

BLACK ACE



R. K. TURNER AND HIS STEEL GUITAR

"I am the Black Ace, I'm the boss card in your hand,
I am the Black Ace, I'm the boss card in your hand,
But I'll play for you Mama, if you please let me be your man"

BLACK ACE

These were the words that listeners to the regular blues programs relayed from station KFJZ out of Ft. Worth in the late 30s would hear as the program was introduced. At that time the name of the Black Ace was a familiar one in the homes of both Negroes and white persons living in the city and in the surrounding country. "They started to call me the Black Ace when I put out the Black Ace Blues in 1937" the singer recalled when we recorded him some 23 years later, in the summer of 1960. "When I was broadcasting they had me play that for a theme song all the time. Folks didn't know who I was and when they commenced to announce me over the radio as the Black Ace folks just called me Black Ace. But that's not my real name. My name is Babe Karo Lemon Turner. I don't know why they named me like that. I threw the "Lemon" away and just used the initials of Babe Karo - B.K. Turner. Never did use the "Lemon" and the "L". Fact is my wife never knew what my full name was until just now." It is as "Ace" that B. K. Turner is known today and the name is neatly embroidered on the fresh white linen of his shirt.

In the summer of 1960 Ace was living in a small, compact house in the suburbs of Fort Worth. He was working as he still works in a photographic studio in the city and his steel guitar with which he had once earned his name was gathering dust in the attic. Working in the Don Juarez Studio "shooting movies and all kinds of pictures", watching the television in the evenings in his neat home, sitting out on the porch with its modern metal chairs or watching baseball on the weekends his life was relatively comfortably ordered, and the blues were forgotten. But his life has not always been as secure in the past and like most other blues singers, Ace came from the country. He was born in 1905 at "a little ole" place they called Hughes Springs, Texas -- oh, about 7 miles this side of Louisiana. I stayed at home with my daddy on the farm down there; stayed on the farm all my life until I was about 30 years old". His work on the farm was hard and the profits were low; there was little enough time for recreation and not too much money for entertainment. But his brother had an improvised guitar made from "a guitar neck which had some wires on" and on this crude instrument he learned as a child to play elementary guitar styles. He had a good voice and in his youth sang in church choirs. He learned a little music: "doh-re-me-fah-so-la-te-doh and such as that, and teach it to other young people." When Babe Turner, as he was known, became about 22 years of age he was able to purchase for himself an old guitar; not a good instrument but one on which he could play the blues that came to his head when he worked on the farm.

It was the Depression that changed Babe Turner's way of living, for his father's farm was hit by the accumulative effects of dropping prices and rapidly diminishing markets. Soon it ceased to support the family and as so many others had done throughout the country, the family broke up in the search for other employment. Ace made his way to Shreveport, La. It was a fortunate and fateful decision for it was there that he met the blues singer Oscar Woods then about 35 years old and in his prime. Though some five years his junior, Babe Turner -- now Buck Turner, or "B.K." -- and Buddy Woods became close friends. Woods played guitar, but in a different style from that in which B.K. was playing at the time. He had a steel Hawaiian guitar laid across his knees which he picked with a bottle neck as he sang the blues. Though he was a taciturn and singular man and known as "The lone Wolf" he readily teamed with the young Texan, playing together at joints and particularly at house parties. The house parties were as much a feature of Southern life as the more widely publicised "Rent Parties" of the cities of Chicago and New York, and an evening's playing would bring B.K. Turner \$1.50 -- more than he could earn for a day's regular work if indeed he could have

found it.

Playing with Buddy Woods he had an opportunity to watch the older man's unusual style and the technique suited him perfectly. He rapidly assimilated and improved upon it, buying himself a "National" steel bodied Hawaiian guitar with a thick, square-sectioned neck. At first he played this with a bottle neck in the traditional manner of the knife and bottleneck blues guitarists but soon saw the possibilities of extending the range of the instrument by using a small medicine bottle to stop the strings at the frets. Holding this in the left hand and picking the strings finger-pick style but with the guitar placed horizontally he could block whole chords in "Sevastapol" tuning or stop individual notes by using both the sides and corners of the bottle. In this way open strings, strings fretted by his free fingers or stopped by the tapping, gliding bottle could be played in a wide range of keys, and as he developed he devised a number of original tunings and unusual rhythmic patterns. How effectively is brilliantly demonstrated in the instrumental solo Bad Times Stomp or in the accompaniment of such a blues as 'Fore Day Creep.

As conditions became better in the later 30s Buck Turner found himself in great demand. He traveled in Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas and finally settled in Ft. Worth. A talent scout heard him playing and this resulted in the six sides for Decca, rare collector's items now, on which his fame amongst the blues enthusiasts outside his home country depended. Amongst these were Black Ace, Lowing Heifer, and Santa Claus Blues, of which two were remade for this collection. In 1936 the Kimber Brothers approached him to play on Station KFJZ and for that station and for others in Texas and Oklahoma he played intermittently until 1941. During this time he made a number of titles for Vocalion in Ft. Worth in 1938 but although one coupling has been reported as having been released obscurely on Melotone under the name of Buck Turner, the others were not released. But if a wider fame eluded him through recording he was offered a small role in the film Blood of Jesus in which he played and sang. "Then after that I was doing pretty good when Uncle Sam told me to come on, let's go fight. And that broke up the musical career and I quit then, 1943."

Returning from the services Ace was faced with the problem of securing new work. He tried numerous jobs - "What kind of work?" he exclaimed, "Man, I done everything!" He was married, had a son and times were tough. 1949 found him and his wife plucking cotton bolls in the cotton patch. "We went out to try to pick some cotton, me and my wife. I think we could pick, oh, about 300 lbs. - well, that kept us eating."

When the cotton-picking season was over Ace secured a job as a janitor at the Ft. Worth Airport which he held for more than 5 years until he was "laid off" in 1955. That year he found himself picking cotton again and the future seemed as bleak as ever. "We didn't pick enough cotton to keep my car - you know somethin' - they took my car away from me. I'd bought me new set of tires and they took the car away from me, tires and all. Finance Company took it, I believe they call it 'Security' ... well, it must have been security'. The car was worth \$1,200!" Out of work he tracked the streets looking for a job and applied regularly at the Employment Office. "Then the man sent me to this Don Juarez studio to work there a day, two days out of every week. And the man liked my work and he gave me a regular job. So been working there ever since."

Of the few exponents of the flat Hawaiian guitar blues style who have been recorded, Oscar Woods is dead, and Kokomo Arnold - whom Black Ace resembles - has long since retired with no desire to play or sing again. These recordings of a great blues singer have the added importance that they may well be the last to be made of a style of blues which has all but vanished.

Paul Oliver - 1961

I AM THE BLACK ACE

BAD TIMES STOMP

DRINK ON LITTLE GIRL

SANTA FE BLUES

NEW TRIFLIN' WOMAN

FARTHER ALONG

EVIL WOMAN

'FORE DAY CREEP

LITTLE AUGIE

YOUR LEG'S TOO LITTLE

NO GOOD WOMAN

SANTA CLAUS BLUES

GOLDEN SLIPPER

Cover by: Paul Oliver

Cover Design: Wayne Pope

Recorded by: Chris Strachwitz in
Ft. Worth, Texas, 1960

All songs by B. K. Turner
Tradition Music-BMI.

For our 84 page catalog giving full details on over 400 Blues, Cajun, Zydeco, Tex-Mex, Country, Jazz, Folk, and Ethnic Lps, Cassettes, CDs, and Videos send \$2.00 to cover postage to:

ARHOOLIE CATALOG,
10341 San Pablo Ave.
El Cerrito, Ca. 94530 USA.

(Catalog includes all releases on ARHOOLIE, BLUES CLASSICS, FOLKLYRIC, J.E.M.F., OLD TIMEY, RAMBLER, and WESTERN labels.)