

TARTER AND GAY

REVISITED

by Kip Lornell & Roddy Moore

This article completes a trilogy that began over a decade ago in *Living Blues* 12 with a piece on Leslie Riddles. The second article (*LB* 18) contained information on Steve Tarter and Harry Gay, based on the reminiscences of Mr Riddles who knew both men during his early days in southwestern Virginia and northeastern Tennessee. At last the trilogy closes with what will almost certainly be the final word on this duo. This information was supplied by Harry Gay himself, whom we interviewed in Johnson City, Tennessee on September 11, 1976.

Like Leslie Riddles, Harry Gay was extremely impressed by Steve Tarter's

instrumental virtuosity. According to Gay, who was born in Gate City, Virginia, November 23, 1904, his partner 'could play anything, I mean anything, that had strings on it!'. Like many other black men of his generation Tarter could play a variety of stringed instruments — guitar, banjo, mandolin, tenor banjo, and piano. This was an age, after all, when swing music, blues and black stringbands were all popular and as an itinerate musician Steve Tarter certainly had to cover all these styles.

Although Harry Gay came from a musical family that included a father who played fiddle and two guitar picking brothers, he observed that 'I made a little better progress once Steve moved into town. First he taught me how to second

while he played the lead instrument like mandolin or violin. He'd be playing and he'd call the chord he wanted me to play.' Their partnership began in the middle 1920s after the two met near Johnson City. Harry is not certain how long Steve had been in the Johnson City area nor where he had been before, but he did think that Mr Tarter was born near Knoxville in about 1895.

After they had been playing together for several months, Tarter and Gay began to provide music for local dances. Despite their musical successes, Harry remarked that 'Steve was a funny fellow. As good as he was, he never did seem too interested in turning his music to any account, to his advantage. Sure, we'd play for dances . . . make a couple of bucks. [We would] play for the white folks, too.' Throughout their days of playing music together, Harry Gay worked at various blue-collar jobs around Johnson City, while Steve Tarter found employment repairing clocks and watches.

By the time the two recorded for Victor in 1928, they had been playing together for about three or four years. They participated in a large field recording session arranged by the Victor Company in October and November. The session documented the Carter Family and many other musicians, though Tarter and Gay were the only black musicians to record. For a more complete account of this session, please see *Old Time Music* 12.

Mr Gay recalls that two local musicians, the Babcock Brothers, informed them of the recording opportunity and brought them down from Gate City to audition. Victor liked them well enough to issue two of their songs, 'Brownie Blues' and 'Unknown Blues'. Unfortunately, the records did not sell well enough to warrant another session. The two men did earn fifty dollars for their troubles as well as a small part in the history of Afro-American music.

They continued playing together until Steve's death in the mid-1930s, working in the country between Johnson City and Gate City as well as the coal camps of southwestern Virginia. Things were going well until Steve Tarter died suddenly of an apparent heart attack.

Not long after that surprising incident, Harry Gay slowed down his career as a musician. When we met him in 1976, he was a very genial, short, wiry man who still played guitar upon occasion. We were impressed by the impact that Steve Tarter had made upon Mr Gay's life, both as a musician and a friend.

Since we met Harry Gay, he has died. In December of 1984 his niece told us that her uncle passed away about four years ago. Gay's death, along with that of Leslie Riddles at about the same time, essentially closes a small chapter of blues history. ■

◆ Kip Lornell has just finished the manuscript for a reference book on blues, gospel and hill-billy recordings in Virginia, to be published by the University Press of Kentucky.



Harry Gay (courtesy Kip Lornell/Blue Ridge Institute)