

Obituary

Joe Willie Wilkins

A tiny rural area known as Davenport, Mississippi marked only by a railroad crossing just south-west of Clarksdale was the birthplace of Joe Willie Wilkins. Born on 7 January 1923 (some sources say 1922), his father Frank Wilkins was an accomplished and respected guitar player. Joe Willie's earliest memories were of a place a little further south called Bobo where he was raised in a typical farming community.

Oddly, his first musical experiments were with the harmonica, but after two years of that he changed to guitar at the age of twelve. His father's musical activities brought him into contact with other country musicians like Sam Harris, a fiddle player, accordionist Walter 'Pat' Rhodes and Bob Williams, another guitarist. Not being allowed to tamper with his father's guitar he soon acquired a box of his own and at about the age of sixteen left Bobo to work as a field hand at the Sherard Plantation near the Mississippi river. By this time he had accumulated a fine repertoire of tunes — he remembered hearing Blind Lemon, Charley Patton and Robert Johnson — and as a solo performer became the local music man. It was his ability to perform almost any request on the spot that earned him the nickname 'Joe Willie — The Walking Seeburg' (jukebox). Helpful encounters with other musicians in the area ensured his increasing musical dexterity, and he met Muddy Waters, Robert Jr. Lockwood and Sonny Boy Williamson (Rice Miller) in the Clarksdale area.

When war came, Joe Willie returned home to help his family, who had moved to the plantation town of Duncan, near Bobo. After Pearl

Harbour early in 1942 he was drafted into the Navy but was discharged after only three months. It was then he discovered that his friend Sonny Boy had got his own radio show, and he promptly went to Helena, Ark. where he started working regularly on King Biscuit Time on KFFA, alongside Peck Curtis, Dudlow and Willie Love.

The '40s saw him constantly in the company of the Delta luminaries like Sonny Boy and Robert Nighthawk — his first wife was Nighthawk's sister. Still learning guitar, he particularly remembered playing with Robert Jr. Lockwood and being made to work very hard by the more experienced man who used to travel back and forth from Chicago to Helena to be an occasional King Biscuit Boy. Some time was spent travelling around Arkansas and Mississippi making guest King Biscuit broadcasts with his colleagues on different radio stations and Joe Willie is also supposed to have played with the 'All Stars', a big band which worked country clubs and schools in Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, Missouri and four other states in 1945–46.

More than likely working with Sonny Boy though — when he was around — Joe Willie had become a proficient guitarist but chose to stick to the straight playing style. Although he could play bottleneck, having been influenced by his father and another King Biscuit Boy Houston Stackhouse, he did not dare play this way in public at this time because of his reverence for Nighthawk, Elmore James and Earl Hooker. But life with Sonny Boy was not always smooth. Stackhouse related the story that Joe Willie once went to Detroit with Sonny Boy only to find himself stranded there when Sonny Boy ran off with the big money, leaving him no choice but to play for pennies to make his fare back to Helena.

The King Biscuit Boys remained popular with or without Sonny Boy, and after a few years with Peck, Pinetop Perkins and Stackhouse, in 1948 Joe Willie left Helena and moved to West Memphis. Here he played with the local musicians and met B.B. King with whom he occasionally broadcast. Sonny Boy was also

briefly resident in West Memphis at the time and their ties continued.

Throughout his career so far, Joe Willie had refused to sing, not giving a great opinion of his own voice. He was to continue his role of instrumentalist-only on subsequent recording sessions in the '50s. The longest sessions were cut with Sonny Boy and Willie Love for Trumpet in 1951 and 1952, but he recorded with Arthur Crump, Willie Nix and Roosevelt Sykes as well. He said he also attended a session of his own in the Sun studios, but lacking confidence in himself, nothing materialised.

In 1959 after the death of his father, he moved from West Memphis to Memphis, which was to be his home until his own death. He continued to play with old friends but after Sonny Boy and Nighthawk died, he did not work so much, although the will was still there. Eventually a partnership with Houston Stackhouse led to the formation of the New King Biscuit Boys and the somewhat bleak '60s led to a more promising outlook for the '70s, although Joe Willie's own health was now suffering. Spurred on by his second wife Carrie, an enthusiastic blues fan herself, and sharing their house with Stackhouse and bass-playing friend Willie Kenebrew, Joe Willie Wilkins & His King Biscuit Boys made appearances at the Ann Arbor Festivals in 1971 and 1973, and Memphis' River City Festivals in 1972 and 1973.

1973 also saw Joe Willie's overdue debut under his own name and as a singer on disc in the shape of 'It's Too Bad' and 'Mr. Downchild', a single made for Steve LaVere's Mimosas label. The early — mid-'70s also provided work for him on the Memphis Blues Caravan, a travelling show made up mainly of old-time artists like Furry Lewis, Bukka White and Sleepy John Estes but also featuring Joe Willie and his Boys. The personnel of the Boys changed periodically and included harp players Sonny Blake and Boy Blue and guitarist Clarence Nelson, but Houston Stackhouse was ever-present and the contrasting styles of his and Joe Willie's guitar playing must have made for exciting shows.

At the beginning of 1976, Joe Willie,



(courtesy Interstate Grocer Co.)

Stackhouse and a lot of other Memphis regulars were filmed by a BBC-TV crew for a programme in 'The Devil's Music' series. They were seen performing 'Mr. Downchild' and this seems to have been their favourite number as Joe Willie was reluctant to allow his vocal talents to be documented further.

Occasional gigs were played at such unlikely venues as the Regency Hyatt Hotel in Memphis for the up-market, curious whites, but Joe Willie was much more at home playing downhome joints like Robinson's Cafe in Hughes, Ark. Meanwhile a quiet revolution was taking place on the blues scene in Memphis. New clubs were opening in an attempt to revitalise the city's heritage after the demolition of Beale Street. Paul and Marti Savarin were running the Shanty Inn in early 1977 after several years of successful blues features on the Memphis Queen Riverboat line, and were soon to open their present club Blues Alley, and in early 1978 Joe Willie was performing regularly at Larry James' Birth Of The Blues club with pianist Mose Vinson. Then playing at his very best, this new found outlet was short-lived, closing in late summer '78, leaving Joe Willie and Vinson without a job. No doubt, had Joe Willie lived, he would have become part of the Blues Alley ensemble, but at 7.15 pm on March 28, 1979, he died in the University of Tennessee Hospital, Memphis, after suffering a heart attack. He was buried on April 3.

With this tragedy we have lost one of the great Delta guitarists and most powerful and well-loved characters of the post-war years. He was remarkable perhaps for never having left the Delta like so many of his contemporaries, but still managing to find regular worthwhile work. So all we have now to remember him are his recordings: his excellent work with Sonny Boy can be heard on Blues Classics 9 which has been reissued and remastered on Arhoolie 2020. Although only one Willie Love track is readily available on LP - 'Seventy Four Blues' on Blues Classics 15, I would pick these recordings to show his style at its best. His outing with Willie Nix produced the classic 'Baker Shop Boogie' and 'Seems Like A Million Years', which are available on Charly CR 30125 and only recently did Joe Willie 'confess' to being responsible for the guitar on Walter Horton's 'Cotton Patch Hotfoot' and 'Blues In The Morning' which are only available on the rare Polydor Juke Blues album. He was not too proud of those performances. There is of course his own single on Mimosa 174 which is a really fine performance considering his obsessive but unwarranted shyness about singing. Last summer it was reported that he had made an LP in a more country style setting on the Adamo label, but I have no details of this record.

And of course we have 'The Devil's Music'. Not only will we get a chance to see again that brief film of the performance of 'Mr. Downchild' when the series is finally repeated, strikes permitting, but Red Lightnin Records have just completed a contract with the BBC to issue the complete uncut soundtrack from the series, which also contains songs not included in the programmes.

Finally if anybody would like to send messages of condolence and support to Joe Willie's widow, I'm sure she would appreciate letters. She is Mrs. Carric Wilkins, 1656 Carpenter Street, Memphis, TN, USA. *Cilla Huggins*

References

The Delta Book: Mike Leadbitter's (as yet) unpublished manuscript.

Living Blues: No. 11 'Joe Willie Wilkins' by Jim O'Neal. Reprinted in *LB* 40.

Living Blues: No. 17 'Houston Stackhouse Interview' by Jim O'Neal.

Several other issues of *Living Blues*.

Acknowledgements

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Joe Willie Wilkins, Ann Arbor, 1973 (Sandy Sutherland)



Joe Willie Wilkins, centre, and Houston Stackhouse, second from left