

MERCY DEE WALTON

Mercy Dee Walton is one of those blues artists who are not appreciated as widely as their talent would deserve it. Born in Waco, Texas, on August 30, 1915 (other sources give Aug. 3 or 13 of the same year), he learned to play the piano from various obscure local players, before moving to the West Coast in the late thirties, doing farm work during the day and playing small clubs at night. His first opportunity to record his barrelhouse piano playing and laid-back singing came in 1949 for the tiny Spire label out of Fresno, California. Of the four songs, "Lonesome Cabin Blues" provided Mercy Dee with his first, albeit minor, chart entry. These solo efforts were followed by 12 titles for Imperial Records 1950/51, adding guitar and bass to the line-up (plus an appearance as vocalist on a Big Jay McNeely title). Walton's biggest chart success came in 1953, when Specialty issued the song he is best known for: "One Room Country Shack". This tale of rural loneliness is now a certified classic blues-standard, with more well-known versions recorded by Mose Allison, Buddy Guy, Junior Wells, and many others. Specialty Records in the U.S. have recently issued a CD with Mercy Dee's complete Specialty recordings, including several previously unissued titles. After just one session for Oakland's Rhythm label in 1954, the Bihari Brothers' Flair label unsuccessfully tried to market him as an R&B artist in 1955: the lightweight material didn't suit Mercy Dee's introverted style, and only the last two titles he recorded for them were convincing. Walton didn't record again until six years later, when Arhoolie Records' Chris Strachwitz discovered him "playing piano in a cocktail lounge, wearing a turban". From February to March of 1961, Strachwitz recorded him extensively, partly in the sympathetic company of harmonica player Sidney Maiden, guitarist K.C. Douglas, and drummer Otis Cherry. Most of these recordings are currently available on an Arhoolie and an Original Blues Classics CD.

On this CD, we present Mercy Dee's recordings for the Spire, Imperial, Rhythm, and Flair labels, almost everything he recorded that's not on the CDs mentioned above. Although he was a more than competent pianist, the most exceptional aspect of Mercy Dee Walton's blues were his lyrics. He is rightfully often compared to Percy Mayfield in his ability to craft an emotional short story out of the limited blues form, although his outlook is definitely more rural than Mayfield's. It is, therefore, more interesting, to take a closer look at the lyrics to the songs presented herein. Walton's first recording deals with a topic that had already been out-of-date by the time it was issued (as Hank Davis points out in his excellent liner notes to a previous reissue of some of this material). His baby has the G.I. Fever, *"every time she sees a brown-clad hero, she breaks right down and clowns."* The only solution Mercy Dee sees is to go *"down to the draft board. I'm going to fall down on my knees. I'm asking to give me some position, in this man's army please."*

"Lonesome Cabin Blues" is reminiscent of Curtis Jones' similar Bedroom situation:

It is lonesome in my cabin, just me and my telephone (2x)

Lord, I has no one to cling to, no one to call my own.

Now, the nights are long and gloomy, no one knockin' on my door (2x)

Lord, no one to feel my sympathy, no one to say bello.

These ol' lonesome cabin blues, is just much too much for me (2x)

Lord, I'm gonna find me some other woman, just to keep my company.

"Evil And Hanky" should rather read "Hanky" judging from the way he clearly pronounces the word:

I'm so evil and bankty, but I cannot help myself (2x)

Now when I start lovin' my baby, sbe turn out lovin' someone else.

I'm tryin' to quit you (once now, baby,) go away and let you be (2x)

I don't know what you're putting down, now, mama, but you sure got a bold on me.

(Now, since) I know you're tryin' to leave me, you think that I'm dumb to the fact

But you might as well straighten up now, baby, because it ain't goin' to be like that.

Another tale of mistreatment follows in "Travellin' Alone Blues":

Now, since I woke up this mornin', 'bout half past three

Lord, callin' my baby, wasn't nobody home but me

From now on, yes I'm travelin' 'lone

I done lost all faith in love, that means women comes on too strong.

Now, since you got me out here baymin' (?), and I never slaved before

And you take all my little money, and jump it up with Mr. So-and-so

From now on, oh yes I'm travelin' 'lone

I done lost all faith in love, for these women comes on too strong.

I'll never do for nary 'nother woman, the way I've done for you

If I bring in 19 dollars, sbe got to bring in 22

I'll never do for nary 'nother woman, baby the way I've done for you

I done lost all faith in love, and these women comes on too strong.

At Imperial, the rather prominent, often over-busy guitarist tends to obscure another batch of outstanding and sometimes unusual words:

I'm goin' to play it cool, so these blues they'll let me be (2x)

Get myself a homely baby, with a face like a chimpanzee.

(sounds like "chimpanese" in Walton's pronunciation)

Never give in to a woman, seem that's when the trouble start (2x)
She'll take all of your money, then go and give someone else her heart.
If you feel yourself slippin', please don't let your baby know (2x)
Say, the first time you show signs of weakness, that's when trouble rolls up to your door.

My life is blank and empty, (just) like a pea out of a shell (2x)
Seems like my heart done froze up, and won't accept nobody else.
I live in a world of shadows, it almost drives me insane (2x)
For me life don't hold nothin', but empty hope in vain.
These days is so blank and empty, these nights are so lonely and still (2x)
Maybe I'll live again, people, but I doubt if I ever will.

It's all over, baby, please try and understand (2x)
Your love have become adjourned, go and find yourself some other man.
Your tears they don't move me, I don't want to bear your words of woe (2x)
Where was all your love and affection, six long lonely months ago?
You heard my story, here's where I get off (2x)
That means it's all over baby, no need for you to cry and clown.

I got a bird-brain baby, with a heart the size of a mustard seed (2x)
She keeps me on the zoom, tryin' to give her everything she need.
She think money's just a coupon, to be issued every day (2x)
She say, if I can't steady issue, she'll pack and be on her way.
She got a face like a baby, and a voice like a kitten swine (2x)
I guess I'll always love, that bird-brain baby of mine.

The second Imperial session brought a more restrained guitarist, and another batch of excellent songs:
I'm goin' back down in the big foot country, I ain't comin' back west no more (2x)
Lord, I'm tired of bein' broke and bungry, and scufflin' around from door to door.
I've scuffled from San Francisco, plumb down in old Mexico (2x)
Lord, I'm goin' way back down in Bam, where I won't have to scuffle no more.
I've tried so hard and failed, people, I've truly done the best that I could (2x)
Oh, but the coast must be too great for me, I swear it just don't mean me no good.

This is my final warning, baby, my mind have reached the danger zone (2x)
Lord, before I stand to see you leave me, I would rather see you dead and gone.
It makes me bawl just like a baby, just to imagine you with someone else (2x)
Oh see, your life wouldn't be worth a nickel, baby please don't make me commit myself.
Give me a chance to cool down now, baby, mama please try and take it slow (2x)
Oh, since any move may prove dangerous, and cause crepe to be hangin' on your door.

Roamin' and ramblin' must be my birtbmark, (seems) I just can't keep it out of my mind (2x)
Like a rollin' stone gathers no moss, I don't ever have a lousy dime.
I'm so tired, blue and disgusted, I regret the day that I were born (2x)
I walks over good things goin' to notbin', and I ain't never, never got no bome.
Don't ever become a rambler, if you ever expect things to come your way (2x)
Or (Lord?) ridin' rails and handouts will become your bobby, and the garbage can will be your pay.

You'll have to walk the straight and narrow, (baby) if you wanna get along with me (2x)
I've been bookin', now I'm evil and bankty, as any one man can be.
I'm wise to all your jivin' tricks, baby, beggin' and pleadin' turned my heart to stone (2x)
You'll have to walk the straight and narrow with me, baby, or I swear you won't last long.
You've heard my story, baby, this is the time to make up your mind (2x)
Oh, if you can't play it straight with me, baby, I swear no mercy will you find.

Whenever love starts fadin', you might as well pack your grab (grib?) and go (2x)
You may be ever so good a scuffler, for love cannot be bought with dough.
You might as well be a beggar, as simply a bloomin' millionaire
You might as well be a beggar, as to be a bloomin' millionaire
As for bought love, it's so deadly, it's been proven that it ain't nowhere.
So, if ever your baby leaves you, (boys) please don't try and buy her back (2x)
Say, you'll only make bad matters worse, and I swear that's a natural fact.

I can't help it at all now, baby, if I got those old old-fashioned ways (2x)
I can't stand you out of my sight, baby, and I don't care what no one do's (!) or say.
Says, I'll beg, steal and borrow, bring it all and lay it in your hand (2x)
Says, I would rather be broke and hungry, than to see you smile with some other man.
Old-fashioned ways may be worrisome, compared to these modern days and times (2x)
Oh, says, but the way you love me, baby, I just can't keep you out of my mind.

*They call me the happy bachelor, I'm goin' to always try and keep it that way (2x)
I'm tired of my heart bein' broke in little pieces, over some chick's low down and dirty ways.
When I leave there's no one to scold me, when I come home there's no one to fuss and fight (2x)
When I dress my whole family's tart, and my board bill's always so nice and light.
Womens ask me why am I a bachelor, they say that I'll want to be loved some day (2x)
But if they had been beckled by love as I have, they'd all be the same old way.*

*I guess this is the pay-off, baby, for treatin' you the way I did
I guess this is the pay-off, baby, for treatin' you so nice and kind
Oh, say you're leavin' me this mornin', I'm standin' bere uringin' my hands and cryin'.
Your heart is like a rock-bed, your mind's like a cobra in the (a) curl (2x)
(sounds almost like "quirl" the way Mercy Dee pronounces it)
But if I could change your mind this mornin', I would give(s) anythin' in this world.
Life is so sweet when love first enter, you feel like a king on a throne (2x)
'ord*, but the pay-off may be so bitter, you regret the day that you were born.*

* Mercy Dee often introduces lines with this exclamation which lies somewhere between "Lord", "or" and "oh".

Of Mercy Dee's two titles that were issued in 1954 on Rhythm Records, one was an instrumental, and one further title wasn't issued until the 60's on an Arhoolie LP. L.C. Robinson's steel offers a welcome variation in the guitar department. In "Trailing My Baby", Walton hints at something terrible happening when he finally finds his baby, even if he has to ride a horse in order to catch her:

*I've looked all over the city, but my baby she can't be found (2x)
Newspaper's gonna sell for three and a quarter, the day I track my baby down.
She been gone four days and two hours, and I'm 'bout to blow my stack (2x)
If I don't find her pretty soon, people, I'll be a ravin' maniac
Everywhere I go it's the same old story, sorry that things turn out this way (2x)
But I'm on her trail like the Northwest Mountie, guess I'll bring her in some day.*

When Mercy Dee Walton arrived at the Bihari's office sometime in 1955, the brothers must have told him that his sad songs of unrequited love and lonesome life weren't about to sell. Thus, his first four titles that were issued on his first two Flair singles were vain attempt to cash in on the rise of rock'n'roll, even including a direct take-off on Chuck Berry's "Maybellene". Musically these titles bop along nicely, but the lyrics really aren't worth quoting, in the case of "True Love" it's only an obnoxious vocal group shouting "True love will

surely find a way" over and over again. What a departure in lyrical contents! As these tryouts didn't sell either, Mercy Dee was allowed to go back to what he could do best for his last Flair release:

*Have you ever been way out in the country, peoples, during the harvest time (2x)
Pickin' fruit or draggin' a big fat sack of cotton, and the sun beamin' down your spine.
High noon I fall up under some shade-tree, tryin' to figure what move to make (2x)
12:30 I'm right back down between two middles, tryin' to get my numbers straight
If I ever get from around this harvest, I don't even want to see a rose-bush grow (2x)
And if anybody ask me about the country, Lord have mercy on his soul.*

Mercy Dee recorded this theme again, for Arhoolie ("Harvest Time") as well as for Bluesville ("Have You Ever Been Out In The Country"). He must have had it fixed in his mind, because he didn't change a word when he recorded it six years later for Bluesville, and only made a very slight change in one line for the Arhoolie version. Rural hardships were a frequent topic in his songs, reaching a peak with "Dark Muddy Bottom" for Specialty. We are closing this collection with one more typical Mercy Dee lyric about his "Stubborn Woman":

*I got a mule-head woman, and she really have got me booked (2x)
She keeps ber mind in the gutter, and ber hands on my pocketbook.
She only keeps me for convenience, so stubborn she won't do a tbing I say (2x)
When she's through I'll be so beat and disgusted, I'll have to give the poor house a plea.
Well, there's no need of me squawkin', or ringin' my bands and cryin' (2x)
I know I'll always love, that mule-head woman of mine.*

Nicholas Neptune, 1994