Death of a Delta giant  
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MY awareness of Bukka White, whose death was reported in last week's MM, goes back quite a long way: to the early middle Forties when I first became seriously involved in what were then called "race" records.

Vocal blues of the kind made by men like Big Bill, Lead Belly, Peetie Wheatstraw and Bukka were seldom released in this country.

And during the war years it was hard though not impossible, to get hold of any. When I first broadcast on Lead Belly, around 1945, not one of his records had been issued here. And nothing was available by Broonzy, Wheatstraw, Blind Boy Fuller, Leroy Carr and any or a score of generously recorded male blues artists.

Into my life, and changing it, at this period came a slow stream of 78 rpm discs from the US race catalogues.

Carr and Blackwell, Big Bill, Half-Pint Jaxon, Sleepy John Estes, Josh White, Kokomo Arnold and Lead Belly and one day through the good graces of a fellow collector, named Claude Lipscombe, Bukka White.

Nothing, of course was ever released in this country on 78 of Bukka's, and the record I obtained was already becoming rare in the USA. I had borrowed it for a programme I'd managed to flog the BBC. Titled "Town And Country Blues," it set out to make a contrast between the primitive rural music of such as Lewis Black and Bukka and the more formalised blues style then developing in Chicago and other cities.

Bukka's "Fixin' To Die Blues" was, I recall, the final track. And it carried the programme out in a magical and original fashion.

I have never forgotten the impression those obsessive lyrics made on me then rhythmically delivered by the singer against an almost inappropriately happy and thrusting guitar-washboard accompaniment. All- these years later, "Fixin' To Die" is still my favourite of Bukka's "sky songs," as he terms them.

The title was one of a dozen striking performances cut on March 7 and 8, 1940 by Bukka and Robert (Washboard Sam) Brown.

"District Attorney," "Parchman Farm Blues," "Where Can I Change My Clothes" are among the interesting items from these sessions, also a "Strange Place Blues" which again bears witness to the bluesman's preoccupation with death as a song theme. "Jitterbug Swing" is a fine example of his powerful, stomping dance music.

Quite a few of Bukka's imaginative songs are concerned with personal
experiences in court and prison with his reaction to the death of friends or family and his own envisaged end.

It is, you could say, a morbid fixation in a musical entertainer, but it has helped to place his better creations in the highest category of blues recordings.

Not unnaturally I suppose, artists being often unlike their art, Bukka in person appeared pretty far removed from the dreamer of doomy verses and the conjurer of eerie atmospheres.

I met him first at the London concert of the American Folk Blues Festival of 1967, and he seemed a tough but friendly enough man who, while probably intense about his music, had his feet firmly on the ground (not in the sky).

Seated backstage, with a cigar as I remember him and bottles of beer at hand, he was happy to talk about his old metal National his bottleneck technique with the big steel tube on the little finger, even his rudimentary piano playing.

But left to his own inclinations he was more likely to chat about mundane things like work and travel, getting some rest or a drink, or the possibility of making records and therefore more money. The poet and visionary was not close to the surface.

A hardness, even a little fierceness, could be sensed; and I'd have felt surprised if it had been otherwise. He lived a pretty rugged and deprived life, active too, around Mississippi < travelling fast, playing odd jobs and, as he put it, "looking for pretty girls." Then he spent time in jail.

A cousin of B. B. King, Bukka was born Booker T. Washington White in Houston Mississippi, in either 1906 or '9 (he gave both dates). His grandfather farmed there. His father, a railroad worker From Texas, showed him some tricks on guitar; and the grandfather played violin.

An uncle, with whom he went to live, possessed a piano. Bukka < it seems to have been a local pronunciation of his name, though White preferred to be called Booker < tried out the keyboard but preferred the guitar. Within a few weeks of obtaining his first box he was "playing in public; the blues, just like today."

Whatever the truth of that remark, it is clear from his first records, made in 1930 and including a splendid train blues, "Panama Limited," that his vocal manner and pounding guitar work remained largely unchanged.

In 1937 White recorded a couple of sides for Vocalion, good too, and the company wished him to make more but before he could do so he was imprisoned for, in his words, "burning a guy up a little."
White has lodged in Mississippi's notorious Parchman pen, where he cut two titles for Alan Lomax and the Library of Congress as Washington (Barrelhouse) White. A barrelhouse player he certainly was, and the incarceration in the state pen gave him, understandably, a lot of vivid images for his songs.

It is interesting to note that his 1940 recordings were what Sam Charters referred to as "the last of the classic Delta recordings to be released on a commercial market."

If White had made nothing else, he would be revered blues fanciers as a patriarch. figure on a par with Patton, Son House and Skip James. But in fact he was rediscovered by enthusiasts in '63 and launched on a new recording career.

His raw but pure Delta music was caught on two volumes of "Sky Songs" (Arhoolie), with his piano on two tracks, and "Mississippi Blues" (Takoma and Sonet). His earlier music beautifully preserved on "Bukka White" (CBS Realm) and this is the album to buy to gauge the extent of his originality and swinging power. But the later stuff, though heavier and often reminiscent of earlier records, is still very well worthwhile. It can be heard on two tracks of Blue Horizon's "1968 Memphis Country Blues Festival," and with group support on "Memphis Hot Shots" (Blue Horizon).

His death removed from the lists a true giant of Mississippi folksong, one of the last of the living legends of country blues.

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