

LET'S BUZZ A LONG WHILE

By Neil Slaven



Slim Harpo, early 1960s. Courtesy Bear Family Records.

It's impossible not to be impressed. I was impressed when this box set arrived on my doorstep and was increasingly so as I turned the pages of the attractively-designed 104 page LP sized book that accompanies these five CDs. Producer Martin Hawkins' book, 'Slim Harpo – And The Baton Rouge Blues' will be published by the Louisiana State University Press next year and a significant amount of the text is reproduced in his essay's seventy pages. Bill Miller is recognised for his laborious research into the Excello tapes, assessing what's original and identifying the false claims of some of the albums released over the last fifty years – can it really be that long? I still remember buying Excello singles from Guy Stevens' stall at Cambridge Circus.

The first two of the five CDs contain all the singles that were released plus album tracks. The next two cover all the alternate takes plus unissued songs and the Imperial session, ending with 'There's Nothing As Sweet As Making Up', a demo of the song Slim was working on when he died. The fifth disc contains everything usable from a gig Harpo and his band played at the Sage Avenue Armory in Mobile, Alabama on 30th June, 1961. There are six new tracks but since two are the instrumental beginnings of the two sets and another is a version of 'Little Liza Jane' and a further two, 'Mathilda' and 'Talk To Me Baby', have unknown singers, it's no wondrous revelation. The sound isn't the greatest, either, not helped by the fact that Slim is singing through his harmonica mic. At least, that's my theory. The guitar solos are clean, though. Not that that worried the young white audience. As Cub Koda colourfully put it, 'the crowd is collectively drunker than a nine-eyed dog but Slim's got a request list in front of him that'd choke a horse'. Rest in peace, Cub.

Slim Harpo was Excello's best selling artist, a fact that takes a moment to digest, largely because in my case I have a particular relish for Lightnin' Slim and the other deep blues artists whose records adorn the label's earliest years, including the magical Baby Boy Warren-Sonny Boy Williamson JVB recordings.

Nevertheless (and here it comes again), the prolificness of the Harpo-Miller partnership cannot but impress, not just for the many sessions but also for the amount of songs written. And Miller did the same for his other artists. The tenacity of his drive to get the best from his artists is both admirable and hard to appreciate. He seems to have been tireless but one has to wonder at what he was seeking and how often he achieved it. What were his criteria? He'd experiment with different musicians and different arrangements. There are occasions here when an unused take is at least the equal or the superior of that released. His musicians were practical but not always the most gifted. In my own production days, after take ten or fifteen, I often went back to take two to find all the qualities the artist was still searching for.

It's salutary to learn that Miller didn't want to record Harmonica Slim, which was what James Moore was calling himself then. He was working with Lightnin' Slim and it was Slim who recommended his harmonica player to Miller. Hawkins quotes Miller's interview with Dave Booth: '(he) sounded horrible, you know...I said: "That won't fly." Lightnin' said, "Mr Miller, man,

I'm afraid James will quit me if you don't record him." So I said, "Tell him to try to get a good song."

So sure enough he did come back in two or three weeks. And he had this great song, 'I'm A King Bee'...but he sounded terrible on it.' He decided to change Moore's vocal: '(I said) sing through your nose'...It wasn't great singing but it was so unusual, unique. That's what sold the records he sold.' Apart from his aspirations, he was obviously a practical man.

Miller also told Moore to change his name. There was a Harmonica Slim on the West Coast, with records on Aladdin and Vita. Both Miller and Moore's wife Lovell claim to have come up with the new name that he would use for the rest of his career. The master of 'King Bee', with 'I Got Love If You Want It' as the B side, was sent to Excello in the first week of April 1957. Three months later, *Billboard* gave it a 'Spotlight' review: 'Harpo comes on strong with his Southern stylings. 'King Bee' gets a flavorsome chant with clearly defined intent, humor beat and market potential. Flip also gets a great performance by the artist with colorful primitive support. Fanciers of this delta style should go for either side.' Go they did but not enough to make 'King Bee' other than a local success with sporadic interest around the regions. The second single, 'Wondering And Worryin' and 'Strange Love', failed to achieve even that but Slim Harpo's reputation was growing with deejays and audiences.

While his popularity increased, his record releases were few and far between, two in 1957, two more in 1958. It wasn't until 1961 that success finally beat at his door. The reason was 'Rainin' In My Heart', a country-tinged ballad that even had a spoken section. Against the odds, it swept the country, spending many weeks on the R&B chart. Then, to mild astonishment, it appeared on the Hot Hundred, rising to number 34 and prompting an appearance on American Bandstand and Excello's release of an album. James Johnson, Slim's bass player, reckoned that his boss got lucky, 'because they had better musicians out there than we were. We (were) just an old blues band and I didn't never think something like that would go that far.'

And it didn't go any further for the next two years. There was a long-running argument between Slim and Miller over publishing royalties. Slim and his band worked hard on the circuit and he also had a haulage business that occupied his down time. Excello released no Harpo records and his recognition dissipated. There was enough unissued material to have done so but perhaps Miller dissuaded the label from using it. At the end of June 1961, Slim was inveigled to cut a session in New Orleans for Imperial, prompting threats from Miller and Excello. Three days later came the live recordings in Mobile, Alabama.

The parties made up in 1963 and renegotiated their deal. Miller withdrew his arbitrary writer's credit from Slim's compositions and future songs carried a 'J. Moore' credit. 'I Love The Life I'm Living', with the instrumental 'Buzzin' on the B side, was recorded in September 1963 and released a month later. 'My Little Queen Bee', also cut at this session, was released in April 1964 and 'Harpo's Blues' came out at the end of the year. None of these made much impression on his audience. Another session in June came up with 'Sittin' Here Wondering', released in October. But Slim's fortunes were about to change once again. In October 1965 'Baby Scratch My Back' was recorded, which Slim later said 'was my attempt at rock & roll'. Written as 'The Scratch', it featured a strong rhythm guitar and later some 'chicken scratch'.



Courtesy Bear Family Records.



Slim Harpo, early 1960s. Courtesy Bear Family Records.

James Johnson reckoned 'I started that mess' but James Brown's 'Papa's Got A Brand New Bag' had been released in June, with Jimmy Nolen's patented scratch technique all over it. So, what price honesty?

The record sold strongly from the very start and by March 1966 it was number 28 on the Hot Hundred and number one in the R&B chart, and remained on the charts into May. A follow up, 'Shake Your Hips' was favourably received but proved reluctant to chart. Nevertheless, it was the title track of an album issued in the autumn of the year. 'I'm Your Bread Maker, Baby' came out in November and *Billboard* gave it a Spotlight review, saying 'this wild, wailing number is a topper for 'Baby Scratch My Back' and should meet with fast sales impact'. But it didn't.

Slim's agreement with Jay Miller expired and Slim vowed never to work with him again. With Lovell's help, he signed a deal direct with Excello and the first session took place in Memphis around April 1967. First to be released was the two-part 'Tip On In', another effort in the 'Scratch My Back' mode. Great things were expected of it but once again it failed to live up to them. 'Te-Ni-Nee-Ni-Nu' went the same way, despite Excello's efforts to get it and themselves noticed. 'Mohair Sam', a hit for Charlie Rich in 1965, was advertised as a 'smash hit' but failed to fulfil its promise. The Excello A&R team, and probably Slim himself, decided a style change was necessary but the 'Tip On In'-flavoured 'That's Why I Love You' went the way of his other recent releases.

Slim's gigs had improved though, and in March 1969 he went from Bill Graham's Fillmore East, where he shared the bill with Ten Years After and John Mayall, to the Whisky-A-Go-Go and Thee Experience on Hollywood's Sunset Boulevard. While there, he recorded 'The Hippy Song', based on his observations of the long-hair-and-bearded denizens of the area. That and 'Dynamite' were album songs but 'Jody Man' was issued as his last single, one of four released during 1969. The five songs cut at his last session in Baton Rouge in December, including 'Boogie Chillun' and 'Rock Me Baby', ended up on his final album.

James Moore died of a heart attack on Saturday 31st January, 1970 at Baton Rouge General Hospital. Bandleader Buddy Stewart remembered: "He used to work on his trucks and, I think on a Thursday, he was pulling an engine out of a truck and it fell on his chest. He was fine when I played cards with him but he was short of breath. The next day he was gone... Slim had punctured his lung and that's how he died." He left a legacy of recordings that are gathered on this compilation.

It's probably impossible to quantify the influence Slim Harpo has had on the blues world, in America and England and anywhere in the world when a bunch of guys put a blues band together and just must have a Slim Harpo song in their repertoire. It began with the Rolling Stones and continued through the 1960s blues boom. His influence has inevitably diminished but is still present and it will no doubt be enhanced by this box set.

Heard in such a concentration there's a tendency to exaggerate the imperfections, in particular Jay Miller's insistence on rapid fade-outs after a couple of minutes. Harpo finishes his vocal, picks up his harmonica and Miller's dread hand commits the track to a silent abyss. While making my notes, I had to put an exclamation mark after the word 'ends', so rarely did it occur.

It's an imperfection but not a fatal one. It was just Jay Miller's way. For someone besotted with the early sessions (like me), it's inevitable that the accession of professionalism on both sides of the control room window reduces the manic enthusiasm that invests 'King Bee', 'Got Love If You Want It' and 'You'll Be Sorry One Day'. The thrashing snare sound on 'Buzz

Me Babe' and 'Bobby Sox Baby' is something I never managed to create during a decade of record production.

Add to that 'Scratch My Back', 'Shake Your Hips' and 'Tip On In' and I'm still gurgling with pleasure. Despite its limitations, the live set has an attraction of its own. The alternate recordings are interesting but given Jay Miller's exacting standards, most are little different from the issued versions.

After Ernie Young sold Excello, the new management tried to bring Slim into a wider musical environment and it was something Slim himself wanted. Perhaps he fancied himself as a soul singer. It was the coming thing. What he and they wanted to do then happened a couple of decades later and dealt a death blow to the blues as a marketable musical genre.

Don't argue, it happened. Lucky then that Slim Harpo's gift was never compromised by the need to entertain audiences who felt nothing for the blues. His music remains what it was, whether rampaging or beguiling. Bear Family's presentation adds an authority to the proceedings, making it a very desirable tribute to a unique talent.

Neil Slaven was reviewing SLIM HARPO 'Buzzin' The Blues', a five-CD box set (LP sized, 142 tracks) with 104 page hardcover book. Total playing time 410 minutes – released on Bear Family BCD 17339 EK.

TRACK LISTING

CD One: I'm A King Bee/ I Got Love If You Want It/ Wondering And Worryin'/ Strange Love/ You'll Be Sorry One Day/ One More Day/ Buzz Me Babe/ Late Last Night/ What A Dream/ Blues Hangover/ Don't Start Cryin' Now/ Rainin' In My Heart/ Snoopin' Around (instrumental)/ Bobby Sox Baby/ Dream Girl/ My Home Is A Prison/ Moody Blues (instrumental)/ I Love The Life I'm Living/ Buzzin' (instrumental)/ My Little Queen Bee (Got A Brand New King)/ I Need Money (Keep Your Alibis)/ We're Two Of A Kind/ Still Rainin' In My Heart/ What's Goin' On Baby/ Sittin' Here Wondering/ Harpo's Blues/ Please Don't Turn Me Down/ Baby Scratch My Back/ I'm Gonna Miss You (Like The Devil)/ Shake Your Hips/ Midnight Blues/ I'm Your Breadmaker/ Baby/ Loving You (The Way I Do)

CD Two: Tip On In (Part 1)/ Tip On In (Part 2)/ I'm Gonna Keep What I've Got/ I've Got To Be With You Tonight/ Te-Ni-Nee-Ni-Nu/ Mailbox Blues/ Mohair Sam/ I Just Can't Leave You/ That's Why I Love You/ Just For You/ Folsom Prison Blues/ Mutual Friend/ I've Got My Finger On Your Trigger/ The Price Is Too High/ My Baby She's Got It/ I'm So Sorry/ I've Been A Good Thing For You/ Hey Little Lee/ Jody Man/ Rainin' In My Heart (overdubbed)/ Stick Your Chest Out Baby/ The Music's Hot/ You Can't Make It/ The Hippy Song/ Dynamite/ Boogie Chillun/ Rock Me Baby/ Baby Please Come Home

CD Three: One Of These Days/ That Ain't Your Business/ I'm A King Bee (alt)/ This Ain't No Place For Me/ I Got Love If You Want It (alt)/ Things Gonna Change/ Wondering And Worryin' (alt -1)/ Strange Love (alt -1)/ Wondering And Worryin' (alt -2)/ One More Day (alt -1)/ Late Last Night (alt -1)/ Cigarettes/ One More Day (alt -2)/ Bobby Sox Baby (alt)/ Buzz Me Babe (alt)/ Late Last Night (alt -2)/ That Ain't Your Business/ Things Gonna Change/ Talking Blues (aka Blues Hangover)/ What's Goin' On/ You Ain't Never Had To Cry (aka Don't Start Cryin' Now)/ That's Alright (You'll Be Sorry One Day)/ That's Alright (alt)/ Yeah Yeah Baby/ Dream Girl (alt)/ Don't Start Cryin' Now (alt)/ Blues Hangover (alt)

CD Four: Moody Blues (instrumental) (alt)/ Rainin' In My Heart (alt -1)/ Rainin' In My Heart (alt -2)/ Wild About My Baby/ That's Alright Baby (Don't Start Cryin' Now)/ Lover's Confession/ Something Inside Me/ Still Rainin' In My Heart/ A Man Is Crying/ Tonite I'm Lonely/ I Love The Life I'm Living (alt -1)/ Buzzin' (instrumental) (alt)/ I Love The Life I'm Living (alt -2)/ My Little Queen Bee (alt)/ Little Sally Walker/ Boogie Chillun/ Blueberry Hill/ I'm Waiting On You Baby -1/ We're Two Of A Kind (alt)/ I'm Waiting On You Baby -2/ You'll Never Find A Love (As True As Mine)/ I Don't Want No One (To Take You Away From Me) -1/ Baby Scratch My Back (The Scratch) (alt)/ I Don't Want No One (To Take You Away From Me) -2/ Baby You Got What I Want/ Your Love For Me Is Gone/ I Gotta Stop Loving You/ Stop Working Blues/ I Just Can't Leave You/ There's Nothing As Sweet As Making Up

CD Five: Star Time (Set 1: Theme and Introduction)/ Hold Me Tenderly (live)/ Little Liza Jane (live Set 1)/ I'm A King Bee (live Set 1)/ Buzzin' (live)/ I Got Love If You Want It (live Set 1)/ You Know I Love You (live)/ Lottie Mo (live)/ Everybody Needs Somebody (live)/ Big Boss Man (live)/ I'll Take Care Of You (live)/ Boogie Chillun (live)/ Moody Blues (live instrumental)/ Sugar Coated Love (live)/ Last Night (live)/ Matilda (live with unknown vocalist)/ Talk To Me Baby (live with unknown vocalist)/ Star Time (Set 2: Theme and Introduction)/ I'm A King Bee (live Set 2)/ I Don't Play (live)/ I Got Love If You Want It (live Set 2)/ Little Liza Jane (live Set 2)/ When The Saints Go Marchin' In (live)/ Rainin' In My Heart (live)