

# The Story Of Blind Joel Taggart's Presto Record

## By Alex van der Tuuk



Blind Joel Taggart, courtesy Mrs. Pernelle Taggart Shaw. Not to be reproduced without author's agreement.

**T**he 1948 Presto recording of Blind Joel Taggart was brought to my attention for the first time during a weekend in March 2003 when Paul Swinton and the late Keith Briggs came over and stayed at my temporary place in Alkmaar, the Netherlands.

That weekend we visited Guido van Rijn and during our conversation Swinton and Briggs came up with the story that a Chicago-recorded Presto acetate by Taggart had recently been offered on eBay.

It was warped, meaning that it could not be played unless a pressing was made of it, which would destroy the laminated record. Swinton and Briggs thought the record was made in 1947 and the label addressed the artist as 'Blind Joe Taggart' on one side and as 'Blind Joe Taggart' on the other side. A few weeks later, on 7th April I emailed Bob Eagle, asking if he knew more about the Presto

recording. In his reply he had inserted the information in his biography on Taggart as follows: "He made a Presto test pressing at Chicago, Illinois on 22nd June 1948, with the titles 'Preshious Lord' (sic) and 'Little Black Train', as by Blind Joe Taggart."

Apart from Paul Swinton mentioning that some initial bids had been made on the record before it vanished, the record remained a mystery for the next seven years.

In May 2010 I informed Guido that I had been working on an article on Blind Joel Taggart and asked him if he knew if there had been label scans accompanying the Presto record. Guido had had the foresight to download the bid sheet and the labels and kindly sent me the information.

On 15th October 2002 the Presto acetate was offered on eBay for an initial bid of \$99.95 by a Chicago seller under the pseudonym of "bubbacrumb".

In his description he wrote that he found the record on Maxwell Street's market some twenty years before. The acetate was slightly bent and the lacquer had small cracks in it. After two days, no one had bid on the record and after the bidding term of five days had expired, the record disappeared.

Guido suggested I should contact the seller via the email address listed. Although this could be a shot in the dark at best, I contacted the seller.

Within 24 hours Bob Buchholz of Chicago revealed himself as the owner of the record. He still had the record in his archives and was surprised that the record never sold at the time. In his response he noted: "One side plays good and the other side has to be started in about a quarter of an inch to get past the bend. I am thinking about putting it up on eBay to see what it will do (with a high reserve)." Asking Bob when and where he found the record he replied: "Actually it was probably in November or December 1982, I found it near the corner of Morgan and Roosevelt Road which was located in the general Maxwell Street area. Some dealers used to set up on the outer fringes of the market to avoid paying seller fees. I bought it from an old black junker who had a metal 78 record box which had some blank lacquers for home recordings in it; then I saw the crude handwritten Presto label on one of the lacquers and said 'I'll take this one!'"

I informed Bob that I had contacted record collector John Tefteller several days before as well, hoping that he would know more about the record himself.

John Tefteller was completely unaware of the acetate and asked me to inform him when I had found the record's owner. Bob and John had known each other from earlier record transactions, and Tefteller, after he had heard who the seller was, went over to Chicago to buy the record. Before selling the record, I asked Bob to transfer the songs on tape for me, which he promptly did, promising to send



Labels shots: courtesy of Guido van Rijn

the tape at once. After John had bought the record, Bob told me that John was going to restore the record and would send us both a better version of the two songs.

Contacting John Tefeller he said that "The Taggart is still being worked on, I don't expect it to be done for a while. I told the guy restoring it I did not need it until next year for the 2012 Calendar CD." To complete the study on Taggart I needed the two recorded songs to analyse the lyrics, his guitar technique and voice. I decided to once more contact Bob Buchholz to ask for a taped copy of the recordings, which he promptly sent.

#### About the recordings

Listening to 'Preshious Lord', which has the best sound quality of the two songs, it is unmistakably Taggart with a much matured voice, sometimes even growling, like he did on the 1934 Decca recording of 'I Wonder Will My Mother Be On That Train'?

Yet his voice, at the age of 55 (he recorded the songs six weeks before his 56th birthday) had grown much more fuller. His guitar playing is very distinct and seems to have improved over the years as well. Here we hear a street musician who played Maxwell Street for many years and seems to have made 'Preshious Lord' one of his standard tunes. The song itself is Thomas A. Dorsey's 1932 composition 'Precious Lord, Take My Hand', with some alterations in the first and second verses. With a playing time of 4:05 minutes this is the strongest of the two songs.

'Little Black Train' is another traditional composition, having been commercially recorded by the Seven Stars Quartette in Columbia, South Carolina, on 8th November 1938, and issued on Vocalion 05477.

Earlier recorded versions were made by the Carter Family (1935; issued on ARC 7-07-62, Vo/OK 03112 and Conqueror 8815) and Harmon E. Helmick (1931, issued on Champion 16744 and reissued on Champion 45112 by Decca). The song was even copyrighted in 1937 by the Carter family, although the song can be traced back to 1909, where it was heard in Durham County, North Carolina.

However, it is clear that Taggart based the song on Rev. J.M. Gates' 24th April 1926 recorded version of 'Death Black Train Is Coming' as recorded for Columbia. It was a monster hit for Gates, who recorded five versions for different companies in 1926.

Despite the poor condition of this side (the

record had been graded as VG+ in 2002) due to the warp and the surface noise, it is still possible to take a proper listen to the record. With 2:43 minutes the song is as strong a performance as 'Preshious Lord'. Both songs indicate that Taggart was still performing daily, judged by his strong voice and his subtle and fluent guitar playing. He would certainly have had a chance to have been recorded would he have been re-located on Maxwell Street by one of the early researchers during the 1950s.

**Both songs appear, fully restored, in the '2012 Classic Blues Artwork From The 1920's Calendar' which is available from Blues Images.**

#### The lyrics

**Blind Joel Taggart (v; g);  
Chicago, Illinois; 22 June 1948.  
Preshious Lord**

Precious Lord, take my hand,  
Lead me on, let me stand,  
I am tired, I am weak, Lord, I'm worn,  
Through the storm, through the night,  
Lead me on to the light,  
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me on.

When the sun goes down,  
Linger on, linger near,  
And when my life is almost gone,  
Hear my cry, hear my call,  
Hold my hand, Lord, lest I fall,  
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me on.

Precious Lord, take my hand,  
Lead me on, Lord, let me stand,  
I'm tired, I'm weak, Lord, I'm worn,  
Through the storm, through the night,  
Lead us on to the light,  
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me on.

When the gates swing open wide,  
Let me enter by Your side,  
And when my life be complete,  
By the river where I stand,  
Guide my feet, Lord, hold my hand,  
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me on.

Precious Lord, take my hand,  
Lead me on, Lord, let me stand,  
I'm tired, I'm weak, Lord, I'm worn,  
Through the storm, through the night,  
Lead us on to the light,  
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me on.

Precious Lord, take my hand,  
Lead me on, let me stand,  
I'm tired, I'm weak, Lord, I'm worn,  
Through the storm, through the night,  
Lead Your people to the light,  
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me on.

#### Little Black Train

Oh, that little black train is coming,  
Get all your business right,  
You better set your house in order,  
For the train may be here tonight.

God spoke to Hezekiah,  
With a message from on high:  
"You better set your house in order,  
For thou must surely die."

Oh, the little black train is coming,  
Get all your business right,  
You better set your house in order,  
For the train may be here tonight.

Oh, he turned his face to the wall,  
And you could see that King in tears,  
He got his business fixed all right,  
God spared him fifteen years.

Oh, the little black train is coming,  
Get all your business right,  
You better set your house in order,  
For the train may be here tonight.

Then, half the men and women,  
Care nothing for the gospel light,  
Hear the bells ring and the whistle blow,  
Little black train's in sight.

With the little black train and his engine,  
One little baggage car.  
Have all your deeds, weak and strong,  
Meet you back at the judgment bar.

Oh, the little black train is coming,  
Get all your business right,  
You better set your house in order,  
For the train may be here tonight.

O, you better be at the station,  
Have a ticket in your hand,  
Little black train is coming,  
You're gonna join that train.

Oh, the little black train is coming,  
Get all your business right  
You better get your house in order,  
For the train may be here tonight

#### Acknowledgements

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#### Note from the author

This article was originally intended to be published as part of the Blind Joel Taggart biography as printed in Paul Swinton's 'The Frog Blues & Jazz Annual No. 2' (2011). Due to space limitations and the length of the article it was decided to leave this part out of the article. Now that the Presto record has been made available to the public, I feel that it is still fair to tell this little tale.