Mambo and Vita. Monte Easter's issue continues the theme of good-time R&B; Easter recorded for the Mesner brothers' Aladdin label about the same time (one side is on the French '14 Magic Lamps' album) and the supposition is that ace guitarist Jimmy Nolen was aboard. It figures, as he had the follow-up release on Elko, 'Let's Try Again' featuring some very T-Bone-ish guitar, and causing enough action to be picked up by Imperial for wider distribution. I wouldn't mind betting that the Clara Sheridan sides also have Nolen present (it's one of those questions I never got around to in the only too brief interview I had with Nolen and now we'll never know) – the sides are tough R&B that were strangely categorised as gospel in a recent auction list!

915 is one of the most sought-after Elkos as the credit to Jimmy Nolen's band hides the vocal of West Coast super-hero Jimmy Wilson. Unfortunately there is little or no information about these great R&B cuts available from the Fulbright interview. 915 was also released on Geddins' Rhythm label and was presumably leased to Fulbright as Geddins had – if possible – even less distribution available than John R. 916 brings forth a gospel group, the Rising Stars, with whom Jimmy Wilson's name is often bracketed. Unusually for Fulbright who would, I suspect, record anybody if they put up the money, the Rising Stars were practised recording artists, having cut for Geddins on Big Town in 1946 and for Ivory Joe Hunter's Pacific label in the same year. By 1948, they were back with Geddins on Trilon and Cavatone, and in about 1951, they appeared on the Aladdin subsidiary, Score. Then a move to John Dolphin's Recorded In Hollywood label, and, after the Elko, back to Geddins and his Hollywood label – an album of this material would be welcome.

With Rev. Latimore and Elko 917, we are back to the essentially pre-war declamatory preaching style – not everybody's cup of tea, but it sure puts the frighteners up this sinner! 918 we have already covered, and 919 is another numbering cock-up, using already allocated matrices. Willie Evans was long thought to be a misprint for Willie Egan and Sunny Guitar Slim was posited as Guitar Slim Green, but having heard the record, I don't think either theory is correct. The disc itself is a grave disappointment with an inexpertly played organ up front overpowering two rather mundane songs. 920 is however, as they say, a horse of unlike hue. Clifton's first record, and what a belter! As Fulbright recalled it 'there's this town on the Lafayette highway 'bout 100 miles south of Lake Charles. I saw this big crowd of people and I got out of my car and found Clifton. I thought it was a harp player! He was just a kid then; him and his brother was playing. I recorded him in Lake Charles, but I didn't do much with the record, so we sold the masters to Imperial. I couldn't



help Clifton much – but they could. Imperial had nationwide distribution'. Finally (or almost), the second reissue of the J.D. Nicholson hit. An inked-in number of 932 on a battered test of a gospel group is the nearest we get to any follow-up issues beyond 921 – note that one title on the test harks back to Elko 201, where we started!

By late 1955, Fulbright seems to have stopped issuing records – by then he was fifty-five years old and maybe had made enough to retire. Or perhaps the advent of rock and roll had forced him into retirement as it did to so many blues artists. Whatever, by 1959, a short comeback with three, today highly prized, 45 rpm issues: the two by Phillip Walker are very much in the Chuck Berry bag with Louisiana overlays, with 'Louisiana Walk' the pick of the bunch, a dangerously high-register guitar riding over a churning rhythm. Elmon 'Drifting Slim' Mickle's cuts were perhaps six or seven years too late, as Fulbright claimed that Joe Bihari stole Mickle from him back in '52. 'I Got To Get Some Money' is a brilliant piece, with Elmon's vocal rocking slowly over the top of Phillip Walker's almost hypnotic guitar.

After that, no more known releases on Elko, though Fulbright seemed to have stayed in the record business until the mid-1960s with the JRM label. Characteristically, he claimed to have been ripped off by distributors over Dike and the Blazers' 'Funky Broadway', which ended up providing Wilson Pickett with a large hit. Fulbright, who had first cut Dike doing the song in Arizona, seems to have ended up with the short end of the stick. The Old House of Music at 823 East Adams Boulevard, Los Angeles (the house photo looking nothing like the house on the label logo!) had shut up shop by 1965, and by 1970 Fulbright had passed on. A warehouse rumoured to hold the remnants of John R.'s stock was still ferociously guarded by two Dobermanns when I visited L.A. in the late '70s and I suspect there is much material (other than that already issued by P-Vine) still to see the light of day.

Whatever remains, it is undeniable that John R. Fulbright recorded most of the important black styles extant during the early 1950s and a lot of the cuts laid down were in the top flight musically. If the P-Vine represented a growing awareness of the West Coast blues, it is now high time that an album of Elko R & B sides is issued to serve as a lasting memory to John R. Fulbright, producer and record-man extraordinaire. ■

### 200 SERIES

200	DORIS AND TOMMIE WATSON	The Day Is Pass And Gone I Thank You Lord	200A 1012
201	WATSON SISTERS	I Live The Life I Sing About Didn't It Rain	1019 210B
202	J.D. NICHOLSON and His Jivin' Five	Black Night Is Gone (vcl. Ray Egge) Love's Limit (vcl. Ray Egge and Wilmagene Hill)	204A 204B
203 to 206 – unknown			
207	J.D. NICHOLSON and His Jiving Five	I Ain't Gonna Be Your Dog No More (vcl. James Hill) '51 Boogie	1017 TXR-44
208	JOE CONWRIGHT and His Lucky Seven	No Need To Cry She Won't Be True	
209 to 253 – unknown			
254	MAC WILLIS	Pretty Woman Howling Woman	101A 101B
254	L.C. ROBINSON and His Combo Playboys	Rock With L.C. Lonely Heart Blues	101A 101B

(Note: These titles are actually:  
LOWELL FULSON *Rocking After Midnight*  
*Everyday I Have The Blues*  
as issued on *Swing Time 196* inter alia)

255 and on – unknown

### 800 SERIES

800 to 820 – unknown			
821	BIG SON TILLIS AND D.C. BENDER	Rocks Is My Pillow Zetela Blues	EL-821-A EL-821-B
822	BIG SON TILLIS, LILLIAN L. TILLIS AND D.C. BENDER	When I Get In This House Woman Ten Long Years	EL-822-A EL-822-B
823	D.C. BENDER AND BIG SON TILLIS	Dayton Stomp My Baby Wrote Me A Letter	EL-823-A EL-823-B
824	THE GOLDEN STAR SPIRITUAL SINGERS	The Gospel Train Is Coming All You Need Is That True Religion	EL-824-A EL-824-B
825	– unknown		

826	BEATRICE HILL with J.D. NICHOLSON and His Jiving Five	I'm So Glad My Lonesome Days Are Gone My Darkest Hour	EL-826-A EL-826-B
827	– unknown		
828	GEORGE CURRY (The One-Man Quartet)	When My Good Lord Decides Live In Jesus' Name	EL-828-A EL-828-B
He makes one voice sound like four All voices sung by GEORGE L. CURRY			
829 and on – unknown			

### 100 SERIES

100 to 106 – unknown			
107	JESSE THOMAS	Another Fool Like Me Gonna Move To California	6342-U 6343-U
108	TAP ANTHONY and His All-Stars	Please Reverend Jones Misled	6348-U 6349-U
109	J.D. NICHOLSON	Black Night Is Gone Lonely Lonely Nights	
110 and on – unknown			

### 900 SERIES

900 – unknown			
901	THE ROCKING BROTHERS	Play Boy Hop The Grinder	217 SA-1559 218 SA-1558
902	PAUL THOMAS, GOSPEL REVELATIONS	Come Over Here God's Blood	219 220
903	SISTER CHRISTINE and Her Piano	Take My Hand If Only I Could Hear My Mother's Prayer Again	220 SA-1560 221 SA-1561
904	REVEREND STEWART And Family	Wings To Fly Away I Made A Vow To God	222 223



905 to 910 – unknown

911	WILLIE EGANS and His House Rockers	Its A Shame Willie's Boogie	A B
912	MONTE EASTER and His Band	Going Back To Kansas City Midnight Rider	EL-912-A EL-912-B
913	JIMMY NOLEN	Let's Try Again Slow Freight Back Home	
914	CLARA SHERIDAN	Another Baby Boy My Heart Gets So Heavy	223 224
915	JIMMY NOLEN'S BAND	I Used To Love A Woman Strangest Blues	225 226
916	THE RISING STARS	The Name Jesus Today	227 228

917	REVEREND LATIMORE	Eagle Stirs His Nest Prayer	229 330
918	SISTER CHRISTINE	King Jesus Is All I Need I'll Anchor In The Harbor Of The Lord	331 332
919	WILLIE EVANS and His Night Owls with SUNNY GUITAR SLIM	My First Date The Rising Sun	224 225



920	CLISTON CHANIER	Cliston Blues Louisiana Stomp	920-A 920-B
921	J.D. NICHOLSON and His Jivin' Five	Black Night Is Gone I Brought It All On Myself	921-A 921-B
922 to 931 - unknown			
932	UNKNOWN GOSPEL GROUP	Please Let Me Rest Didn't It Rain (Male vocal group inc. Charles Johnson, James Franklin & O. Outlow - acc. gr. - details from test)	
933 and on - unknown			

### 000 SERIES

001	PHILLIP WALKER BAND	I Want You For Myself Louisiana Walk	B-001-A B-001-B
002	PHILLIP WALKER BAND	Hello My Darling Playing In The Park	B-002-A B-002-B
003	ELMON MICKLE	Flat Foot Sam I Got To Get Some Money	003-A 003-B
004 and on - unknown			

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### P-VINE SPECIAL PLP 2-704 CONSISTED OF:

Strangest Blues/I Used To Love A Woman (Jimmy Nolen)/Louisiana Walk/I Want You For Myself/Playing In The Park/Hello My Darling (Phillip Walker)/Pretty Woman/Howling Woman (Mac Willis)/Blue And Lonesome Blues/Misery In My Life (Smokey Hogg)/Flat Foot Sam/I Got To Get Some Money (Elmon Mickle)/Listen Here Mr Fireman/San Francisco Bay Blues (Jesse Fuller)/Zetela Blues/Rocks Is My Pillow/Ten Long Years/I Got A Letter (Big Son Tillis & D.C. Bender)/Hard Luck Blues/Lonesome Road (Unknown Artist A)/Another Fool Like Me (Jesse Thomas)/West Helena Blues (George Smith)/Come Back Baby (Unknown Artist B)/Strange Ol' Feeling (Unknown Artist C)/I Ain't Gonna Be Your Dog No More (J.D. Nicholson)/Let's Try It Again (Jimmy Nolen)/It's A Shame/Willie's Boogie (Willie Egans)

