NOTES BY CHARLES EDWARD SMITH FOLKWAYS RECORDS FS 3824

ARBEE'S BLUES

ARBEE STIDHAM, VOCAL AND GUITAR
MEMPHIS SLIM, PIANO AND ORGAN
JUMP JACKSON, DRUMS

GOOD MORNING BLUES
FALLING BLUES
BLUE AND LOW
MISERY BLUES (CALYPSO)
MY BABY LEFT ME
IN THE EVENING
WALKING BLUES
I'VE GOT TO FORGET YOU
STANDING ON THE CORNER
CARELESS LOVE
TELL ME, MAMA

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

ARBEE'S BLUES

43 W. 61st ST., N.Y.C., U.S.A.

Library of Congress Catalog Card No. R 61 1762

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

FOLKWAYS RECORDS Album # FS3824
 632 BROADWAY, N.Y.C. 10012

ARBEE'S BLUES

Arbee Stidham, vocal & guitar
Memphis Slim, piano & organ
Jump Jackson, drums

SIDE I

Band 1: GOOD MORNING BLUES
Band 2: FALLING BLUES
Band 3: BLUE AND LOW
Band 4: MISERY BLUES (Calypso)
Band 5: MY BABY LEFT ME
Band 6: IN THE EVENING

SIDE II

Band 1: WALKING BLUES
Band 2: I'VE GOT TO FORGET YOU
Band 3: STANDING ON THE CORNER
Band 4: CARELESS LOVE
Band 5: TELL ME, MAMA

ARBEE'S BLUES

by Charles Edward Smith

(Aided by Ray Flerlage's helpful notes on talk with Arbee Stidham and Memphis Slim (Peter Chatman).)

"When the blues start falling,
They fall like showers of rain...."
-Falling Blues

"My daughter always said I should follow Slim," said Arbee Stidham, "--but he moves so fast!"

Since both Arbee and Memphis Slim move in the world of blues, one can only suppose that Arbee's daughter had in mind Memphis Slim's knack for winning over new audiences to the blues-- some who had theretofor thought the honky-tonk strain only a poor relation to jazz, others whose ears had been woo'd by a city slicker called rock and roll. Well, as Slim is Arbee's manager, I don't think his daughter need worry too much. For here is the album she's been plugging for, Arbee's first longplay set, and Slim is not being managerial at all-- just sitting at the piano, playing blues and boogie woogie for an old friend.

In the blues-jazz world of today everyone and his cousin seems to be hurrying on to something new, long before the possibilities of the old are exhausted. Yet in a recent Down Beat poll, if you discount popular singers such as Frank Sinatra -- a fine singer, a jazz-influenced singer but not a jazz singer -- most of the top places (category: male vocalist) will go to singers grounded in the blues: Joe Williams, Ray Charles, Jimmy Rushing -- and Louis Armstrong, who sang blues before creating the prototype of the jazz vocal! All of these jazz singers, to a greater or lesser extent, respect the blues and are not given to exaggerating blues devices into cliches, a common weakness of much rock and roll.

Arbee's blues style owes something to that of the 1930's when so many "juke joints" (honky-tonks) were situated between country and city blues and blues "entertainments" reflected both environments. Bedrock elements of blues are present in his singing, the down-to-earth tonality, insistent beat, vibrato and quaver of country blues style, sometimes blended with jump tempo and other characteristics associated with urban blues. But--as anyone considering jump blues in relation to country tunes will be aware -- this is over-simplifying. There was no great gap between country and city music, even in the early days of blues popularizing. When the Minstrels set up tents on the cross-roads, country and city music were not nearly as far apart in the South as elsewhere.

When Arbee was persuaded into playing guitar -- thereby breaking out of semi-retirement -- he based his style upon blues guitar. Having worked for years in music, and never far from the blues, the transition was neither sudden nor spectacular -- yet when one considers that in 1954 he was in a state of depression because he had to give up alto saxophone and, consequently, steady work in music, his is an amazing accomplishment.

He'd listened to Broonzy, of course, and no doubt other top men, yet his guitar style has a freshness that is in no way imitative. It is also, like that of many fine blues singers, the instrumental style of a man whose guitar is a second voice, a chop of rhythm, a chord to build a song on.

"I've played a lot of jazz, but I've played the blues also," Arbee told Slim and Ray Flerlage. He turned to Ray. "Big Bill and Slim and Big Maceo, maybe, did more for me -- opened more doors and all that sort of thing, you understand -- than anybody else."

"I think blues is the first music," said Arbee, (after a few "warming-up" remakrs) "--it's the original music. Everybody's had the blues. The blues is a feeling. Some people say they don't like the blues. I think it's just that the blues does something to them they don't want to admit. It makes them think back on unhappy things that have happened through life--and they don't want to think about it..." He left the sentence hanging, then continued, "The blues is something you go back and express your feelings-- heartache, trouble, hardship-- whether with a woman, with your friends, hard times. Blues is more of a word than music--in Mexico, West Indies, England, Jamaica--everywhere in the world they sing the blues."

When the concept of "happy" blues was introduced into the conversation, Arbee was dubious-- despite the humor that occurs, sometimes, in his own music. Slim pointed out, "There can be happy blues, too, like My Baby's Comin' Home and I Feel So Good." With the mention of the latter, one of Big Bill Broonzy's tunes, Arbee conceded the point.

Arbee appears to make a sharper distinction than do most of us between blues and blues-related tunes, satirical songs about love, etc. etc. However, a more potent reason for his concept of blues may lie in the fact that he himself went through hard times such as those that gave depth and honesty to the blues.

In 1954, at 37, he had to give up playing alto saxophone -- his doctor told him flatly he had to quit music, either playing or singing. The blowing of saxophone, particularly, aggravated a condition that caused persistent nose-bleeds.) It was a long time before he was able to resume any musical activity, even singing. Without it, he became deeply depressed. He could say "Good morning, blues," in a wry and twisted voice but he couldn't sing it out as a challenge, as he does now. You have to have at least a hope for happiness to be able to do that.

Arbee Stidham was born in De Valls Bluff (pop. 830) Ark., got his schooling at Prairie County Training School and Dunbar High, the latter in Little Rock. However, he spent a part of his early teens in Memphis which in earlier years had been, so to speak, the capital of urban blues -- and was still going strong (though Kansas City had taken the play away by the time Arbee was growing up!). (Both W.C. Handy and Jelly Roll Morton, who held divergent views on contentious points of early jazz history, agreed on one thing, the variety and quality of blues and honky-tonk music in Memphis.) No doubt a little of this rubbed off on Arbee. An uncle, Ernest Stidham, was at one time leader of the Memphis Jug Band -- one of the few bands of this type that won respect from early blues-jazz collectors--in which Arbee's father played alto sax and clarinet. The band included two uncles and an "outsider" named Jud who, in Arbee's opinion, was too much a part of the group to be considered really an outsider.

As a kid, Arbee liked to listen to tunes like Heebie Jeebies Blues (that was a kind of happy one, wasn't it?) on a wind-up Victrola. Blues were his favorite music. Lacking an outlet for his musical ambition, he took to thumping on an old bucket, liking the sound it made, and the rhythm. "I could even," he recalled, "make the thing change tune! I was rough with a bucket! I could wail on a bucket when I was a boy!"

At this point Slim described a man making musical tones by sliding a broom across the floor. Many of the anonymous and gifted creators of Negro American folk instruments would have nodded in agreement at Slim's next remark -- "A man can make music out of just about anything if he sets his mind to it."

Coming home one night, Arbee's father caught him beating on the old bucket, was so impressed that he went out next day and bought the boy a saxophone. Since his father was then busy with dance jobs, and since his mother, brother and sister were none of them musical, Arbee was largely self-taught.

In his mid-teens, in Little Rock, he headed a dance band. It was billed as "Arbee Stidham and His Southern Syncopators," played at the school auditorium, the Masonic hall, clubs and elsewhere locally. He was the only under-age member of the band and his father used to pick him up after jobs to see that he got right home.

Some time after the illness mentioned earlier in this story, Arbee was able to do a little work, but only as a singer. And he had never had real success in that field, even in earlier years. He had once made a record that sold well -- it was of one of his own tunes, My Heart Belongs To You -- but its popularity seemed to be a fluke. Meeting Slim -- they were both living in Chicago by then -- Arbee told him what a rough time he was having. Slim said, "You mean you've got a hit record like that on the street and can't get a job?" That, Arbee, agreed, was exactly right -- and he'd done a lot of walking.

"I remember the snow was knee deep that winter," said Arbee. "Slim had me contact Jimmy Daniels in Atlanta and next day I was headed down there -- with a job!"

His wife Geneva encouraged him to take up guitar and he did so -- it built up his morale just to be able to play at home, and for friends. But, having a friend as talented as Big Bill, he didn't feel equipped to play professionally, even when he showed an unusual aptitude for that instrument. This is where a little missionary work came in. Big Bill sometimes borrowed Arbee's guitar to go out on a job. One evening, as Arbee put it, Big Bill "tricked" him.

On that occasion -- this should have warned him but it didn't -- Broonzy insisted Arbee go with him to the job. The request was unusual but Arbee obliged. They went along to the Zanzibar, where Bill was working. Then Bill quietly disappeared, leaving Arbee with the guitar.

After a while the manager walked over and suggested Arbee play something while they waited for Bill to show. Arbee explained that he couldn't play. The manager, obviously skeptical, kept after him and finally the piano player for the little "combo" they had there, a man nicknamed Pie Face, also put the pressure on, urging him to play -- "or else we won't any of us get paid!"

With a little judicious prodding, they got him to sit on the stand -- just so the customers wouldn't get mad! When Big Bill still didn't return, someone said, "Go on. Play a few chords." Arbee said, (he was a little shaky by this time) "No. I can't play the guitar." They came back at him -- "Then pretend to play!" Well, that was his undoing. They coaxed him along into playing a few chords, then singing.

The crowd yelled for more. Arbee was encouraged but honestly bewildered -- he'd been out of key most of the time, and knew it. But to have the audience with him, and the men on the stand, put him on the right road. He found the key and, surprising even himself, "really started to swing".

At this point Big Bill emerged from under a car where he'd been hiding, unwound his big frame and dusted himself off, grinning all over. "I thought you said you couldn't play!" he shouted.

Arbee started for him but the crowd good-naturedly called him back. Said Arbee, "That's how I started to play the guitar." He paused for a split-second, glancing at Slim and Ray as though he still found it hard to believe it had happened, in fact, it had. There was still a little wonder in his voice as he said, "I think Big Bill had it planned that way all along!

Arbee, in talking about it afterward, described this Folkways session, his first with Slim and, as noted, his first album, as "so relaxed -- like playing at home. I did numbers over that I'd never done 'right' before."

Arbee, Slim and Jump Jackson play together as though they'd been doing it for years. A blues and honky-tonk repertoire in some ways parallel to this was popular in the 1930's. Now, decades later, there is again a growing public for blues that sound like blues and blues-boogie woogie piano like Slim's that blends unusual harmonic ideas into blue chords and incorporates riffs and tone clusters with un-

affected skill. The beauty of tone and rhythmic accent Slim employs on I've Got To Forget You -- on which Jump Jackson lays down the beat like drums on a slow march -- and the little melodic phrases he improvises behind the voice on many tunes, are a joy to the ear.

What with Arbee's direct, sincere blues-nurtured singing, the fresh sound of his blues guitar, Slim's piano and Jump's steady hand at the drums, there is no trio quite like this in blues today.

NOTES ON PERFORMANCES

SIDE I, Band 1: GOOD MORNING BLUES (Traditional)

Arbee, Slim and Jump give one of the most widely sung and played blues in America a walloping workout. Arbee's voice kicks it along with vigour, and with some good guitar-picking between and behind verses. He also takes a guitar solo.

SIDE I, Band 2: FALLING BLUES (Stidham)

The blues have been falling down like rain since 1925, when Lonnie Johnson first recorded such a tune -- and probably long before. Arbee's Falling Blues, strongly sung to an unusually effective accompaniment of electric organ, guitar and drums, was inspired by one of Slim's tunes. (Not even Slim could recall which one it was -- finally decided Messin' Around might have been Arbee's point of departure.) "This is the best number I did," was Arbee's frank appraisal. He added, "Slim played a tremendous background." This marked the first time Slim ever played an electric organ.

FALLING BLUES

When the blues start falling
They fall like shower of rain
And if the blues was water
I'd be so wet I wouldn't even know my name

The blues fell down on me
And, and they almost ruined my health
I'm so tired of having the blues
Oh how I wish they'd lick on someone else

The blues come to me every evening
Ever since you been gone
They make me walk the floor all night
And wring my hands and moan

The blues fell down on me
And they almost drove me insane
And they had me so mixed up
Until I didn't even know my name

SIDE I, Band 3: BLUE AND LOW (Broonzy-Stidham)

To a slightly "Spanish" beat (as old blues singers sometimes called it) Arbee sings his own blues ballad with simplicity and conviction, contributing fine guitar throughout. Almost the only vocal embellishment in this moaning blues is the use of vibrato.

Though it was an old Arkansas-Mississippi blues of Bill Broonzy's that inspired it, the melody has a family relationship to that of Betty And Dupree which came up from Georgia to Tennessee where Brownie McGhee learned it from his father (in "Blues by Brownie McGhee" FA 2030).

Though he changes the verses slightly in singing them, they are substantially the following, which he wrote down for us.

BLUE AND LOW

Here I am today, (2)
Feeling blue and low,
No one to console me,
Nowhere in this world to go.

No one writes me letters, (2)
There's never a knock on my door;
Seems all my friends have forsaken me
And I can't help feeling blue and low.

Each day I try to forget (2)
All the things that worry me so--
But I've made no progress
And I'm still feeling blue and low.

SIDE I, Band 4: MISERY BLUES (Jump Jackson)

There's a loose rein on tempo on Jump's calypso-style jump tune -- apparently they wanted it that way. Note how Arbee's guitar is adapted to "comp" the voice, not merely in phrasing and rhythm but, in this instance, featuring a more "percussive" style. I liked these verses:

MISERY BLUES

Some folks got the blues (2)
But I got misery;
I got a cold-hearted woman --
She's just as mean as she can be.

Now when I come home feeling happy (2)
That gal never kiss or hug,
But she curses her dear old pappy
As though I was a thug.

SIDE I, Band 5: MY BABY LEFT ME (Stidham)

Arbee wails in traditional style to Jump Jackson's blues beat. Slim plays almost gospel-style piano at times but early in the performance his piano and Arbee's guitar provide pungent harmony -- reminding us that any ideas Slim got -- from Tatum or elsewhere, he brought back to the blues. (Which is to say, he has considerable pianistic knowledge, which he expresses in blues terms.) He shares the instrumental solo spot with Slim's guitar.

MY BABY LEFT ME

My baby left me
Left me cold and hand
Wouldn't hated so bad
She left with another man

I want to know, I want to know
What did I do wrong.

She left me feeling blue
Heart-broken and worried
Wasn't nothing I did
Just something the poor girl heard

Wherever you are baby
Please listen to this song
And pack up your clothes baby
And bring yourself back home

I love you baby
Can't get you off my mind
Won't you please come home
So I can stop crying

SIDE I, Band 6: IN THE EVENING (Leroy Carr)

A moving interpretation of a nostalgic blues. What makes this performance especially attractive is that Arbee gives it something of the quality Leroy Carr did (in a record long since out of print). It's in the plaintive melodic mood of the composer's more famous How Long Blues, with much the same easy blues-boogie tempo and the shaping of the last line into a refrain:

In the evenin', in the evenin',
Mama, when the sun goes down,
When the sun goes down.

The single-string solo guitar might have been inspired by his friend Bill Broonzy--it has a comparable blues touch.

SIDE TWO

SIDE II, Band 1: WALKING BLUES (Broonzy-Stidham)

Sung in a traditional style, using vibrato and quaver, in a pleasantly rough tonal texture. Worrying the tone is a vocal stylistic device reflected in blues guitar and also in a style of muted brass identified with early jazz (e.g. passages for wah-wah mute). On piano, Memphis Slim is sweet, solid and as assured as he's ever sounded. Here are some of Arbee's verses:

WALKING BLUES

I'm going to leave here walking
Lord and talking to myself
I've got to find my baby
Before she gets somebody else

When I find my baby
I'm going to admit I done her wrong
And I'm going to fall down on my knees
Lord and beg her to come back home

I'm going to find my baby
Dont think she can't be found
I'll walk up and down the highways
Until my mustache drag the ground

I'm going to find her, yes I'll find her
Oh, I don't care where she may go
Because I'll walk all the way from Chicago
Down to the Gulf of Mexico

SIDE II, Band 2: I'VE GOT TO FORGET YOU (Stidham)

There's a snap to the rhythm as drums, piano and guitar put Arbee's voice in a groove tampo. He sings in a very blue vocal style, between a moan and a shout. In his solo Slim uses tremolo phrases as tone clusters and, behind the voice, his deliberate rhythmic accents are conveyed with rich, full tonality.

I'VE GOT TO FORGET YOU

Baby the sun gone down
You know what you promised me
But you didn't keep your promise baby
You walked away and left poor me

You left me smiling)2
Someday you'll come back crying)
You'll be done stayed away so long
Until I've worried you off my mind

This is how Arbee wrote down the last stanza from memory:

I'm glad my home ain't here, (2)
I'm just stopping through your town;
I'm going to catch the first train leaving
And ride and ride from town to town.

And this is how he sings it:

I'm glad my home ain't here, (2)
Mama, I'm just stopping through your town;
I'm going to catch the first train that passe, Mama,
And I'm gonna ride all around from town to town.

SIDE II, Band 3: STANDING ON THE CORNER (Stidham)

The country boy-city girl situation described in this blues, sometimes with cynical humor in its lines, is reminiscent of a type of blues popular in the depression -- when men came into the cities looking for work. No doubt it also relates to earlier blues of the same type.

I was standing, standing on the corner
I was holding my hat in my hand
I was looking for a woman
One that didn't have no man

A real fine gal walked by
She looking real cute and fly
I ask her if she had any objection of me
Strolling along by her side

She said, daddy if you got some money
Come on sugar pie
But if you ain't got no money
Good by country guy

If you'd only be my baby
Honey you could be my boss (?)
And I'd stick closer to you
Than Jesus did the cross

SIDE II, Band 4: CARELESS LOVE (Traditional)

Every singer has his own way of doing this venerable blues that, in its origin, combined elements of Afro-American folk music with English balladry. When asked if he'd record it -- the only tune specifically requested -- Arbee was uncertain, fumbling around for verses and tempo. At last he thought he had it and gave the nod to the control room. As it turned out, he had a good set of stanzas ready to roll and though he sings with restraint (relatively speaking) the voice combined with its full-bodied musical setting makes this a worthy addition to interpretations of this tune on long-play.

SIDE II, Band 5: TELL ME, MAMA

Tell Me, Mama presents the eternal triangle, honky-tonk style. The looseness with which it is organized is very much like blues "entertainments" of the 1930's, though it is better played and represents a more contemporary technique than its predecessors. Toward the end, Slim throws a few chords out in left field but somehow they "belong"

Two performances were taped, the second because the men thought they could do better with the instrumental solo spot. These "takes" follow in the sequence in which they were taped but at the end of the guitar and piano chorus on "take" 1 we switch to the beginning of the same instrumental chorus on "take" 2 (then let it continue through to the end). The first is interesting because of the use Arbee makes of rhythm guitar, the second for the vigour of two-way improvisation of guitar and piano.

-Charles Edward Smith