

# MERCY DEE WALTON

## PITY AND A SHAME

Some years ago I walked into one of the hotel bars in Reno, Nevada, and was pleasantly surprised by the sound coming from the juke box. I had never expected to hear low-down blues in any Nevada tavern — but there it was — just piano and drums and a voice singing about that **One Room Country Shack**.<sup>\*</sup> The label on the machine identified the artist as one Mercy Dee. I had never heard of him before but from that day on I was never to forget his music. That was the time when "Rhythm and Blues" was breaking into the "pop" music field and Mercy Dee must have been one of the first "down-home" blues singers to reach beyond the previously all Negro audiences which had been used to Big Bill Broonzy, Blind Boy Fuller, Georgia White, and Jazz Gillum in the thirties and forties. Since then of course Jimmy Reed, Lightnin' Hopkins and many others have broken down this musical caste system, and today people all over the world are enjoying the blues of the American Negro.

Over the years I heard rumors that Mercy Dee lived in Stockton, Calif. but no one was quite sure where. His relatives in Texas also told me: "Oh, yes he lives out in California" but again they weren't quite sure where in the Golden State. Finally at a recording session I mentioned the name of Mercy Dee and someone said: "Sure, I know him, got his address right here". So, more or less by accident, I finally met the man who has played and sung the blues most of his life.

Born in Waco, Texas on August 30, 1915, young Mercy Dee heard many a powerful and seasoned piano player. He heard them at "10c. house parties" which would take place most every week-end out in the country. Someone would hire a piano player and find an empty house, charge 10c. admission and the party was under way. Others would bring food and sell it toge-

ther with beer and moonshine. The piano player made perhaps \$1.50 for playing all night but as Mercy Dee says: "A dollar was a great thing in those days". These parties would start on a Friday night — go on all day Saturday and all that night until Sunday, when some of the folks would go off to church — but after that they would all be back and party until late Sunday night — just to get a little rest before going back out into the fields on Monday; choppin' or picking cotton, pulling corn, or harvesting water melons. Usually during the course of a week-end you could hear four or five different piano players — they would make the rounds. During the winter they would often be in the cities: Waco, Dallas, Ft. Worth; but in the summer they would mostly play house parties in the country. One of these players was a man named Delois Maxey and he left a strong influence on Mercy Dee. He never made any records but everyone around Waco knew him as one of the best piano players. In those days an artist didn't need a record on the juke box to keep him in the eyes of the public — his personal appearances among his friends were the important thing. Delois Maxey apparently had many specialty numbers for which he was known but he also knew all the popular blues numbers of the day.

Mercy Dee came to California before the second World War and moved around from Los Angeles through the Central Valley to Oakland and San Francisco, playing mostly for the farm workers who knew his kind of blues. When you drive through California's San Joaquin valley on a hazy day, hiding the Sierra range in the east and the Coast range in the west, through Bakersfield, Fresno, Stockton, and all the smaller towns in between, you get the feeling that you are in Central or Southern Texas. Endless stretches of cotton, corn, spinach, grapes, and other vegetables and fruits offer proof that this is one of the richest agricultural regions in the country. But farming here has become big business. The people you see out in the fields came here from Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Mississippi, and other farming regions of the South. They had always done this type of work and they

<sup>\*</sup> A compilation of Mercy Dee's original hit recordings is available on Specialty CD 7036 titled **One Room Country Shack**.

figured they could make a better living out West than they could back home under the absolutely hopeless sharecropping or tenant farming systems. They found not only wages higher in California, but also prices and the workers were largely at the mercy of the big operators. Minimum wage laws excluded farm workers, and, besides, they had to compete with the even lower standard of living of the Mexican nationals. But with the people came their music — the Arkies and Oakies had brought Hill-billy music to California and the Negroes brought the blues. Mercy Dee knew the blues and he played them on Central Avenue in Los Angeles, out at Jericho's in West Fresno, in Stockton or on 7th Street in West Oakland. When gigs were scarce you could find him out in the fields picking cotton or cutting spinach and many of his songs, like **Have You Ever Been Out In The Country** tell you about it.

After the War, with large numbers of independent small record labels appearing like wild-flowers all over the country, an enterprising Chinese-American named Chester Lu contacted Mercy Dee to make some records. Spire was the name of his label and to my knowledge the two discs by Mercy Dee were the extent of his catalogue. But the records got around and other newly-founded labels specializing in "Rhythm and Blues" heard of Mercy Dee and soon his records were appearing on two or three different labels. When his "hit" record of **One Room Country Shack** broke all over the country, Mercy Dee became a full-time musician and entertainer. He was soon touring from coast to coast with various package shows, playing dances at local auditoriums: For a time he toured with the Big Jay McNeely band — at the time one of the most popular and sensational of the "honking" bands featuring frantic tenor sax music. On the same show was fellow Texas blues man Smokey Hogg who enjoyed considerable fame himself in those days. Mercy Dee compares these dances with the "10c house parties" of the old days back home, because people would come from miles around to hear their favorite artists and to have themselves a "ball". However now it was on a large commercial scale and reputations were usually made via the phonograph record rather than through

personal appearances, in as much as the personal appearances of recent days were largely the result of having a hot-selling record on the juke boxes. However the Big Jay McNeely band was an exception because they had built their reputation almost entirely through live performances as their records never really captured the fantastic sound of that band.

Mercy Dee likes the blues because by playing them he disposes of his troubles — but playing on the rhythm and blues circuit he has learned to like other types of music as well. However he says that in order to play the blues you must be a **Blues Man** — not just any musician can play the blues. I agree fully with him — you simply can't expect any competent musician to play the blues — they have to be in him.

When Sidney Maiden, Mercy Dee, and Otis Cherry got together in the studio in Oakland to make this LP, they were no strangers. Sidney had played with Mercy Dee, in the Valley many times and the kind of blues they both play just doesn't change much over the years. Sidney makes his home in Fresno now where he leads his own group playing gigs in the neighboring towns and sometimes driving as far as Seaside near Fort Ord on the coast to play a dance for the soldiers in that area. Originally from Louisiana, Sidney came to the Coast during the war to work in the ship yards at Richmond, where he met guitarist K. C. Douglas and drummer Otis Cherry. The three of them plus a second guitarist played as a group for many years and made their first record together. Otis Cherry today still plays with K. C. Douglas whenever a gig comes up which calls for a good blues band. Mercy Dee usually plays around the Stockton area but recently he came to San Francisco to play an engagement at Barbara Dane's blues night club, **Sugar Hill**. Upon hearing the tapes by Mercy Dee, Barbara asked me: "Where is that band from — they must be from Chicago." Well, Chicago, Houston, Detroit, or Stockton the blues are the same and will continue to be the same — yet at the same time each artist is a unique stylist and Mercy Dee is one of the best.

Notes by CHRIS STRACHWITZ

Notes reproduced from the original album liner.