

BLIND WILLIE McTELL - A LAST SESSION

Samuel B. Charters

Harris: Thanks, Jimmy Wallington! Well! Well! So this young fellow called Red Nichols is celebrating 30 years on the radio, huh? Don't seem possible, Red! But you know something, you and I have known each other for 26 of those years. You remember when we first got together?

Nichols: Like yesterday, Phil! I'd been playing in New York and I wanted to see my folks who were living in the San Francisco Bay area, so I joined up with Henry Halstead and his band at the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco -- and sitting next to me was little Philsy! Or should I say, Wangah, the little Indian drummer?

Harris: Yeah --- say that Loring --- say that! (laughter). And from the first time that you and I got together we just seemed to hear ear to ear and we got along okay --- in fact, while we were with the Halstead band and all the time we were with them we shared a room together and we were sidemen in the orchestra --- and --- I would say sidekicks the rest of the time --- that was us.

Nichols: Sure, and we've been able to get together every once in awhile ever since.

Harris: That's right, Red! Well, again, congratulations, for hitting 30 and I'm gonna be a little different --- instead of suggestion that you make it 30 more, I'll settle for 29. Do you think you can make it, Rodney (laughter)

Nichols: I'll sure try, Phil! And thanks for dropping by.

The orchestra leads off with "Thanks for the Memory"

Wallington: And now, who --- but Bob Hope!

Hope: Thanks, Jimmy Wallington, thanks for asking me down to Red Nichols on his 30th anniversary! You know, to look at Red you'd never think he was that old. I guess that puckering keeps a fellow young --- least that's what I've been trying to sell Jane Russell. But Red has brought this world a lot of happiness with his wonderful band --- his famous band --- Red Nichols and his Five Pennies. Yes sir, that's what he has left after tax! (laughter)

Nichols: Mighty nice of you to drop in, Robere! I sure appreciate it. I figure that if I ever have to give up the trumpet and take to acting it will be because of you.

Hope: How's that again, bub?

Nichols: Well, it was you that first started me talking on a radio program.

Hope: Yeah, I know --- and thanks for the memory --- I remember how it all began --- it was in 1936 on the Atlantic family with Honey Chile and Frank Parker. You already had your first big commercial radio program --- featured Ruth Etting in your band --- then later in the year you got another show with Frank Parker --- I replaced Frank and that's when I started needling you into speaking lines.

Nichols: Yeah! You even wrote them for me.

Hope: Yes sir, you're right, Red! If you ever turn out to be the world's greatest actor and win an Oscar before me, I'll hate myself. Red, it was swell of you --- so that we could get together on your 30th --- and --- I'll keep it quiet for you --- congratulations and good wishes and many happy returns of the day.

Nichols: Well, Bob, that's an expression that never fails to go over big. Thanks again for stopping in.

Wallington: Here now is the roll call of the present Five Pennies --- Joe Rushton, bass saxophonist --- King Jackson, trombone --- Rollie Culver, drums --- Walter Sheets, piano --- Matty Matlock, clarinet --- Well, we hear their most recent release --- it's the perennial favorite, "That's a Plenty"

In an earlier issue of Record Research I discussed at some length the recordings of Blind Willie McTell, the interesting blues singer from the Atlanta area who had persistently recorded for a number of companies from the late '20's until 1952. Knowing McTell's habit of turning up unexpectedly - he even fooled me with a re-issue I did of a "Blind Willie" side on Vocalion, not realizing it was McTell - I should have known that there would be a final session by McTell. Shortly after the book "The Country Blues" came out I received a letter from someone named Jan Cox in Atlanta who offered to help get more information about singers and musicians in the Atlanta area. When I asked him about McTell he answered that a record shop owner named Ed Rhodes had recorded him in the fall of 1956 and had an hour tape of his singing and playing. The letter reached me while my wife and I were traveling in Israel, and it was with great impatience that I waited for our return to New York so that I could get in touch with Rhodes.

I was able to talk with him at some length a few weeks later when he flew to New York to deliver the tape to me. He had gotten to know McTell in the summer of 1956, and asked him to record for him. McTell was still bitter about some of his experiences with people in the recording field and at first he refused.

It was only after he'd known Rhodes for some time that he finally agreed to come into the shop and maybe put a few numbers on tape. When he got there Rhodes had the machine set up and a bottle of corn whiskey for him. This was enough for McTell, and he sat down and played for an hour, singing many of his favorite songs, and talking about his background and the story of the songs.

Two or three years later Rhodes sold his recording equipment and threw the tapes he'd done into a discarded barrel in the attic of his store. When he went to look for the tapes only one had survived, fortunately the McTell tape. When he tried to find McTell again in the winter of 1960 he was told that Willie had died during the fall; so it is possible that this session was McTell's last. It is beautifully recorded and covers a broad variety of McTell's songs, and it is in many ways a fitting last session for this very fine singer. The following is a master sheet of the tape and its contents from which a selection will be released by the Prestige Record Company, 203 S. Washington Ave., Bergenfield, New Jersey, in the fall of 1961.

BLIND WILLIE McTELL, voice and guitar, recorded by Edward Rhodes, Atlanta, Ga., fall, 1956. Ampex equipment, telefunken microphone.

	(time)
warm up	15"
BABY IT MUST BE LOVE	1'35"
Talk about "Dyin' Crapshooter's"	3'25"
DYIN' CRAPSHOOTER'S BLUES	2'50"
Talk about early life.	1'50"
PAL OF MINE	2'40"
More about life.	2'45"
DON'T FORGET IT	2'10"
Talk about "Kill It Kid"	2'00"
KILL IT KID	3'15"
Talk about "That Will Never Happen"	1'30"
THAT WILL NEVER HAPPEN NO MORE	1'30"
A request for "My Blue Heaven" and a performance of it.	3'30"

HOUSE BANDS OF YESTERDAY - COLUMBIA (Cont'd)

An interesting Selvin innovation, usually tied in with the first of the motion picture themes, was to do the number on Columbia as THE COLUMBIA PHOTO PLAYERS or one of the other names or even BEN SELVIN AND HIS ORCHESTRA, always with a vocal interpolation; and the same song, usually with the same arrangement but always without a vocal, and nearly always as RUDY MARLOW AND HIS ORCHESTRA, for the 35c. labels. By this time, the superior Columbia recording and pressings both were present on the Harmony-Clarion-Diva-Velvet Tone-Silver-tone chain, and these were the equal of the more expensive pressings on the Columbia label and, excepting for perhaps some hot jazz being purveyed on some other cheap labels, this was the best buy ever to be offered by any record company and a better one than any other major was offering.

Annette Hanshaw was recruited from the Perfect ranks about 1928 to be Harmony's equivalent of Ruth Etting, and she did right nicely by them, often with the same accompaniments Etting was using, with Venuti and Lang often predominant. A most unusual procedure was followed when Hanshaw was used on all of the Columbia labels for some sides apparently while still contracted to Harmony and the carbon copies of it. For instance, she does LOVER COME BACK TO ME/YOU WOULDN'T FOOL ME, WOULD YOU? (Co 1769-D) which was a 1928 grooving; also two hits from FOX MOVIE TONE FOLLIES OF 1929; BIG CITY BLUES/THAT'S YOU, BABY (Co 1812-D). About the same time, she appears on Okeh with IF I CAN'T HAVE YOU, from Colleen Moore's film, FOOTLIGHTS AND FOOLS, backed with THE RIGHT KIND OF MAN, from a Fox film starring Lenore Ulric (OK 41327), and LOVABLE AND SWEET/MOANIN' LOW (Ok 41292). All of this, while she was being featured on the Harmony group in such numbers as TIP-TOE THROUGH THE TULIPS (H-1012), AM I BLUE? (H-940), IF I HAD A TALKING PICTURE OF YOU (H-1066) and MY FUTURE JUST PASSED (H-1178), all from current screen fare. It may well be that no other artist ever appeared simultaneously on as many labels, before or since, and using her own name on all of them, and, undoubtedly, all of them were under Selvin's supervision.

In 1933, American Record Co. took over Columbia, and Okeh and the other 75c. labels came to a standstill, Okeh being reactivated as a 35c. reissue label utilizing the earlier Okeh releases, and Harmony and the other original 35c. platters were discontinued. With this drastic change, the labyrinth of house bands that had been the blood vessels of the Columbia Record body suffered a thrombosis, presently to die and appear in another incarnation of infinitely less complexity and, to one record fan, at least, even still less glamor in the shape of several supervising maestri such as Paul Weston, Percy Faith and last and certainly not least, Mitch Miller, but all of them of relentless conformity.

Coda: My record collection includes a green-label Columbia (12098-F) which is a pair of violin solos of SONNY BOY and A LITTLE LOVE, A LITTLE KISS and the violinist is Benito Selvinc

BLIND WILLIE MCTELL - CHARTERS (Continued)

Some talkabout drinking	1'10"	Talk about people in room	2'45"
BEEBLE UM BUM	2'35'	SALTY DOG	2'50"
Talk about "Salty Dog"	1'40'	WABASH CANNONBALL	2'30"
A MARRIED MAN'S A FOOL	2'00'	Talk about "St. James"	45"
Talk about "A to Z"	40"	ST. JAMES INFIRMARY	2'25"
A TO Z BLUES	1'40'	Talk and "If I had the Wings"	2'00"
Talk about New Orleans	1'40		
GOODBYE BLUES	1'45"	INSTRUMENTAL	3'30"
BASIN STREET BLUES	1'30"		

As is always the case in a session of this kind the performances were uneven in quality; some of them uninteresting, but there was enough of McTell singing and talking to edit from it an interesting release.

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 N E W S
 * VICTORIA SPIVEY
 AND
 * LONNIE JOHNSON
 *
 * have recently
 * recorded for
 * Prestige.
 *
 * They will open
 * together at
 * GERDE'S FOLK CITY
 * on West 4th Street
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 * This is a reunion
 * after more than
 * 30 years
 * * * * *

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