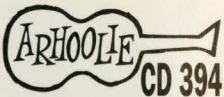


# ROBERT PETE WILLIAMS

## Vol. 1 – I'm Blue as a Man Can Be



1. PARDON DENIED AGAIN (4:44)
2. THIS WILD OLD LIFE (4:20)
3. JUST TIPPIN' IN (4:10) (\*)
4. LOUISE (4:25)
5. CHURCH ON FIRE (Take 2) (3:00) (\*)
6. TEXAS BLUES (5:05)
7. I'M BLUE AS A MAN  
CAN BE (5:25)
8. UP AND DOWN BLUES (6:00)
9. SO MUCH IS HAPPENIN' IN  
THIS WICKED WORLD (4:13) (\*)
10. COME HERE BABY (2:00)
11. LEEVE CAMP BLUES (7:07)
12. TWO WINGS (3:42) (\*)
13. ANGOLA SPECIAL (4:12)
14. MOTHERLESS CHILDREN  
HAVE A HARD TIME (5:12)
15. PLEASE LORD, HELP ME  
ON MY WAY (4:00) (\*)

(\*) = previously unreleased

Total Time: 69:00



### Robert Pete Williams —

vocals with 6- and 12-string guitar

Recorded by Dr. Harry Oster at Angola State Penitentiary, Louisiana in 1959 and 1960, except #3, which was recorded by Chris Strachwitz in Berkeley, Ca., April 1970.

Edited & annotated by Henry Kaiser  
Produced by Chris Strachwitz & Harry Oster

Cover photo by Harry Oster  
Cover by Wayne Pope

#1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8 & 10 previously issued on Arhoolie LP 2015, # 11 & 14 previously issued on LP 2011; # 13 previously issued on Folklyric LP 109 & 77LP 12/17. #3, 5, 9, 12, & 15 previously unissued

*This CD #394 is Volume one of two. Volume two is available on Arhoolie CD #395.*

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# ROBERT PETE WILLIAMS

## *I'm Blue As A Man Can Be*





## Robert Pete Williams

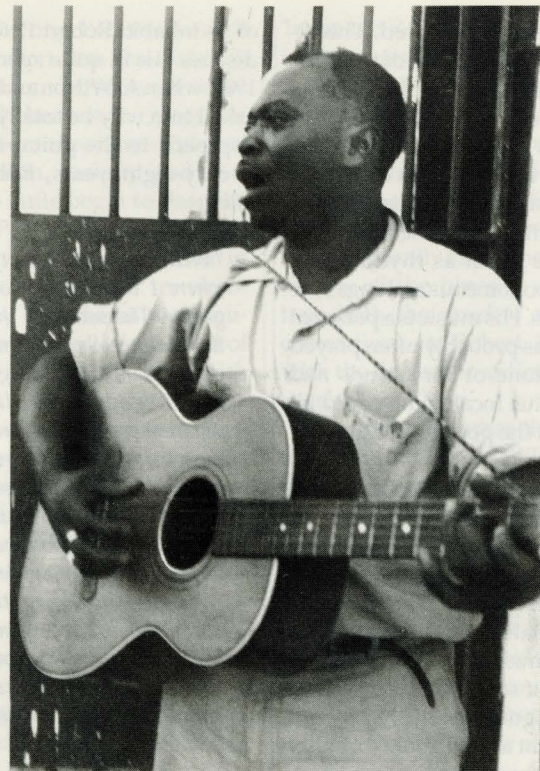
### *"I'm as Blue as a Man Can Be"*

Robert Pete Williams was one of America's most unique and personally expressive bluesmen. Like Skip James, Joseph Spence, and John Lee Hooker, Robert Pete developed a technically complex and original guitar style that he used to accompany his often extemporaneous vocals. In fact, as Al Wilson pointed out in **The Little Sandy Review** (Vol 2: 1 & 2), Robert Pete fulfilled a unique condition in blues, one which other players merely hinted at: a musical style in which improvisation played nearly as important a role as predetermined factors. Since Robert Pete's recording career did not begin until the late 1950s, and his music was marketed almost exclusively to white, urban international audience, he had little influence on his blues contemporaries. His music was so strikingly unusual, idiosyncratic and complex that it seemed only to have influenced a very small number of later artists. Ry Cooder, Captain

Beefheart, Miroslav Tadic, and myself are a few that come to mind.

Robert Pete's lyrics and musical accompaniment were often improvised. Each performance is a music dedicated to the moment and tied to other significant events, feelings and thoughts in Robert Pete's life. He recorded quite a few albums for various labels during the 1960s and the first line that he spoke or sang was often used by the producers as the title of his original improvisations. During this period he often considered highly personal and poetically original topics in such songs as *Ugly and Wrong*, (heard on his Takoma album).

The musical language that Robert Pete set his lyrics in was modally based rather than employing what Al Wilson called "the supreme blandness of the I-IV-V progressions of American pop music or still worse, the ever-so-happy ragtime chord progression" that most other Blind Lemon Jefferson-in-



*Robert Pete Williams at Angola, March 1959*

fluenced bluesmen followed. This fidelity to the modal nature of the African music from which the blues sprang is one of Robert Pete's greatest strengths. His music is often rhythmically complex and tends not to fall into the even measures and phrase lengths of most country bluesmen. In fact, Robert Pete is about as rhythmically strange and spontaneous as things ever get in the blues. His music is a personal music, and was probably often played for himself alone or for friends and neighbors in his locale who could all readily accept the personal originality of his sound.

Robert Pete's prison and more traditional blues, often as not, can be analyzed in terms of social commentary, love songs and gospel/religious numbers. There are several other particularly special facets to the work of this unique musician. In addition to being a kind of social art, the music of Robert Pete's guitar music has a kind of transcendent and visionary quality that seems to come from somewhere other than the normal world that most

of us inhabit. Robert Pete was able to discuss this in quite specific terms. In 1967, when Al Wilson and David Evans asked him why he totally changed his approach to the guitar at the age of twenty-eight years, Robert Pete replied:

*"Well, I changed my style when I see where I could find more notes on a guitar. The sound of the atmosphere, the weather changed my style. But I could hear, since being an air-music man. The air came in different, with a different sound of music. Well, the atmosphere, when the wind blowing carries music along. I don't know if it affects you or not, but it's a sounding that's in the air, you see? And I don't know where it comes from—it could be from the airplanes, of the moaning of automobiles, but anyway it leaves an air current in the air, you see. That gets in the wind, makes a sounding, you know? And that sounding works up to be a blues."*

Listen to *Louise* on this CD, with its

odd droning B string. Like the work of Skip James, Robert Pete can instantly create a unique and transcendent atmosphere with the sound of his guitar and voice. The normal musical language of rhythm, melody and harmony can not quite begin to describe how Robert Pete managed such effects. Certainly his music has much in common with many other transcendent, visionary and shamanistic musics from all over the planet: a kind of magic power. This quality, along with the essentially modal nature of Robert Pete's music and his rhythmic complexity and irregularity, certainly has much in common with the African stringed instrument musics that may have served as the wellsprings of American rural blues guitar. The *tidinit* string music of what is now considered Mauritania (on Ocar 558532/33), sounds surprisingly like Robert Pete with its sudden cascades of notes and its un-notatable rhythmic phrasing. We can also hear similarities in some of the work of present day African acoustic guitarists such as Ali Farka

Toure and Robert Pete. Ali Farka Toure has often stated in interviews that his is the tribal music of the Tamashek people. The songs of Ali Farka Toure that most resemble those of Robert Pete are the ones that Ali Farka Toure cites as being Tamashek in origin. While it may be difficult or impossible to academically know the true African origins of the blues, I can certainly hear both the musical and spiritual connections in Robert Pete's music with the ancient traditions of African musical art.

In putting together these two volumes of Robert Pete Williams for Arhoolie, I listened to about four hours of previously released and unreleased material, mostly from late 1950s recordings by Harry Oster. Chris Strachwitz tells me that many of the gospel numbers were never issued because he had planned a prison religious songs LP that was never released. These two volumes begin to give a more complete picture of the religious work of Robert Pete. Several other blues songs may not have been re-



leased due to the extreme weirdness of the guitar phrasing. Several of those numbers, such as *Just Tippin' In* are included in these two volumes. Volume II features an unusual and poetic monologue/interview with Robert Pete, that gives more of a sense of his human personality and personal style.

I saw Robert Pete play only once back in 1968 or 69 when the Boston Blues Society presented him in Cambridge, Mass. I remember shaking hands with him; his grip had the total softness of an Asian martial arts master or another great bluesman I once interviewed, John Lee Hooker. He seemed to be a gentle man who disappeared in the worlds of his music as he sang and played. I think that Robert Pete's life and music were the same thing. They were one. This is a great and rare quality for a performer and another indication of the magic of his work.

*(Henry Kaiser, April 1993)*

Note: the texts to "Pardon Denied Again," "Up And Down Blues," "I'm As Blues As A Man Can Be," and "Louise" can be found in **Living Country Blues** by Harry Oster 1969, (Folklore Associates, Detroit, Mich.) along with many other blues recorded by Dr. Oster during his years at LSU in Baton Rouge, La. (from the mid-50s until 1963) when he was producing records for his Folklyric label, many of which are now being reissued by Arhoolie Records, who purchased the label on May 1, 1970.

*Also Available:*

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*Robert Pete Williams at Angola, March 1959*

# ROBERT PETE WILLIAMS

## Vol. 1 – I'm Blue as a Man Can Be



### Over 60 Minutes of Classic BLUES

1. PARDON DENIED AGAIN (4:44)
2. THIS WILD OLD LIFE (4:20)
3. JUST TIPPIN' IN (4:09) (\*)
4. LOUISE (4:24)
5. CHURCH ON FIRE #2 (3:01) (\*)
6. TEXAS BLUES (5:07)
7. I'M BLUE AS A MAN CAN BE (5:23)
8. UP AND DOWN BLUES (6:00)
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THIS WICKED WORLD (4:13) (\*)
10. COME HERE BABY (1:57)
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HAVE A HARD TIME (5:24)
15. PLEASE LORD, HELP ME  
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(\*) = previously unreleased. Total Time: 65:00

**Robert Pete Williams** — vocals with  
6- and 12- string guitar

Recorded by Dr. Harry Oster at Angola State  
Penitentiary, Louisiana in 1959 and 1960.

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