

1. BACK HOME BLUES (4:20)
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3. SATURDAY NIGHT WOMEN (3:40)
4. BEEN IN CRAWFORD TOO LONG (2:55)  
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**Joe Lee "Big Joe" Williams** -  
vocals & guitar

**Austen Pete** -  
vocals and guitar, also  
plays second guitar behind Big Joe

**John "Shortstuff" Macon** -  
vocals & (rattling) guitar

**Glover Lee Connor** - vocals

**Amelia Johnson** - vocals

**#1 - #19** recorded by Chris Strachwitz in Crawford, Miss.  
on May 21, 1971 on a Magnacord reel to reel recorder with  
two Elektrovoice mikes. **#20 - #26** recorded at a radio  
station in Starkville, Miss. ca. March 1971.

Sessions organized and directed by Joe Lee Williams

All songs © by Tradition Music Co./BUG Music,

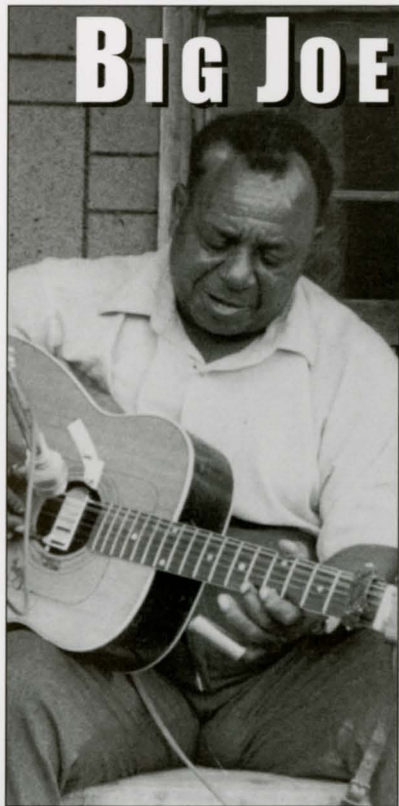
except # 2, 13, 14, 15 & 16.

**NOTICE:** We have been trying to contact the performers,  
other than Big Joe Williams, on this CD. If you have any  
information please contact Arhoolie Records.

# BIG JOE WILLIAMS *and Friends*

## GOING BACK TO CRAWFORD





Big Joe Williams

# BIG JOE WILLIAMS

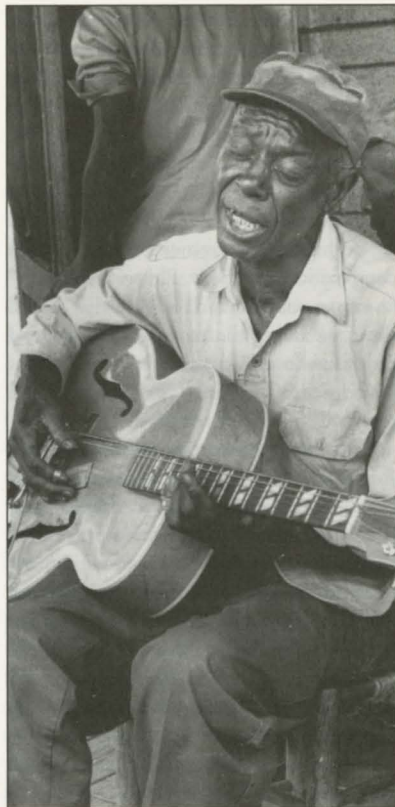
*and Friends*

## GOING BACK TO CRAWFORD

Joe Lee "Big Joe" Williams was one of the first giants of the Blues I was given the opportunity to record in the fall of 1960 when he came to Oakland, Ca. in search of work and with hopes of reviving his then almost faltering career. He had found his way to Bob Geddins' make-shift studio, made a short demo tape for him, and was soon thereafter arrested for assault. I happened to stop by to visit Mr. Geddins that weekend – from my job as a school teacher in Los Gatos – when Bob played me a tape he wanted me to hear. After hearing the first notes I recognized the inimitable sound of Big Joe Williams. I asked Bob Geddins if he had recorded Big Joe in Chicago and he replied: "No, right here in Oakland – I just paid his bail and they let him out of jail – he is staying at this hotel on San Pablo Ave." I was stunned, but soon

confronted by one of my favorite blues singers. Still under great emotional and financial stress, Big Joe came to Los Gatos a few days later (with his friend Marcellus Thomas, his wife Mary and their little boy) and recorded what is still considered to be his most intense and powerful record ever. The album became the second release to appear on my newly formed Arhoolie label and is now available on Arhoolie CD 315.

Big Joe was a very intelligent man, born on a farm outside Crawford, Miss. (southwest of Columbus in NE Miss.) of a Cherokee father and an African-American mother. One of 18 children he became interested in music early in life and left home to make his way as an entertainer by the time he was 12 years old. An unsurpressible personality, Big Joe played fish fries, house parties, levee and railroad camps, anywhere they would throw him a few cents. By 1918 he apparently worked for Doc Bennett's Medicine Show out of Mobile, Alabama and then by the early 1920s went on to tour with the Birmingham Jug Band and the Rabbit Foot Minstrels. He played and sang in the streets, in saloons and soon along the black



Austen Pete



honky tonk circuit often in the company of pianist Little Brother Montgomery. Big Joe began to record in the late 1920s along with many other “first generation” country blues artists and he didn’t stop recording and traveling this country (as well as Europe) until his death, at the age of 79, on December 17, 1982. Big Joe Williams is perhaps best remembered for his composition of “Baby Please Don’t Go,” an enormous hit which he recorded several times, including the moving version heard on this collection taped in May of 1971 at his home in Crawford, Miss. where he had returned to be with relatives.

Unfortunately, during his lifetime Big Joe never received the rewards which his incredible talent as a composer and powerful, emotional creator of the blues should have brought him. However, his trips to Europe – with the pioneering annual American Folk Blues Festival (produced by the late Horst Lippman and his partner Fritz Rau) and then several times on his own – must have given Big Joe some sense as to how highly his work was regarded by European blues and jazz fans. Just a month before his death, on



Big Joe, back home in Crawford surrounded by relatives

November 16, 1982, Big Joe received a special “Pioneer of the Blues” award and made his last public appearance at the annual W.C. Handy National Blues Awards in Memphis, Tennessee. Bob Koester had released a superb album by Big Joe Williams in 1959 on his Delmark

label and should be credited for bringing him to the attention of a wider, new, mostly white audience, which around 1960 was beginning to take a great interest in what was until then considered low class, crude, vernacular black “alley” music. Although European jazz fans, who

heard this music as from another world, had been interested in authentic country blues for some time. Most white folks here in the segregated US on the other hand did not have an opportunity to hear “down home” blues to any significant degree until the 1950s when records of this music (made for the African American market) were suddenly widely heard on the radio. With the movement during World War II of large numbers of rural workers from the farms of the deep South to defense-related jobs in cities of the North (especially Detroit and Chicago, as well as the West Coast – especially California) came a demand for records of “down home” blues. Much like what happened with rap music in the 80s, the street music of an underclass suddenly became accessible to the broader masses via radio and many were captivated by the power, beauty and rhythm of the blues as well as its remarkable poetry. The ferocious delivery and rawness of Big Joe’s music as well as his pure rural Mississippi style which he had grown up with, by the 1960s was losing favor with black audiences who were more and more

favoring younger and often smoother, more polished artists. On the other hand Big Joe was also too raw for many white "folk" audiences who were embracing the polished acts of Josh White and Brownie McGhee with Sonny Terry. But Big Joe never gave up and continued to try and make a little change everywhere and anyway he could.

This particular set of recordings came about due to Big Joe's marvelous way of keeping in touch with everyone who had ever tried to help him market his music be it via night clubs, festivals or recordings. He also had the experience of being a producer and talent scout - going back to the 1930s when he was recording for the Bluebird label. Big Joe would help the record man round up other singers he knew and would help train them to create 2-3 minute pieces which could be put on wax and marketed to the juke box operators. Big Joe in the late 50s did this for Bob Koester in Chicago where he helped record several down home blues artists for Delmark records and then again a bit later for Pete Welding who released some marvelous material on his Testament

label. In the same manner, except by remote correspondence, Big Joe contacted me after I had recorded him with his long time friend, Charlie Musselwhite a few years earlier. I have a pile of very detailed letters which were probably written by various relatives who could put Big Joe's thoughts on paper. He first suggested a local radio DJ should record him along with Mr. Shortstuff (a cousin of Big Joe's), Glover Lee- Connor, Austen Pete, and several other "discoveries" and then send me the tapes for my approval. I was a bit reluctant but told Big Joe to go ahead and I would let him know if the tapes were to my satisfaction. As you can hear by the 7 selections at the end of the CD, these tapes did produce some fine music but technically they were highly compressed, a bit distorted and it seemed to me a bit musically restrained. Big Joe had actually sent me an earlier tape which was very amateurishly recorded but included a nice harmonica player only known by his first name, Jerry! Finally, partially to appease and please Big Joe and to see if I couldn't do a better job myself, I wrote to him that I was coming to Mississippi following

stops in south Texas, Houston, Louisiana, and New Orleans on my annual trip driving to the South. I had recorded "Boisec" Ardoin and Canray Fontenot, Austin Pitre, and the New Orleans Ragtime Orchestra by the time I got to Crawford. It was late May and already very hot and I recall being disturbed by Shortstuff's guitar which rattled due to the pick ups on it and he refused to take them out. Big Joe however was in fine form but was fronting the session so that the other singers could be featured and did not sing very much but rather played guitar backing several of them. After I got home I received a letter from an attorney

representing Amelia Johnson who although more than glad to make the recordings, apparently had second thoughts - and so the tapes remained on the shelf for 28 years. Recently I listened again and was surprised by the remarkable music made that hot day in May of 1971 and decided to release the best of Big Joe Williams and friends - produced by Big Joe who worked so hard to prepare these singers for the session. It's authentic "down home" Mississippi blues - pure country blues - under the direction of one of the great masters: the late Big Joe Williams.

Chris Strachwitz - March 1999

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Produced by Chris Strachwitz  
and Big Joe Williams

All Photos © Chris Strachwitz  
Cover Photo (l to r) "Shortstuff",  
Amelia Johnson & Big Joe Williams  
Graphic Design by Morgan K. Dodge

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Joe Lee "Big Joe" Williams, famous for his emotional singing, his 9 string guitar, and his composition "Baby Please Don't Go," was not only one of the pioneer Mississippi blues singers/guitarists, but also a talent scout and record producer. Big Joe produced this remarkable set of recordings in his hometown of Crawford, Miss. in 1971 by gathering talented relatives, neighbors, and acquaintances to hopefully present their songs to the wider world. Although belatedly, this CD brings you some of the most moving, pure, and authentic country blues ever put on records. Thanks, Big Joe!

### All tracks previously unreleased

Joe Lee "Big Joe" Williams - vocals & guitar

Austen Pete -vocals and guitar,  
also plays second guitar behind Big Joe

John "Shortstuff" Macon -  
vocals & (rattling) guitar

Glover Lee Connor - vocals

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