THIRD STREET BLUES: FORTUNE RECORDS, owned by the illustrious Browns', does not offer much help concerning past or present forms of the blues in Detroit. They will go into their short dissertation about the non-existence of blues in Detroit bars and record shops, but I sure did want those Big Maceo and Henry Smith acetates! By some stroke of luck Mr Brown did offer some noble assistance, and asked if I would like to hear some unissued tapes. Out of the speakers came some 1st-rate Doctor Ross! Very fine stuff indeed, harmonica on every song, drums played in a Freddy Below style, but then he fast forwards the tape and a new song starts. Mr Fortune has made a futile attempt to modernise some of the tapes with what else but an organ. Most of the time it is soft, but... (this is the LP 3011 reviewed in BU 82 - ed.)

Regarding bygone sessions, the vault contains the likes of John & Grace Grim, Eddie Kirkland, Eddie Burns and much more...almost heard these, but they really keep it hid and the cabinet door nearly took my hand off as it closed! No more tapes today. I gave an outline for an LP of the above material but Brown thought it would not sell if it contained so many artists! Write him on that!

It seems the Richard Brothers should have recorded under the alias 'Whiskey Head Buddies' as Jack Brown, like many folks in the Motor City agree that alcohol was their first love. This however never impaired any of their fantastic efforts, in fact Robert would not even reach for his harp unless his spirits were flowing. Fighting among themselves, or the band, or anyone else in the near vicinity, is the reason for Robert and Howard's lone endeavour at the Fortune studio. It seems Fortune is no longer interested about what is in the vaults, or more important, WASHBOARD WILLIE; unidentified harpist. photo gp.

what should come out, and the only way songs will be heard is if quantities of mail comes in or someone buys the tapes. A hopeless problem, since the Browns will then think they're sitting on a fortune.

"JVB BLUES" or "CRAWLIN' ROUND IN THE BACK ROOM"

The initial journey to Joe Von Battle's shop on 12th Street netted an unknown Washboard Willie tape, no information, and no scarce discs. Second time round though, Joe's health was somewhat better after a month of rest, and he said to just crawl in the back room, and see if I could find anything good. Under chairs, boxes, in fact everywhere were reels of tape and stacks of acetates a couple of feet high. Papers signed and money done gone, I left, hoping some blues were in my hand.

Back at the motel after a little bribery and Jack Daniels Sour Mash Whiskey, the owner lent me his phonograph. The first few moments revealed such oddities as little girls reciting 'The Star Spangled Banner', and some poets reciting dirty poems of 1948 vintage. Further down the stack 13 John Lee Hooker songs. Beautiful moaning and foot stomping. Then Detroit Count doing a fast boogie spiked with his local-color lyrics. On the flip was one-third of a slow blues that ended with Joe's voice saying "no, not that one". I guess a partial unknown song is better than no song at all. Rocky Fuller (real name Richard Lee Fuller) came next, bottlenecking the strings much in the way of "Gonna play my Guitar". Finally unknown, unissued sessions by the likes of L.C.Green, Walter Mitchell, Robert Richard, Brother...
Will Hairston, Eddie Burns and many unidentified Detroit bluesmen who are equally fantastic.

Talking with Joe on a later trip, I found that his shop had been torn down with 3/4 of the block for upcoming Urban Renewal. 12th Street along with Hastings Street have special places in the memory of Mr. Battle. His blunt recollections consist of "nothin' but pimps, hustlers and murderers". He uttered stories of the constant flow of blues, beer and blood; definitely not mentioned in the travel guides.

Joe had not seen his old musicians in years but did receive a phone call a short time ago. Someone left a message that One String Sam had been playing along some of Detroit's streets. Sadly the person never called back, but at least he is alive and hope remains. L.C. Green, and Sam Kelly possibly were recording names as Joe remembers the two musicians but not with those names. Quite a few others in Detroit never heard of the mysterious duo, so the above reason may not be too fat from the truth.

JVB primarily sold songs to other companies, and released material on his labels. Radio Stations would not push a record unless a tempting cash figure accompanied the record. Hence JVB was not always heard on local stations. The Eddie Burns Deluxe session was recorded for JVB, as Washboard Willie said, he was always wondering when it would be released. So one is quite sure that most Detroit blues originated at one of the local recording spots. Recording anyone and everyone was the Battle policy, hoping for a hit. Instead JVB created a legacy of tough, unusual sounds never to be forgotten......

thanks, Joe.

BO BO JENKINS: "DEMOCRAT BLUESMAN"

John Pickens Jenkins was born January 7, 1916 in Forkland, Alabama. Sacred singing at local churches provided an early acquaintance with music, while his uncle taught him some blues on guitar. Black Robert and Richard Agee, local Alabama guitarists, also provided assistance. After a stay in the Army, Bo came to Detroit and started in the mechanics field. Unable to keep away from the blues, he started taking photos in various clubs, and met with musicians like John Lee and Baby Boy.

Following the stealing of his girl by a guitarist named Percy, somebody told Bo to take the guy's guitar. The next day BoBo got a Lee Paul (same one he uses today) and started guitar again. Calvin Frazier and Albert Witherspoon helped Jenkins and soon Bo had a band together. Witherspoon, Jenkins, Rayfield Fischer and Brer Rabbit (taught by Baby Boy) on guitars and Robert Richard handling the harp while Harry Fleming beat the drums. After playing the nearby area, the band came to be recognized and one of the Chess Brothers arranged a session (glowing reports on this in Cash Box news at the time – Ed.). Bo had one song ready titled "Six Strings Beat 21 Guns" but Chess made him change the words and the finished product was "Democrat Blues". Seems Eisenhower's name was always cropping up in blues songs and that was not allowed. Bo also claims that Elmore married Fischer's sister. Drifting back, Bo remembered Elmore playing while in his teens at Camp Anderson, Mississippi.

Concerning record dates, the Boxer session had Earl Phillips on drums and Freddy King was to have played guitar but for some reason did not. The unknown guitarist on the Fortune session is Brer Rabbit (real name James Johnson), drums Ted Walker. These people are present on the Big Star date and there are two unissued Boxers - "That Woman/Reelin' & Rockin'" (not the Berry song). Bo said Calvin, Baby Boy and Maceo played regularly at Brown's Bar on Hastings. Warren quit playing because his family got so large and music wouldn't bring enough income. Oh yes, Baby Boy
really did not like skinny women!

Searching later for Robert Richard turned up more comments of heavy drinking and heavy harp, but he'd moved from one ghetto to another and left no address. His brother Howard reportedly took off with L.C. years ago for Wisconsin. Walter Mitchell is somewhere in Ohio; the evening finished with Bo and his band playing at a local club and sounding like 1955.

The great Bo Bo Jenkins, who made the classic Chess record of "Democrat Blues" :

CALVIN FRAZIER: "DID YOU EVER HEAR OF ROBERT JOHNSON?"
Calvin was born February 16, 1915 in Osceola, Arkansas, and in his early teens played guitar in the surrounding areas. He met Robert Johnson at a street-corner in Helena and soon they were playing together. Calvin said he usually played second guitar, and at times someone played washboard. Calvin also stated that Peck Curtis played washboard with them. Strange as this may seem, it is quite possible as Sampson Pittman (also active in the area) and Calvin made tapes for the Library of Congress in 1938 and they sound quite similar to Johnson's lyric and instrumental style. He said Robert wanted him to go along when he was going to make some records. Some trouble ensued and one of Calvin's brothers was killed — that man never killed anyone else — Calvin ended up in a Memphis hospital after that and heard that Robert was poisoned.

Calvin's description of Robert was of a man who was moody and quickly changing emotions. Robert he said, was crazy because he was so involved with music. He hardly ever played the same song twice exactly, always changing it around. One night they were drinking after a set had finished and someone offered Robert and Calvin some whiskey; it turned out to be cleaning fluid and they were both sick for weeks! Calvin said he never heard any of Robert's records, so on a following visit I brought along an LP...."Motherfuc-
ker....that Robert" Calvin explained as the disc played on, he did not even know there was an LP of a little-known figure like Johnson. He said he did not imagine I had ever known about Johnson; so he thought he would tell me about his favorite musician. And when Calvin sang out the words just about perfectly, well I have to guess Robert really did travel around and play his music everywhere.

Another interesting story Calvin related was of Big Maceo stealing "Worried Life Blues". Frazier used to sing it in a more primitive fashion back in Arkansas, and later modified it in Detroit. Maceo and he then decided it would be a hit. That night they decided to record it in Chicago and planned to leave the next morning to see Lester Melrose at Victor. Calvin ended up drinking away the night and awakening the next day without Maceo. Maceo made a hit of it and told him later he was sorry for "robbing his song". Shortly after they were friends again and Calvin relates he lost a song, but Maceo did give him some good whiskey!

* * *

Today Detroit's bluesmen are pretty much gone, either through death, better jobs or lost interest in their music. About the only bands to hold down steady gigs are Bo Bo Jenkins' and Washboard Willie's. They've been able to adapt while still playing blues. It needs someone to locate the old musicians and start them to playing again, in schools or anywhere — and maybe Detroit will once more shake like it used to.