

Ray's Rudiments: Great Blues LP Series

by RAY TEMPLETON

Polydor Juke Blues

The final instalment in this series is dedicated to the memory of the late Mike Leadbitter, born 75 years ago

John Lee Hooker
Slim's Stomp 2310 256

Elmore James
Walter Horton
Cotton Patch Hotfoots 2383 200

also available

Freddy King -
His Early Years 2343 047

Wynonie Harris / Eddie Vinson -
Jump Blues 2343 048

Country Paul / Ralph Willis / Robert Henry -
Faded Picture Blues 2941 201



From *Let It Rock*, 1972. From the Tony Burke Collection.

These articles have covered a wide range of album series, from officially licensed to blatantly bootlegged; from EPs to box sets; from major labels to the smallest back-bedroom operation; from series that ran to over fifty volumes, to ones of three or four. The content has ranged from impossibly rare pre-war blues, to utterly obscure post-war gospel quartets; from the previously unissued fruits of endless hours of digging in tape archives, to new recordings by artists who had never previously had the breaks they deserved. Presentation ranged from the latest in professional design, at one end of the scale, to white sleeves with a rubber stamp, at the other. Documentation ranged from an accompanying book to nothing at all. All of them played their part – to a greater or lesser extent – in supplying a growing and increasingly eager audience with music that they had not previously had the chance to hear.

Mike Leadbitter

In many ways, these articles can be seen as tributes to the individuals who made them happen. I won't list them all here (read the articles!), but it is worth considering how different the lives of blues fans would be without the dedication and passion of people like Francis Wilford Smith, Pete Whelan, Bruce Bastin, Bob Hite, Frank Scott, Guido van Rijn, Peter Lowry and Barret Hansen, to single out just a few. There was something almost visionary about their determination. There is, however, one individual in particular whose contribution seems to be woven almost all the way through this history. His name appears in many of the articles in this series, whether as sleeve note writer (Atlantic Blues Originals, Specialty Story, Juke Blues), original researcher (Jay Miller recordings), compiler (Genesis) and, of course, as reviewer (Kent

Anthology, Imperial Legendary Masters, Chess Golden Decade). His influence would have been felt strongly in other series, too, even if not necessarily acknowledged. This – as many readers will no doubt already have recognised – was Mike Leadbitter, who was born 75 years ago, and who died tragically young in 1974.

Mike Leadbitter was born on 12th March 1942, in Simla, India, the 'summer capital' of the British Raj, which at this time had only a few years left to run. Back in the U.K., he grew up in Bexhill-on-Sea, in East Sussex, and at Bexhill Grammar School in the 1950s, discovered rock'n'roll and r&b, which led quite quickly to a particular preoccupation with blues of all kinds. Was there something in the water? ⁽¹⁾ Bexhill also produced other luminaries including Simon Napier and John Broven, two key figures in blues research and documentation, whose names have also cropped up across these articles. With Napier, Leadbitter formed the Blues Appreciation Society in 1962, then *Blues Unlimited*, the

first English-language blues periodical, the following year. The list of his achievements in the field over the following decade would be a very lengthy one. Articles flowed out of him, published not just in *BU* but in all sorts of specialist and general musical periodicals. Sleeve notes abounded. One of his principal legacies, though, was his outstanding work on post-war blues discography, as first published in collaboration with Neil Slaven, 'Blues Records 1943-1966', 1968. I still treasure my dilapidated copy, and still consult the successors of that work almost every day.

The Juke Blues Series

In *Billboard*, dated 20th May 1972, the following new item appeared: 'Polydor is launching a new series this week, Juke Blues, specialising in post-war urban blues music. The series will be marketed under a split Polydor/Juke Blues label and will be introduced by three albums ... Material for the series has been compiled from the various U.S. labels licensed to Polydor in the U.K. and further albums by Robert Henry, Arthur Crudup and Sonny Boy Williamson will be released in July.'

I don't know how many blues fans were *Billboard* readers in the early 1970s, but it seems likely that their curiosity would have been stirred by this promise. An album by Robert Henry! Now that would be interesting, but no – it turns out that the message is more than a little garbled. Henry would appear on one album, represented by his four only known sides. Crudup would have two tracks on another, with Sonny Boy playing harp in the backing band. The rest of the item was correct, though. Polydor's Juke Blues series was launched with three LPs, one by Freddie King, one shared by Wynonie Harris and Cleanhead Vinson, and one by Lowell Fulson, the first two from the King label and the last from Jewel, of Shreveport Louisiana. These were followed by further albums, all deriving from King or Jewel, plus one from Roulette Records of New York.

Later in the same year, in *Billboard* dated 30th September 1972, there was another piece of news that must have quickened the pulses of any blues fans who might have been reading it: 'Polydor has acquired the Kent label catalog for release in the U.K. and Eire. The deal is for two years with two one-year options. The material will be marketed on Polydor's Juke Blues series although no specific date has yet been set for initial releases ...'. It was only a few years since the Kent Anthology of the Blues series had made available many great riches from the Modern/RPM/Flair and Meteor labels (see *B&R* Nos. 309 and 310), but these were U.S. releases (later reissued in France), so available in the U.K. only as imports. As such, the prospect of a series of U.K. releases of this material was tantalising indeed. It would transpire that only three albums of this material would be included in the series, and it wouldn't be until the 1980s, when Ace acquired rights to the Modern catalogue (which they now own), that we started to get comprehensive access to this great music. But that is to get ahead of ourselves.

At this time, Polydor had several new blues albums in catalogue, including sets by Doctor Ross, Johnny Mars and Jimmy Dawkins. John Mayall was also contracted to the label at the time, and had initiated a 'Crusade' series which was to be dedicated to some of his heroes. J.B. Lenoir's posthumously-released, self-titled LP (Polydor 2482 014) was first in the series, and it included edited parts of an interview Mayall carried out with Lenoir's widow, Ella Louise, intercut between tracks. This doesn't seem to have sold many copies and later became highly collectible, although it has been reissued on CD, without the interview sections. The only other release in the 'Crusade' series seems to have been Shakey Jake's 'The Devil's Harmonica' (Polydor 239 1015) in 1972 ('carefully arranged and totally lacking in feel', wrote Mike Leadbitter in *BU*).⁽²⁾

The Juke Blues series was put together by Simon Gee, Polydor's jazz and blues production manager at the time. Gee was responsible for A&R in these musical areas and his name is to be found as compiler on various albums of the period, including jazz, r&b, soul and vocal groups as well as blues. It was he who selected the tracks for the albums in the series. The presentation varied across the series, but each volume had a new and very distinctive cover design. Mike Leadbitter, as so often, wrote most of the sleeve notes (Steve LaVere is also credited on No.11) and supplied the discographical data.

The Albums⁽³⁾

1. His Early Years: Freddy King – Polydor 2343 047 (1972)

This was a new compilation of Freddy's sides for the Federal label, mostly – as the title suggests – deriving from his first few sessions for the label, in 1960 and 1961, plus one each from the following two years. It's all prime blues from our man, a good thirteen-track selection of both his trademark guitar instrumentals including the classic 'Hideaway', and songs like 'Love Her With A Feeling' and 'Have You Ever Loved A Woman', the two sides of his first Federal 45. As an introduction to King's recordings for the label, the most decisively blues-based of his work, this is probably as good as any on vinyl.



Mike Leadbitter and Simon Napier at the Goldband Studio, Louisiana, July 1969. From the Mike Rowe Collection.



Jackie Wilson with Mike Leadbitter, 1972. Photo: Bill Greensmith.



Dr. Ross with Mike Leadbitter, probably AFBF, London, October 1965. Photo from *R&B Monthly*.

2. Jump Blues: Wynonie Harris/Cleanhead Vinson – Polydor 2343 048

The second release in the series was a bit of a departure for the time, as in 1972, the market for jump blues was far from being well-established in the U.K. From the blues magazines of the day, it's clear that both readers and reviewers favoured downhome and urban blues styles over the more sophisticated r&b practiced by shouters like Wynonie Harris and Cleanhead Vinson. Musically, this is just as much blues as anything else in the series, but the horn sections and jazzy arrangements must have seemed very different to many potential purchasers. It would be interesting to know how this album sold, compared to the others. Certainly, it deserved to do well, as – from Vinson's tour de force, 'Cherry Red', to Harris's *risqué* classic, 'I Want My Fanny Brown', this represents some of the very best of this variety of the blues.

3. Heavy Bag: Lowell Fulson (sic) – Polydor 2384 038

Recorded for Jewel in 1969 and released the following year, 'Heavy Bag' is Lowell Fulson's contribution to that famous pile of LPs recorded around that time – including such items as Howlin' Wolf's 'dogshit' album and the various Chess 'London Sessions' – which paired great bluesmen with younger rock musicians. These were all very controversial at the time, but tend to sound a bit less so in retrospect, and 'Heavy Bag' seems to me to be one of the less problematic ones. What you feel about it probably depends on your tolerance for Eddie Hinton's lead guitar, and his use of fuzz-box and wah-wah. Either way, while it's far from my favourite of Fulson's albums, it's well worth a listen.

4. Faded Picture Blues: Country Paul/Ralph Willis/Robert Henry – Polydor 2941 201

We get to Robert Henry eventually, with this fine anthology of some of the more downhome sounds released by King Records in the 1940s and '50s. The entirely obscure Henry only recorded four sides that we know of, and here they are – excellent, pounding piano blues. 'Country



From the B&R Archive.

Paul' was the pseudonym used by the label for a series of singles by the prolific Edward P. Harris, who also recorded as Carolina Slim, Lazy Slim Jim and Jammin' Jim for Savoy and Acorn. Like most of the rest of his records, these are all solo guitar/vocal cuts, although unlike some of his other work, where he demonstrated the influence of Piedmont artists like Blind Boy Fuller, all eight of the tracks here find him squarely in mournful Lightnin' Hopkins mode. Ralph Willis is more fun, with his New York country dances and driving blues, aided and abetted by Sonny & Brownie.

5. Harpin' On It: Frank Frost/Jerry McCain/ Arthur Crudup – Polydor 2941 001

The Jewel label was putting out blues 45s in the 1960s, when most labels had given up, getting them some airplay and on to jukeboxes in the South, serving what was probably an older audience still interested in the music. This anthology of harmonica blues, with pretty much a side each from Jerry McCain and Frank Frost, plus a little icing on the cake of a quite different origin draws on these very rich resources. Frank Frost was originally from Arkansas (although by this time based in Mississippi), and Jerry McCain was from Alabama and both had already seen release on other southern labels. Frost had recorded for Sam Phillips, producing one 45 and an album, released on the Phillips International label (rare, and very much sought-after at this time). His influences included Howlin' Wolf, Jimmy Reed and Slim Harpo, but the Jewel sides have a robust

charm of their own. Frost was a fine harp player but, in fact, most of the powerful harmonica on these sides comes from Arthur Oscar Lee Williams. McCain had been recording as far back as the 1950s, for Trumpet Records, and his musical reference points were a little wider than Frost's, mostly blues-based, but taking in a bit of funk and even some near doo-wop on 'Sugar Baby', all (except that one) enhanced by some of his highly recognisable harp sounds. Rounding out the album were two gems from Arthur Crudup, originally issued a decade earlier on Trumpet under the unlikely pseudonym of Elmer James, and later released on a Jewel 45 credited to Elmo James.

6. The Seventh Son: Louisiana Red – Polydor 2941 002

This was a bit of an oddity in the series, as it was the only one originally recorded for New York label Roulette Records, and in fact it had been released in the U.K. under its original title ('The Lowdown Back Porch Blues', Columbia 33SX 1612) when it was pretty much brand new, in 1963. Actually, it was a bit of an oddity in the Roulette catalogue too, as it's very much – as that title implied – a downhome blues album. Red's guitar and occasional rack harmonica is supported only by bass and drums, and while he brings plenty of his own character to it all, there are strong echoes of Lightnin' Hopkins, Muddy Waters and others – the best kinds of blues influences. As such, it's a thoroughly fine album, and the sharp, funny opening track, 'Red's Dream', released on a 45 with the quite different, but equally pointed 'Ride On' Red, Ride On' on the flip side, is rightly acclaimed as some of the artist's best work.

7. Lonesome Lightnin': Lightnin' Hopkins – Polydor 2941 005

One of the main beneficiaries of Jewel's determination to continue to put out downhome blues, was Lightnin' Hopkins, with a long string of singles on the label. I'd happily make a case that along with his Arhoolie albums, these represent his strongest work of the 1960s – in other words, this is truly great blues. Many years later, Westside would be able to compile a two-CD set of this material, with more than forty tracks (highly recommended, if you can find it), but in 1973 this fourteen tracker offered plenty to feast on, from tough topical blues like 'Vietnam War', all the way to one of this artist's few attempts at a blues ballad, the extraordinary 'Lonesome Lightnin''. The presence of the great Houston piano player Elmore Nixon is a particular bonus.

8. Wild Child: Wild Child Butler – Polydor 2941 006

Wild Child Butler was another harmonica player who cut several very strong 45s for Jewel, in 1966 and '67, and this album pulls them together,



Wild Child Butler, Band On The Wall, Manchester, April 1991. Photo: Brian Smith.

with several other tracks from the following year. It's all excellent 1960s blues, recorded in Chicago and featuring such notable sidemen as Walter Horton – there's a very appealing two-harp sound on tracks like 'Axe And The Wind' – as well as Willie Dixon (who also produced), Lafayette Leake, and Jimmy Dawkins (at various different sessions). The sessions were all well put together, with strong, tight arrangements, and the results are thoroughly enjoyable blues records.

9. Slim's Stomp: John Lee Hooker – Polydor 2310 256

In his early years, John Lee Hooker used multiple pseudonyms as he skipped from label to label, and the one he used when recording his 78s for King Records in the late 1940s was the entirely misleading 'Texas Slim' (Hooker was from Mississippi and lived in Detroit). Regardless of label or *nom de disque*, though, this is classic early Hooker, when all he needed to create a brilliant blues record was his voice, his guitar and a stamping foot. This was effectively an enhanced (two extra tracks) and reshuffled reissue of an earlier album that had been issued in the U.K. some years earlier as 'Sings Blues', Ember Records EMB 3356, which itself was based on an original King LP of the same title, King LP 727. This time, though, tracks were mastered from original 78s from Dave Sax's collection, with much improved results.

10. Cotton Patch Hotfoot: Elmore James/Walter Horton – Polydor 2383 200

One side each by two of the Modern company's (now) most celebrated blues artists make up this wonderful LP. The Walter Horton recordings can claim a key role in promoting a lifetime's love of Memphis blues in the present writer, especially the title track, with its beautifully minimalist accompaniment from Joe Hill Louis, and Horton blowing his head off. The judicious selection of Elmore's Meteor and Flair sides is also hard to beat, although it would be difficult to select any eight of his tracks at random from this period that would fail to give complete satisfaction. There were several overlaps with 'The Resurrection Of Elmore James', and two from 'Memphis Blues', in the Kent Series, but remember that these albums were available in the U.K. only as imports.

11. Blue In The Morning: Joe Hill Louis/Willie Nix – Polydor 2383 214

To all intents and purposes, this is a Joe Hill Louis album, with a couple of bonus tracks by Willie Nix appended. Another way of looking at it is that this and the following album (number 12) represented an elaboration of the Kent Anthology volume of Memphis Blues, across two LPs, with a total of 32 tracks to the earlier set's twelve. The Kent had included a few tracks by Louis, but considering how much he had recorded for Modern and Meteor, there was hardly any of his work available (although there had been a bootleg collection of his sides released in the late 1960s on Advent). Maybe his very basic, one-man-band sound was considered a bit of a hard sell, even by downhome blues standards, but the fourteen tracks on this LP quite rightly glory in it. It's an excellent cross section of his rough, tough music: slow blues, boogies and even an instrumental – not that common in Louis's discography. Two of the four released on Meteor under the pseudonym of Chicago Sunny Boy, are among those included. The Kent anthology had included one side of Willie Nix's only RPM release, but here it was accompanied by its original flipside – both classic post-war Memphis blues, much enhanced by Willie Johnson's storming guitar.

12. Blues For Mr Crump: Wolf/Bland/Parker/Blair – Polydor 2383 257

Willie Johnson also figures strongly on this album, which offers almost a whole side of tracks from Howlin' Wolf's RPM sessions. U.K. listeners would have been well-versed in Wolf's Chess work, but any additional examples of his earlier recordings in Memphis and West Memphis would have been very welcome indeed, and here were seven of them. In retrospect, it's remarkable to reflect on just how long it took before we had a comprehensive view of Wolf's pre-Chicago work. At this point it was still some way in the future, as they were sneaking out in small helpings like this. It's also worth restating just how good these recordings are. This was one of the greatest vocalists of American music fronting a ferocious little band, mixing deep tradition with contemporary innovation. Southern blues of the early 1950s simply didn't get any better than this. Side one was topped off with Sunny Blair's fine, swinging 'Step Back', probably the best cut from the company's Arkansas sessions. Side two comprised five of Bobby Bland's earliest recordings, also from Memphis, two of Little Junior Parker's and one on which they shared the vocal honours. Bland's are nice early examples of his big, soaring blues shouting, with that unique smokey tone, and there are some fine sidemen, including the great Matt Murphy and the inimitable Ike Turner among others. Parker's cuts are none too shabby, either – another outstanding Memphis singer.

Postscript

The albums were almost unanimously well-received in the specialist press, although both John Broven in *BU* (4) and Bob Fisher in *Blues Link*(5) expressed reservations about the sustained exposure to Joe Hill Louis ('one for the dusty, musty collectors only', said Broven). There was also all-round approval of the generous number of tracks – up to sixteen on most albums, at a time when twelve or fourteen was more usual – and of the bargain price-tag (£1.50, rising to £2.15). However, almost from the start reviewers were also remarking on information received that the series was not selling as well as hoped. Later, John Broven would even use the term 'ill-starred' to describe the series (4).

Mike Leadbitter died in November 1974, and Simon Gee left Polydor that same year. There would be no more issues in the Juke Blues series. It seems entirely appropriate to dedicate this article to Leadbitter's memory, and to pay tribute to the incredible volume of work he left behind, as his sleeve notes for the Juke Blues series would prove to be some of the last of his work published during a too-short, but incredibly prolific, lifetime.

Notes:

- (1) visiting Bexhill a few years ago, I called in at the local museum, where they make much of the town's role in the history of motor-racing, but nothing at all of its role in blues research and publishing. Nor was there a blue plaque on 38a Sackville Rd, the address from which *Blues Unlimited* was published, for over a decade.
- (2) *Blues Unlimited* number 96, November 1972, page 29.
- (3) some of the albums – numbers 4 to 8, I think – also carried an additional Polydor sub-series designation: 'Carnival Gold Standard'.
- (4) *Blues Unlimited* number 108, June/July 1974, page 21.
- (5) *Blues Link* number 5, pages 43-44.



Courtesy Victor Pearlman and the B&R Archive.