

BLIND WILLIE JOHNSON

his story
told, annotated and
documented by

SAMUEL B. CHARTERS

in Louisiana
and Texas

illustrations by
Ernest York

SI-FP-FW87-D c -02513
Johnson, Blind Willie
Blind Willie Johnson

loneliness is like
cold black night -
its SHADOWS numb the
mind - LEAVES A man
An empty shell -

York



FG 3585

FOLKWAYS RECORDS & SERVICE CORP., N. Y.



BLIND WILLIE JOHNSON

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by

Samuel Barclay Charters

When Blind Willie Johnson died in Beaumont, Texas in 1949 he had been a legend for many years. Between 1927 and 1930 he had recorded fifteen magnificent religious records for Columbia Records; then as far as anyone knew he had disappeared. The recordings were successful; widely distributed and re-issued on subsidiary labels. Willie knew nothing about this. He was living in Beaumont, singing on the streets, trying to provide for his family in the hard Depression years. The storekeepers along Forsythe Avenue, in the colored district, remember him as a tall, heavy man, not dark in color; a dignified man and a magnificent singer. A small picture taken of him in the late 1930's shows a square, heavy face, a thin straight mouth. His head was shaved, the blind eyes closed.

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In 1947, when the first reissues of the early jazz recordings were becoming relatively common, reissues of a handful of Blind Willie's recordings were among the first available. The first definitive series of jazz reissues, the Folkways "Jazz" series, included in Volume 2 Blind Willie's haunting Dark Was The Night, Cold Was The Ground. In Beaumont Willie was attending church every Sunday at the Mount Olive Baptist Church, playing his guitar to accompany young people at evening services, preaching to small meetings.

In the winter of 1949, as a major study of jazz which included a discussion of Blind Willie was beginning to reach a large audience, Willie's house at 1440 Forest burned. He, his wife Angeline, and the children got out safely, losing only a few furnishings and Willie's guitar. The house was filled with water, but Angeline spread newspaper over the wet bedding, and they slept in the house that night. Willie was a restless sleeper, and turned over onto the soaked mattress. He was sick the next morning, but he tried to sing on the streets and earn a little money. He died of pneumonia a week later. Angeline had

tried to get him into a hospital, but he was not admitted, probably because of his blindness.

In the spring of 1954 I was living in New Orleans, and a close friend, Richard B. Allen, told me that he had talked with a blind singer on South Rampart Street who had said that he had known Blind Willie in Texas. We interviewed the singer, Elder Dave Ross, the next week, and he said that he thought Blind Willie was still living in Dallas. My wife and I drove to Dallas and began asking in the streets for Willie Johnson. A year later we had traced him to Beaumont. We walked along Forsythe Avenue on a cold November afternoon, asking if anyone had seen a blind gospel singer. "Which one?", they asked me. I said an older man that played a guitar. They asked me, "Which one?"

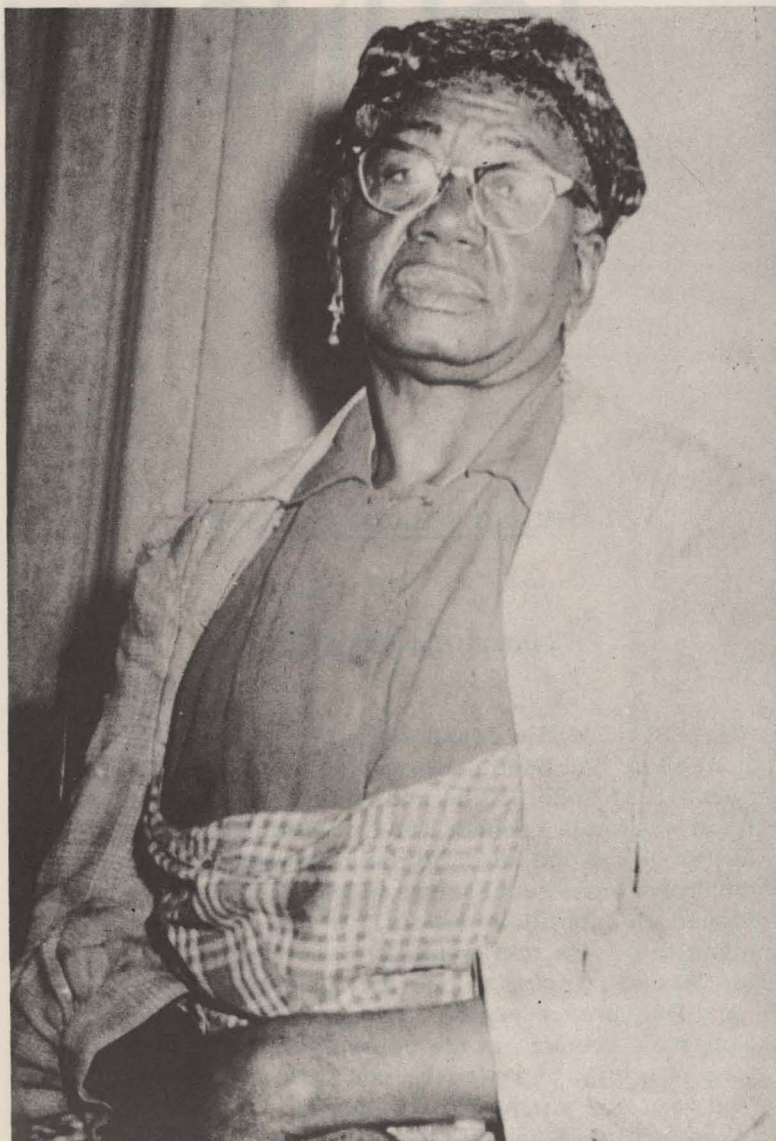
Late in the afternoon I talked with the druggist at Fowler's Pharmacy, at the corner of Forsythe and Neches, and he was able to place the man I was looking for. He sent me to Angeline, who was living in a shack at the outskirts of town. Until we reached Beaumont we had no idea what Willie looked like. Every person we had talked to in northern Texas that had known him was blind.

Blind Willie was born outside of Temple, Texas, about 1900. His father, George Johnson, was a farmer. There was at least one brother, Robert. Willie's mother died when he was a baby, and his father married again. The second wife had another man, and in a fit of anger after an argument with Willie's father threw a pan of lye water in Willie's face, blinding him. He was seven years old.

Angeline said that Willie always wanted to be a religious singer, but Adam Booker said that when he first met Willie in 1925 Willie was singing a few secular songs. Willie's father would bring him into Hearn, Texas, where Booker was pastoring, every Saturday, and Willie would play on the streets. Willie was singing If I Had My Way on the streets of Dallas when Angeline met him in 1927. They lived in Dallas and Waco, then settled in Beaumont after two or three years of wandering. The first recordings were made in Dallas in December, 1927. Willie sang alone. Columbia sent him to New Orleans in December, 1929 to record ten more songs and he stayed in the city nearly a month, playing on the streets. Elder Dave Ross, the blind singer who had sent us to Dallas, had first met Willie in 1929 in New Orleans. There is a woman singing with Willie on the records, probably from one of the local churches.

Richard B. Allen has heard a story in New Orleans about a blind religious singer who was arrested in 1929 for trying to incite a riot. The singer was in front of the Customs House singing If I Had My Way, a highly emotional version of the Samson and Delilah legend. The chorus is sung, "Oh Lord, if I had my way I'd tear this building down." The singer was very probably Blind Willie.

Angeline sang with Willie on the last group of recordings, done in Beaumont in 1930. They never heard from Columbia again. They stayed close to Beaumont, except for occasional trips to Houston to sing for a few days. They were in Houston from August 11 to 18, 1936, for the encampment of the "South Texas Missionary Baptist Association of Texas." Angeline led Willie through the streets in the later years, singing with him. She is still living in Beaumont, making a poor living as a midwife and day nurse.



THE RECORDINGS

Band 1.

DELILAH WAS A WOMAN FINE AND FAIR HER
PLEASANT LOOKS HER COAL BLACK HAIR.
DELILAH GAINED OLD SAMSON'S MIND . . .
SAMSON'S MOTHER REPLIED TO HIM, CAN'T
YOU FIND A WOMAN YOUR KIND AND KIN . . .
SAID GO AND MARRY THAT PHILISTINE . . . IF
I HAD MY WAY . . OH WICKED ONE . . MY LORD
TEAR THAT BUILDING DOWN.

If I Had My Way I'd Tear That Building Down -
Blind Willie Johnson. Vocal solo with guitar accom-
paniment. Columbia record Co 14343, master
number W145321. Recorded Dallas, Texas.
December 3, 1927.

Band 2.

I'VE GOT A BIBLE IN MY HOME. I'VE GOT A
BIBLE IN MY HOME. I DON'T READ MY SOUL BE
LOST. NOBODY'S FAULT BUT MINE. NOBODY'S
FAULT BUT MINE.

Nobody's Fault But Mine - Blind Willie Johnson.
Vocal solo with guitar accompaniment. Columbia
record Co 14303, master number W145318. Record-
ed Dallas, Texas, December 3, 1927.

Band 3.

IN THE YEAR OF 19 AND 18 GOD SEND A MIGHTY
DISEASE. KILLED THE MEN MANY THOUSAND ON
THE LAND AND ON THE SEAS. WELL, GOD IS
WARNING THE NATION . . .

Jesus Is Coming Soon - Blind Willie Johnson, with
unidentified soprano. Vocal duet with guitar accom-
paniment. Columbia record Co 14391, master
number W147569. Recorded Dallas, Texas,
December 5, 1927.

Band 4.

SOME PEOPLE SAY THAT YOUR SISTER WILL DO
WHEN YOUR MOTHER'S DEAD, LORD. WHEN SHE
MARRIES SHE'LL TURN HER BACK ON YOU . . .
MOTHERLESS CHILDREN HAVE A HARD TIME . . .

Mothers Children Have A Hard Time - Blind Willie
Johnson. Vocal solo with guitar accompaniment.
Columbia record Co 14343, master number W145319,
Recorded Dallas, Texas, December 3, 1927.



Band 5.

DARK WAS THE NIGHT, COLD WAS THE GROUND
ON WHICH OUR LORD WAS LAID . . .

Dark Was The Night, Cold Was The Ground - Blind Willie Johnson. Vocal solo with guitar accompaniment. Columbia record Co 14303, master number 145320. Recorded Dallas, Texas, December 3, 1927.

Band 6.

I WONDER WILL A MATCHBOX HOLD MY SOUL.
I WONDER WILL A MATCHBOX HOLD MY SOUL
. . . I WOULDN'T MIND MARRYING BUT I CAN'T
STAND SETTling DOWN . . GOIN' TO ACT LIKE
A PREACHER SO I CAN RIDE FROM TOWN TO
TOWN . . .

Match Box Blues - Blind Lemon Jefferson. Vocal solo with guitar accompaniment. Okeh record 8455. Recorded Chicago, Illinois, 1928.

Band 7.

GOING TO SAVANNAH TO MAKE SOME JACK.
HOLD THAT CAT 'TIL I GET BACK . . .
IT'S JUST RIGHT FOR ME . . .

It's A Good Little Thing - Blind Willie and Partner. (Not Blind Willie Johnson) Vocal duet with two guitar accompaniment. Vocalion record 02622, master number 14010 - 1.

Band 8.

HEY MAMA . . HEY GIRL . . DON'T YOU HEAR
BLIND BOY FULLER CALLING YOU!

Little Woman You're So Sweet - Blind Boy Fuller. Vocal solo with guitar accompaniment. Columbia record 37230, master number W 26601.





The five songs by Blind Willie give a fairly clear picture of his stylistic range as a singer and as his own accompanist. The soprano singing on Jesus Is Coming Soon is probably Angeline; even though she doesn't remember it. If I Had My Way and Jesus Is Coming Soon are sung as rough, chant-like songs, almost shouted in harsh, growling tones. Mothers Children and Nobody's Fault But Mine are sung with a stronger, clearer voice, with the harsher tones used for emphasis. Dark Was The Night is sung as a wordless cry. In later recordings Willie used both a false soprano voice and a false bass voice.

The guitar accompaniments are as varied in style as the voice. He played in at least three tunings; the standard E-B-G-D-A-E, "Hawaiian" tuning, E-C#-A-E-A-E, and an open E tuning, E-B-G#-E-B-E. The E tuning is used for the chants If I Had My Way and Jesus Is Coming Soon. The guitar is played with finger picks and a thumb pick. The sound is an intense and highly rhythmic ostinato, complex and unvarying, a superb stylistic complement to the harsh, rough voice. There is no harmonic movement in these accompaniments. Melodic elements are

introduced in the upper strings, but they are completely subordinated to the relentless rhythm. A dominant chord is very difficult to play when the guitar is tuned this way and there are no harmonic cadences. He usually plays a full chord at the end of the recording.

The "Hawaiian" tuning was introduced into the country before the first World War, and was very popular. The guitar was laid across the lap while a small steel bar in the left hand slid up and down the strings. Finger picks and a thumb pick were usually used on the right hand. Country musicians used a variety of objects to slide along the strings, from small bottles to pieces of tin. Blind Willie used a pocket knife.* The accompaniments to Mothers Children, Nobody's Fault But Mine, and Dark Was The Night, are in this style. The sliding piece of metal on the upper strings is used to make it easy to play melodies, and Willie uses his voice and the guitar in highly developed melodic interplay. The guitar plays the first phrase, the voice sings the second; the voice sings the first three lines, the guitar plays the last. One of the possibilities of the tuning is the repetition of melodic material an octave above or below its first statement, because of the three E strings. He makes beautiful use of this in both Nobody's Fault But Mine and Dark Was The Night.

The harmonic possibilities of the "Hawaiian" tuning are limited, it is an open A chord, but with a careful use of superimposed harmonies over the unvarying tonic in the bass a feeling of subdominant and dominant can be set up. The accompaniments are more varied harmonically than those in the E tuning.

The standard tuning is used to accompany songs of obvious white derivation. Willie plays it with a flat pick. There is considerable melodic material played on the bass strings, with conventional harmonies on the upper strings. The rhythm is the swinging, relaxed dance beat of a lot of white country music recorded about the same time.

* The "Hawaiian" style, considerably modified, was a characteristic of Mississippi blues playing until the second World War. The men put a broken bottle neck on the little finger of the left hand and used it to slide on a single string.

The songs themselves came from a number of sources. Jesus Is Coming Soon was written by Willie, but the others are widely known in Texas. Adam Booker, the preacher, said that the words for If I Had My Way are from Doctor Watts. The other three are late Baptist. The wordless cry of Dark Was The Night is unlike anything recorded in the area. There is a recording by Leadbelly, who was in east Texas for years, on Folkways 1p FP4, in which Leadbelly hums a melodic fragment similar in mood to Blind Willie's recording. He said that this type of singing was used in Baptist services in the area, and this is probably the background for Dark Was The Night. Angeline's version of the same song (Band 3, reverse side) is very different from her husband's. It is a completely realized solo including both a song leader's call, and a group's response. A line is sung and immediately followed with a response variation.

Angeline taught Willie many of the songs he sang in the streets. There were over a hundred song books in an old trunk beside Angeline's shack in Beaumont. The weather and roaches had destroyed all but a few of them. I bought one from her for \$.25. It was the Redeemer's Praise, for the Sunday School, Church, and Family by T.C. Okane, published by Walden & Stowe, 1881. It contained words and music for over 500 songs.

These trite, commonplace songs came to life in Willie's voice and guitar. He brought to them fire and excitement. In superbly creative, imaginative performances he expressed his faith in his God.

Singing or begging are the only ways a blind man can make a living in farm country. Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind Willie (a different Blind Willie), and Blind Boy Fuller sing the blues, but like Blind Willie Johnson they were wanderers, singing in the streets to an audience they could only hear.

Blind Lemon was raised outside of Corsicana, Texas, and his records fall into two rough categories. There are the songs of rural Texas, and the more urban blues, based on the endless sexual laments of the urban Negro. Match Box Blues is a field "holler". The rhythm is the irregular beat of a chant, rather than a blues dance rhythm. The guitar is used as a second voice rather than an accompaniment, and there is a high tonal and rhythmic contrast. The guitar is tuned to the standard E-B-G-D-A-E and played with the fingers. Lemon's guitar patterns are endlessly varied. At one point he uses a walking bass that was later a standard trick of his pupil, Leadbelly. Lemon was very popular and

widely known. As Adam Booker said when asked about Lemon, ". . . he was about the best we had."

It's A Good Little Thing by Blind Willie and partner is a fairly typical example of the two guitar blues style. The lead guitar plays melodic figures on the upper strings, and is usually played with finger picks. The second guitar plays a strong harmonic bass pattern on the lower strings and is usually played with a thumb pick or a flat pick. Both guitars are tuned to the standard tuning, but the second guitar is played in the key of G, and the lead guitar is played with a capo on the third fret so that the chord positions for the key of E, the usual blues key, can be used. The sound is a little brighter than the usual E sound.

The melody for It's A Good Little Thing is found everywhere in the South and has been recorded under a number of titles. It was most recently popular as the melody for Bottle It Up and Go, recorded on Bluebird by the Mississippi guitar player, Tommy McClennan. The lead guitar player on the Blind Willie and Partner version sounds like he might have heard some records by Lonnie Johnson. The guitar solos contain the highly disjunct, rhythmically regular melodic lines very typical of Johnson's style. The second guitar plays a simple ascending bass line against the colorful melodic material.

Blind Boy Fuller, raised outside of Durham, North Carolina, was one of the earliest guitar players to integrate the melodic and rhythmic elements of the two guitar style into a solo style. Melodic figures are set against bass lines, simple chord patterns are contrasted with linear figures, strongly accented rhythms suggest poly-rhythms of considerable complexity; and the colorfully exciting accompaniment is set against a strong, simple vocal line. Fuller was a sensation. Played with a flat pick the style is easier to play than it sounds, and there were many imitators. One of the younger blues singers, Brownie McGhee, who has recorded several blues for Folkways on FP 30/2, called himself "Blind Boy Fuller #2" on his early records.

Little Woman You're So Sweet is one of Fuller's later recordings. It is an 8 bar blues, similar to the older, less sophisticated blues. The accompaniment to the simple vocal line is restrained; carefully complementing the voice. The guitar plays in unison with the voice, or follows it in simple imitation, completing the phrases with harmonic, rather than melodic material.

Fuller and his great contemporary, the Mississippi singer Robert Johnson, were almost the last of the great wanderers. In many cities in the South singing in the streets is now illegal, and the musicians union has made it difficult for the itinerant blind singer to perform in barrooms or eating places. The few young singers on the streets of the smaller cities like Beaumont or Mobile, Alabama sing in the thinly mannered popular radio styles. There is a Texas singer, Lightnin' Hopkins, from Houston; a wanderer in the great tradition, bringing to his blues a strong sense of drama and a rich sense of humor. He has no imitators, and with him will pass a great tradition in American music.



RECORDING DATA

Elder Dave Ross was recorded at his home at 3318 Callipe St., New Orleans, May 30, 1954. Pentron equipment, tape speed 7 1/2" per second. Recording by S. B. Charters.

Adam Booker was recorded in Brenham, Texas, November 6, 1955. Angeline Johnson was recorded at 2525 Euclid St. (the home of a neighbor) Beaumont, Texas, November 8, 1955. Pentrone equipment, ElectroVoice 360 microphone, tape speed 7 1/2" per second. Recording by S. B. Charters.

The Blind Willie Johnson recordings Co 14303 and 14343 are from the collection of S. B. Charters. Jesus Is Coming Soon is from the collection of Harry Souchon, New Orleans, La. The Blind Boy Fuller example is from the collection of R. B. Allen; the Blind Willie and Partner recording is from the collection of Harry Smith. Match Box Blues is from the Folkways collection. Grateful acknowledgement is made to Souchon, Allen, and Smith for their permission to use this material from their personal collections.

FOLKWAYS RECORDS wishes to thank Mr. Waters Turpim for making available the art of Ernest York. Mr. York, a former art student at Morgan State College, has also had art training at Hampton Institute and the Art Students League in New York.

THE RECORDINGS OF BLIND WILLIE JOHNSON

(The number to the left of the title is the master number, the number to the right the release number. A series of dashes in place of a release number indicate that the title is the reverse of the number above it.)

Dallas, Texas. December 3, 1927
 W145316 I Know His Blood Can Make Me Whole Co 14276
 W145317 Jesus Make Up My Dying Bed - - -
 W145318 Nobody's Fault But Mine Co 14303
 W145319 Mothers Children Have A Hard Time Co 14343
 W145320 Dark Was The Night, Cold Was The Ground Co 14303
 W145321 If I Had My Way I'd Tear That Building Down Co 14343

Dallas, Texas. December 5, 1927
 W147568 I'm Gonna Run To The City Of Refuge Co 14391
 W147569 Jesus Is Coming Soon - - -
 W147570 Lord I-Just Can't Keep From Crying Co 14425
 W147571 Keep Your Lamp Trimmed And Burning - - -

New Orleans, Louisiana. December 10, 1929
 W149578 Let Your Light Shine On Me Co 14490
 W149579 God Don't Never Change - - -
 W149580 Bye and Bye I'm Goin' To See The King Co 14504
 W149581 Sweeter As The Years Go By Co 14624

New Orleans, Louisiana. December 11, 1929
 W149594 You'll Need Somebody On Your Bond Co 14504
 W149595 When The War Was On Co 14545
 W149596 Praise God I'm Satisfied - - -
 W149597 Take Your Burden To The Lord And Leave It There Co 14520
 W149598 Take Your Stand Co 14624
 W149599 God Moves On The Water Co 14520

Beaumont, Texas. April 20, 1930
 W150307 Can't Nobody Hide From God Co 14556
 W150308 If It Had Not Been For Jesus - - -
 W150309 Go With Me To That Hand Co 14597
 W150310 The Rain Don't Fall On Me Co 14537
 W150311 Trouble Will Soon Be Over - - -
 W150312 The Soul Of Man Co 14582
 W150313 Everybody Ought To Treat A Stranger Right Co 14597
 W150314 Church, I'm Fully Saved Today Co 14582
 W150315 John The Revelator Co 14530
 W150316 You Gonna Need Somebody On Your Bond - - -

