

A HANDFUL OF KEYS

Bob Hall & Richard Noblett



BOODLE IT ONE TIME?

For once the central figure of this article is not a pianist but the Paramount recording artist *James 'Boodle It' Wiggins*, a vocalist and sometime harmonica and kazoo player. Wiggins is of particular interest because of the bewildering array of pianists who appear to have accompanied him during his short recording career.

Believed to have been located in Dallas by a Paramount scout, R.L. Ashford, who ran a music store and shoe shine parlour there, Wiggins went to Chicago early in 1928 and recorded two titles for Paramount as 'Boodle It' Wiggins, the only time he used this name by which he is generally known to collectors. Whether Wiggins returned to Dallas or remained in Chicago is uncertain but there was a recording later that year by Vocalion of a James Wiggins. This track remained unissued, and indeed may conceivably be by a different artist.

About a year later Wiggins was recorded by Gennett in Richmond, Indiana, for eventual issue on Paramount. At this session he was in the company of Blind Leroy Garnett, a pianist with whom he is usually associated.

Garnett was believed, largely on the strength of the title, 'Louisiana Glide', that he recorded at this, his only session, to be from Louisiana but recent research by Gayle Dean Wardlow suggests that he may have come from Texas too. Chuck Martin, a former member of the Bob Wills' band, whom Gayle interviewed in 1972, remembered the best pianist he ever heard was a blind black man called 'Blind Leroy' who was from around Ft. Worth. Martin had heard 'Blind Leroy' in Dallas and it seems just possible that he was Garnett and that he was also sent to Chicago by R.L. Ashford.

By this time it appears that Wiggins was living in Chicago and a 'Boots' Wiggins is remembered by James Walker as an associate of Leroy Carr, Clarence Lofton, Punkin (a pianist) and Hop Johnson (Curtis Jones' guitarist) when they would all gather at a pool hall at 43rd and State.

James Wiggins has always been believed to have met a violent end, in the best blues tradition. This is confirmed by Jimmy Walker who told Erwin Helfer that Wiggins was killed for having an affair with another man's wife and

that Walker was present at the killing which occurred around 1929/30 in a house at 51st and Federal. Wiggins' recording career ended about October 1929 so his death probably occurred late 1929 or early 1930.

The above information conflicts with previously published information which it is necessary to briefly review. Gayle Dean Wardlow reported, (Wardlow 1966), that James Wiggins and Blind Leroy Garnett were sent to Paramount by H.C. Speir, but subsequent interviewing revealed that Speir had confused Garnett/Wiggins with Charley '44' Taylor who came from the South Mississippi-Northern Louisiana area around McComb down to Bogalusa into New Orleans.

Big Bill Broonzy told Paul Oliver that James Wiggins came from Louisiana and was a large man of vast strength. A verse from one of Wiggins' songs, 'Evil Woman Blues', was believed to point to him coming from Bogalusa:

*Mister Conductor Man, I wanna talk with you,
I wanna ride your train, from here to Bogalu'.*

It was also reported that when Wiggins returned to Bogalusa he failed to step off the sidewalk for a white woman and was subsequently accused of assault. As a result of this he was lynched and shot. However because he was so strong when he was cut down secretly by friends he was still alive. When he had recovered he went to Baton Rouge, Louisiana where he was still living although permanently deformed. (Oliver 1960, pg. 207)

Research in Bogalusa by Wardlow has, perhaps not surprisingly, so far failed to substantiate this story. Wiggins is not remembered there nor is any lynching. Although black/white relations in the South might preclude such questioning there is no record of a lynching in Bogalusa at this time in any of the easily available reports. (see for example R. Ginzburg 1962, 10 people were lynched in 1929 and 21 in 1930.)

It should also be noted that 'Bogalu' is not the customary way of referring to Bogalusa either by blacks or whites in the area and its inclusion in the song is more likely to be for rhyming.

However the Jimmy Walker report needs to

be clarified, for in a later interview with Mike Rowe he didn't recognise the name James Wiggins and thought that the man who was killed at 51st and Federal was a piano player possibly named Johnny. However the tantalising connection is Jimmy's insistence that this was the man who 'put out the 'Forty-Four Blues'.'

It also needs pointing out that most of the other information about Wiggins is based on the linking of him with Blind Leroy Garnett and needs to be treated as equally speculative. It is presented in the hope that further research may confirm or deny it.

James Wiggins' Recordings

The James Wiggins discography (according to Godrich and Dixon) is as follows:

'BOODLE IT' WIGGINS: vcl. acc. by prob. Bob Call, pno.; own kazoo -1

	Chicago, c. February 1928.		
20378-2	Keep A-Knockin' An	Pm 12662,	
	You Can't Get In -1	Bwy 5086.	
		F	
20379-2	Evil Woman Blues	Pm 12662,	
		Bwy 5086.	
		A (Bb or Ab)	

JAMES WIGGINS: vcl. acc. unknown pno.

	Chicago, c. 13 November 1928.		
C-2560-A	One More Time Blues	Vo unissued	
		?	

Richmond, Ind., Saturday 12 October 1929
Vcl. acc. by Blind Leroy Garnett, pno; own hea.-2

15764-A	My Lovin' Blues	Pm 12878	
		A (Ab)	
15765-A	Weary Heart Blues -2	Pm 12878	
		Ab (G)	
15768-A	Forty-Four Blues	Pm 12860,	
		Bwy 5061.	
		F# (F)	
15769-A	Frisco Bound Blues (Frisco Town)	Pm 12860,	
		Bwy 5061.	
		E (Eb)	

Vcl. acc. by poss. Charlie Spand, pno.

L103-2	Corrine Corrina Blues	Pm 12916	
		F	
L-104-1	Gotta Shave 'Em Dry	Pm 12916	
		Ab	

(The apparent keys of the recordings are given below each issue number on the right hand side. In those cases where we believe that the apparent key is not the true key, we have given the probable true key in brackets.)

James Wiggins' eight issued sides present a wealth of interest to blues piano enthusiasts. On his first coupling, 'Keep A-Knockin' and 'Evil Woman Blues', the accompanist is usually credited as Bob Call, although in earlier times Dobby Bragg was also suggested. There is however a clue in one of the sides where Wiggins says 'Oh whoop it now Mr. Bob' ('Evil Woman Blues') which makes Bob Call the more likely contender.

A great deal of mystery surrounds the name of Bob Call, although he is associated with the group of pianists who lived in Detroit. If we rely solely on label identification, he appeared on only three sides in the twenties, in addition to the Wiggins' sides, where he is not mentioned on the record label. Godrich and Dixon state that he also accompanied other singers of the period but the source of this information is not known.

Throughout the thirties Bob Call did not record at all, as far as we know, although his name has been persistently, but quite erroneously, linked with that of Black Bob. After the war, in September 1947 in Chicago, a pianist called Bob Call recorded with Arbee Stidham, for Victor, and Big Bill Broonzy, for Columbia. Again that year the same pianist accompanied the Victor artists Jazz Gillum, Washboard Sam and Tampa Red in Chicago. There were further sessions in 1949 with Sam and Stidham and then Bob Call made a record under his own name for Coral. No details are available but reports suggest that the sides are ordinary jump Blues of the forties. The next year found Call again accompanying Stidham and playing on Gillum's last unissued session for Victor. He was also the pianist on Robert Nighthawk's United date but it appears that Bob Call's final session was on 8th and 9th November 1951 in Chicago for Mercury again in the company of Big Bill. There are considerable differences between the two pianists and it is not known for certain that the post-war artist is the same man as the twenties pianist.

The situation is somewhat complicated by the discovery by Mike Rowe in the Chess files of some unissued Parrot pop-R&B sides by 'Robert Call Jnr.'; we have yet to discover whether there were one, two, or even conceivably three pianists having the name Bob Call! One report, however, suggested that a Bob Call was still living in Chicago in 1968 so it may yet be possible to solve this mystery.

However to return to the twenties pianist, Godrich and Dixon gave the discography of Bob Call as follows:

ELZADIE ROBINSON: vcl. acc. by Bob Call, pno. Chicago, c. November 1927.

20191-2 The Santa Claus Crave Pm 12573
Eb

20192-2 St Louis Cyclone Blues Pm 12573
Eb

BOB CALL: pno. solo. Chicago, c. 19 December 1929

C-5028- 31 Blues Br 7137
F# (F or G)

According to Little Brother Montgomery, Bob Call 'followed' Will Ezell, (zur Heide, 1970, p. 45) and if the two were friends, it is probable that Ezell was responsible for getting Call the Elzadie Robinson session, since Ezell was her usual accompanist. Call's accompaniment on these sides is quite distinctive and very similar to the accompaniment on Wiggins' 'Evil Woman Blues'. This suggests firstly that Call is indeed the pianist on 'Evil Woman Blues' and secondly that it is played in Bb or Ab, keys closely related to Eb, and not in A as would appear from the record.

This key displacement also adds weight to the aural evidence that Call is not the pianist on 'Keep A-Knockin'. Apart from the fact that the piano style and general ambience of the two sides is noticeably different, 'Keep A-Knockin' is in F, and this apparent key is almost certainly correct. Normally if there is a key displacement due to a mechanical or tuning fault, it would be expected that every side recorded during that session would show substantially the same displacement. It thus seems possible that notwithstanding the two sides having adjacent matrix numbers they were not recorded at the same session. If this is so, then there is no reason to suppose that Call is the pianist on both sides. Possibly the assumption that Paramount matrix numbers give the sequence in which sides were recorded is not always correct but even if the sides were recorded at the same session it does not necessarily follow that the same pianist was used on both titles.

Returning now to James Wiggins, the piano accompaniment on 'My Lovin' Blues' and 'Weary Heart Blues', from the second issued session, is by Blind Leroy Garnett, according to the label information. Garnett played in a barrel-house style with ragtime affiliations and with very little blues influence. This can also be seen from his two solo sides, recorded at the same session, 'Chain 'Em Down' and 'Louisiana Glide'. It is remarkable therefore that he should also have been credited without question with the 'Forty-Four Blues' accompaniment, which is in quite a different idiom. Unfortunately in this case we can not obtain any help from the key displacement to support our aural impression. 'Weary Heart Blues' has a harmonica solo, presumably by Wiggins, and is therefore almost

certainly in the key of G rather than Ab. A harmonica to play in the key of Ab would have been quite difficult to obtain in the twenties, whereas G would have been fairly common. 'Forty-Four Blues' and 'Frisco Bound Blues' do not have a credit to Garnett, the label merely states 'piano acc.'. Nevertheless the 'Forty-Four' theme is commonly played by blues pianists in the key of F and as the apparent key of the record if F#, it is possible that in this case too the true key has been displaced a semi-tone higher. (A more detailed analysis of the 'Forty-Four' theme is to be found in Oliver, 1968, pgs. 90-127.) The available evidence suggests therefore that this track, 'Forty-Four Blues', was recorded at the same time as the Garnett sides. Despite this the authors cling grimly to the view that Garnett was not the pianist on this track.

For completeness it is only fair to add that we have reason to believe that the solo Garnett sides from this session have a key displacement a semi-tone lower than the true key, which merely adds to the confusion surrounding the session. One possible explanation is that as the session was recorded for Paramount by Gennett the matrix numbers do not reflect the recording sequence.

The reason we have concentrated on 'Forty-Four Blues' is that we have very little to say about the other side, 'Frisco Bound Blues'. This side is a barrel-house piece based on Memphis Minnie's 'Frisco Bound' which was issued about a month before the Wiggins' side was recorded. The pianist does not particularly resemble Garnett or the possibly unknown pianist on 'Forty-Four Blues'. If anything the accompaniment is similar to that on 'Keep A-Knockin'. Beyond this it is very difficult to say more.

We have also not been able to find out a great deal about Wiggins' final session on which Charlie Spand has been suggested as the pianist, presumably because an adjacent matrix number belongs to a Spand recording, 'Room Rent Blues'. However the authors have still not been able to find anyone with a copy of this record.

We will reserve a discussion of Charlie Spand for a later occasion since we think he merits more than a passing mention. It is sufficient to say at this present time that the piano on Pm 12916 does not sound at all like Spand although it does bear some relation to Garnett's style and in the case of 'Gotta Shave 'Em Dry' is in a key, Ab, in which Garnett, but not Spand, is likely to have played.

Of necessity much of this article has been speculative, and it can only be hoped that further research will add clarity to the confusing picture.

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Jimmy Walker (Mike Rowe)