

Elder Roma Wilson
"This Train is a Clean Train"

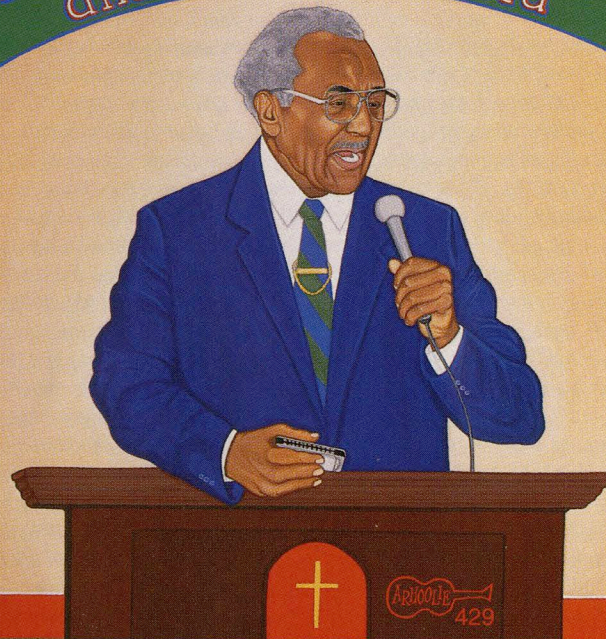
Arhoolie CD 429



"It is a rare and great gift that as we stumble to the end of the 20th Century we are blessed to hear and witness the soul moving music genius of Elder Roma Wilson. His harp, his voice, his breath are one. Sitting inside the sounds of his singing and playing is like opening the front door to walk into tomorrow with the best of the solid grounding of yesterdays keeping you steady. Let the world say, 'Amen'."

(Bernice Johnson Reagon)

ELDER ROMA WILSON
and his harmonica



"THIS TRAIN"

Elder Roma Wilson

"This Train is a Clean Train"

I first heard of harmonica blower, Roma Wilson in 1963. I was working in Mississippi as staff coordinator for SNCC, a civil rights organization, and met blind musician, Rev. Leon Pinson, playing guitar in the streets of the Mississippi Delta. Pinson reluctantly blew into a racked harmonica as he slid his pocket knife across his "talking guitar" and the saints came marching home! He complained that the harp took too much wind but added that his former partner in song... Elder Roma Wilson... had an inexhaustible wind supply. Wilson, a former sharecropper, he said, moved from Mississippi to Arkansas and then to Michigan.

When SNCC organized a freedom song festival in Greenwood, Miss. in the 1960s, I recommended that Pinson/Wilson and civil rights legends Fannie Lou Hamer and Amsie Moore perform with visitors

Pete Seeger, Theo Bikel, and Bob Dylan at the first integrated festival performance in the Mississippi Delta. We could not, however, locate Elder Wilson.

Almost thirty years later, I finally met Roma Wilson at his home in Red Hills, Miss. Leon Pinson had recorded a tape of Roma and himself and sold three of the tapes to Quint Davis (of the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival), Ry Cooder, and me after a Martin Luther King Center Benson & Hedges concert I had produced in Atlanta, Georgia. Pinson had discovered his former partner when word reached him that Wilson had moved back home to Mississippi. The duo was immediately recommended to appear at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival.

Roma Wilson at 80 years had more wind than any harp blower I had ever heard. I had listened to Sonny Boy Williamson (Rice Miller) in Helena, Arkansas,

during my college years and knew Peg Leg Sam from his Chatum County Fair performances in my native North Carolina. Neither man could match the prowess and energy of a young Roma Wilson. His instrument seems to be a part of his voice as he plays endless riffs with ease.

Elder Wilson plays African American folk spirituals dating back to slavery. He had learned to play the mouth harp as a boy with old worn-out harmonicas discarded by his older brothers. Wilson learned to suck or "choke" these harps in order to get a new sound out of them. He listened to both traditional secular and sacred harp masters and became known throughout the north Mississippi Church circuits for his gospel version of the traditional folk tune, "This Train."

Wilson and Pinson received standing ovations in New Orleans and were booked in 1991 by the Southern Arts Federation as part of its first Deep South Musical Roots Tour. Wilson has since worked in "music in the schools" programs in the Mississippi Delta, played engagements throughout the South and in 1994 was honored with a National Heritage Fellow-

ship by the National Endowment for the Arts and received this prize at the annual program in Washington, D.C. On that occasion producer Chris Strachwitz met Elder Wilson who was accompanied by his son Sammy Lee Wilson on second harp and his daughter Esther M. Gray on guitar. In the 1970s Mr. Strachwitz had reissued "Lily of the Valley" (as "Stand By Me") from Elder Wilson's only issued 78 rpm record on an album of historic gospel music, which Mike Seeger has called "the single most important selection by multi-harp players in existence". Chris was overwhelmed by the performance that night and was delighted to finally meet the man who had created that magnificent recording (# 7 on this disc).

This CD is the first recording Wilson has ever consented to be produced. It contains all of Elder Wilson's historic family recordings from the late 1940s and also shows the present repertory and energy of this 84 year old master of the folk spiritual and gospel harmonica. This Train is a Clean Train and Elder Wilson is still at the throttle!

(Worth Long - 1995)

WILSON WINS HERITAGE FELLOWSHIP FOR TRADITIONAL HARMONICA SOUND

By Jane Hill

(Reprinted with permission from The Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal, 3/23/95)

BLUE SPRINGS - Elder Roma Wilson didn't discover he was world famous until he was 80 years old.

While on a trip to New Orleans an East German man, who heard Wilson playing the harmonica, gave him a record including three songs Wilson and his three sons played in a Detroit record shop in the mid-40s.

"I didn't know a thing about it," Wilson said, shaking his head "But people in Germany, New Zealand, Australia and all over had been listening to me play for years and years."

Wilson, 83, is finally winning some recognition for his love of spiritual music.

Early this month, Wilson was named as one of 11 folk artists from across the nation to win a National Heritage Fellowship grant given by the National En-

dowment for the Arts. The fellowship carries with it a \$10,000 onetime grant and an official ceremony honoring his achievement to be held in Washington D.C. this fall.

"I feel grateful about it," Wilson said. "All my years of playing the harmonica and I never believed it would lead to this."

Wilson's music has enjoyed recent accolades at the Chicago Blues Festival, the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife and other traditional American musical festivals where his unique style is gaining fans and students. A tribute album to the legendary blues artist Robert Johnson on which Wilson played his version of the spiritual "This Train (Is Bound For Glory)" was nominated for a Grammy Award in 1993.

Worth Long, a folklorist for the state of Georgia, who nominated Wilson for the fellowship, said all the attention Wilson has received recently is well-deserved.

"Elder Wilson is the foremost spiritual gospel harmonica player alive. It's as simple as that," Long said in a recent interview.

Finding his own voice

Wilson, born in Hickory Flat on December 22, 1910 and raised in Union County, began playing the harmonica when he was about 13 years old.

"I would listen to the old gentlemen around me play and I started to pick it up from them," Wilson said.

Because he could not afford a new harmonica, Wilson trained himself on old mouth harps played by his older brothers. In order to get a traditional sound out of the worn out instruments, Wilson had to develop a new way of playing and his unique "choke" method of harmonica playing was born.

"I learned the notes from the older gentlemen where I could play them OK then I would get off by myself in the

woods and feel for the notes and the sound I wanted," Wilson said. "I like the harmonica to sing the words I would sing if I was singing the song by myself. Mostly I developed my own way of playing to suit me."

Wilson became an ordained minister in the Pentecostal Church at the age of 18 and with another musical minister, the Rev. Leon Pinson of New Albany, he traveled North Mississippi preaching the gospel and playing music.

The two men achieved a certain amount of fame on the church circuit, with songs like "Lily of the Valley," "Better Get Ready" and "This Train," which became a special favorite with congregations because of Wilson's ability to make his harmonica chug, blow and whistle like an approaching train.

Wilson and his family moved to Michigan in the early 1940s. Wilson worked in a metal foundry in Muskegon until the foundry closed in 1942. Then he and his family moved to Detroit.

To make ends meet, Wilson said he, three of his sons and his daughter would go down to Hastings Street, a three mile

stretch in Detroit that served as a center of black cultural life in Detroit at the time. There, Wilson and his children would play spiritual music for the crowds of people playing on the street for enough money to make ends meet, he said.

"They would let you play in vacant lots because no one was using them," he said. "There were so many people down there on a Saturday, the crowds went on for miles."

Wilson had taught his three sons how to blow the harmonica. His daughter, too small to hold and play her guitar upright, learned to play by laying it flat on her lap and pressing the frets from the top.

One day, Wilson and his sons were invited to play harmonica in Joe's Record Shop on Hastings St.

"We didn't know he was recording us," Wilson said. "But we played about three songs for him and they are the same songs that turned up on the albums over in all those other countries."

Wilson moved back to Mississippi in

the 1970s after the death of his first wife. Today he lives in the Red Hill community with his second wife of 18 years, Ruth, who knew him in his early ministry days in the churches of rural Mississippi.

Wilson reunited with Rev. Pinson as well and the two still play music at churches when invited for special programs.

The re-release of Wilson's early recordings in the 1980s caused some misconceptions about him and his music. One record company writer went so far as to assume that Wilson had been taught by earlier blues masters and, "as blues legends claim that one sold one's soul to the devil to play that well."

"We had to tell them that ain't true," Wilson said with a laugh. "I'm alive and well in Mississippi and I still don't play no blues." Though he has been used and misunderstood as an artist, Wilson said he is not adverse to the idea of being recorded again.

(Jane Hill)

For a more detailed account of Elder Wilson's life, note article/interview by Alan Young in Blues & Rhythm, #81, August 1993.

Elder Roma Wilson

"This Train is a Clean Train"

1. Ain't It a Shame
2. Give Me My Flowers While I Live
3. This Train is a Clean Train
4. The Lord Will Make a Way, Yes He Will
5. My Lord's Gonna Move this Wicked Race
6. Gonna Wait Till a Change Come
7. Lily of the Valley (Stand By Me)
8. Better Get Ready
9. Trouble Everywhere
10. Got Just What I Wanted
11. This Train
12. Climbing Jacob's Ladder
13. I Don't Care What Skeptics Say
14. Death Ain't Nothing But a Thief
and a Robber
15. Get Away Jordan
16. I'm So Glad, Trouble Won't Last Always
17. Amazing Grace
18. Motherless Children
19. Have You Tried Jesus - He's Alright
20. This Train is a Clean Train

Elder Roma Wilson - vocals and harmonica on all selections;

6 - 11: accompanied almost certainly by his sons Clyde (age 11) and Sammy Lee (age 13) on additional harmonicas (Detroit, Mi. ca. 1948);

13 & 14: accompanied by his wife, Esther Ruth;

19 & 20: accompanied by the congregation of Johnson's Chapel, Church of the Living God, in Abideen, Miss.

Recorded by Chris Strachwitz and Worth Long in Red Hills, Miss. (near Tupelo) on November 22 & 23, 1994 (# 19 & 20 were recorded on November 23, 1994 in Abideen).

Selections # 6 - 11 were recorded by Joe Von Battle at his record shop, 3530 Hastings Street in Detroit, Mich., in 1948.

Cover art by Mary Proenza

Back cover photo © by Chris Strachwitz

Produced by Chris Strachwitz & Elder Roma Wilson

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ELDER ROMA WILSON

"This Train is a Clean Train"



1. AIN'T IT A SHAME
2. GIVE ME MY FLOWERS WHILE I LIVE
3. THIS TRAIN IS A CLEAN TRAIN
4. THE LORD WILL MAKE A WAY, YES HE WILL
5. MY LORD'S GONNA MOVE THIS WICKED RACE
6. GONNA WAIT TILL A CHANGE COME
7. LILY OF THE VALLEY (STAND BY ME)
8. BETTER GET READY
9. TROUBLE EVERYWHERE
10. GOT JUST WHAT I WANTED
11. THIS TRAIN
12. CLIMBING JACOB'S LADDER
13. I DON'T CARE WHAT SKEPTICS SAY
14. DEATH AIN'T NOTHING BUT A THIEF
AND A ROBBER
15. GET AWAY JORDAN
16. I'M SO GLAD, TROUBLE WON'T LAST ALWAYS
17. AMAZING GRACE
18. MOTHERLESS CHILDREN
19. HAVE YOU TRIED JESUS - HE'S ALRIGHT
20. THIS TRAIN IS A CLEAN TRAIN

Total Time: 73:00

Elder Roma Wilson - vocals and harmonica on all selections; (accompanied as noted on page 7).

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(Bernice Johnson Reagon)

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