WILLIE BROWN
Fare Thee Well:

By BERNARD KLATZKO

McKune had heard Manheim’s copy of a Willie Brown Paramount and gave this opinion of Brown to Pete Whelan who had never heard Willie perform at all. McKune was the only authority on country blues at that time and so Whelan and, a few years later, McClosky, used to pump McKune with questions about blues singers in order to avoid the pitfall of spending money on “bad” records.

In fairness to James (who rightly regarded Patton as the greatest, hearing Brown only once) his first impression of Willie as a weaker singer in the Patton vein was really a quick and accurate judgment. The fact that Brown stands as a giant against most other blues singers wasn’t as apparent in 1957 as it is today.

The importance of all this is that McClosky had some vague prospects of finding the Willie Brown Paramount among Manheim’s effects. What added spice to the situation was that McKune didn’t remember which Paramount Manheim had. Paramount released only two Willie Brown records. A half dozen copies of Future Blues/M & O Blues (on the Champion 50023 reissue) are in the hands of collectors; so we know Brown’s music of the early ‘30’s. Two cracked and unplayable Paramounts (both Future/M & O) were dug out of Mississippi shacks, first by Wardlow in 1963 and then, Dave Evans in 1967. But Paramount

McClosky’s investigations into the missing Willie Brown Paramount led to a curious trail of intrigue, dissolution and death...

Somewhere, not far off, timber wolves had begun howling in unison. The trail was cold. It had begun in 1930 at the Paramount furniture factory (subcontractors to the Wisconsin Chair) in wintry Port Washington, Wis. Thirty eight years later, the trail made a sharp right turn east to New York.

By April, 1967, Barney McClosky, the most voracious record collector of his time, made a hurried exit from his overworked ‘57 Chevy and descended on the ‘innocent’ streets of Queens, New York.

He was wearing a sheepskin-lined, genuine cowhide jacket and a black beret, an attire which would have made him appear quite at home with the Basques and rugged mountain cliffs of the Pyrenees, but rather absurd amongst the high rise apartment buildings of Queens.

He trembled slightly with anticipation as he approached one of the buildings. This mission was important. Philip Manheim had died and Barney was here to scavenge the remains of an alleged prize collection of rare jazz and blues records.

Actually, the contents of this collection were virtually unknown because Manheim was unapproachable by other collectors who were out to make unfair trades. What attracted Barney, a fierce country blues competitor, was the magic name Willie Brown.
Manheim was afraid of germs and wore gloves, McKune had said. He wouldn’t shake hands with you unless he had gloves on.

Barney suspected that the chances of the Willie Brown Paramount still being there were miniscule. Didn’t Manheim’s relative tell Barney that Manheim died about a year ago?

“What record collection?” She said. “I haven’t seen Philip in 15 years. He died alone—Peniless.”

This information was gleaned after Barney had made over 15 telephone calls (most of them embarrassing) to various Manheims listed in the New York telephone books. This desperate search begun when a letter from McClosky to Manheim was returned by the Post Office stamped DECEASED. McClosky had never written to Manheim before.

Being unable to establish any workable relation with Manheim’s only contactable relative, Barney went directly to Manheim’s apartment house, The Wentworth Arms, to talk to the superintendent. In the lobby, Barney discovered the porter mopping the floor.

“Maybe you can help me,” he said. Barney showed the porter the returned Manheim envelope to establish his legitimacy as an interrogator. “I buy old records and I know Mr. Manheim had a nice collection. Could you tell me what happened to his records?”

The porter put down his mop and searched for the right words. “Well, urra, urra, you’ll have to talk to the Super,” he said.

“I tried the Super. He isn’t home. Don’t worry, I won’t make trouble—see? No trouble. I’m only interested in buying the records. Are there any records left?”

“Well,” said the porter, “most of the records was disposed of by the Super.”

“Did he sell them or throw them out?” Barney asked.

“Well, you’ll have to talk to the Super,” the porter said. “Call the Super. He comes in at five. The phone. The building is in the phone book.”

Barney left, found the telephone number of The Wentworth Arms in the Queens book, and called at 5:30.

The Super’s wife answered the phone. She spoke with a pungent Irish brogue.

“I was at your house earlier today. Did the porter tell you?”

“Yes.”

“Are there any records left?”

“There are a few in the basement. It doesn’t pay to come out here for them. So few, hardly any.”

“Well, let me come out anyway. I’ll take my chances, okay?”

She reluctantly agreed to let Barney come back the next day, Sunday.

On Sunday it had turned bitter cold. It was to become the last cold day in April. This, Barney thought, is it. Only a few records left. The chances are remote. I’m doing it for the Willie Brown.

The Super’s name was Kearney. McClosky rang the bell. Kearney came to the door. He was in his 60’s, about five feet, ten inches, with bright blue eyes and a ruddy complexion. They shook hands. He had big hands, Barney thought, like Jack Dempsey.

“I’m Kearney,” he said.

After a few minutes Mr. Kearney began. “Manheim was a fine gentleman. He had class. A Yale graduate, you know. He died two years ago. I don’t know what happened to him at the end. He came from a fine family and had plenty of money. But at the end, you know, he was carting works of art out of the building and selling them.”

Could have sold his records, too, Barney thought.
"He was acting strange," Kearney said. "He kept to himself, you know. He didn't like to bother with people because they always wanted something from him. He didn't go for that. Funny though, he was always taking young men up to his apartment, you know. Especially some young fellows just out of prison."

McClosky and Kearney took the elevator down to the basement. They walked over to a huge cardboard box, the type used for shipping canned goods and measuring three by four by three feet high. Books made up the bulk of its contents. But strewn over the top and to one side were 78 r.p.m. records.

Barney began probing. He examined the first disk, "Relaxin' At The Toro", Muggsy Spanier on Bluebird, new but cracked. Good white jazz of the '30's, but not rare. Next, "Rock Of Ages", F.W. McGee on Victor E and still in one piece. Top preacher of the late '20's who made some of the best religious records. This was not among them.

Next, "Jonah In The Belly Of The Whale", new and whole. The last onethird of the record contains some of the most exhilarating religious music ever waxed. Sold a hundred thousand copies in its day.

Next, "Vicksburg Blues-No. 2", Little Brother Montgomery on Bluebird N. The second best Little Brother record, Exceeded only by "Vicksburg-No. 3"—and one of the finest country blues with piano accomp. (a rare combination).

Next, "Stacker Lee", Furry Lewis, Brunswick E, the country blues classic, the reissue pressed from the original Vocalion master. Barney fished for more. There were several Clarence Williams Okehs in G condition. Nothing more.

NO WILLIE BROWN.

"God, Barney thought, the skeletal remains, "What happened to all the other records, Mr. Kearney?"

"Some were thrown out, you know. But he must have had some in his other apartment in Manhattan."

"Another apartment?" asked Barney, surprised. "What's the address?"

"Have no idea. Fact is, you know, he died there not here," Kearney said.

"What caused his death? How old was he?"

"He was about 52. Don't know what he died of. What do you die of at 52?"

Barney handed the Super $1.50 'for his trouble' and the records. Did it pay to track down Manheim's Manhattan address? Dead over two years and all property in Manhattan probably confiscated by the City. Barney's greed had measurable limits. Not quite insane, in fact, perhaps completely sane, he knew the time. It was time to bid Willie Brown FARE THEE WELL.

EPILOGUE: Paramount 13099 still hasn't been recovered by a known collector at this writing. But, as luck would have it, a completely unknown Willie Brown performance was discovered in the archives of the Library Of Congress. It was well concealed, since it was listed in the catalogue as a Son House recording of "Make Me A Pallet On The Floor". Recorded at Lake Cormorant, Miss., 1941.

Future Blues/M.O. Blues-reissue available on Origo, OHL-3, Mississippi Blues; Make Me A Pallet On The Floor-issued and available on Herwin 92404.