

DRIFTING SLIM – DISCOVERED

Frank Scott

(With acknowledgment to Henry Vestine)

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The search for a long missing blues singer can be a very enjoyable and exciting affair, following up the various leads and clues which finally result in a meeting with the artist in question. If that artist is still as good a performer as had been hoped, than that joy is further multiplied.

The story of the quest for Drifting Slim begins in 1952 when the Modern family of record labels started issuing a series of records by Drifting Slim, Junior Brooks, Sunny Blair and Baby Face Turner. Although all these vocalists were different it was quite clear that the band was the same in every case. And what a fine band that was! Featuring a tight, downhome sound which seemed to epitomise the Southern jook joints of the early and mid fifties, these records were to obtain a great deal of popularity and cause a great deal of controversy among blues collectors in later years.

This might have been the end of the story and Drifting Slim and his band would have drifted into the clouds of obscurity which enveloped so many fine blues artists of both the post war and pre war periods. But fortunately, this was not to be the case this time, and we pick up the story again a few years ago when Los Angeles blues collector Bruce Bomberg started finding some fine blues records out locally by someone named Elmon Mickle. Careful listening to these records indicated that Elmon Mickle was none other than Drifting Slim. Since all these records were local and recent, it was a fair assumption that Mickle was still in town, and so the search began.

Inquiry at the record shop where Bruce bought his Mickle records revealed that the proprietor Pat knew Elmon and he promised to pass on Bruce's telephone number to him. Nothing further happened for a few weeks until Bob Hite and Henry Vestine paid a visit to the Duplex Revolving Record Rack, where they found pinned on the wall a photo of Elmon, complete with address and telephone number! Several days later, Bruce called at this address and the woman who answered the door said that Elmon no longer lived there but that she knew him quite well and would pass on the message that we wished to see him. Again we feared that nothing would happen; however, two days later Bruce's phone rang and the voice at the other end said, "Hello, this is Model T Slim, I believe that you wish to speak to me."

The following Sunday, Bruce and myself called at the shabby little apartment house on South Main Street where we met Elmon along with several friends and relations who were all intrigued to see the two white boys who were so interested in Elmon. He is tall and slim (hence the pseudonym) with slightly greying hair and a light complexion. He was very friendly and charming and didn't seem in the slightest nonplussed at our barrage of questions, all of which he was quite willing to answer to the best of his knowledge.

Elmon was born on February 24, 1919 in Keo, Arkansas and is his parents' third child. He first became interested in singing the blues in his late teens when he saw a performance in town by John Lee 'Sonny Boy' Williamson, together with Yank Rachell. He was so impressed by Sonny Boy's renditions of 'Sugar Mama' and 'Good Morning Little Schoolgirl' that he would never be satisfied until he could sing and play these numbers just like Sonny Boy. He spoke to Sonny Boy after the show, who promised to spend the night with him and teach him to play.

Elmon met him a few more times and he continued to practise very hard to emulate his idol. The influence of Sonny Boy is evident in many of Elmon's recordings, and Elmon states that he can sing

every number that Sonny Boy ever recorded. However, this is not to imply that Elmon is a copyist, as he draws his material from a wide range of sources and includes original material too in his repertoire, which is very wide indeed. During them mid-forties, Elmon played over KDRK and KGHI in Arkansas. At the former, he was accompanied by country singers Lonnie Glosson and Wayne Rainey who were to teach Elmon several more songs to add to his repertoire. Here members Rice Miller applying to KIDRK but not getting along with Lonnie Glosson. So Elmon took him along to KGHI where Miller began his very successful radio career. Shortly afterwards, Miller started calling himself Sonny Boy Williamson. Elmon and Sonny Boy became firm friends and played frequently together at local clubs and dances.

One very interesting statement of Elmon's was that it is he who plays harp on Elmore James' Trumpet recording of 'Dust My Broom' and 'Catfish'. Apparently both he and Sonny Boy were at the session but Sonny Boy insisted on fooling around and so Elmon took over. Aural evidence indicates that this is indeed a possibility. However, Elmon insisted that the vocal on 'Catfish' is also Elmore, which it plainly is not. He also stated that Elmore frequently played with two bottlenecks, one on his little finger and one on his ring finger!

In 1952, Elmon formed his now legendary band consisting of himself on harmonica, Baby Face Turner and Crippled Red on guitars and Bill Russel on drums. Crippled Red is better known by the name he used on record - Junior Brooks. Sunny Blair joined the band very shortly afterwards, having been taught by Elmon to play the harmonica.

As Elmon worked very hard on the railroad during the day and was very devoted to his family, he rarely travelled far from home with the band. Partly as a result of this he was not really familiar with any of the other artists who were playing in the South at the same time. The mysterious Charlie Booker and Houston Boines must remain mysterious for the time being.

During 1952, he and the band made their famous series of recordings for Joe Bihari in North Little Rock, Arkansas. These recordings were released on the Modern, R.P.M. and Meteor labels and although they sold fairly well he and the band got very little reward as they were swindled out of their royalties by their manager.

Almost immediately after the first recording session, Junior Brooks died of a heart attack, in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and so Elmon started to practise on the guitar in order to fill in. Sometime later he also learnt to play the drums and so has now become a one-man band.

In 1957, he decided to leave Arkansas and so he and his wife packed their things and set off for Los Angeles where they arrived in September of that year. Since he has arrived here he has rarely played in clubs, confining most of his musical activities to private parties and gatherings.

His first recordings in Los Angeles were for J.R. Fullbright's Elko label. He recorded several titles for Fullbright, but only one coupling was issued. He also issued some items on his own label E.M., which were recorded in the Austin McCoy studios and also some titles on the J. Gems label. His most recent record is 'Good Morning Little Schoolgirl', his old favourite, which he recorded under the pseudonym of Model T Slim for Jimmy Johnson's Wonder label about nine months ago. This record was paid for out of Elmon's pocket as Johnson wanted him to record 'T Model Blues' and Elmon insisted upon 'Schoolgirl'. Johnson wasn't really interested in releasing the disc, but Elmon persuaded him to let him have a hundred copies which he would distribute privately. It is hoped that with renewal of interest in Elmon, Johnson might be persuaded to re-issue this fine record.

Although Elmon had no instruments, his guitar having been stolen and his harps worn out, he managed to borrow a guitar and did a half-an-hour performance for us. His voice has changed little since he recorded as Drifting Slim, being powerful and vibrant, and his guitar style, though a trifle rusty after a few months without practice, was strong and rhythmic and promises great things to come. He did say that he is more of a harp man and feels lost without one, as that is his lead instrument. His favourite singers are Blind Boy Fuller, Big Boy Crudup, Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, Elmore James and of course, both Sonny Boys, so it is not surprising that his style is very downhome indeed. His material ranged from Crudup's 'Train Fare Blues' to his own 'Flatfoot Sam'. He even did a duet with one of his lady friends on Howlin' Wolf's 'Little Baby'.

Arrangements are being made to get Elmon a guitar and to record him at U.C.L.A. as a one-man band under the direction of Pete Welding. By the time this article appears, these recordings should have been made and I hope to report them at a later date. Elmon expressed great enthusiasm in recording and also looked forward to any possible club dates that we could arrange for him; it being hoped that he can be booked into the Ash Grove. It is also hoped to make some more commercial records with him for the local Negro market. Elmon is a fine performer and a charming person and it is to be hoped that success will not elude him for too long.