The identity of Black Bob, the Bluebird and Vocalion pianist of the mid-1930s has never been clearly established. This is surprising in view of the large number of well-known blues singers of the period he accompanied, and the fact that he appears to have been the regular partner of at least two of them, Big Bill Broonzy and Memphis Minnie. In his life story, as told to Yannick Bruynoghe (Bruynoghe, 1964, p. 48) Big Bill says: ‘After that time [making some records for Lester Melrose in 1928] I got a piano player, Black Bob, and I played with him for several years’.

Broonzy also mentions (Bruynoghe, 1964, p. 138) that after parting with her husband Joe McCoy, Memphis Minnie struck up a partnership with Black Bob. This suggestion is reinforced by an announcement which appeared in the Chicago Defender of September 26, 1936 (Allen, 1970): ‘Memphis Minnie: Opens at Tramor Hotel and Cafe, 740 East 47th St., Chicago, records for Vocalion; blues singer, will be accompanied by Black Bob; piano; Arnett Nelson on clarinet’.

Why then has the real name of such a ubiquitous character as Black Bob never been confirmed? It is certainly not for the want of trying by a number of speculators, and as a result, the names of at least four artists have been put forward as candidates for the mantle of Black Bob. The main contenders are Bob Call, Lovell Alexander, Bob Alexander, and Bob Robinson. As I stated in an earlier article (Hirst, 1977) Bob Call is a name frequently mentioned, yet there appears to be no evidence to directly link this artist with Black Bob. The connection between them seems to be based solely on Call’s post-war associations with Big Bill, Jazz Gillum, Tampa Red, and Washboard Sam – artists with whom Black Bob recorded in the 1930s. In a series of articles which appeared in Blues Unlimited (Hall and Noblett 1975a and 1975b; Rowe, 1975) dealing, among other things, with both Bob Call and the equally mysterious Robert Call, Jr., Bob Hall and Richard Noblett rejected the idea that Bob Call was Black Bob, a view shared by Godrich and Dixon (1969, p. 133) ‘This pianist [Bob Call] accompanied quite a number of blues singers of the period [the late 1920s], including Elzadie Robinson, James Wiggins and others. Eroneously, but frequently, it has been suggested that Black Bob is a pseudonym for Call’.

Hall and Noblett (1975a) and zur Reide
name as Aletha Robinson. She too wrote a lot of songs that were recorded by Paramount artists—for example, 'You Ain't Foolin' Me' by Priscilla Stewart (Pm 12205) and indeed she was very much a part of the Paramount organisation as Sam Charters has noted (Charters, 1960, p. 56): "Arthur Laibly and Aletha Newcomb with [J. Mayo] Williams [at Paramount] and there was a young girl Aletha Robinson, working as a general assistant."

We therefore seem to have established beyond reasonable doubt (that Bob Alexander was a pseudonym for Aletha Robinson or: 'Bob' Alexander Robinson as I shall call him in the remainder of this article! But was he Black Bob? I shall have more to say about 'Bob' Alexander Robinson later, but first we must discuss the final creditor for the Black Bob book.

This is an artist whose name is known mainly as a clarinettist, Bob Robinson; Godrich and Dixon (1969, p. 86) have this to say about him: 'It has been suggested that this [pseudonym of Black Bob] is Bob Robinson, but a certain amount of mystery surrounds this artist.'

This suggestion agrees with what Bob Koester told me when we discussed the identity of Black Bob during my visit to Chicago in the summer of 1972. He said that Washboard Sam had told him that Black Bob was Bob Robinson, but I am not certain whether Sam meant that the identity of Black Bob Robinson or whether he simply said he was Bob Robinson and Koester assumed he meant the clarinet player.

I believe, however, that we can reject the theory that the clarinettist Bob Robinson was also Black Bob, the pianist of the State Street Swingers' session from Thursday, 1 October 1936, as it has been re-issued on Collectors Items 003; Godrich and Dixon (1969, p. 665) say the vocalist is probably Bob Robinson and the pianist is possibly Black Bob. In any case, my opinion is identical to the vocalist on the Hokum Boys' session of c. December 1928, re-issued on Riverside 8803, which again is supposed to be Bob Robinson (Godrich and Dixon, 1969, p. 321). The pianist on the Swingers' session again in my opinion is identical to the pianist on those recording sessions where Black Bob is definitely said to be present; and the vocalist on the Swingers' session is in my opinion not playing the piano. Hence, if my ear is correct, it seems virtually certain that Bob Robinson was not Black Bob.

It is interesting to note, however, that Bob Robinson last recorded in 1937, the year Paul Oliver says Black Bob died, and so it would seem worthwhile to use some space in discussing what little appears to be known about this great piano player. At first, we will start to look for information on Bob Robinson things start to get very confusing. For example, in my earlier analysis (Hirst, 1977), I reproduced the following quote by George Tom Dorsey (O'Neal and Dorsey, 1975): 'I and Arch Woolley, the Hokum Boys was me, Bobby Robinson, and there was a girl in it, Aletha Dickerson. She used to be Ink [J. Mayo] Williams' secretary. And she played piano. Bobby Robinson was Aletha Dickerson's husband, I think, at that time.'

Eventually, Spivak has also said that the clarinet player Bob Robinson was Aletha Dickerson's husband, while at the same time supporting our earlier conclusion by refuting the suggestion that he was Black Bob (Godrich, 1965): 'I knew Aletha Dickerson. We were very close at the time. And I know that Aletha Dickerson was only a singer, and may have played around with a saxophone (and/or a clarinet!).' He was definitely not Black Bob.

So according to both Tom Dorsey and Victoria Spivak, Aletha Dickerson was not Black Bob. As a further check, Bob Robinson, an artist who also recorded for Paramount under his own name (Pm 13028, Pm 13030, and Pm 13064), as well as recordings up to 1937 for Bluebird and Vosland (Godrich and Dixon, 1969, p. 906) give Aletha's real name as Aletha Robinson. She too wrote a lot of songs that were recorded by Paramount artists—for example, 'You Ain't Foolin' Me' by Priscilla Stewart (Pm 12205) and indeed she was very much a part of the Paramount organisation as Sam Charters has noted (Charters, 1960, p. 56): "Arthur Laibly and Aletha Newcomb with [J. Mayo] Williams [at Paramount] and there was a young girl Aletha Robinson, working as a general assistant."

We therefore seem to have established beyond reasonable doubt (that Bob Alexander was a pseudonym for Aletha Robinson or: 'Bob' Alexander Robinson as I shall call him in the remainder of this article! But was he Black Bob? I shall have more to say about 'Bob' Alexander Robinson later, but first we must discuss the final creditor for the Black Bob book.

This is an artist whose name is known mainly as a clarinettist, Bob Robinson; Godrich and Dixon (1969, p. 86) have this to say about him: 'It has been suggested that this [pseudonym of Black Bob] is Bob Robinson, but a certain amount of mystery surrounds this artist.'

This suggestion agrees with what Bob Koester told me when we discussed the identity of Black Bob during my visit to Chicago in the summer of 1972. He said that Washboard Sam had told him that Black Bob was Bob Robinson, but I am not certain whether Sam meant that the identity of Black Bob Robinson or whether he simply said he was Bob Robinson and Koester assumed he meant the clarinet player.

I believe, however, that we can reject the theory that the clarinettist Bob Robinson was also Black Bob, the pianist of the State Street Swingers' session from Thursday, 1 October 1936, as it has been re-issued on Collectors Items 003; Godrich and Dixon (1969, p. 665) say the vocalist is probably Bob Robinson and the pianist is possibly Black Bob. In any case, my opinion is identical to the vocalist on the Hokum Boys' session of c. December 1928, re-issued on Riverside 8803, which again is supposed to be Bob Robinson (Godrich and Dixon, 1969, p. 321). The pianist on the Swingers' session again in my opinion is identical to the pianist on those recording sessions where Black Bob is definitely said to be present; and the vocalist on the Swingers' session is in my opinion not playing the piano. Hence, if my ear is correct, it seems virtually certain that Bob Robinson was not Black Bob.

It is interesting to note, however, that Bob Robinson last recorded in 1937, the year Paul Oliver says Black Bob died, and so it would seem worthwhile to use some space in discussing what little appears to be known about this great piano player. At first, we will start to look for information on Bob Robinson things start to get very confusing. For example, in my earlier analysis (Hirst, 1977), I reproduced the following quote by George Tom Dorsey (O'Neal and Dorsey, 1975): 'I and Arch Woolley, the Hokum Boys was me, Bobby Robinson, and there was a girl in it, Aletha Dickerson. She used to be Ink [J. Mayo] Williams' secretary. And she played piano. Bobby Robinson was Aletha Dickerson's husband, I think, at that time.'

Eventually, Spivak has also said that the clarinet player Bob Robinson was Aletha Dickerson's husband, while at the same time supporting our earlier conclusion by refuting the suggestion that he was Black Bob (Godrich, 1965): 'I knew Aletha Dickerson. We were very close at the time. And I know that Aletha Dickerson was only a singer, and may have played around with a saxophone (and/or a clarinet!).' He was definitely not Black Bob.

So according to both Tom Dorsey and Victoria Spivak, Aletha Dickerson was not Black Bob. As a further check, Bob Robinson, an artist who also recorded for Paramount under his own name (Pm 13028, Pm 13030, and Pm 13064), as well as recordings up to 1937 for Bluebird and Vosland (Godrich and Dixon, 1969, p. 906) give Aletha's real
Dear Mr. Leadbetter:

In regards of the letter you wrote me in December about writing a story on me about my records, I will be pleased to help you in any way I can.

I must apologize but since those years ago I have forgotten quite a bit. As I can remember in 1950 we played at the Regal Black Bob played the piano, I played the guitar. We were then recording the record "I Have You Cry."

In 1952 at the Cheekler, Walter played the harmonica, Black Bob played piano, and I played the guitar. In the recording "He and My Chaufeeur." Although it was cut in Chicago.

In the job of 1954, we recorded the record entitled "Kissing in the Dark." Black Bob remained playing the guitar, and I can't seem to recall who played the drums.

I hope this will be of some benefit to you. I apologize for not being able to write to you sooner. In this letter I am enclosing this picture of me.

I hope to hear from you again. I am very grateful for what you are doing for me.

Yours truly,

Minnie Lawlers

and Dixon, 1969, p. 588)

It is of course just conceivable that 'Bob' Alexander Robinson and Bob Robinson were the same person, as I suggested previously (Hirst, 1977), but if this were the case then it would mean that 'Bob' Alexander Robinson could not be Black Bob either! However, it seems very unlikely that the two 'Bob' Alexander Robinson (Bob Alexander) were the same person, particularly if the Gennett files for the Hukum Boys' session of Friday 6th September 1929 are correct (Godrich and Dixon, 1969, p. 322). The person named as Bob Robinson on clarinet, Jimmy Blig on the piano, and Bob Alexander on guitar! Two of the recordings from the session have been issued on Yazoo L-1051 and there are definitely three instruments present. I think on balance we can safely assume that both 'Bob' Alexander Robinson and Bob Robinson were two different people — although possibly related — and it seems more likely that Bob Robinson was married to Aletha Dickerson rather than 'Bob' Alexander Robinson, although this remains unconfirmed. If 'Bob' Alexander Robinson were Aletha Dickerson's husband it may have something to do with the coincidence of Bob Robinson last recording in 1937 and Aletha Dickerson coming into her own as an accompanist in the same year, a coincidence I commented on before (Hirst, 1977). The most important thing is that by showing 'Bob' Alexander Robinson was probably not Black Bob we have left the way open for Bob Alexander to be Black Bob!

To sum up, we have discussed four candidates for the title of Black Bob — Bob Call, Lovell Alexander, Bob Alexander ("Bob" Alexander Robinson), and Bob Robinson: and we have rejected three of these — Bob Call, Lovell Alexander and Bob Robinson. This leaves us with only one contender, 'Bob' Alexander Robinson, and I see no reason for rejecting the idea that he was Black Bob.

The assertion that 'Bob' Alexander Robinson was Black Bob seems to have the characteristics of a good theory: it fits the observations and is capable of disproof. When I say it fits the observations I mean that a name like 'Bob' Alexander Robinson is quite consistent with the names put forward by Paul Oliver and Washboard Sam — Bob Alexander and Bob Robinson respectively — and if Big Bill told Albert McCarty that Black Bob's real name was Bob Robinson it is also quite consistent with that. By capable of disproof I mean that the theory can be easily falsified. Readers might like to compare the piano playing of Black Bob with the playing of Alex Robinson on the Blind Blake session of Thursday 20 June 1929 (Godrich and Dixon, 1969, p. 92). The five tracks are available, for example, on Riverside 8804, Biograph 12023, and Biograph 12031, "Hookworm Blues" in particular (on Biograph 12031) makes an interesting comparison. I also understand that Ernest Virgo has written an article on Black Bob (Hall and Noblett, 1975b) and I would be interested to read his conclusions.

Better still, how nice it would be if someone living in Chicago, perhaps the team of indefatigable researchers at Living Blues magazine, could contact Little Brother, Thomas Dorsey, and J. Mayo Williams to see what the connections were, if any, between the Robinsons of the Hukum Boys and Paramount, and Black Bob.

But best of all it would appear from the tenor of his book that Aletha Dickerson was still alive in the late 1950s when Sam Charters was researching the Country Blues (Charters, 1960, p. 44):

"When [J. Mayo] Williams left Paramount in 1927, there was a strain in the company's relations with Lemon [Jefferson], Laibley and Satherley, who had worked with Williams, were still with Paramount, but Lemon seems to have been partly the responsibility of the young girl with Paramount, Aletha Robinson, and she still remembers Lemon with a shudder of disgust."

If Aletha Dickerson Robinson is still alive and can be interviewed, I believe the problem of identifying Black Bob would be finally resolved: and I have been told that a British collector has been in correspondence with her in recent years!

Let me conclude by suggesting that Black Bob himself was still around in the late 1930s and may have been alive up to at least the 1950s. In an unsigned interview with Mike Rowe, Moody Jones, who says he came to Chicago in 1939, claims to have played with Bob in the clubs. He remembers him as a little black guy, very dark skinned, and not popular. He also tells of another black musician who was a stickler for musicianship that if anybody played a wrong note he would stop in the middle of the number and berate the unfortunate musician! Perhaps this is further evidence that Black Bob was 'Bob' Alexander Robinson. Little Brother Montgomery has said that Bob Alexander gave him the first piano lessons of his life (zur Heide, 1970, p. 42), and who else but a music teacher would be as much as Black Bob is supposed to have done in the Chicago clubs?!

Finally, in writing about an interview with Dave Johnson, sister of Memphis Minnie, Mike Leadbetter (1970) had to say about Minnie's recording sessions in the early 1950s: 'By 1950 Minnie was getting too old to do as she used to and the public's changing tastes made her record sales drop off. She was dropped by the majors and returned to the independents to try her luck. Her voice was still clear and strong, and with Son Joe and her pianist Black Bob behind her, she recorded for Regal, Checker and JOB.'

The presence of Bob on these sessions was significant and an undated letter, now in the Blues Unlimited files, from Memphis Minnie to Mike Leadbetter. Again, readers might like to compare the piano playing on these sessions with the known playing of Black Bob. The Checker sessions should be heard on Chess 6648 and 6649.

(my ms. Notes: (Genesis: The Beginnings of Rock) where Mike Leadbetter, in his sleeve notes, gives Black Bob as the pianist; the Regal session is available on Biograph 12035; and the JOB on Boogie Disease 102. The pianists on the Regal and JOB sessions are usually taken to be Sunnyland Slim and Little Brother Montgomery, respectively, and I must say that the piano on the Checker recording sounds nothing like Black Bob to me. So why did Minnie insist that Bob played on all three sessions? This is just another source of confusion as we never answered the question. 'Who Was Black Bob?'

References


3 Brunynoge, Y. (1964): Big Bill Blues, Oak, N.Y.


14 Oliver, P. (1964): 'Sleeve Notes to RD-7685, Big Bill And Sonny Boy'.


16 O'Neal, J. (1975): 'Sleeve Notes to AXM-5522, Little Brother Montgomery: Crescent City Blues'.


