

blues news

LINCOLN, NEB.

● Lincoln blues fans have feasted on offerings from some of Chicago's best blues guitarists during recent months.

John Littlejohn, backed by the Bob Riedy Band, was at the Zoo Bar Mar. 11-13. Riedy's group had some new personnel and appeared to muddle through some tunes. Johnny Littlejohn, however, was playing tasty guitar and was in good voice and humor.

Magic Slim & The Teardrops, an especially popular group in Lincoln, played their second 1976 gig at the Zoo Apr. 8-10. The group performed its usual entertaining mix of blues and soul-funk-dance tunes. Slim's guitar work was tougher than ever, especially on the more raucous numbers.

Mighty Joe Young and his excellent group blew everybody out during their Apr. 29-May 1 stint at the Zoo. Neither a small Thursday night crowd nor competition from the televised Ali-Young fight on Friday dampened the music. By the time the bar filled on Friday Mighty Joe had hit his stride and it was a hard-charging show from then on out.

—Bart Becker

ELSEWHERE

Good Blues Cheap Booze

On The Near North Side

NEVER A COVER OR A MINIMUM

Mondays:

★ **BIG WALTER HORTON & BIG RED** ★

Tuesdays:

★ **FLOYD JONES, BIG RED, &
BIG JOHN WRENCHER** ★

Wednesdays/Thursdays:

★ **HOMESICK JAMES** ★

Fridays:

★ **ERWIN HELFER & S.P. LEARY** ★

Saturdays:

★ **JOHN BRIM** ★

Sundays:

★ **SUNNYLAND SLIM** ★

ELSEWHERE ON LINCOLN

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TARTER & GAY

By Kip Lornell

Stephen Tarter and Harry Gay made only one record, both sides of which are now available on the Yazoo LP EAST COAST BLUES (L-1013). Yazoo's liner notes describe them only as "completely obscure bluesmen." The following recollections by Rochester, N.Y., guitarist Lesley Riddle probably constitute the first published information on Tarter & Gay. Kip Lornell's article on Lesley Riddle appeared in LB #12.

—Ed.

Lesley Riddle first met Tarter & Gay in the Kingsport, Tenn., area about a year before they made their record ("Brownie Blues"/"Unknown Blues," Victor 38017, recorded in Bristol, Tenn., on Nov. 2, 1928). Lesley estimates that both men were about 30 years old at the time and had been playing together about two or three years around Kingsport before he ever met them. "They played for birthday parties and things like that," he recalls. "They played professionally for many years. A lot of times doctors and people like that would have birthdays and they would be invited to come and play for them.

"Stephen Tarter was from around Gate City or Big Stone Gap (Va.), somewhere around there. Harry Gay was from Gate City, Va." (Gate City and Big Stone Gap are small towns just inside Virginia, only about 10 miles from Kingsport. Carl Martin was also from this area, but Lesley never knew him.)

"They never did get famous because their singing was not all that good, but Steve was one of the finest instrumentalists that I ever heard," Lesley says. "He played more like that good guitar player from Nashville, Chet Atkins! Steve could play anything. Anything that he heard sung or played, he could go home and play it. He could play guitar, banjo, mandolin, fiddle, anything that had strings on it. He was like Roy Clark—he could play everything. Steve played a whole lot of that guitar jazz. He could rag his guitar just like you can rag a piano. Steve's father, I think, he was a musician. I used to hear Steve talk about how his father could play fiddle, mandolin and guitar, just like he did. That's probably where Steve picked it up at."

Lesley says that although Steve was the best guitarist he ever saw in person, he played mandolin more than he did guitar:

"If he could get someone to play guitar with him, he used to grab his mandolin." Lesley remembers that Steve was about 5'6", slim, with medium dark skin. Steve usually did the singing when he got together with either Harry or Lesley. The Tarter & Gay record (with Steve on vocals) was popular around Kingsport, according to Lesley, and he wonders why they didn't record more. They played together around the area until Steve's death. Lesley was in North Carolina visiting relatives when Steve died "around the late 1930's sometime," so his knowledge is secondhand. He thinks Steve died in Kingsport or Gate City, but he's not sure how.

Tarter taught Gay "everything that he knew on guitar," Lesley says. "Harry was a very good guitar accompanist, beautiful on second guitar." Harry was the backup man in the duo; Lesley never heard him sing, and he only played guitar. After Steve's death Harry all but gave up playing: "He was still around there. Harry never played too much by himself. If you wanted to hear him play, he would sit down and play you a piece or two." Lesley last saw Harry about 10 years ago in a restaurant in Johnson City, Tenn.

Lesley himself played with Steve a number of times. He recalls, "Steve and I went down in the country over in what they call the mountains, a place called Horse Creek. It was about seven miles out of town, there in Kingsport. We went over there one night and played for an old man there, he was 91 years old. It was his birthday. There was another time up on Wynolia Street, a doctor had a birthday party over there one night. Steve got me to go over there and play with him. Harry wasn't around that night. That was the first night that I ever did know that Steve could play piano. I would play second behind Steve. Once in a while on a blues or something that I knew, I would sing and Steve would follow me. Steve would get some of those old fast rags of his on guitar. He used to take 'Unknown Blues' and play it a little faster, put it up a little bit. He could play it fast, slow, any kind of way. He was a good guitar picker. He used to straight pick a lot, too. I never heard him to play with no steel (slide). I imagine that he could play with one."

Even after all these years Steve Tarter has retained a prominent place in Lesley's memory. He rates Steve in the same class of guitarists as Blind Lemon Jefferson, although they play in very dissimilar styles. It's a pity that we'll never get a chance to hear more of Tarter & Gay.