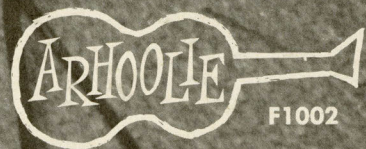


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**big joe
Williams**
**tough
times**



BIG JOE WILLIAMS AND HIS 9-STRING GUITAR

Tough times and trouble are nothing new to Big Joe Williams, he has met them and lived with them all his life. The highways have been his home and the streets are his pathways. One week he may be in Chicago, in St. Louis the next, then again you might meet him in Jackson, or perhaps out on the Coast hoping to cut some records. The fancy night clubs in the colored sections of town don't offer their bandstand to Joe's type of music but perhaps he can find an audience in a small beer joint down the street, where the people know his music which comes from the Bottoms, from the hot, humid Delta country, from the Levee camps, from the southern jook joints, and from the country house parties. This is the life which Big Joe sings about and his guitar compliments his rough voice and his forceful delivery.

Unlike Mance Lipscomb (Arhoolie F1001), the "Songster," Big Joe is a specialist, he is a "Blues Singer"—he has a definite style and uses familiar material largely as a vehicle for his own individual expressions. Where Mance would sing and play a number in much the same way he once heard it from someone else, Big Joe will take a song and give us his very special interpretation of it. Rather frequently he will also make up a number about almost anything which has come across his mind and in this album you will find **Greystone Blues** a fine example of his impulsive creativity.

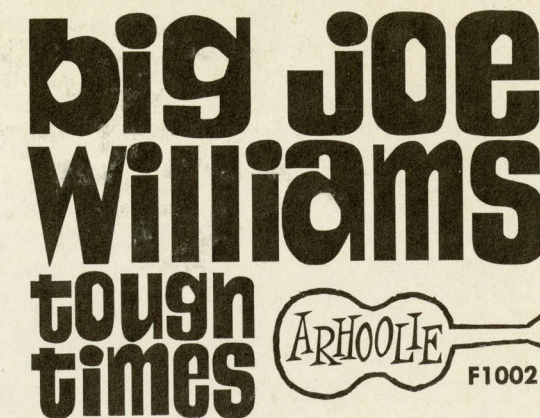
Born in Crawford, Miss., on October 16, 1903, Joe Lee Williams was one of sixteen children and at an early age made his way from the farm to the tougher but less restrictive life around the Levee Camps, railroads, and lumber mills. He played old guitars which he fixed up to his liking and the 9-stringer he has today is an example of his talent to rebuild instruments so as to give him a unique sound. Around 1918 he toured with the Rabbit Foot Minstrels and later during the 20s made his first records for Vocalion. Later he worked and recorded with the late Sonny Boy Williamson and since the last war he has lived largely in St. Louis and Chicago but most of the time he is out "hoboing and traveling."

Big Joe's songs are a remarkable mixture of traditional, autobiographical, and improvised elements. Perhaps it was my luck, and the listener's, that the day when most of the sides on this LP were recorded, Big Joe was under considerable emotional strains. He was worried and upset and the first group of songs, most of them unfortunately spoiled by equipment failure, reflected these anxieties and difficulties which were a result of some minor trouble in Oakland. I feel that this condition has rendered amazing emotional qualities to each one of the songs on this LP. **Greystone Blues** was one of the best. Even though it opens with a standard line about Anna Mae—and my first impulse was to write that name down as the title—the second half tells you his feelings about this rather confused situation. The transfer from the Oakland city jail to the "Greystone" security building at the Santa Rita Correctional Facilities in Pleasanton, Calif., must have been a terrible, unforgettable experience for the singer.

The opening number, **Sloppy Drunk Blues**, is a tune associated with Sonny Boy Williamson who recorded it for Victor as **Bring Me Another Half a Pint**. **Yo Yo Blues** is an average blues consisting of a number of song elements and yet retaining a certain unity. This is the kind of general material usually found on commercial blues records. On the other hand **President Roosevelt** is a topical item and is one of the best songs about the late president. Again you can feel the personal involvement which the artist has with this song and the times it reflects. Roosevelt Skyes is generally associated with the tune **Forty Four**, usually a piano number, but it most likely predates that artist. It is a well-known piece among the older Southern blues singers and many have made recordings of it, however Big Joe gives us a real powerful and forceful interpretation of it on his guitar. A highly autobiographical selection is **Mean Stepfather**, in which parental neglect is strongly criticized. **Brother James**, although not in ballad form, is no doubt one of the most moving stories in this collection matched by an overpowering delivery. It's the type of song that might be found among white hillbilly singers but rarely have I heard a blues of this quality. **Shake Your Boogie** and **She Left Me a Mule to Ride** are two highly rhythmic dance or "jump" pieces exhibiting Big Joe's remarkable use of the slapping bass effect reminiscent of Barbecue Bob and perhaps the bass guitar in a Mexican Mariachi band. Big Joe needs no rhythm section to back him—he is his own. Both are tunes associated with Sonny Boy Williamson who recorded the latter as **Sonny Boy's Jump** for Blue Bird. Two more highly personal items are **Vitamin A Blues**, a remarkable remake of Big Joe's early Blue Bird recording, and **So Glad**, "his favorite" which again turns into an improvised personal reflection.

The late Mrs. Mary Williams was a remarkable singer in her own right and **I Want My Crown** found her in beautiful form, accompanied by her husband's powerful guitar. Reminding one of the late Blind Willie Johnson, this turned into a very moving and highly personal spiritual.

Chris A. Strachwitz



SLOPPY DRUNK BLUES
YO YO BLUES
(A levee camp moan)

PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT

FORTY FOUR BLUES

GREYSTONE BLUES

I WANT MY CROWN

MEAN STEPFATHER

BROTHER JAMES

SHAKE YOUR BOOGIE

VITAMIN A BLUES

SHE LEFT ME A MULE TO RIDE

SO GLAD

RECORDING DATA

She Left Me a Mule to Ride was recorded by Bob Geddins in Oakland, Calif., in the fall of 1959. All other titles recorded by Chris A. Strachwitz and Richard Garvin on October 5, 1960, in Los Gatos, California.

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