

## CD-A

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2. CANE CUT MAN (5:10)
3. MY DADDY WAS A HOODOO MAN (4:42)
4. NO MORE SWEET POTATOES (4:30)
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6. COWS LOVE MUSIC (4:37)
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10. BEEN MISTREATED SO LONG (3:52)

(total time 47:00)

**Robert Pete Williams** – vocals and guitar  
(slide on # 4)

All tracks recorded by Dr. Harry Oster in Louisiana and Iowa.

All notes and comments by Elijah Wald

Edited by Chris Strachwitz & Erik Keilholtz.

Cover photo by Chris Strachwitz.

Inside tray photo by Paul Oliver.

All selections composed or arranged by Robert Pete Williams, © by Tradition Music Co. (BMI),  
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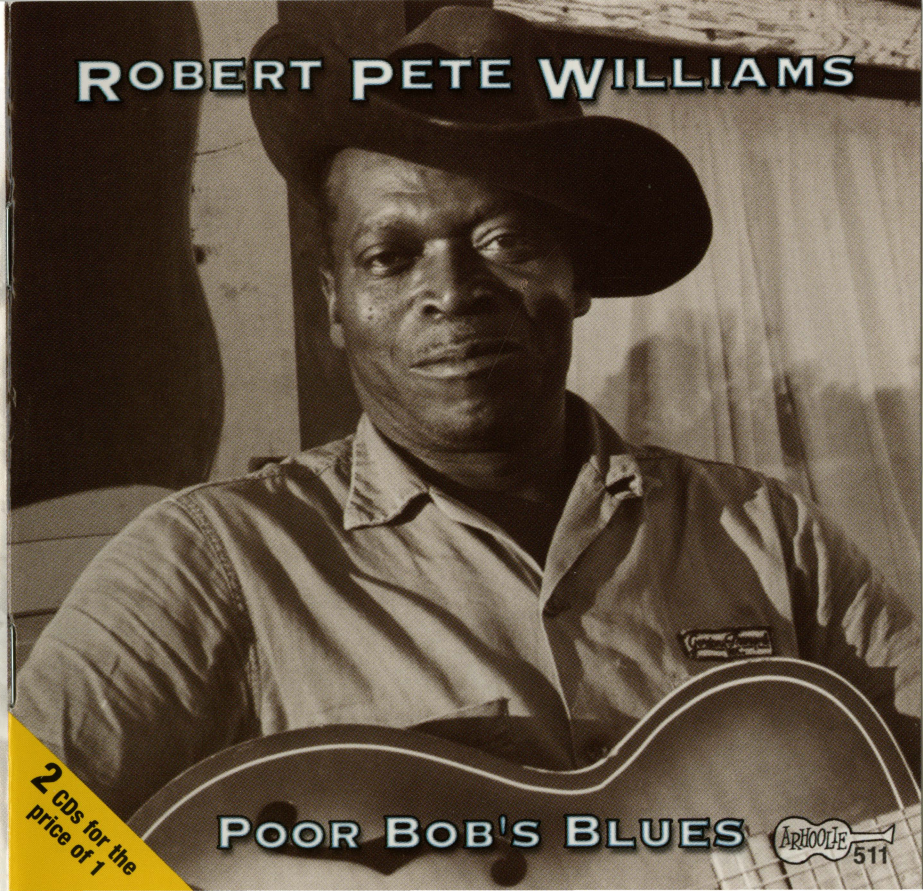
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# ROBERT PETE WILLIAMS



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## POOR BOB'S BLUES







Photo by Chris Strachwitz.

**ROBERT PETE WILLIAMS** was a unique talent, the most unusual of all the bluesmen “discovered” during the blues revival that began in the late 1950s. Indeed, it is likely that without the revival audience Williams could never have been successful outside his own local circle. While most bluesmen were expert entertainers, assimilating the trends of their time and able to play versions of all the top blues hits, Williams insistently went his own way, and even when he played a familiar song it was often all but unrecognizable. He was probably closer to John Lee Hooker than to any other important artist, but nothing in his music suggests that he had adapted his style from Hooker’s. Instead, they had each reached back to the pre-blues “field holler” tradition, and built styles that retained the free-form, unrhymed approach that in everyone else’s hands had been streamlined into a more formal and regular blues structure.

Because of this approach, Williams is the most African-sounding of all the African-American rural musicians recorded in the twentieth century. The way he sets up a fast, repetitive pattern on the guitar, then sings over it in loose, unrhymed phrases, stretching the lines as his mood carries him and often spending a whole song without changing his underlying chord, is uncannily like the approach still common in West Africa. Indeed, if one ignores the fact that he is singing in English, he sounds more like an African musician than he does like almost any of his contemporaries from the American south. (A far more complex and technical analysis of Williams’ guitar style, done by Al Wilson in the 1960s, can be found in Peter Guralnick’s *Feel Like Going Home*.)

The development of Williams’ style is something of a mystery. He told interviewers that he was influenced by Blind Lemon Jefferson, and also by



Peetie Wheatstraw, whose work was such a staple of his performances in his youthful days as a dance musician that he became locally known as “Peetie Wheatstraw.” What makes this mysterious is that, although Wheatstraw was a fine, soulful singer (and one of the strongest influences on Robert Johnson), his songs were completely regular in both meter and rhyme scheme, and it is hard to detect any hint of his influence in Williams’ recordings. Apparently sometime in his late twenties, Williams had completely reshaped his approach to music. As he explained to the blues scholar David Evans:

“The sound of the atmosphere, the weather changed my style.... 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 affect 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 come from the airplanes, or the moaning of automobiles, but anyhow it leaves an air current ... and that sounding works up to a blues.”

In this, as in many other respects, Williams can seem like a living embodiment of the most familiar clichés of blues criticism. Since the 1940s, writers have regularly described blues as improvised, personal music, sung by poor black southerners to express their sorrows, and reaching back to slavery times and the African folk tradition. Blues singers are often portrayed as hard-drinking, rough men, discovered in prison farms serving time for murder, or languishing unknown in the small hamlets of the rural south. In fact, a lot of this is pure romanticism. Most of the best-known names in blues were adept professional



Photo by Paul Oliver.



entertainers, based in urban centers and given to wearing fine clothes and shaping their performances to the tastes of nightclub audiences — and in the music's heyday, the biggest stars were usually women. It was only after the music had largely faded from popularity with black audiences that a group of mostly white fans and critics established the now-familiar myths. When Williams appeared on the folk scene, he perfectly fit all of these myths, and paradoxically that kept a lot of people from noticing quite how unusual and innovative an artist he was. He so perfectly matched the common idea of the blues tradition that it was easy to miss the fact that there was no one else like him.

As to his personal history, Williams was born in 1914, in Zachary, Louisiana, a small town just north of Baton Rouge. He started playing guitar in his early 20s, and for a while worked as a musician at local dances, but his

performing career seems to have trailed off by the 1940s, as the electric R&B style came to the fore. However, where some players of his generation simply abandoned music at this point, he instead turned inwards, coming up with a style that would have made little sense at a juke dance, but served as a personal emotional outlet. Because of the intimacy of this music, he would very likely never have been heard or recorded by anyone outside his friends and family had it not been for a stroke of bad luck: In 1956 he shot a man (in what he always explained was self-defense), and was given a life sentence to the Angola State Penitentiary.<sup>1</sup> Every prisoner in Angola knew the legend of Leadbelly singing his way out to freedom, so when Harry Oster appeared with a tape recorder during Williams' second year there, he was more than happy to make a recording. The result, "Prisoner's Talking Blues," did exactly what he had dreamed: Oster

(and various other supporters) wrote to the governor, and Williams was paroled in 1959. For five years, his parole kept him trapped on a local farm, unable to travel, but in 1964 he was finally granted a pardon and appeared at the Newport Folk Festival, beginning a career of touring and performing that lasted almost until his death in 1980. His stark, idiosyncratic style was not to

everyone's taste, and he never really made a decent living from his music, but his records and performances eked out his earnings from a small scrap iron business. Today, although he remains one of the less familiar names in the blues pantheon, an artist who had few predecessors and fewer followers, his music stands as one of the most distinctive bodies of work on record.

<sup>1</sup> Harry Oster's *Living Country Blues* gives the year of Williams' conviction as 1954, but other sources generally agree on the later date.

## HARRY OSTER

Williams' Arhoolie recordings were made by Harry Oster at various locations, between 1959 and the end of his life. Oster had been born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1923, the son of Russian Jewish immigrants, and originally got involved in folk music through a Yiddish singing group. He moved to New York in the mid-1940s to do graduate studies at Columbia School of Business, and

while he was there he picked up a little guitar, then started singing on a folk radio show in Syracuse while teaching Economy and Industrial Management. Bitten by the music bug, he decided to become a folklorist, and got a second graduate degree from Cornell, in English and Folk Literature. Then, in 1955, he got a job in the English department of Louisiana State University.





Harry Oster. Photo by Joan Liffing-Zug Bourret.

The move to Louisiana was what turned Oster from an academic and amateur singer into one of the great field researchers. Through his students and fellow professors, he became aware of the incredibly rich traditions in the surrounding countryside, and applied for a summer grant to record some of it. With \$500 he began traveling the state, documenting as much traditional music as he could find. Rather than specializing, he recorded “Cajun, Afro-French, mainstream French, Anglo-American and Afro-American” songs, and in 1957 he used his own money to issue a first LP, *A Sampler of Louisiana Folk Songs*, as a production of the Louisiana Folklore Society, a group he had founded with two other members of the English Department.

Two years later, Oster started his own label, Folk-Lyric. By that time, he had done extensive Cajun recordings,

released an album of *Angola Prison Spirituals*, and also provided Folkways Records with its most exciting blues discovery of the decade: the New Orleans singer and guitarist Snooks Eaglin. Eaglin had been working as an electric guitarist with local R&B bands like Allen Toussaint’s Flamingoes, but Oster heard him playing and singing solo acoustic blues on the street, and recognized him as a unique artist in that form. The Folkways album, *New Orleans Street Singer*, remains a masterpiece, and Oster released further Eaglin recordings on Folk-Lyric (now available on Arhoolie CD 348).

Unlike other blues fans of the period, Oster was not a record collector and he made no attempt to hunt up artists who had recorded back in the 1920s or 1930s. “I sort of went about it in a quite different way, which produced some interestingly different results, more offbeat performances



and more unusual repertoire,” he explained in a 1995 interview with *Blues Notes* newsletter. For example, he made some wonderful recordings of Butch Cage and Willie B. Thomas, a fiddle and guitar duo who played not only blues but also minstrel songs, hoedowns, and other survivals of pre-blues African-American traditions (available on Arhoolie CD 372, *Country Negro Jam Session*). In 1960 he received a Guggenheim scholarship and spent a year writing *Living Country Blues*, an annotated collection of more than 200 lyrics he had recorded in Angola and elsewhere.

Oster’s many trips to Angola Penitentiary produced not only Williams’ debut, but enough first-rate material for albums of blues, spirituals, and work songs, as well as oddities like a prison doo-wop group and a woman singing the pop-blues hit “Since I Fell for You” while working in the laundry room (both on Arhoolie CD 419,

*Angola Prisoners’ Blues*). Meanwhile, he was doing extensive recording of traditional Cajun music (some of it available on Arhoolie CD 359, *Folksongs of the Louisiana Acadians*), and even an album of the New Orleans jazz stalwarts Billie and Dede Pierce (Arhoolie CD 488).

While all of this work brought Oster an international reputation as a folklore collector, LSU had little interest in it, and continued to assign him basic English courses. As a result, in 1963 he took a job at the University of Iowa, and he continued to be based in Iowa City until his death in January of 2001, except for a year in Memphis in 1969. In Iowa, he continued to do field research, recording music of the local Norwegian, Dutch, German, Czech, Amish, Anglo-American, Afro-American, and Meskwaki Indian traditions, as well as forming the Friends of Old Time Music, which

sponsored concerts by Williams and other traditional artists and held an annual old time fiddlers picnic.

However, the move to Iowa spelled the end of Oster’s career as a record producer: “In a more congenial social environment and in a framework where I had stimulating courses to teach, my mania for producing records subsided,” he wrote in an article for *Blues and Rhythm* magazine. “Also I felt I had said most of what I had to say.” In 1970, he sold his label to Chris Strachwitz, who has reissued the Folk-Lyric albums along with many of Oster’s unissued recordings on Arhoolie.

In the same article, Oster wrote some general thoughts on his approach to folklore recording: “Collecting is an art which depends on a lot of intangibles which defy codification, despite what one hears from the now fashionable scientific approach to folklore. The collector has to build up

an intense rapport with his informant, to sense nuances of the situation, to shift the direction of his questioning to fit the subtleties of a delicate situation, sometimes to prime the pump by performing himself, somehow to help sustain an atmosphere in which the informant performs naturally and enthusiastically.” As for those who might be inspired by his example and have “the appropriate daring or foolhardiness to start [their] own record company,” Oster’s wryly reassuring advice showed the hard-won wisdom of experience: “The end may be bankruptcy, but the young folklorist has little to lose in any case.”

Elijah Wald – 2003





Photo by Chris Strachwitz.





Robert Pete Williams with Mance Lipscomb at Ann Arbor Blues Festival. Photo by Chris Strachwitz.

## THE SONGS – DISC A

### 1. MY MIND WANDERING AROUND (acapella) (5:55)

“Sometime — which it happens that-away — your mind sometime wanders off and sometime it don’t come back. But I hope I don’t be like that.” A unique example of Williams singing a “field holler,” the sort of slow, free-form, meditative moan that people would sing while working alone, or just wandering down the road, as he explains between lines. Music historians have written at length about how such singing evolved into the more formal blues songs, and it is easy to see how this kind of performance fed Williams’ free-metered, improvised style. On the other hand, his singing here is quite different than when he has a guitar in his hands. It is more relaxed and richly melodic, and the dynamic control is amazing, as when he sinks to a barely audible whisper to hum a few precise notes between the lyrics. As he explains, it is just his mind wandering, but also kept in control and able to “come back” when he wants to make a point. This is not only one of Williams’ greatest performances, but one of the subtlest and most intricate examples of the holler tradition to survive on record.

### 2. CANE CUT MAN (5:10)

The classic Williams sound, his story of a period working as a sugar cane cutter, sung over an accompaniment that suggests chord changes at times, but without ever completely moving off the root. Unlike John Lee Hooker, though, who sometimes simply sounds as if he has not thought to change chords along with his voice, Williams is always very conscious of the interplay between voice and



instrument. On pieces like this, he comes closer than any other American folk artist to the sound of the Malian griots, who have the same technique of playing fast, repetitive, monochordal phrases under their slower-rhythmed, recitative vocals. How he ended up sounding quite this African is a mystery: there is no other African-American musician who comes this close to the West African style, and older black guitar players tended to keep the simpler rhythms familiar from John Hurt or Mance Lipscomb. Wherever it came from, this shows Williams as one of the true geniuses of the deep southern style.

### **3. MY DADDY WAS A HOODOO MAN (4:42)**

Following the previous cut, this song is much closer to the sort of sounds Williams would have been hearing on the radio, or from other musicians. While he still spends a lot of time on a single chord, he makes much clearer changes, and both his theme and his playing style are closer to Hooker's approach. Of course, this is only relative; Williams had one of the most personal styles in blues history, and no one who has heard much of his music would ever mistake him for Hooker or anyone else. As for the lyric, "My daddy was a hoodoo man, he could tell you anything, darling, anything you want to know," it is worth noting that Williams was from "down in Louisiana," the place that Mississippi Delta guitarists sang of going to get their "mojo hands." Hoodoo, or voodoo, probably became a common term in the US only after the Haitian revolution brought a flood of immigrants at the end of the 18th century, and has always been strongest in New Orleans, and spread out from there.

### **4. NO MORE SWEET POTATOES (4:30)**

"No more sweet potatoes, the frost done killed the vine/ Blues ain't nothing but a good woman on your mind." A classic blues couplet, sung by thousands of earlier singers, but as usual Williams builds a free improvisation around the traditional lyric, abandoning any formal structure to play loose, evocative slide riffs and forming it into a unique personal statement.

### **5. POOR BOB'S BLUES (3:54)**

Despite the title, this is anything but a meditative lament. As on "Cane Cut Man," Williams plays a hot guitar rhythm behind a slower vocal, but this time he is playing with more direct rhythmic drive, the way he would have accompanied a country dance. Those of us who are used to dance bands always having drummers may find it hard to picture, but Williams was a popular party musician in his youth, and on songs like this his infectious beat would have got plenty of people out on the floor. As he sings, "Let's go out and have some fun, darling, we can ball 'til the break of day."

### **6. COWS LOVE MUSIC (4:37)** What more is there to say?

### **7. CAN'T YO-YO NO MORE (5:14)**

"I lose my nature baby, and I just can't yo-yo no more . . ." The metaphor reaches back to the yo-yo craze of the late 1920s, which was instantly seized on by numerous blues singers, including Blind Lemon Jefferson and Texas Alexander, as a trendy sexual reference. Williams, as usual, takes only the basic phrase from the previous versions and builds his own song around it.



### **8. SHAKE, SHAKE BABY (5:42)**

This song does seem to have entered Williams' repertoire during the blues revival. It was recorded in 1960 by the Texas songster Mance Lipscomb (on Arhoolie LP 1001, the label's debut album, now Arhoolie CD 306), who later appeared alongside Williams at various festivals. At least, the first verse was; Williams almost never learned a full song from any source, and his later verses, while they include stock traditional phrases — "I can't yo-yo" shows up again — never bother to use the usual rhymes.

### **9. LORD, I DONE YOU WRONG (3:10)**

A sensitive blues lament of love going bad: "My fault, lord, that I done you wrong."

### **10. BEEN MISTREATED SO LONG (3:52)**

"I've been mistreated so long, I don't know how to act sometimes." The more closely one listens to Williams' lyrics, the more surprising some of them seem. At first hearing, he often seems to be recycling blues clichés, but if one is attentive he often turns out to have found a way to put his own twist on them. The fact that he feels no need to rhyme his lines means that he can phrase his thoughts with unusual directness, whatever they may be, as in this song where his lover is driving him to strike back. She has been "dealing with the Devil," and he is ready to do the same: "I'm going to the hoodoo, I'm going to put you under my feet/ I'm gonna have you baby, do anything in the world I want you to do."

## **THE SONGS – DISC B**

### **1. THINGS ALL WRONG WITH ME (6:42)**

As with many of Williams' songs, this is an improvised piece, simply titled by its first line. Williams plays with a slide (he typically used the back of a jackknife handle\*), in open G tuning. The musical arrangement is interesting, sung over a single chord, but suggesting the usual blues progression of the fifth to the fourth, though as a repeated phrase between vocal lines rather than in its regular place under the last sung line of each verse. Williams often used stock blues lyrics, but tended to personalize them. Thus, he sings the churchily clichéd "If I should die before my time should come, bury my body way down on Highway 61" (the famously blues-associated highway runs a few miles from his hometown), but after repeating that line in the classic 12-bar pattern, he finishes it off with the completely personal, non-rhyming, "Reason I say that, darling, that's the onliest highway that I ride."

\*It has sometimes been written that Williams learned to play slide from Fred McDowell, whom he met after he started to play on the blues revival circuit. While he may have picked up some licks from McDowell, he was recording slide work before he made his first trip out of his home region, and little if any of his playing on these discs suggests any such debt.

### **2. MATCHBOX BLUES (5:40)**

This performance finds Williams on more standard blues territory, singing a fairly straightforward 12-bar blues made up of familiar verses. The title is taken from the second verse, first made famous on record by Blind Lemon Jefferson, but the collage of lyrics could as easily have been named after any of the other stock phrases. It is interesting here to see how, even while working within a



more regular musical form, Williams continues to stretch or shorten his instrumental lines as the mood takes him, much as John Lee Hooker did on similar pieces.

### **3. SAD NEWS FROM KOREA (4:34)**

This is one of the few examples of Williams singing a song clearly learned off a record. "Sad News from Korea" was a topical blues recorded by Lightnin' Hopkins in 1952, and Williams goes so far as to imitate key licks from Hopkins's guitar style.

### **4. WHAT A SHAPE I'M IN (5:20)**

Another personalization of basic blues themes, this song expresses the loneliness of the "motherless child" with "nowhere to lay his worried head." As usual, Williams tends to borrow not full verses, but simply key lines, then to couple them with his own thoughts.

### **5. POOR BOY, LONG WAY FROM HOME (4:11)**

"Poor Boy, Long Way from Home" is one of the most widespread slide pieces in the Southern rural repertoire, once played from Texas to the Carolinas. Williams, though, never plays the basic melody of the song, a gentle melody that almost certainly dates from the 19th century, before the rise of the blues era. Other blues players who recorded this song tended to revert to the older style, exemplified by versions such as Gus Cannon's slide banjo variation and Elizabeth Cotton's "Vestapol," but Williams was completely a man of his time, and seems to have had no interest in the earlier folk repertoire.

### **6. OUT ALL NIGHT LONG (4:10)**

"Got my head tied up this morning, from drinking all night long, My head beating, head so bad, beating like a hammer."

If Williams was playing for an audience back home, this song would have earned plenty of knowing chuckles. While it ends with a resolution to stop drinking so hard, it is mostly the wry lament of the hangover sufferer who is all too familiar with his ailment and will be back singing the same song next week. Unsurprisingly, Williams plays a fairly regular 12-bar blues accompaniment rather than going into one of his deeper, more introspective musical excursions.

### **7. CRYING WON'T MAKE ME STAY (5:50)**

"Tell me woman, where'd you stay last night?" The most upbeat song on this album, this is one of the relatively few Williams recordings that gives us a taste of the sort of music he would have played at dances. Its propulsive rhythm and basic licks suggest that Williams was influenced by Lightnin' Hopkins's fast blues numbers, though he eschews the boogie shuffle bass Hopkins favored.

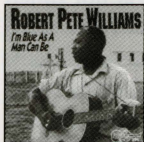
### **8. ALL OUT AND DOWN (3:47)**

"I'm all out and down, but I won't be down always." The lyric is not much different from that of the preceding track, and it shares some of the same rhythmic drive, but here Williams is clearly taking the words more personally. Rather than feeling like a dance piece with vocal interjections, the rich soulfulness of his voice pushes the guitar into the background, and comes across as a direct talk with the woman he is addressing.

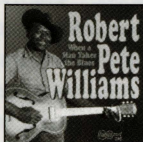


## 9. TOM AND OLD MASTER (story)(9:15)

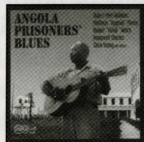
"You might think it's a story, but it's true," Williams says, introducing a folktale of slavery times: Old master says he is going away and leaving Tom in charge of his plantation, and Tom decides to take his friend George and go across the river to steal a hog. Master paints himself black, and goes along pretending to be George, and Tom is fooled until they are heading back across the river with a hog and the paint starts to wash off. "Gettin' mighty white-looking back there," Tom says, and abandons Old Master in the middle of the river, runs home and pretends to have been in bed the whole time. When Old Master confronts him, though, Tom admits his crime and takes his punishment. "In them days they'd give you a hundred lashes and turn you loose — wouldn't run you off the place, they'd just whup you and let you stay on on the place. So he give old Tom that hundred lashes there, old Tom whooped and hollered 'round there and, 'Next day,' he say, 'you'd better be to work too.' Well, old Tom was right there: 'Yessir Old Boss, I'll be there, I'm on my way!'" Pete plays guitar along with his story, imitates the grunting of the hogs, and laughs at both his imitations and Tom's machinations. The moral is far from clear, and one has to wonder when Williams laughs at Tom's whupping whether this is partly for the benefit of his white listeners.



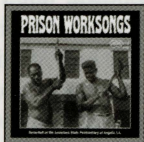
Robert Pete Williams  
*Volume 1 - "I'm Blue  
As A Man Can Be"*  
Arhoolie CD 394



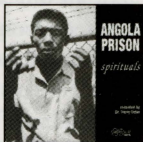
Robert Pete Williams  
*Volume 2 - "When A  
Man Takes The Blues"*  
Arhoolie CD 395



*"Angola Prisoners'  
Blues"*  
Various Artists  
Arhoolie CD 419



*"Prison Worksongs"*  
Various Artists  
Arhoolie CD 448



*"Angola Prison  
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Robert Pete Williams with Johnny Winter at the 1970 Ann Arbor Blues Festival. Photo by Chris Strachwitz.

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“...the most avant-garde blues performer ever recorded. **No punk rock band** has ever matched the jagged, acerbic fury of the riffs Williams played 35 years ago. **No rapper** has approached his ability to evoke the torment of life in prison or bend language to cast an eerie spell over a chance encounter with a seductive woman.... He had never been recorded when he was discovered in Angola Penitentiary in Louisiana, convicted of murder.” – Milo Miles, *New York Times*

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