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FOLKWAYS FTS 31033

THERE'S ALWAYS TOMORROW

ARBEE STIDHAM



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ARBEE STIDHAM

Notes by Frederic Ramsey, Jr.

In outline, bluesman Arbee Stidham's musical career follows the general sequence of many of the men and women from the South and Southwest who came together in Chicago in the late 1930's and '40's to perform and record for displaced Negroes from the same areas who had come looking for work. The first migration had begun during and following World War I; and a second migration got under way in the 1930's when the record companies moved their studios to Chicago. It was swelled by outbreak of war in 1941 and a second boom followed. They came from Mississippi, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Alabama, Texas, Missouri, Arkansas, Georgia.

There had been a very active period, sometimes called a "golden age" of jazz and blues recording in Chicago beginning about 1924 and declining in the thirties as the Depression hit. With years that led up to War II, activity resumed again, carrying forward into the post-war era. This was followed by a late 50's renaissance of blues interest which became international; bluesmen went to New York, then beyond New York to England, Sweden, France, Germany to record. But by and large, the life of performing blues people has never been stable; they surface for a time when discovered by new or younger audiences, when folk festivals bloom, or when a market develops overseas. No one has written a chronicle of what some of our better bluesmen have done during the periods "in between" — it would help to round out the story of what has been a scuffling existence for many. (Cf. Note at end)

Stidham first surfaced as a recording artist in Chicago, 1947, when Victor's "rhythm and blues" talent scout, Lester Melrose, arranged a session for him. The small band that backed Stidham's vocals was made up of alto, tenor saxophones ("Sax" Mallard, Bill Casimir); Bob Call, piano; Tampa Red, guitar; Ransom Knowling, bass; Judge Ruley, drums. Bob Call, Tampa Red, Knowling and Ruley were veterans of Chicago blues dates. Knowling who played bass horn and string bass, had recorded with Broonzy, Lil Green, Lonnie Johnson, Tampa Red and many others; Ruley had recorded with Broonzy. There was a hit for Stidham in the four tunes they recorded September 18, and so Victor set up a New York date for him, backed by the Lucky Millinder Orchestra, in December of the same year. There followed a number of other dates in 1949 and 1950, using similar small band instrumentation, but with personnel changes in reeds, and addition of a trumpet player.

Since then, Arbee Stidham has recorded for a number of labels: Sitting In With, States, Checker, and Abco in the years 1951-1956. He came again to New York in 1960 and recorded for Bluesville and Folkways (Folkways FS 3824 and FS 3826 — with Memphis Slim, Jump Jackson, for 3824; Memphis Slim and Jazz Gillum, for 3826).

Stidham dropped from record lists for the rest of the decade; but returned in 1973. He had left Chicago, settled in Cleveland, Ohio, continued to play. In 1973, he took a new band into the studio. The group includes singer Stidham, playing guitar and French harp or harmonica; Frank Porter, saxophone; Lindsay Tuft, electric organ; Everett Mitchell, Jr., second percussion; Marquee Davis, drums. All the titles are Stidham compositions.

The band that Stidham assembled for this session sounds easy, relaxed, in control of the music. There's a good time, funky feeling that dominates performances, suggesting the Saturday-night mood that Stidham produced on one of his earlier titles from the Chicago days, "Barbecue Lounge." The rhythm section — and the electric organ has to be included along with the drums, string bass, tambourine — paces each title with assurance, handling slow, fast, medium, tempos with confidence. The organ sustains and supports the bass player with

short-lived, low-register punctuations. At times, whether by accident or design, there's almost the sound of a bass horn pumping along behind whatever else happens to be going on. The tambourine man gives good rhythmic texture in the higher range while the drummer works over the large cymbal with his sticks. What's being said musically — the expressive melodic line — is carried by Stidham, going back and forth from electric guitar to his harp, and Porter, who cuts in, sometimes using riffs that call and respond to the vocal line, sometimes coming in after the voice with eloquent blues phrasings that build the mood. As a unit, the group demonstrates that it's played together long enough to achieve closeknit structure without its members having to get in each other's way.

The programming is balanced. Some of the tunes, like "Please Let It Be Me," "You Keep Me Yearning," are unabashedly pop-blues, much more likely to appeal to a younger generation with lyric thoughts on its mind than to the aficionados who prefer the earthy blues of a near-vanished tribe of Deep South bluesmen. Yet Stidham demonstrates that he has roots in this tradition as well; "People's Blues," "Take the Pain From My Heart," "Tired of Wondering," "If You Just Hold On" fit in here. "If You Just Hold On" sounds like a tune straight from a Baptist hymn book, and its message goes with the music: "It's a hard road to travel, and a long way to go — But we can make it if we just hold on." Similarly, "There's Always Tomorrow" exhorts followers to "keep the faith." All of this confirms the lifelong exchange that has taken place between daily music and Sunday music — presumably at opposite poles, yet each deeps drawing from the other's resources.

"My Lincoln Continental" tells a different story. One of the ways Arbee Stidham has kept himself going during periods "in between" has been as a car mechanic. It began in the late twenties back in his Arkansas home town, De Valls Bluff, when a rich white man handed down a special model Cadillac to Stidham. So now he's made up a song about a ride in a Lincoln Continental. Snippets from it would probably do as a first-rate TV commercial for the Continental, and no doubt will appeal to those who make the cars and the commercials. But that misses the point.

What Stidham has put together in his song about the Continental is his up-date of a "talking blues," complete with monologue, musical sound effects mimicking the car, its motor and its push-button controls. The old-time blues-singers used to "call the train" or "call the dove" — that is, put their music together to make it sound like a fast freight or a bird calling from the roadside. The sounds weren't strictly literal and the talk was often tall. They weren't selling a freight train or a wood dove, they were fascinated with transposing mechanical or animal sounds to a voice or an instrument. And when they talked, they constructed a dream or a tale, not a sales pitch.

So it goes with Arbee Stidham's update:

You know everybody say you have to be blindfold when you're riding in your Lincoln Continental to tell the difference in the ride. But you don't have to be blindfold because that Lincoln Continental just tell you what you're ridin' in. You're ridin' so smooth and easy you reach out to turn your television on. Then you realize you're ridin' in that Continental an' there ain't no television there you're ridin' so smooth you don't know the difference you think you're sittin' in your own living room. I'm lookin' down there, I'm ridin' along an' I see a car down there now I'm goin' think about when you passin'. Here's the way it sounds when you passin' (harp plays). I just passed him up, see? Now we goin' on down the road now I feel like I'm gonna relax and cruise some

and I'm gonna put it in automatic controls-control. Now that's when you relax, take your foot off the accelerator and just touch that button . . . and you're movin' (electric organ burp-buzz, and into harp solo). I went by, now (harp continues) . . . Now I'm goin' sit here with an automatic cruise control. Look down the road — but all I have to do is sit here and rant back you don't have to do nothin' 'cause it movin' down this road, it's usin' and groovin' along you know, you got everything under control you know you got it under control so you set there on the ca'pet 'cause I'm telling you the truth, man, there's not another ride like that Lincoln Continental ride. Now I just want to sit here and just ga-roove . . . (into harp solo). Now open it up! (harp solo & finale)

It's been a busy year for Arbee Stidham, a time of renewed musical activity that one hopes will put a period to a long time of "in between." He plans new compositions, and new recording sessions with the band he's organized in Cleveland. The recordings heard here have already produced results that make this seem possible. Audition tapes of the session were heard by film makers of Venture Productions, an independent group that specializes in feature programs for network and educational television, and camera work on a new program, "The Bluesman," was begun right away. The one-hour feature, filmed in color, is now in the cutting stage, and will be seen on a number of outlets.

"In doing this session," Stidham says, "I thought back to my boyhood days when I was singing the Blues in and around my home town, De Valls Bluff, Arkansas, where I was born 2-9-1917, when people was really living and playing the blues . . . they always have and always will tell a story."

Note: (Refer to paragraphs 1 and 2 of Arbee Stidham Notes) There is ample coverage of the Chicago blues scene, 1930's and '40's, in the Notes to the Folkways Memphis Slim LP, "Memphis Slim Recalls His Favorite Blues Singers — Blues from the Thirties and Forties" Folkways FA 2387. Migrations of musicians and their audiences, and the later shift to Europe are also discussed.

Biographical data about Arbee Stidham can be found in Notes to Folkways FS 3824, "Arbee's Blues," written by the late Charles Edward Smith; and additional background for Stidham appears in Folkways Notes to FS 3826, "Blues by Jazz Gillum, with Arbee Stidham and Memphis Slim" in Notes by Iola and Ray Flerlage.

—F. R. Jr.

SIDE I

1. PLEASE LET IT BE ME (2:21)
2. I STAYED AWAY TOO LONG (3:36)
3. THERE'S ALWAYS TOMORROW (3:17)
4. YOU KEEP ME YEARNING (2:40)
5. TIRED OF WONDERING (3:46)

SIDE 2

1. IF YOU JUST HOLD ON (4:02)
2. TAKE THE PAIN FROM MY HEART (3:07)
3. MY LINCOLN CONTINENTAL (3:51)
4. WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF YOU WERE ME? (3:53)
5. PEOPLE'S BLUES (4:25)

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