

non J.D. Short content eliminated

J.D. SHORT - PART 2

As the Depression began to recede in the middle thirties, recording activity started to pick up; but Chicago was now the major blues centre, and the field trips of the twenties were not repeated on anything like the same scale. St. Louis artists who had been popular in the late twenties, like Edith Johnson and Henry Brown, were not

recorded again, and the record companies stuck with established favourites like Roosevelt Sykes, Walter Davis and Peetie Wheatstraw. It was to be twenty-five long years before J.D. Short took part in another recording session.

In the late thirties, swing music was the thing, and after learning clarinet from Douglas Williams, J.D. played in Williams' swing band for some years. About the same time Big Joe Williams made St. Louis his base, and there was some musical contact between J.D. and Joe. J.D. seems not to have been much influenced by the Chicago blues of the thirties and forties, and he continued to perform the blues of his youth.

J.D. was almost 40 when he was drafted into the Army. From October, 1942, to March, 1943, he served with the 92nd Division before being invalided out following an injury received on an obstacle course which eventually caused his death twenty years later. It is unclear whether he was actually involved in active service, as suggested by the lyrics of his "Fighting For Dear Old Uncle Sam".

On his return to St. Louis following his discharge, J.D. went back to daywork, playing evening and weekend gigs when the blues were in demand. As recounted earlier, Bob Koester became interested in Short when he took over on harmonica from one Little Head or Little Hat (Little Hatchet?) at a Big Joe Williams rehearsal during the summer of 1955. Bob was sufficiently impressed with Big Joe and J.D. as a duo to arrange club dates and a concert at a local college, but after a few weeks Joe, ever the rambler, left town.

A couple of years went by, and then on February 8th, 1958, Big Joe arrived at Koester's record shop for a session, bringing J.D. with him to play harmonica. Apart from the fourteen or so Big Joe vocals, on most of which J.D. played harp, Bob also recorded an exciting instrumental ("Jumping In The Moonlight"), two J.D. vocals and a brief interview (part of which appears as "J.D. Talks" on DL-609), with a view to the eventual compilation of a full LP by Short. This was never to happen, as the next couple of years were occupied by Delmar's move to Chicago, the change of name to Delmark because of a previous copyrighting of the name, and the preparation and eventual issue of the very first LP by Big Joe Williams; this was "Piney Woods Blues" (DL-602), on which J.D.'s harmonica adds atmosphere to tracks like "No More Whiskey" (soloing after Joe's injunction to "tear it on down"), "Good Morning Little School-Girl" and "Drop Down Mama".

The two vocals that J.D. recorded for Delmark, "Stavin' Chain Blues" and "You've Got To Help Me Some", show the changes in his music since his pre-war sessions. The natural limitations of the rack harp/guitar format had resulted in simpler, more formalised instrumental accompaniments. The eccentric brilliancies of his pre-war guitar work had gone, although the relentless surge of harp and guitar could still generate excitement. Greater emphasis was now placed on his singing and the lyrics of his songs which, if perhaps not as rich and strange as his earlier compositions, are nonetheless both original and striking. "Stavin' Chain Blues" runs as follows:

Chorus: You can't get down like poor old Stavin' Chain,
Can't get down like poor old Stavin' Chain,
Killed a woman, served time for killing a man.

Stavin' Chain was known at Parchman, everybody knows,
Parchman Penitentiary wouldn't harm you none.

Chorus: You can't get down like poor Stavin' Chain,
Well he served time for killing a woman,
Come back and served time for killing a man.

He throwed his ball and chain, away he go,
Line that he's taking, people, he'd leave when he's travelling home.

Chorus: You can't get down like poor Stavin' Chain,
Well he served time for killing a woman,
And time for killing a man.

Well happy little man, happy as he can be,
He knows boys, Stavin' Chain was his name.

Chorus: You can't get down like poor Stavin' Chain,
Well he served time for killing a woman,
Came back and served time for killing a man.
Forty-five minutes, time to go,
Get upside that tree Stavin' Chain, let's cut some more.

Chorus: You can't get down like poor Stavin' Chain,
Well, you can't get down like poor Stavin' Chain.
Love my baby, love her true,
Think about you babe, what you gonna do.

Chorus: Oh, you can't get down like poor Stavin' Chain,
Killed a woman, served time for killing a man.
Well, throwed his shackles, broke away,
Bet nobody can move like he can that day.

Chorus: Can't get down like poor Stavin' Chain,
Well he killed a woman, come back and killed a man.

The role of the mysterious Stavin' Chain as a sexual hero in Negro folk music has been examined at length in Richard A. Noblett's limited edition booklet "Stavin' Chain (A Study In A Folk-Hero)", published in 1969, but space here permits only a cursory mention of this fascinating figure. Verses about Stavin' Chain are known by most bluesmen and songsters over 50 (eg. Mance Lipscomb and Jesse Fuller), but there are few examples of pre-war commercial recordings of "Stavin' Chain" and one of these, Johnny Temple's on Decca 7532, uses the phrase as a phallic symbol ("I wonder what's the matter with my stavin' (stave-in?) chain") rather than a name, as in Lil Johnson's Vocalion recording ("You can't ride this train, I'm the chief engineer I'm gonna run it like Stavin' Chain.") now available on Stash 101. (I haven't as yet heard Jazz Gillum's "Slavin' (sic) Chain" on Bluebird B-7986.) There are, however, several versions recorded in the field for the Library of Congress, notably those by Tricky Sam, Wilson Jones and Blind Willie McTell.

J.D.'s version is distinctive in that it specifically concerns a rounder, twice imprisoned at Parchman Farm following killings, who made his escape, in the tradition of Old Riley, and returned to his wenching ways. Noblett mentions that Short knew another, slightly different version of the song, which he performed for Bob Koester. J.D. apparently met a singer who called himself Stavin' Chain in the Clarksdale area, sometime between 1912 and 1920. As Noblett points out, it was probably quite common for a bluesman to take the name Stavin' Chain, just as some bluesmen were dubbed Lemon in imitation of Blind Lemon Jefferson.

"You've Got To Help Me Some" is a driving number which concerns a woman who comes in too drunk to make love to her man:

Keep on loving on the bar-room floor,
Make a funny move, baby, don't make no more,

Chorus: You better help me some, oh help me some,
Now if you want to serve me high powered lovin',
Oh babe, you got to help me some.

Grind my coffee down on your floor,
Don't want me baby, why in the world don't you let me know,

Chorus: You got to help me some etc.

Late last night, half past four,
Come in drunk, baby, wouldn't move any more,

Chorus:

Love me baby, free good will,
How can I get my thrill if you just keep on layin' still,

Chorus: (repeated twice)

Late last night, half past four,
Come in drunk, baby, wouldn't move any more,

Chorus:

J.D. later recorded this song for Sam Charters, but the two-guitar accompaniment on the Delmark version gives it the edge instrumentally. Big Joe and J.D. really thunder out the closing instrumental chorus. They also generate considerable instrumental excitement behind Big Joe's vocal on the old Sonny Boy Williamson number "Gonna Check Up On My Baby", during which Big Joe addresses J.D. as 'Jelly Joe'.

Sam Charters first met Short in 1960. By this time, J.D.'s health had begun to deteriorate. Circulation trouble had already led to the amputation of two of his toes, and it was steadily getting worse. When Sam decided to record J.D. at his home on Cole Street in the summer of 1962, neither could have had any idea that J.D. had less than four months left to live, and it is fortunate that enough songs were taped to provide a fitting testament to an outstanding and much under-rated artist.

Four of the recordings made at J.D.'s home on July 3rd, 1962, were issued the following year on FA 2467, a Folkways LP which also featured Library of Congress recordings by Son House. In addition, one track contains J.D.'s recollection of the time when Charley Patton stopped by his father's cabin and played his guitar.

The notes to this album, from which some of the basic information for this study has been drawn, indicate that J.D. was a gentle, sincere man, very different in temperament from his excitable cousin, Big Joe Williams. The photograph of J.D. that appears in Sam Charters' book "The Poetry Of The Blues" (Oak) shows him to have been both calm and possessed of a natural dignity. He is wearing a hat and a smart jacket with a carnation in the buttonhole, and holds a guitar with two round sound holes, and a rack harp fitted to it.

J.D. talked to Sam at length about the blues and blues singers, and some of his perceptive comments are reproduced in "The Poetry Of The Blues", and included on the recent Sonet LP, discussed later.

"Well the blues first came from people being low in spirit and worried about their loved ones. It's a lot of times we can get worried and dissatisfied, and we can get to singing the blues, and if we can play music and play the blues we may play the blues for a while until we get kind of pacified. That cuts off a lot of worry. Sometimes the people that's listening at you have actual(ly) been through some of the same things that I have been through, and automatically that takes effect on them and that causes their attention to come on and listen at it."

In his notes to the Folkways LP, Charters admits to great difficulty in transcribing many of J.D.'s verses, but transcribing lyrics has never been Sam's strong point, and after careful listening I have been able to decipher all J.D.'s post-war recordings, except for the odd doubtful word.

"So Much Wine" starkly portrays the descent into oblivion of the wino, the wine-drinking alcoholic whose addiction is as deadly as that of the drug addict, but less brutally dramatic. Whenever I hear this gripping track, I think of the fate of L.C. Williams, an excellent Texas blues singer who was a protege of Lightnin' Hopkins and recorded for Freedom, Gold Star and Sittin' In With. Williams was a wino, and died at the age of 36. A photograph of him sitting on a porch accompanied an obituary by Paul Oliver and Mack McCormick in the March, 1961, "Jazz Monthly", and the blank stare of the wino was all too obvious.

In the few lines Charters transcribes in the Folkways booklet he uses commas to suggest that J.D. is addressing a lady named Lucy in verse 3, but actually Sweet Lucy, like Sneaky Pete (verse 1) is a brand of cheap wine. In his version of "Nobody Knows You When You're Down And Out" (included in "Leadbelly's Last Sessions, Volume 2"), Leadbelly refers to Sneaky Pete wine, and in conversation afterwards with Fred Ramsey explains that this is homemade wine, so potent that after drinking it "you start broadcastin' in the street":

You know I got up this morning, boys, hadn't had a bite to eat,
Just had to go round the corner, boys, get a shot of old Sneaky Pete.

Chorus: I drink so much wine, yes, so much wine,
Yes I drink so much wine, boys, want to drink a bottle in my doggone sleep.

See me walking along, boys, ain't said a doggone thing,
Just bet you five dollars I got to slip a long neck in my hand.

Chorus:

Knees got the rickets, head got to rolling,
Keep on drinking Sweet Lucy, life won't last me long.

Chorus:

Getting down to nothing, boys, nothing but skin and bones,
Doctor said, "Sweet Lucy? You know life can't last you long."

Chorus:

Don't believe Sweet Lucy would surely carry you down,
Just go out and hold a fifth and look all around.

Chorus:

Doggone wine getting down my throat,
Doggone Sweet Lucy about to get my goat.

Chorus: ("Well I drink..." instead of "Yes I drink...")

Well keep on drinking that no good wine,
Doctor about to shoot you right square in your spine.

Chorus:

(For the lighter side of wine drinking, listen to Sticks McGhee's hit, "Drinkin' Wine Spo-Dee-O-Dee", or Champion Jack Dupree's "Get Your Head Happy With Wine", which is all about getting high on Sneaky Pete.)

"Train Bring My Baby Back" is unique amongst J.D.'s issued recordings in that it features him playing harmonica only, rather than his usual rack harp/guitar combination. The aural shape of this piece harks back to the early days of the blues, with the harmonica filling in between the verses, to take the song just one stage beyond the field holler. A fascinating example of what the blues was like in its formative stages, recorded sixty years out of its time.

Bye bye train now, bring my baby back,
Bye bye train now, oh and bring my baby back,
Well, man, she got a new way of loving, man, about to drive me (a sack).
Well now I'm going uptown now baby, you know I'm going to buy me a Stetson
hat,
Well now I'm going uptown now baby, I'm going to buy me a doggone Stetson
hat,
Well now I'm going to satisfy my baby, I know just what my baby like.
Well now I know the only thing that will get my baby back,
Well now I know the right thing now, yes now to get my baby back,
Well now I'm gonna be a pimp, I'm gonna start to wearing a brand new
Stetson hat.
Well I'm gonna come down through town with my brand new Stetson hat (x2),
Well the people tell me how I'm dressed, it's gonna make my baby come
right back.

"You Been Cheating Me" has a chorus line which connects it to Leroy Carr's "How Long How Long Blues" (Vocalion 1191, recorded in 1928), and to the earlier (1925) recording by Ida Cox, "How Long Daddy, How Long" (Paramount 12325). It may well derive from an early version of the "How Long" theme.

You know you been cheating me for another man,
Seems like, darling, all my love in vain,
Well how long, how long will this go on?

How long, how long will I have to be put down,
How long, how long will this go on?

You say you love me, oh yes you do,
Why do you do things make me so blue?
But how long, how long will this go on?

Stay away weeks at a time, I don't know where you at,
Well now baby, I love you yet,
But how long, how long will this go on?

Mistreated me at night, now you're feeling blue,
Well I just wish I had you to carry my troubles to,
Well how long, how long will this go on?

I'm here in town baby, without your love,
Well I just wanted you (to) carry my love,
How long, how long will this go on.

"Fighting For Dear Old Uncle Sam" is one of the most potent World War II blues on record. J.D. vividly evokes the grim scene of soldiers crouched in foxholes, surrounded by mud, barbed wire and bullets. There is wry humour in the reference to camp followers in verse one, but verse three brings home the harsh reality of war. The powerful drive of harmonica and guitar superbly complements J.D.'s impassioned singing, and the whole performance is country blues at its very best.

Time the war's all over, there's gonna be war right here (x2),
Well on account of so many women now totin' away the soldiers' monthly pay.

I may go down in South Pacific (or) go down in the European land (x2),
But I'm going down swinging boys, I'm going down fighting for dear old Uncle Sam.

So dark was the night now, people cold, cold was the ground (x2),
Me and my buddies in some old foxhole, we had to keep our heads on down.

Well, machine guns and cannon roaring, boys we were afraid to raise our heads (x2),
You know I bet it cost a million dollars, boys now you know we'd all have been dead.

It's the first of the month now, salute the lieutenant and get our pay,
It's the first of the month now, salute the lieutenant boys and get our pay,
There's a little piece of paper laid on the side, sign it and send your wife home a lot of pay.

Some say they'll be so glad when the boys all come back home again,
Some say they'll be so glad, boys all come back home again,
You get so many soldiers without their pay, the soldiers ain't gonna be your friend.

Honey the war's all over, ain't nothing but a different shout,
Honey the war's all over, nothing but a different shout,
'Cause the war's all over, they just don't know what it's all about.

During the summer of 1962 Sam Charters was working on a film, using a hand-held 16mm camera to shoot the action, and a portable recorder for the soundtrack. When he was visiting St. Louis he filmed J.D.'s one-man-band performance of "Slidin' Delta", with J.D. beating out the rhythm on a small bass drum. The beater was a child's rubber ball on the end of an old metal rod, operated by his foot. Charters mentions that he played two harmonicas mounted on his guitar. The film, which also featured Memphis Willie Borum, Pink Anderson, Furry Lewis, Baby Tate, Gus Cannon and Sleepy John Estes, was titled "The Blues", and premiered at the University of Chicago Folk Festival in January, 1963.

In 1967, recordings made for the film soundtrack were issued on LP. Asch A-101 includes the recording of "Slidin' Delta" made on the sidewalk in front of J.D.'s Cole Street home, complete with street noises. The recording balance tends to over-emphasize the accompaniment, but J.D.'s vocal is still audible, and although his habit of 'rushing time' (ie. progressively speeding up the tempo) is here rather disconcerting, the performance is a fascinating and unique one. The fragmentary lyrics and falsetto whooping and hollering are somewhat reminiscent of Tommy Johnson, and this similarity is discussed later in connection with another version of "Sliding Delta" which Short recorded.

J.D. introduces the recording with an explanation of blues feeling, from which I quoted in the preface to my book "The Blues Revival" (Studio Vista, 1971): "What I think about that makes the blues really good is when a fellow writes a blues and he makes it with a feeling, with great harmony, and there's so many true words in the blues, of things that have happened to so many people, and that's why it makes such a feeling in the blues."

Oh, Slidin' Delta, done been here and gone,
Now don't you hear me cryin' pretty mama,
Hey, Slidin' Delta, done been here and gone,
Well it took my baby, weeooh oh weeooh.

Whoa, slow down train, let my baby on board,
Now don't you hear me cryin' pretty mama,
Slow down train, let my baby on board,
I want to ride, eeheoh, eeheoh, train...

Oh, Slidin' Delta rocked me up and down,
Now don't you hear me cryin' pretty mama,
Oh, Slidin' Delta rocked me up and down,
I'm goin' to keep on walkin', weeooh weeooh.

Now tell me babe, what you want me to do,
Now don't you hear me cryin' pretty mama,
Now tell me babe, what you want me to do,
You may want me, eehee won't be back no more.

Well I hate to hear, Slidin' Delta whistle blow,
Now don't you hear me cryin' pretty mama,
Hate to hear, Slidin' Delta whistle blow,
Now every time I hear it, weeooh make me want to go.

Well come on baby, I'm goin' up the line,
Now don't you hear me cryin' pretty mama,
Oh, come on baby, I'm goin' up the line,
Well that Slidin' Delta, ooh changed my baby's mind.

Well come on baby, have a walk with me,
Now don't you hear me cryin' pretty mama,
Come on baby, have a little walk with me,
We gonna walk, weeooh weeooh weeooh...

(To be concluded in the next issue)

BOB GROOM

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