

"HAVE A GOOD TIME"

The Music

This first anthology is intended to present a fair cross-section of the popular Blues sounds heard in Chicago during the 'fifties and early 'sixties. The music was recorded with a Black audience in mind and the artists making it were all favourites among their kind.

The touch of bassist and producer Willie Dixon, a stalwart of the Chicago scene, is very noticeable in the blues of Walter Horton, Homesick James and Bob Woodfork. The simple, rhythmic drive of their songs is almost a thing of the past. Horton demonstrates the rocking, amplified harmonica style popularised by Little Walter, while Homesick James and his slide-guitar (better known as "bottle-neck" guitar) takes one back to the Mississippi Delta. Bob Woodfork in contrast gives out with two straight "jump" blues for juke-box listeners.

From Jeff Titon and Lazy Bill came the extremely obscure titles by Snooky Pryor. Taken from a demonstration disc, fidelity is poor, but these wonderfully rare, rural-blues harmonica cuts by Snooky warranted inclusion. Also obscure is the track by Smokey Smothers, a member of the bass-heavy Jimmy Reed school. This, with the two Prez Kenneth tracks, are the only items on this album that have been previously issued, for even the numbers by L. C. McKinley have not been heard before. His last recordings, L. C.'s blues are extremely urban, showing the West Coast influence on the Delta artists of Chicago and completing our picture of a fascinating heritage.

THE ARTISTS

Walter "Shakey" Horton

Walter was born on April 6, 1918, at Horn Lake, Mississippi. The son of Albert Horton, a Memphis City Corporation worker, he was raised on a farm. Walter learned to play a harmonica at a very early age and, disliking farm life, ran away from home in 1930. He headed straight for the bright lights of Memphis and tried to make a living as a street musician, associating with the Memphis Jug Band.

He became friendly with Floyd Jones and Big Joe Williams during the 'thirties and travelled through the Delta with them, eventually moving with Floyd to Chicago via St. Louis around 1937. For two years they stuck together, scuffling on the streets, and then Walter gave up and went back home to get a steady job.

His settled life came to an end during the late 'forties, when sickness compelled him to turn to music again for his daily bread. He began commuting regularly between Memphis and Chicago, getting work with Eddie Taylor, Muddy Waters and Jack Kelly. In

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early 1951 Walter went to Sam Phillip's Studio in Memphis and cut some records which were leased to Modern. At first he was known as "Mumbles" Horton, but Phillips switched his name to Little Walter in 1952, when the real Walter hit the national charts. This deception failed and Walter continued to record for Phillips until 1953 under his own name. From this period came the beautiful "Easy," which appeared on the Sun label.

Since 1954 Walter has based himself in Chicago and can be found on the West Side today. A long association with Willie Dixon led to sessions for States, Cobra, Decca, Argo and other labels, but real success always eluded him until recently. Singing with a fierce intensity and blowing wild, amplified harmonica, Walter has established himself as a leading exponent of Chicago blues.

"Homesick" James Williamson

Actually named Johnny William Henderson, James was born in Somerville, Tennessee on April 30, 1910, and called himself James Williamson after his father. He was raised on a cotton holding and his musical mother provided the inspiration for him to learn guitar. He had little interest in hard work, yearning for the easier ways of a musician, and left home when he was 15 to lead the life of an itinerant.

James rambled widely during the 'thirties, meeting and playing with people like Sleepy John Estes, Bill Broonzy, Buddy Doyle, Snooky Pryor, Calvin Frazier, Robert Johnson, Sonny Boy Williamson and his cousin Elmore James. Making his home base Chicago, James would get together combos to tour the South or just go down alone to try his luck. Eventually he found he had to have a day job to survive and from the 'forties on, spent most of his time in Chicago.

The success of Elmore James in 1952 and his subsequent move to Chicago, led to a partnership with "Homesick" that lasted until Elmore's tragic death in 1963. Though James' first recordings owed little to Elmore, and it was the success of "Homesick" on Chance that got him his nickname, his recordings following the partnership were often imitations in the hope of getting a chart hit for himself. However, this did not detract from the performances which were always of a high standard.

Recently, James has recorded for Prestige, Colt and USA and has proved that he is a slide-guitar king in his own right. Live performances in Europe and Chicago have, at last, led to him being judged on his own merits and his popularity is greater than ever. Instead of classing him as a mere Elmore imitator, we must remember that he was 8 years Elmore's senior and it is extremely likely that many may be knocking the wrong man.

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Snooky Pryor

Snooky is still a complete mystery, though it is known that he is alive, well and preaching on Chicago's West Side. His real name is James Edward Pryor and he is a product of the rural South. In Chicago he belonged to the Sunnyland Slim "circle" and began recording in 1948, probably inspired by John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson. Though he never got a "hit" like so many of his friends, Snooky continued to record until 1963 and was extremely popular in Chicago.

A great and individual singer and musician, Snooky could play both harmonica and drums, spending much of his life with Home-sick James and Floyd Jones as band leader or accompanist before retiring. He will have nothing to do with Blues today, considering it to be "sinful" and has no regrets about changing his life.

One of the most popular Chicago artists with collectors, Snooky we hope will soon be interviewed. The titles we feature by him were recorded around 1960 for audition purposes and are fine examples of his great talent.

L. C. McKinley

L. C. died recently, never having been interviewed and his life is a blank. It is known that he was born in Winona, Mississippi, but we lack details of his age and experiences.

His recording career was brief, spanning six years during the blues hey-day of the 'fifties. Playing in an urban, polished style, L. C.'s guitar filled in neatly behind his "shout" vocals. Little of his Mississippi background was evident in his music, but his popularity showed that he was appreciated even though all his records flopped.

We feel that the two numbers on this album are among his best. They rock well and L. C. is singing with conviction. Previously unissued, they help to increase the small legacy of recordings he left us to enjoy.

Prez Kenneth

"I have always liked the blues since I was a boy. In 1958 I ran across a friend of mine and he and another friend had an old guitar . . . I joined them and I sang while they played. I went over to their house which was on the south-side of town, two or three times a week. The funny part about it was that they had a guitar with three strings, but we would stay up 'til two or three in the morning playing the blues. We kept it up for about a year and I decided to buy me a guitar . . . I went to school for a while and began to play bass a little. We started playing in a small club, then I met a fast talking man who said he was a promoter for a

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recording company, and said he could help me. I was excited because I really wanted to cut a record. This guy who wanted to help me, led me to believe he was going to cut a record for me. So by this time I found out he didn't have any money to cut anything. I became disgusted and for a while didn't do anything.

So from here on, I am through with fast talkers. Now when I am out playing a gig I sing the blues just like I feel it, and I can feel it. So I try to forget the troubles I've been through from the time I started until now. Thank you."

(From a letter to Sunnyland Records, November 1970.)

"Poor" Bob Woodfork

The son of Annie Mae and King Woodfork, Bob was born on March 13, 1925, at Lake Village, Arkansas. He grew up in a farming community, taking to music in the 'forties as an escape from the fields.

He moved to Chicago at the outbreak of War and joined the Navy. On his discharge in 1947 he turned to the musician's life as soon as he got home. With Otis Rush he made his debut at "Bob's Tavern" on 27th and Wentworth, and the owner introduced him as "Po' Bob," giving him a nickname that has stuck.

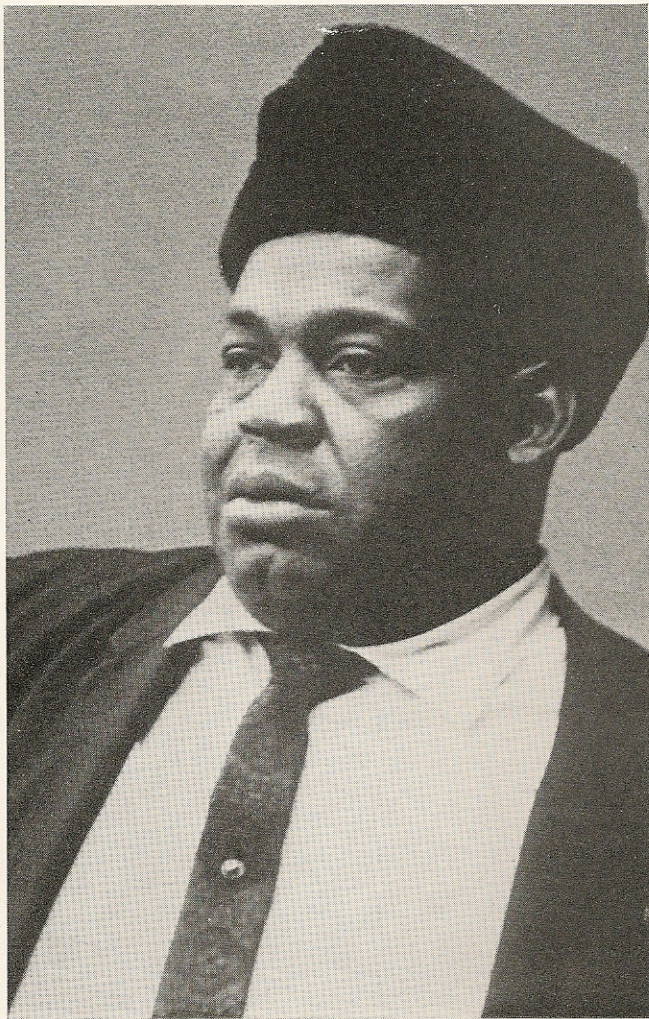
Since that day he has spent his life in the role of an accompanist, touring with Jimmy Rogers, Howlin' Wolf and others as well as recording with Sunnyland Slim. In 1964 he tried to make his own name but failed, drifting into obscurity. His strength is in his voice, which is both effective and "bluesy," for his guitar-work is very limited. The two exuberant examples of his talent on this set should remind us that he must not be forgotten.

Otis "Smokey" Smothers

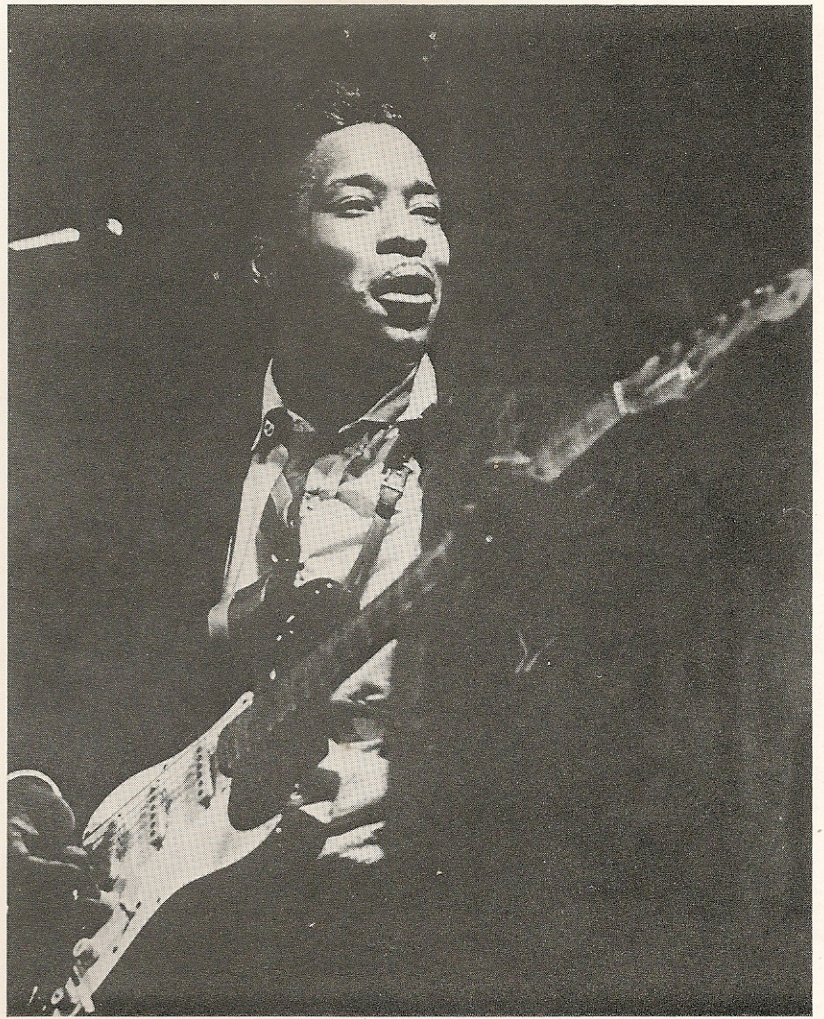
This fine guitarist and singer was born at Lexington, Mississippi, on March 14, 1925, and is the brother of Abraham "Little Smokey" Smothers. He began to play guitar in 1939 after a start in music with his local Baptist church. Soon after, he headed North to Chicago.

His first job was with the Big Boy Spires combo, and then, in 1955, he formed his own, performing in a style made popular by Jimmy Reed. Spotted by Sonny Thompson, Smokey recorded many sides for Federal before the label ended and has recently switched to Gamma. His powerful, amplified music has also been heard on many Howlin' Wolf recordings and is typical of Chicago. Our track was recorded at an unknown date, but aurally comes from his Federal period and was only issued recently.

MIKE A. LEADBITTER (December 1970)



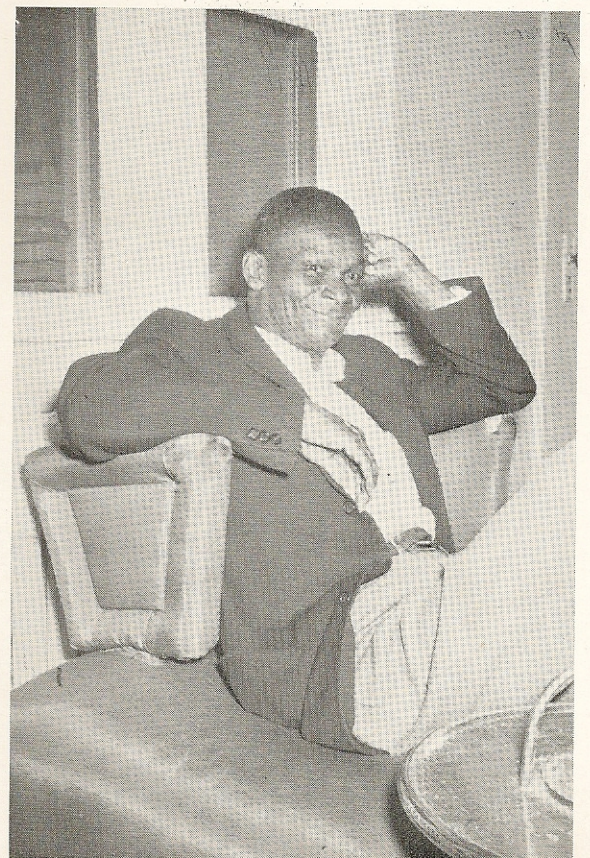
WILLIE DIXON (courtesy Chess)



BUDDY GUY



L-R—HOMESICK JAMES, ELMORE JAMES 1959
(Marcel Chauvard/Jacques Demetre)



LAZY BILL (courtesy Jeff Titon)



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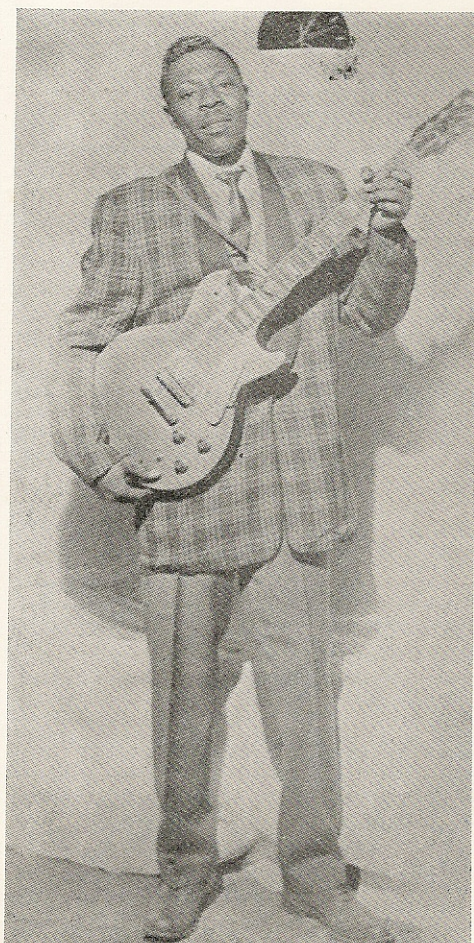
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(courtesy
M. Vernon)



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L-R—WALTER HORTON, WILLIE DIXON, CLIFTON JAMES, SUNNYLAND SLIM, JOHNNY SHINES