

BARRACK ROOM LAWYER

by Guido van Rijn and Chris Smith



Lawyer Houston and his second wife, Ella, probably at a party to celebrate his retirement from the Army, c. late 1961.

This feature is a follow-up to our biography of Lawyer Houston, published in B&R 215. As we related in that issue, around 1949 Lawyer Houston – his real name – recorded eight songs at Jim Beck’s studio in Dallas. Beck, like Houston, was a native of Marshall, Texas. The session was purchased by Atlantic, which perhaps saw the deal as a negotiating ploy which might help it break into the country music market, for which Beck was producing important recordings. Two 78s were issued, but the remaining songs stayed on the shelf until 1972, when the complete session appeared on LP. By 1952, Houston was in California, where he recorded a further seven songs, two with alternative takes, for African-American entrepreneur John Dolphin. Dolphin sent a tape to King, but nothing was issued, and the tape lay forgotten until Neil Slaven unearthed it many years later.

Houston’s recordings were a sideline during his career in the Army. Apart from a two-month break in 1946, he served for twenty years, from 1941 to 1961, and was stationed in the Pacific theatre, occupied Germany, Japan and Korea as well as the continental US. One of his Atlantic 78s was credited to ‘Soldier Boy Houston’, and during his recording sessions he often sang about his experiences in the Army. A basic but effective guitarist, Houston is justly admired as an idiosyncratic and often amusing lyricist, who also sang about migration to



Lawyer at work at the California State Museum.

the West Coast, and celebrated the nightlife of Dallas and Lawton, Oklahoma.

We are now able to present some additional biographical details from public records and, for the first time anywhere, to publish photographs of Mr. Houston with family members and fellow workers.

In B&R 215, we wrote: ‘On 21 October 1939, Lawyer D. Houston, Jr. was born. His mother’s name is given in the Texas Births Index as Kathleen Miller. Presumably she and Lawyer Houston were married, but this marriage also seems not to have been of long duration, although whether it ended by death or divorce is not known ...’

The discovery of the certificate for Lawyer Houston’s second marriage enables us to state that his marriage to Katherine Miller ended by divorce in 1940. The second marriage certificate, which gives his name as Lawyer Danial [sic] Houston, indicates that he received only an eighth-grade education, not the twelve years that we reported. The latter figure derives from Houston’s death certificate, but the eight years on the marriage certificate presumably reflect his own declaration, and must be accounted more reliable.

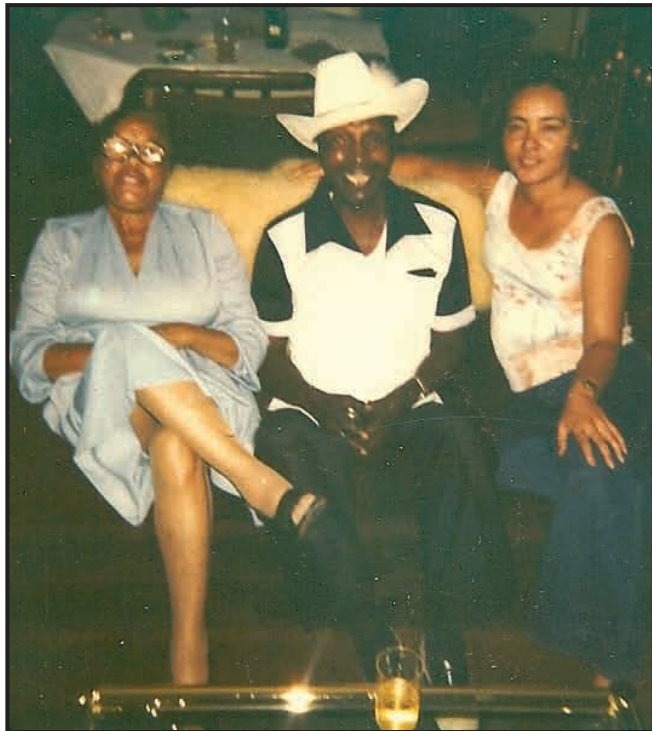
The marriage was solemnised on 8th May, 1971 by Elder Samuel Rainey, at the General Assembly Church of the First Born, 1249 West 67th Street, Los Angeles.

When he remarried, Lawyer Houston was working as a janitor, and living at 1429 West Gage Avenue, Los Angeles. This was also the address of the bride, Ella Virginia Moore, née Reliford; like Houston, she was divorced. Ms Moore was working as a grader in a garment factory. She had been born in Louisiana to Calib [sic] Reliford and Hattie Reliford, née Gary, both of whom were also natives of the Pelican State.





With co-workers at the California State Museum.



Lawyer with his wife Ella and his sister-in-law.



Lawyer with his wife Ella and grandson, Scott.

Ella Reliford's first marriage took place at an early age, for she gave her date of birth as 9th October 1916, and the date that her previous marriage had ended as 1930.

Lawyer Houston is described as 'widowed' on his death certificate, and according to the Social Security Death Index Ella Houston, born 9th October, 1915 [sic], died in Los Angeles in March 1985. Her Social Security number was issued in California.

Reliford is an uncommon surname; in the 1920 census only 299 Relifords were enumerated, 188 of whom were African-American. Forty five of that cohort were living in Louisiana, but Calib, Hattie and Ella are not among them. (The use of variant spellings such as Relford, Relaford and Releford has not enabled us to trace them.)

However, assuming a considerable degree of misreporting in the census, Ella Reliford may be the person listed as Eliza Reliford, aged four years, three months on 1st January, 1920. This is consistent with an October 1915 birthdate. She was living in Ninock, Bossier Parish, and was the daughter of Homer and Katie Reliford, aged 36 and 26 respectively, and both Louisiana-born. It may be relevant that one of their six children (aged from twelve years to four months old) was Hattie L. Reliford, aged two years, four months.

We concluded our article in B&R 215 by noting our failure to trace Rosie Dyson, who described herself on Lawyer Houston's death certificate as his daughter.

However, in April 2008 we managed to do so. Mrs Dyson was born on 9th June 1930, so in fact she is Lawyer Houston's

stepdaughter. When we spoke to Mrs Dyson, she was very kind, and surprised that we were so interested in her stepfather. We sent her a copy of B&R 215, and a CD-R of all his recordings.

Mrs Dyson said that she had a few pictures of Lawyer Houston in her photograph book, and that one of them showed him in uniform. She promised that she would ask her daughter, Mrs Jacqueline Brandt, to copy the photos for us. Mrs Brandt, whose husband is a sergeant in the US Army, was in the process of moving to another state, but when she had settled in her new home, her mother visited her for Thanksgiving 2008. Mrs Dyson brought the photo albums with her, and thanks to the generosity of his stepdaughter and granddaughter, readers can at last see these images of Lawyer 'Soldier Boy' Houston.

The label shots of the rare Soldier Boy Houston Atlantic 45 are courtesy of Victor Pearlin. All other photographs in this feature are copyright © Mrs Rosie Dyson and Mrs Jacqueline Brandt, and may not be reproduced without permission. The authors (<rijn8194@planet.nl> and <chris@skerries.demon.co.uk>) will be happy to forward enquiries about their use.

