

"THE BIG SUNFLOWER"

by

JOHN GODRICH

Readers of "Vintage Jazz Mart" may have noticed with interest, in their last issue, a Paramount test under this credit advertised by Mr. Duncan Allerdycce, and may have viewed this item with excitement, hope or even downright scepticism! It went for a fantastically high figure to Mr. Graham Irish of the U.S.A. If anyone knows his address or if he reads this, I'd very much like to get in touch with him regarding another Paramount, by Side Wheel Sally Duffie.

In response to my eager enquiries, Mr. Allerdycce most obligingly let me have the history of this record, which was owned by a friend of his, and who related it's discovery as follows:

"I picked up the Paramount test in a Brooklyn junk-store in the early 30s along with some Harry Dials, Jabbo Smiths, Noonies and a stack of assorted blues singers, all at five cents apiece. The owner was so pleased to see someone buying instead of selling, that he offered me a free bed! The Sunflower has a very rough voice, but unlike many blues singers has an astonishingly good sense of rhythm and harmonics. There is an excellent guitar player-not the vocalist-whose style resembles to a certain degree Barbecue Bob, but who incorporates dazzling runs in his repertoire; the nearest comparison I can make is Johnny St. Cyr's playing on Little Derek Christians "My Blue Heaven". During the record the vocalist says; "Those picking fingers sure do knock me out, Ranbo (or Randall?)".

A few years later I was fortunate to meet an executive of the defunct Paramount Company at a party. I'd always been fascinated by this Big Sunflower record, and I asked him if he had any recollection of the singer. To my delight he replied that he remembered him quite well, but couldn't recall any guitarist. Apparently The Sunflower was a very big, powerful, light-skinned Negro. The man said he appeared to be exceptionally well educated for a coloured man of the period, and had a quick wit and sense of humour. He distinctly remembered him saying that most of the things he did were his own compositions, so presumably "High Yaller Blues" comes into this category. The man went on to say that he had the impression that the Sunflower was mixed up with run-running and boot-legging - he always had plenty of money and never seemed unduly worried about payment for recording. He also recalled him saying that he recorded for two other companies-Emerson and possibly the Radiex, Van Dyke, Grey Gull tie-up, but as far as he knew they hadn't been issued".

Some story! There may be other Big Sunflower sides about then, but this is the first we've come across anywhere. Here are the details of this one test, as far as we can give. Unfortunately the master number was all but obliterated, but appears to be as given below, after pencil rubbings etc...

The Big Sunflower : vol acc. unknown guitar, Chicago c. May
21306-1 High Yaller Blues Para Test I929

Note: There is, in Mississippi, a township of Sunflower.
Also a Sunflower river. A connection is not impossible.

THE LEADBELLY SONGBOOK - Edited by Moses Asch & Alan Lomax.
96 pages, illustrated. From OAK PUBLICATIONS, 121 W. 47th St.,
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Mike Leadbitter.