

# RAY'S RUDIMENTS

by Ray Templeton

## 'SOME SWEET DAY' TAMPA RED & BIG MACEO

Mapping the careers of two of the most distinctive artists – and one of the greatest partnerships – in the history of Chicago blues.



Tampa Red circa 1940s, From the B&R Archive.

**T**ampa Red, as both singer and guitarist, was indisputably one of the most popular, prolific and influential blues artists of his time, and it was a long time, lasting about a quarter of a century. At the height of his popularity, he was inspiring all sorts of guitar players, from imitators like Tampa Kid to more original interpreters like Robert Lee McCoy (later Robert Nighthawk) and as his own career began to wane, his direct influence was clearly apparent on some of the finest blues artists of the next generation – from the biggest names like Muddy Waters and Elmore James, to the more obscure, but still great, Dan Pickett. Disentangling the history of Tampa Red's songs is a job for another time and place – he wasn't the first to sing 'Black Angel Blues', and 'It Hurts Me Too' is clearly derived from 'Sitting On Top Of The World' – but you could easily make the case that it was Tampa who was principally responsible for bequeathing those songs, and many others, to the world.

Record buyers snapped up his 78s, starting in the late 1920s, and continued to do so until the early 1950s. There are so many of them that his complete recordings fill no fewer than fifteen volumes in Document's Complete Chronological series. And there lies the problem. How many listeners want to buy fifteen volumes by Tampa Red? Some will, to be sure, but most would

almost certainly prefer to acquire by selection, and that's what this article will aim to help with.

Tampa Red's real name was Hudson Woodbridge, but he took the surname of his grandmother, Whittaker. He was born in Georgia, but grew up in Tampa, Florida, and it seems to have been there that he developed his very particular slide guitar style. Unlike many other bottleneck players of his generation, who exploited the excitement that could be generated by slashing the slide across chords, with the strings jangling out in harmony (or exhilarating dischord), Tampa Red developed his own, more carefully controlled style, which involved picking chords and runs with his fingers, and interspersing them with very clean slide lines, on single strings, with rarely an echo from another string to be heard (one exception is on his very first recorded side, the one-off Paramount recording, 'Through Train Blues'). He recorded a wide range of music (within a broad blues context), and his considerable appeal depended on a variety of factors – including his voice, his way with *risqué* and other comic material, his interplay with other musicians – but his guitar playing was evidently a key factor, a fact that seems clear from his recorded solos. If you want a close look at the Tampa Red style, take his 1929 solo instrumental, 'You Got To Reap What You Sow'. He had already been recording for about a year at this point, and had already racked up a very large number of sides, and established a reputation as an entertainer, but this was his first outing entirely on his own. Fortunately we have transfers from very good copies, so we're able to hear



Big Maceo, thought to be with Harmon Ray. From the B&R Archive.

it in outstanding clarity. Red plays both accompaniment and lead, by using his thumb and fingers to provide the bass line and outline chords, while his slide picks out an only slightly embellished melody, sustaining and elongating notes with great taste. On the face of it, it's a simple, uncluttered sound, but it demanded no little skill – and it works beautifully.

You can hear this performance on 'Bottleneck Guitar 1928-1937', Yazoo CD 1039; I may be influenced by nostalgia, but there are few better ways to sample Tampa Red's music than a collection like this, which amazingly after forty years, is still in print, both CD and download. The downside is that you only get fourteen tracks, but what a selection! Here's definitive hokum like 'What's That Tastes Like Gravy' and 'The Duck's Yas Yas Yas' – nobody who bought those discs could have been in any doubt about what the joke was. Here are some of the very best examples of his ability to punctuate and emphasise the lyrics sung by artists as diverse as Frankie Jaxon, Ma Rainey, Madilyn Davis and Georgia Tom (Dorsey). 'If You Want Me To Love You' is a brilliant duet performance in which Tampa's guitar combines with Dorsey's piano and vocal, weaving a tough blues lyric into a minor-keyed, gospel-tinged melody – one of the essential urban blues recordings of the 1930s. You also get the Paramount 'Through Train Blues' mentioned above, 'Seminole Blues', a beautiful duet from the late '30s with an unknown second guitarist, and 'Come On Mama', featuring his 'Hokum Jug Band'. In those fourteen tracks you get a long way towards hearing at least an outline of the whole story of the young Tampa Red, although it will most likely leave you wanting to hear a lot more.

Another equally well-chosen and well-presented sampler, with sound quality that is at least as good, is 'The Guitar Wizard', Sony 4757022, in the Roots'N'Blues Series, also still available as CD and download. There's a little overlap, but the more generous selection of nineteen tracks (in the current edition – the previous version had only seventeen) includes a similar mix of accompaniments, band tracks, duets and solos. It would be too easy nowadays to get hung up on Tampa Red's guitar playing, because it was so special, but he was also a pretty special vocalist – he delivers a beautiful, slow poignant blues like 'Reckless Man' with total conviction, but he could also convey just the right balance of urbanity and mischief on a *double entendre* lyric like 'That Stuff Is Here'. This disc also offers his lovely 'Black Angel Blues' and the swinging 'Dead Cat On The Line', with Georgia Tom. And to balance the hokum and fun, there's the trenchant social comment of 'Turpentine Blues', another solo, exquisitely played and sung with real heart and soul.

Both of the above CD selections focus on the late 1920s and early 1930s, and if you want to get a lot more of the same, there's the first five complete chronological volumes: 'Volume 1: 1928-1929', Document DOCD-5073, 'Volume 2: 1929' Document DOCD-5074, 'Volume 3: 1929-1930', Document DOCD-5075, 'Volume 4: 1930-1931', Document DOCD-5076, 'Volume 5: 1931-1934' Document DOCD-5077. There's also a JSP box that covers a similar period: 'Tampa Red & Georgia Tom: Music Making In Chicago', JSP 77160. And it's only fair to mention that there are (or have been) various other single disc samplers, on Indigo, Complete Blues and Catfish, for example, although duplication is always a problem.

Around about this time, two major changes took place. The first was that Tampa's long-standing partner, Georgia Tom Dorsey, who had been with him since his first Vocalion session in 1928, had left the blues behind to devote his life to sacred music. Secondly, Tampa left Vocalion behind and started a new association with Bluebird Records, which would last for the next two decades. There had been some shifting of public tastes in this post-depression period,

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and this was reflected in the way the Bluebird sessions pretty quickly tried out various new combinations, adding a washboard or second guitar here, a clarinet or an alto sax there. And there was another innovation, introduced at the very first Bluebird session – on a couple of tracks, Tampa played a kazoo. From the following year, there would hardly be a session on which he didn't feature this device on at least a couple of songs. It's probably true to say that this particular factor more than any other is the one that has alienated so many current blues fans from Tampa Red's 1930s and later recordings (although it evidently did not have this effect on the people who bought the original 78s). To say they are missing out on many masterpieces is maybe putting it a bit strongly, but there's much in the next decade that is very well worthwhile, kazoo or no.

This, of course, is the combination of label, material, arrangements and recording policy that came to be dismissed as 'The Bluebird Beat',

and there is no doubt that the musicians and producers made record after record that aimed for a similar audience. But there's also no doubt that the audience in question – the record-buying public – loved the records, or they wouldn't have happily continued to buy them. And with good reason – Tampa continued to sing and play beautifully, he delivered new material that was as moving or as much fun as the old (not surprisingly, as it was often in a very similar melodic and lyrical vein), and there are many excellent recordings from this period – great blues like 'Kingfish Blues', 'Grievin' And Worryin'' (with its beautiful, and slightly unexpected melodic solo), and 'Stockyard Blues', alongside irresistible dance songs as diverse as the swaggering 'I Could Learn To Love You So Good', the racy 'I'm Betting On You' ('Baby, let's give a party and let's have some fun/I've got the hot-dog, so you just bring the bun') and 'Stop Truckin' And Suzy-Q', on which Tampa's kazoo

combines effectively with Arnett Nelson's clarinet, skating very agreeably over Black Bob's piano. There are also songs like 'Don't Dog Your Woman' and 'It Hurts Me Too' that – in one form or another – became standards of post-war blues. We even get the chance to hear Tampa on piano (with delightful guitar by Willie B. James) on 'Nuttie And Buggy Blues', 'My Gal Is Gone' and others, and later still we get a small band of trumpet, tenor, piano and drums.

In fact, one thing that is increasingly noticeable as these years wear on is that we start to hear less and less of Tampa Red's slide guitar. This is likely to be a change that was dictated at least partly by fashion – it was probably felt, whether on Tampa's part or that of the producers, that the slide didn't fit so well with the small group sound of this period. And yet, smack bang in the middle of all that, there's the session on October 11th 1937, where after a handful of lively band sides, there's half a dozen beautiful duets, with an unknown guitar player, mostly with Tampa on piano, but two on slide guitar, including the lovely 'Seminole Blues', mentioned a long way above. I'm bound to add, though, that Tampa also liked to sing a pop ballad or two, and at the very next session after the one described above, he was fronting a jazzy-sounding band and crooning the likes of 'Happily Married' and 'A Lie In My Heart'.

The definitive collection of the material from this period was reissued in two official double-CD sets: 'The Bluebird Recordings: 1934-1936', Bluebird RCA 66721 and 'The Bluebird Recordings 1936-1938', Bluebird RCA 66722-2. The former is still available, at least as a bargain-priced download, but the latter seems to have gone, at least for now. The same period is covered in the complete chronological series by: 'Volume 6: 1934-1935' Document DOCD-5206, 'Volume 7: 1935-1936', Document DOCD-5207, 'Volume 8: 1936-1937' Document DOCD-5208, 'Volume 9: 1937-1938' Document DOCD-5209, 'Volume 10: 1938-1939' Document DOCD-5210.

Surprisingly, there was a solo session in November 1940, but this was quite different to former times. Tampa played amplified guitar (and kazoo), and only uses slide on half of the tracks. His electric style is much more basic than you might expect, given the skills he had shown in his earlier days. He mostly plays straightforward chords, with the occasional bent note for emphasis, and a few runs on the bass strings (not dissimilar in approach to what Lightnin' Hopkins would sometimes do – more elaborately – later in the decade). The slide comes out on 'This Ain't No Place For Me', 'Hard Road' and two others – he keeps it quite simple, but these are good records by any standards. This session, among others, is included on 'Volume 11: 1939-1940' Document DOCD-5211.

Tampa's partnership with pianists was always a key part of his work, and after the departure of Georgia Tom, it was mostly Black Bob who filled the keyboard role, although there were also sessions with Myrtle Jenkins and, later, Blind John Davis, none of which give any cause for complaint. On 24th June 1941, Tampa came to the studio with a new piano player, Big Maceo Merriweather, and it reflects not at all badly on those previous keyboard men (and woman), to say that this new partnership was one made in heaven. Maceo's thundering left hand, and his strong and ever-resourceful right hand work, not only provided quality and vigour to the overall sound, but it also seemed to inject a new enthusiasm into Tampa himself, pushing him to new heights of energy and inspiration.

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# BIG MACEO & TAMPA RED

*From the B&R Archives*



At the same session, Maceo cut six sides in his own right, revealing a voice as effective as his playing – one that mixes expressive power with a certain sense of vulnerability, balancing beautifully with the emphatic drive of his instrumental work. 'Worried Life Blues' is one of the great blues songs, recorded in both straight versions and heavily reworked forms, by many blues artists. It wasn't virgin material when Maceo picked it up – Sleepy John Estes's 'Someday Baby Blues' was probably his source – but to say he made it his own would be an understatement. Nor was it the only brilliant performance that day – all five of the others are outstanding. The way Maceo's rolling piano mix with Tampa's slide guitar on 'Ramblin' Mind' creates one of the great sounds of 1940s blues, while his vocals on 'County Jail Blues', with its distinctive melodic twist, convey the anger and confusion of a sudden encounter with the law. When he sings the stock line: "I know my baby, she's going to jump and shout/When that train roll up and I come walking out," you forget the potential *cliché* and visualise exactly what he's describing. 'Can't You Read' would have had them rocking in the aisles, in both senses. For a measure of Maceo's distinctiveness as a piano player, check out the extraordinary chromatic passage he throws in almost casually after the first line of the second verse of 'Texas Blues'. This is no ordinary piano player, no ordinary blues player, although a bluesman through and through.

It would be no problem to pick out plenty of similar moments to treasure from Maceo's next session, in December of the same year, but the song that has always captivated me most is 'Poor Kelly Blues' – that rare thing, a fully-realised narrative blues, comprising just five verses, each like a perfectly framed movie shot. The murderer Kelly gets more sympathy in the song than the woman he shot in cold blood, but the way the story unravels points up the complexity of the human emotion behind it – an absolute *tour-de-force*. The rest of the sessions cut by the two men in the first couple of years of the war consolidate one of the great blues partnerships, whether you take a Tampa Red record like 'Mean And Evil Woman' or one of Big Maceo's, like the intense 'Some Sweet Day' (both of which make varied use of the format from 'Worried Life').

When recording resumed, as the war was starting to draw to a close, Tampa cut a fine session with John Davis, while Maceo cut the brilliant solo, 'Flyin' Boogie', unissued at the time. Then they were back together, and if anything were even better than before. 'Maceo's 32-20', his take on '44 Blues'/'Vicksburg Blues' is one of the finest versions of the theme, and another masterwork. The two instrumental showcases (with running commentary) 'Texas Stomp' and 'Detroit Jump' are as musically compelling as they're riotous in atmosphere, while Tampa's vocals on his own tracks at the same session, like 'Mercy Mama' and 'Give Me Mine Now' are among the strongest he had ever done. Over the coming months the classics kept coming – a version of 'Big Road Blues', related to Tommy Johnson's, but brought up-to-date in execution, and the fast-pounding 'Chicago Breakdown' are probably the highlights from Maceo's point of view, while cuts like 'Corinne Blues' and 'Play Proof Mama' show how Tampa Red's vocals and guitar could mesh perfectly with the piano player to create a sound that is as satisfying (and as much fun) to listen to as it must have been to play. Tampa's sides with Maceo on piano are on 'Volume 12: 1941-45', Document DOCD-5212 and 'Volume 13: 1945-1947', Document DOCD-5213.

Then, after a final session together in February 1946, Tampa was back in the studio with Blind John Davis. These are good records (Sax Mallard's clarinet playing on 'New Bad Luck Blues' is a particular treat), but the partnership with Big Maceo had genuinely aspired to greatness. The reason for the change was that Maceo had suffered a stroke, which disabled his right side. This would not be the end of his recording career, but from here on in – he would live another seven years – he would sing and play left-hand piano only. On his last Victor session, in February 1947, Eddie Boyd played piano (doing his best to sound Maceo-ish), with Tampa on guitar, and despite an occasional shakiness in the vocals it's all pretty good. Unmistakeably, there's a certain magic missing, but these are decent records.

Tampa's later career has never been as popular with compilers, but there have been exceptions. There was a good Blues Classics LP in the '70s, and in the 1980s Krazy Kat issued a fantastic compilation of sides (1944-1952), concentrating especially on those which featured Little Johnny Jones on piano. Jones was influenced by Big Maceo, but never a copyist, and arguably one of the strongest and most inventive Chicago blues players of his generation. He died young and sadly never really had the opportunities he should have to record, so it was great to discover (or for the more discographically aware, to be reminded) that he had made a significant contribution to some very good sessions under another artist's name. By this time, the new wave of Chicago blues was washing across the recording scene, and the way Jones underpinned the band's sound helped it swim with the tide. This also provided a context for Tampa's slide guitar to come to the fore again, and there's a more contemporary urban Chicago sound about the way he plays on tracks like '1950 Blues' and 'Love Her With A Feelin'. This turn-of-the-decade period is comprehensively covered on 'Volume 14: 1949-1951', Document DOCD-5214, and there's also a good selection on the first disc of the various artists' box set, 'Chicago Is Just That Way', JSP 7744.

Johnny Jones also played on a Big Maceo session, for Specialty in 1949. It seems Maceo played left hand on the piano and Jones played right, and between them, with Tampa still on guitar, they conjured an even more convincing recreation of Maceo's heyday than with Eddie Boyd. Again, these are decent records – they don't have as much of that fervent, affirmative lift that we expect from the best of Maceo's Bluebird/Victors, but if you didn't know the background, there's no reason why you wouldn't just enjoy these as very good

piano-led Chicago blues. Unfortunately, I don't think it's possible to be quite as positive about the last sides Maceo cut, for Fortune Records in Detroit in 1951, just over a year before he died. In the discography, James Watkins gets a co-credit on the piano, but Maceo's left hand dominates, and it's a very odd, ragged and lop-sided sound, not helped by the fact that the vocals are noticeably weak and even slightly slurred. If you compare 'Have You Heard About It?' with 'Can't You Read?' from the 1941 session (essentially the same song) the contrast is quite shocking. The complete Big Maceo is available on 'Volume 1: Flyin' Boogie', Document DOCD-5673, and 'Volume 2: Big City Blues', Document DOCD-

5674, both volumes unreservedly recommended, even bearing in mind that the latter includes the last Victors, the Specialys and the Fortunes, when Maceo's talent was so much reduced. Alternatively, there's a very good single disc compilation of Bluebirds and Victors on 'The King Of Chicago Blues Piano', Arhoolie 7009.



Big Maceo. From the B&R Archive.



B&R Archive.

In 1953, while his association with Victor still seems to have been just about still alive (if waning), Tampa Red cut a short session for the small, independent label, Sabre, using the pseudonym Jimmy Eager. One single appeared, and there were another two sides, which have subsequently seen the light on compilations. In what seems to have been an attempt to update his sound on record, Tampa's own playing is very much in the background, and the band's sound is dominated by L.C. McKinley's big, T-Bone Walker-ish guitar sound, with its crashing chords and brash flights of lead. They're by no means bad records (and for fans of McKinley's playing, they're pretty good ones), but I reckon Tampa sometimes sounds like he's struggling a bit – there's almost a kind of desperation about the verse sections of 'I Should Have Loved Her More', 'Please Mr Doctor' and 'Baby Please Don't' are better, with some plaintively effective vocals.

If this was an attempt to strike out in new directions, it doesn't seem to have led anywhere. Fortunately, there were two more sessions for Victor, both of which should please any Chicago blues fan, with Jones playing some fine piano and Rice Miller (Sonny Boy Williamson II) and Walter Horton on harp, respectively on the September and December 1953 sessions. This is vintage stuff, that I suspect isn't as well known and as appreciated as it might be (check out Horton's beefy, amplified soloing on 'Rambler's Blues', for just one highlight). Lead guitar is played by the excellent Willie Lacey – maybe somebody at Victor (or even the man himself) felt that, after all, Tampa's slide style was just out-dated in the age of Elmore and Muddy. Plenty of good stuff to be found, anyway, on 'Vol. 15 1951-1953', Document DOCD-5215.

As the careers of the new breed of Chicago bluemens blossomed, they left less room for the old hands, and after the December 1953 session, Tampa Red disappears completely from the discography – as both lead artist and accompanist – for several years. But not for good. In 1960, he cut enough for two LPs for Bluesville, 'Don't Tampa With The Blues', OBCCD-516-2 and 'Don't Jive Me', OBCCD-549-2. There is a quietness about these entirely solo recordings – especially when you compare them to the hefty Chicago blues band sound of the 1953 recordings. Tampa plays quite sparse guitar accompaniments, his fingers picking out basic chords (with no slide), and there's a kind of gentle wistfulness to his vocals. On paper, this might not sound like it amounts to much, but the simplicity of these recordings, in my view, have a particular attraction of their own. Both are well worthwhile – their laidback appeal reminiscent, in a way, of Lonnie Johnson's Bluesville work – and there really isn't much to choose between the two albums. Unfortunately, they seem to have gone out of print, and don't even seem to survive as legitimate downloads (although 'Don't Jive Me' does appear as a download bootleg, with the track order mixed up a bit).

Tampa Red lived for more than twenty years after these sessions, but would record no more. He died, aged 77 in 1981, but effectively missed out on the massive popularity of the blues that kicked off in the early 1960s. His impact – in terms of the influence of his work at the long-lasting height of his career – had been felt on all sorts of aspects of the music, both style and content, but maybe the warm, genteel sounds he was making on those Bluesville albums would have seeded out of place to many in that new blues audience who favoured the rough and tough. Our loss, maybe, but carefully sampled there's much to be found, much to give real satisfaction, in a career of many highlights.