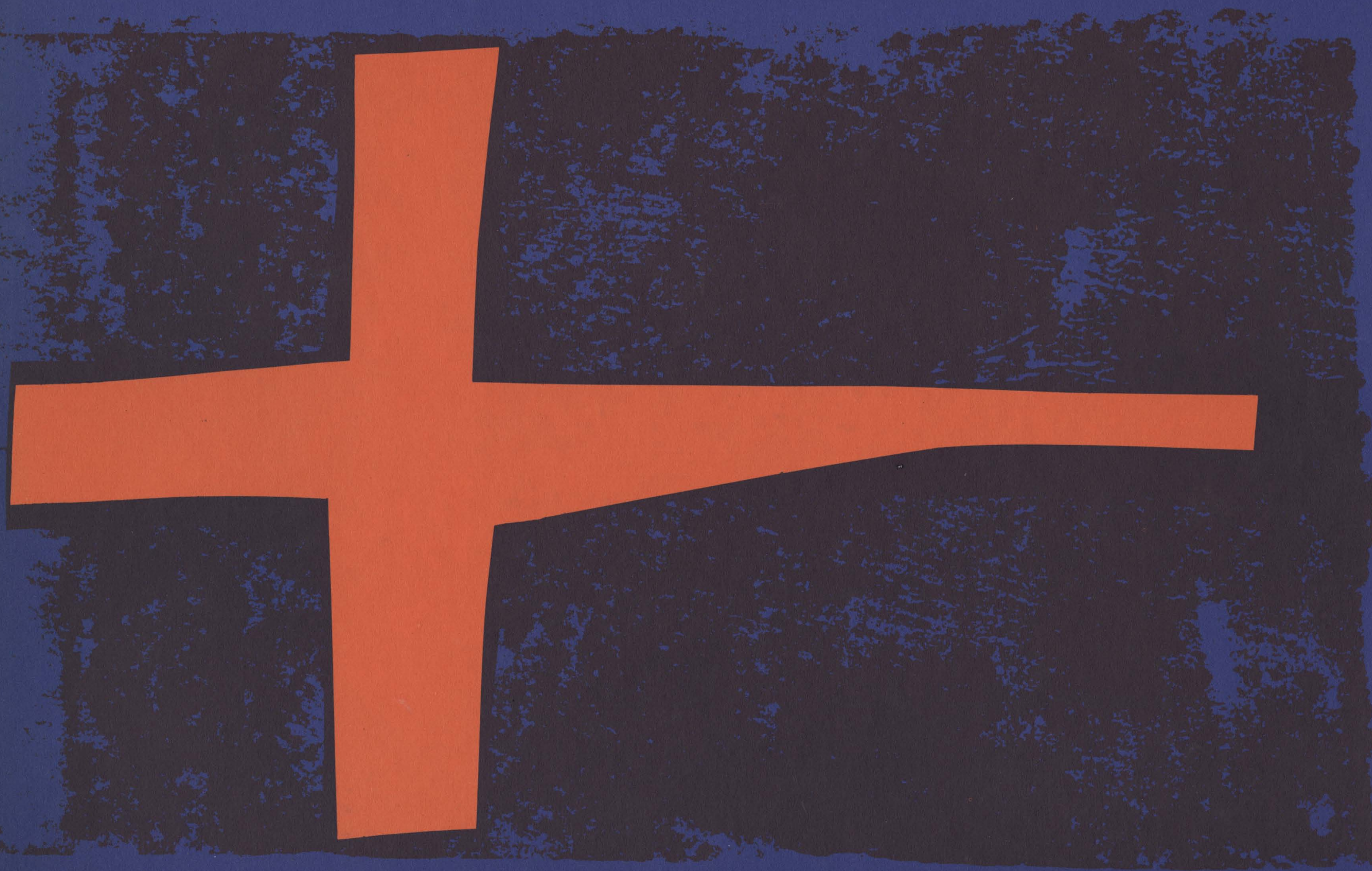


# BILLY WILLIE JOHNSON

RBF 10

1927-1930

Edited and with an introduction by Samuel Charters



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Jesus Make Up My Dying Bed  
God Don't Never Change  
Trouble Soon Be Over  
Let Your Light Shine On Me  
The Rain Don't Fall On Me  
I Know His Blood Can Make Me Whole  
I'm Gonna Run To The City Of Refuge  
Lord, I Just Can't Keep From Crying  
Everybody Ought To Treat A Stranger Right  
Jesus Is Coming Soon  
Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning  
Church I'm Fully Saved Today  
Eye And Eye I'm Goin' To See The King  
Can't Nobody Hide From God

RECORDED UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF SAMUEL CHARTERS

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

# RECLUTCH PROJECTS

RBF 10

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# BLIND WILLIE JOHNSON

## 1927-1930

Edited and with an Introduction by Samuel Charters



Although the racial caste system of the American South almost completely dominated the lives of the people forced to live under its brutal indignities the dominant white society left a few gaps in the wall of repression that surrounded the Negro families living in the towns and in the countryside around them. It was as though they sensed that to stifle these men and women completely would bring down on their heads the violence of the social revolution which has finally overtaken the South. They left to their neighbors religion and sexuality, encouraging them to think of a society where they would find equality in Heaven, rather than on southern earth, and to vent their suppressed rage in promiscuity and drunkenness. There was also no restraint on an expression of these attitudes, even though there was a tight control on any other expression of political or economic thought. The result was the great creative outburst of the spiritual in the years following the Civil War and the development of the blues in the years from about 1910 to 1930.

At the point when the blues was emerging from the field holler and the work chant the recording industry had begun to turn to American rural music, and the result was a rich documentation of an emerging musical form. At this same period, roughly the late 1920's and the early 1930's, the religious styles were undergoing a transition from the older spiritual to the gospel music of the modern period. The recordings generally reflect the tentativeness of this transitional period. The group singing is often dominated by the styles of the formal spiritual groups and the individual singer usually limits himself to the conventional texts and imagery of the Baptist hymnal. There is often considerable instrumental dexterity and a vibrant singing style, but there is less often a personal poetic expression of the depth and the variety of the blues singers of the period.

There was, however, a Texas religious singer who used the religious song as an expression of a personal poetic style, just as Lemon Jefferson, the Texas blues singer, used the materials of the blues as his own creative expression. The religious singer was the great Willie Johnson, a blind singer from Marlin, Texas, who like Lemon Jefferson was given the name "Blind" for his recordings and was known as Blind Willie Johnson. His songs, even when they are derived from the hymn book materials, have a vibrancy and a vividness of image and expression. In some of them, like the narrated JESUS IS COMING SOON, he is able to describe a contemporary event like the 1918 influenza epidemic, in others, like GOD DON'T NEVER CHANGE he reflects, in a personal language, one of the basic concepts of the Christian philosophers.

Although Willie sounded like an older man on the recordings he was only twenty six or twenty seven when he first went into a studio in Dallas in 1927. He was born on a small farm near the Brazos

River about 1902, the son of a farmer named George Johnson. Willie was blinded when he was seven years old. His father's second wife threw a pan of lye in his face to get even with his father for a beating and he was left blind for the rest of his life. He sang in the streets of the small cotton towns in south central Texas, and came into Dallas in the spring of 1927, where he met his wife, Angeline. She remembers that he was singing "If I Had My Way I'd Tear This Building Down," as he went along the street and she walked behind him singing it with him until he noticed her.

He was a good looking man. Tall, with a good face. He was also a great singer and a stunning guitarist. Although his songs can often be traced to earlier sources his guitar style is more elusive, and there is little resemblance between his playing and that of other Texas singers who recorded at about the same time. Singers who recorded a year or so later already reflected his influence, but there seem to be no earlier musicians in his style who left recordings behind them. Another singer is known as the source of only one of his songs, EVERYBODY OUGHT TO TREAT A STRANGER RIGHT. It was usually thought of as the song of Madkin Butler, an older singer who never recorded, but who sang for church groups throughout the countryside where Willie grew up. His other songs have been so completely changed in his hands that they become his own personal expression, building on the great Biblical figures of Samson and David, and reflecting the loneliness of the motherless child or the homeless stranger. He sings with such intensity that it is often difficult to understand the verses, in other songs he half sings, half plays the text, letting the guitar follow and amplify the melodic line. He is a harsh, demanding singer, but he is also one of the greatest of the singers to come out of the rural South in the more than thirty years that have passed since he went into the recording studio.

Although Willie's recordings were difficult and uncompromising they sold widely. Of all the artists to record during the burst of recording activity in the South between 1926 and 1931 he was one of the most successful. In part it may have been due to the emotional crisis of the first depression years, but in part it was to the quality of the music itself. He influenced nearly everyone who heard the recordings. Sometimes, like Reverend Gary Davis, the singers still do almost all of Willie's songs, and often, as with Fred McDowell, they still have some of his guitar style in their own playing. Even when the recordings were first released the guitar style attracted attention. The first advertisements and the first reviews in 1928 called attention to the brilliance and the individuality of the guitar accompaniment. Willie seems to have used three tunings, a regular, a sebastopol, and an open tuning, and he played in a variety of accompaniment styles, ranging from a knife

style that was highly melodic, as in JESUS MAKE UP MY DYING BED, to an insistent picking style, as in TROUBLE WILL SOON BE OVER.

If he had not made his greatest recordings just as the Depression was closing in on the South he might have become more widely known to a city audience, but when the company that he was recording for went into bankruptcy in 1932 he dropped out of sight and never recorded again. He and his wife Angeline finally moved to Beaumont, Texas, and he died there of pneumonia in 1949. The recordings that he did between 1927 and 1930, however, are one of the great bodies of religious song, both in their stylistic range and in their artistic development, and they can stand, as well, as a symbol of the strength of the religious faith that has enabled some of the colored men and women living under the pall of discrimination to find some hope and some promise in their bleak lives.

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I would like to thank Pete Whalen and Ben Kaplan for making available original records from their collections.

Other Recordings by Blind Willie Johnson are available on Folkways Record FG 3585, "Blind Willie Johnson" a documentary of his life, with Angeline Johnson; FJ 2802 "Jazz, Volume 2;" and both RBF releases RBF 1, "The Country Blues" and RBF 203, "The Rural Blues."

#### SIDE A

##### Band 1. "JESUS MAKE UP MY DYING BED"

A number of Blind Willie Johnson's songs, of which this is one, present considerable difficulty in transcription. In "Jesus Make Up My Dying Bed" only occasional phrases are clear and the guitar is often used to begin or end a vocal section.

##### Band 2. "GOD DON'T NEVER CHANGE"

Oh God, God don't never change,  
He's God, always will be God.

God in the middle of the ocean,  
God in the middle of the sea,  
By the help of the great Creator  
Truly been a God to me.

Oh God, God don't never change,  
God, always will be God.

God in creation,  
God when Adam Fell,  
God way up in heaven,  
God way down in hell.

Praise God, God don't never change,  
Oh, always will be God.

-- to the mountain,  
Said how great I am,  
Want you to get up this mornin'  
Skip around like a lamb.

God, God don't never change,  
Oh, always will be God.

God in the time of sickness,  
God is the doctor too,  
In the time of the influenza  
He truly was a God to you.

Well it's God, God don't never change,  
Praise God, always will be God.

God in the pulpit,  
God way down at the door,  
It's God in the amen corner,  
God's all over the floor.

Well it's God, God don't never change,  
Oh, always will be God.

##### Band 3. "TROUBLE SOON BE OVER"

###### CHORUS:

Oh, trouble, soon be over  
Sorrow will have an end,  
Trouble soon be oh -  
Sorrow will have an end.

Christ is my burden sharer,  
He's ma only friend,  
Early in my sorrow (?)  
He tole me be no end.

###### (CHORUS)

God is ma strong protection,  
He's ma bosom friend,  
Trouble rose around me  
I know who'll take me in.

###### (CHORUS)

He proved a friend to David  
I heed him and I'll pray,  
The same god that David save  
Will yield me rest someday. (?)

###### (CHORUS)

Well, though ma burden may be heavy  
And almost crush me down,  
Someday I'll rest with Jesus  
And wear a starry crown.

###### (CHORUS)

I'll take this yoke upon me  
And live a Christian life,  
Take Jesus for ma saviour,  
Ma burden will be light.

###### (CHORUS)

He proved a friend to David  
I heed him and I'll pray,  
The same god that David save  
Will yield me rest someday. (?)

###### (CHORUS)

##### Band 4. "LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE ON ME"

###### CHORUS:

Let it shine on me  
Let it shine on me,  
Let your light from the lighthouse  
Shine on me.  
(Repeat)

My Lord he done just what he said,  
(Ref) Let your light from the lighthouse  
Shine on me.  
Healed the sick and raised the dead,  
(Ref) Let your light from the lighthouse  
Shine on me.

###### (CHORUS)

I know I got religion and I ain't ashamed,  
(Refrain)  
Angels in the heaven done wrote my name,  
(Refrain)

###### (CHORUS)

(chorus is repeated twice)

##### Band 5. "THE RAIN DON'T FALL ON ME"

###### CHORUS:

Oh the rain, let 'er rain,  
Let 'er rain, don't let 'em in.  
Oh the rain, let 'er rain,  
(Don't) let 'em in.

(Chorus repeated twice the first time)

Don't you know  
Promised it true,  
It was sent from heaven to you,  
It was sent, dearly beloved,  
Son of God.

(CHORUS) (repeated once)

It's for you  
It's for you  
It's for you and your children too.  
-- rain, let it rain,  
Don't let 'em in.

(CHORUS) (repeated once)

Guitar solo, then CHORUS repeated twice.

#### Band 6. "I KNOW HIS BLOOD CAN MAKE ME WHOLE"

Antiphonal in form, with the responses in the guitar.

I know his blood can/ (guitar plays phrase  
"make me whole")  
Oh his blood can/ . . .  
I have heard -- (?)  
(Guitar plays phrase "I know his blood can  
make me whole.")

Blood of Jesus. . .

Well his blood. . .

I was a gambler (just like you) . . .

Oh blood . . .

I was sick and I couldn't get well . . .

Glad his blood has . . .

Jesus blood can . . .

Oh blood . . .

I was sick and I couldn't get well. . .

#### Band 7. "I'M GONNA RUN TO THE CITY OF REFUGE"

CHORUS:

I'm a run, I'm a run,  
I'm a run to the city of refuge,  
I'm a run. (Repeat twice)

Oh the preacher was preachin' the gospel,  
He sat with the 'leven men,  
I'll show you the one that's in heaven  
If you would just only come in.

CHORUS (varied on repeat to "Help me run" etc.)

Repeat 1. Repeat chorus in first form.

Let me tell you my sinner,  
If you want to join his band  
You got to be converted  
And give the preacher your hand.

CHORUS (varied on repeat to "I'm gonna run" etc.)

Well, the holy ghost is a mystery  
God sent it in the land,  
But strugglin' hard at the master  
Tryin' to stay in Jesus's hand.

CHORUS (repeated in first form)

Well the twelfth chapter of revelation  
Along in the thirteenth verse,  
The dragons that John did preach about  
Drag us off to death in hell.

CHORUS (repeated in first form)

Well round that -- table,  
When Jesus was about to leave,  
--  
And the holy ghost set you free.

(CHORUS)

#### SIDE TWO

#### Band 1. "LORD, I JUST CAN'T KEEP FROM CRYING"

CHORUS:

Well, I just can't keep from cryin'  
Sometime,  
Well, I just can't keep from cryin'  
Sometime.  
When my heart's full of sorrow  
And my heart's filled with fear  
Lord I just can't keep from cryin'  
Sometime.

My mother often told me  
Angels bonded your life away,  
She said --  
But trust in God and pray.  
I'm on the King's highway  
I'm strugglin' every day.

(CHORUS)

My mother she's in glory  
Thank God, I'm on my way,  
Father he's gone too  
And sister she could not stay,  
I'm trustin' Him every day  
He will there my burden lay.

(CHORUS)

I thought when she first left me  
I'd grieve a little while  
Soon it all would be over,  
I'd join her with a smile.  
But the thought as I grow older  
I think of what I told her.

(CHORUS)

#### Band 2. "EVERYBODY OUGHT TO TREAT A STRANGER RIGHT"

CHORUS:

Everybody ought to treat a stranger right  
Long way from home.  
Everybody ought to treat a stranger right  
A long way from home.

Careful of how you treat a stranger  
Careful how you turn him away,  
--  
Will turn him from your gate.

(CHORUS)

--  
Be careful how you go along,  
You must always treat a stranger right  
Always serve him in your home.

(CHORUS)

Well, all of us here are strangers  
None of us have no home,  
Don't never hurt your brother  
And cause him (to fool his own)?

(CHORUS) (repeated)

Well, Christ came down a stranger  
He didn't have no home,  
Well, he was cradled in a manger  
And oxen kept him warm.

(CHORUS)

Well the Wise Men found a stranger,  
Well the child was one day old,  
They --  
Well, they offered him gifts of gold.

(CHORUS)

Band 3. "JESUS IS COMING SOON"

CHORUS:

Well, we done told you  
I got some warnin'  
Jesus comin' soon,  
Well I thought I got some warnin'  
Jesus comin' soon.

In the year of 19 and 18  
God sent a mighty disease  
It killed men many thousand  
On land and on the seas.

(CHORUS)

Great disease was mighty  
And the people were sick everywhere  
It was the --  
It floated through the air.

(CHORUS)

The doctors they got troubled  
And they didn't know what to do,  
They gathered themselves together  
They called it the spanishin (?) flu.

(CHORUS)

Soldiers died on the battlefield  
Died in the camps too,  
Captain said to the lieutenant  
I don't know what to do.

(CHORUS)

Well God is warnin' the nation  
He's warnin' them every way,  
To turn away from the evil  
And seek the Lord and pray.

(CHORUS)

Well the noble (?) said to the people  
You better close your public schools,  
Until --  
Better close the churches too. (?)

(CHORUS)

Read the book of Zacharias  
Bible plainly says (?)  
Said the people in the cities dyin'  
'Count of their wicked ways.

Band 4. "KEEP YOUR LAMP TRIMMED AND BURNING"

(This song is antiphonal in form, the lines  
divided between Johnson and his wife Angeline.)

CHORUS:

Keep your lamp/trimmed and burning,  
Keep your lamp/trimmed and burning,  
Keep your lamp/trimmed and burning,  
See what my God has done.

Sister/don't get worried (3 times)  
Cause the work is almost done.

(CHORUS)

Brother/don't get worried (3 times)  
Cause the work is almost done.

(Instrumental Chorus)

Well I'm joinin'/gone before us (3 times)  
See what my God has done.

Well then don't get worried (3 times)  
Cause the work is almost done.

(Pause)/ almost over, (3 times)  
See what my God has done.

Brother/don't get worried (3 times)  
Cause the work is almost done.

Band 5. "CHURCH I'M FULLY SAVED TODAY"

(This song is antiphonal in form, the lines  
divided between Johnson and his wife Angeline.)

CHORUS:

Church I'm fully/saved today  
Saved today/ saved today,  
And I'm in/ in this narrow way  
This narrow way/This narrow way,  
Ain't no evil/ can be found  
Can betide/evil can betide  
I'm lookin' for my Saviour's sign.

(repeat)

I'm walking/in the light )  
In the light/ in the light ) 3

(CHORUS)

There's a wonder/in my soul )  
In my soul/in my soul ) 3  
I'm lookin' for my Saviour's sign.

(CHORUS)

I know his blood/will make me whole )  
Will make me whole/can make me whole ) 3  
I'm lookin' for my Saviour's sign.

(CHORUS) (repeat three times)

Band 6. "BYE AND BYE I'M GOIN' TO SEE THE KING"

CHORUS:

Bye and bye I'm goin' to see the King (3)  
Wouldn't mind dyin' if dyin' was all.

Wouldn't mind dyin', got to go by myself (3)  
Wouldn't mind dyin' if dyin' was all.

(CHORUS)

'Zekial saw a wheel, wheel in the middle of a  
wheel (3)  
Wouldn't mind dyin' if dyin' was all.

(CHORUS)

-- saw him comin' with his dyin' garments on (3)  
Wouldn't mind dyin' if dyin' was all.

(CHORUS)

After death you've got to stand the test (3)  
Wouldn't mind dyin' if dyin' was all.

Band 7. "CAN'T NOBODY HIDE FROM GOD"

CHORUS:

Angeline: Oh can't )  
Willie: Nobody hide )  
A: Nobody hide ) 3  
W: Can't nobody hide, )  
Together: Oh can't nobody hide from God.

A: You can hide from your sister,  
But you can't hide from God.  
W & A: Can't nobody hide from God.  
(Repeat entire)

(CHORUS)

A: You can hide from your deacon,  
A & W: But you can't hide from God.  
Can't nobody hide from God.  
(Repeat entire)

(CHORUS)

(Repeat verse one twice)

A: You can hide from your brother  
A & W: But you can't hide from God,  
Can't nobody hide from God.  
(Repeat entire)

(CHORUS) (Twice)

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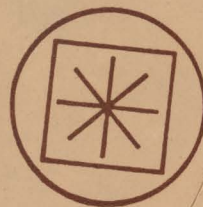
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**BLIND WILLIE JOHNSON.**  
**1927 - 1930**

Edited and with an introduction by  
Samuel Charters

SIDE 1 RF-10A  
33 $\frac{1}{3}$  RPM

**RBF**



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Band 1. Jesus Make Up My Dying Bed  
Band 2. God Don't Never Change  
Band 3. Trouble Soon Be Over  
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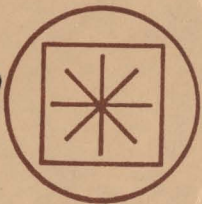
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SIDE 2 RF-10B  
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- Band 1. Lord, I Just Can't Keep From Crying
- Band 2. Everybody Ought To Treat A Stranger Right
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