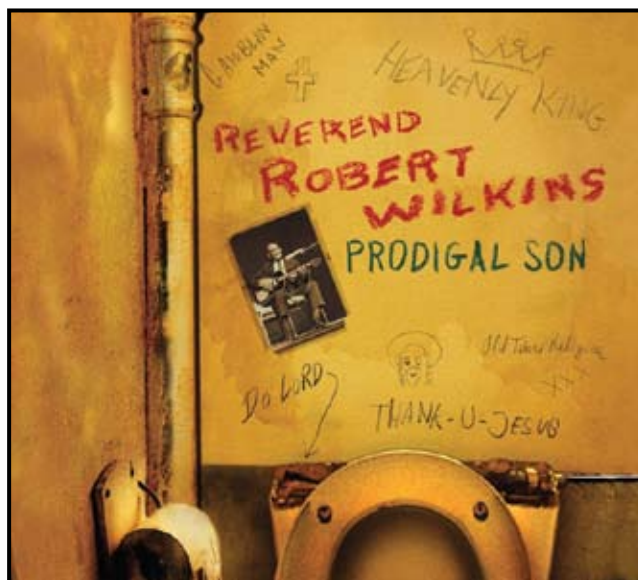


REVEREND ROBERT WILKINS: Prodigal Son

Bear Family BCD16629AH (56:17)

**Jesus Will Fix It Alright/ Thank You, Jesus/
Just A Closer Walk With Thee/ Do Lord
Remember Me/ Here Am I, Send Me/ The
Prodigal Son/ Jesus Said If You Go/ I'm
Going Home To My Heavenly King/ Old Time
Religion/ I Wish I Was In Heaven Sitting
Down/ It Just Suits Me/ The Gambling Man/
Biographical statement**

Most readers probably know in outline at least the story of how Robert Wilkins made some of the most highly regarded of all vintage country blues recordings in Memphis in 1928-1935, how in 1942 he promised that if his wife was spared he would never play blues again, and how he subsequently became a preacher, and was re-located in 1964 by the really quite simple expedient of writing to the two Robert Wilkins in the Memphis street directory. Those who don't will find the story told very readably in the essay which accompanies this issue by Dick Spottswood, who was the re-locator and the stimulus for the recordings heard here: "The man who answered was the one we sought."



Tracks one to eight come from 'Memphis Gospel Singer', originally Piedmont PLP13162, which Dick says sold only a few hundred copies, but there have been reissues in the meantime. The other four music tracks come from the same sessions at Falls Church, Virginia, on 13th and 16th February 1964, and have been previously issued by Biograph on both LP and CD. Their CD contains two further titles apparently from these sessions, which it is odd not to find on this lavish presentation. 'It Just Suits Me' looks as though it is previously unissued but the notes credit it to Biograph and the lyrics seem clearly to identify it as Biograph's 'Holy Ghost Train'. 'If this ain't the holy ghost, I don't know, and it just suits me.'

If Wilkins kept his promise not to sing the blues, he emphatically did continue to play them, most obviously and dramatically in the nearly ten-minute long 'The Prodigal Son', which is a (minimal) reinvention of his 1929 masterpiece, 'That's No Way To Get Along', and an utterly stunning performance withal. 'The Gambling Man' is also a blues for all practical purposes. 'I told my son don't leave home, now he's gone, left me alone, his mother heard the church bell toll, oh, how she did weep and moan.'

Wilkins remained in fine voice and the versions of familiar spiritual vehicles like 'Just A Closer Walk', 'Do Lord Remember Me' and the COGIC hymn, 'Jesus Said If You Go', are lively and involving. Elsewhere the interest is even more firmly centred on the guitar playing, which fortunately is up to the burden. It is not the case, as is claimed in Frank Corso's 'Notes On The Music', that the words 'Jesus Will Fix It Alright', repeated over and over in various tones, make up the entire text of the song, but there aren't many others. On the other hand, the assertion 'Oh, gamblers, alright, Jesus will fix it alright,' is probably a significant part of the religious point of the song. 'I Wish I Was In Heaven' offers some particularly enjoyable interaction between voice and slide guitar.

Two tracks are instrumentals whose religious purpose, if in reality there is one, can only be apparent to those already aware of it. 'Thank You, Jesus' is a party piece built out of swinging riffs tied together in interesting and varied ways. 'I'm Going Home' is based on 'Old Jim Canan's', which Wilkins had recorded in 1935 but which had not yet been issued in 1964. It is, as the notes say 'fast, driving and intense'.

As well as the essays already referred to, the lavish production reproduces a piece by Tony Glover from the 1st March 1969 issue of Rolling Stone on the afterlife of 'The Prodigal Son', following its appropriation by a British rock band whose American record label was disinclined to give credit or pay royalties to some superannuated black preacher. This was eventually sorted but the fall out has affected this issue in a rather distressing way, making this probably the only gospel album ever to be issued with a toilet on its cover. Evidently - I only know this because it is pictured inside as if once was not enough - this mimics the cover of the rock album in question. I hope this is in the expectation that Stones fans will rush to buy it rather than intended to suggest that Rev. Wilkins's music is important only because they recorded it, but it is difficult to be sure. The expectation is doomed to failure and the alternative explanation is disgraceful.

Given how important the music is, if you don't have it buy this CD anyway, but turn its face to the wall!