

Tampa Red: Time To Reassess A Legacy?

By John Broven

The recent Tampa Red double CD, 'Dynamite! The Unsung King Of The Blues' on Ace featuring Little Johnnie Jones and Big Maceo Merriweather, has had a long journey to the marketplace as described by John Broven, the CD's compiler, who also argues that Tampa's somewhat checkered legacy should be revised.



Tampa Red, RCA promotional photo. Courtesy Gilles Pétard.

Back in the 1940s, Tampa Red's impact as a singer, songwriter and guitarist was enormous on a rising group of young artists. Among them was Chuck Berry, who wrote in his autobiography: "When I began to listen to boogie woogie and swing, my desire to hear anything without a beat diminished. I became a fan of Tampa Red, Big Maceo, Lonnie Johnson, Arthur Crudup, Muddy Waters".

For years I'd been nagging Rob Santos, vice president A&R at Sony Music Entertainment in New York, to release a Tampa Red compilation featuring the astonishing blues piano of Little Johnnie (also known as Johnny) Jones and, before him, Big Maceo. I'd known Santos since the mid-1990s when he was with AVI Records in Los Angeles and I was a consultant with Ace Records in London supervising the reissue of the great Excello-Nashboro catalogue, then owned by AVI.

Why was I keen to put another Tampa Red compilation on the market? There had already been several reissues on vinyl and CD, as detailed by Ray Templeton in his *Blues & Rhythm* overview (*B&R* 285). Yet whenever RCA, owned by BMG before Sony, launched a Tampa Red reissue series it started, logically, at the beginning, and petered out by the 1940s. As a result very few of the 1949-1953 recordings, in particular, have seen official release from master tapes and acetates. Readers of long memory will recall the brilliant U.K. RCA EP in 1965 compiled by Mike Vernon, then running *R&B Monthly* and later Blue Horizon Records, also the RCA 'Guitar Wizard' double LP issued in 1975, both with four Jones-accompanied tracks, but that was about it. All right, there are the unauthorised 'complete' fifteen-volume Document CDs, admittedly good for reference purposes but full of 'snap, crackle and pop' from direct-transfer disc dubs. Tampa Red's legacy deserved better.

Sony and Ace Projects

In view of my relentless interest, Santos approached me almost two years ago to compile a sixty-track Tampa Red compilation from Bluebird and RCA Victor. There was one personal downside: Sony wanted a

download release only. As a longtime vinyl and CD collector, that wasn't much use to me or, I suspect, most of my generation.

Still, with *Juke Blues* friends, Richard Tapp and Tony Collins, I had enormous enjoyment arriving at a 'Best 60' consensus from 1940 onward using a three-star track-by-track system. Tapp and I favoured the later sides with Johnnie Jones, whereas Collins plumped for the earlier recordings with Big Maceo. Our deliberations were helped by the availability of the original session sheets that are still housed in the Sony archives. The overall quality of the music was astonishing, which led to the question: Why isn't Tampa Red better respected as a pioneering bluesman by the cognoscenti?

At this point Santos opened the door for a fifty track double CD on Ace. To the credit of my former colleagues at Steele Road, led by managing director Roger Armstrong, the idea was fully embraced and so in early March this year a deal was concluded. Meanwhile I made several trips to the Battery Studios on 43rd Street where Sony in New York conducts its mastering. First the masters had to be ordered from the archives. Then box after box of tapes and stamper acetates had to be disseminated and transferred digitally by engineer Matt Cavaluzzo. Essentially the master tapes related to the years 1950-1953, with stamper acetates covering the preceding period. Interestingly, this demarcation more or less coincided with RCA's launch of the 45 rpm single. Indeed, as from 1st May 1949, Tampa Red's records were released in both 45 and 78 formats.

The hunt was on for the unissued sides. Quickly we found 'I Got My Habits On' and 'Mary Lou Blues' with Big Maceo (1942), and 'If I Don't Find Another True Love' (1953) with Big Walter Horton on harmonica but disappointingly there was no sign of 'We Don't Get Along No More' with Sonny Boy Williamson II's harmonica.

On the other hand there was the unexpected bonus of several quality alternate takes on master tape, including an unissued 'Evalena', with a distinct 'Walking By Myself' feel three years ahead of the Jimmy Rogers classic. Out of interest, Ace consultant Peter Gibbon discovered that 'Evalena' coupled with 'Ramblers Blues', both on the RCA U.K. EP, were earmarked for a 1954 release on Groove, the RCA subsidiary, but the single was withdrawn prior to release.

Once the selected Sony tracks were transferred to computer file, I attended the mastering sessions with engineer Maria Triana, who did an excellent job with her equalising and 'declicking' work to maximise the audio for listening pleasure. Although from a younger generation, she clearly enjoyed the music and made the point that these recordings 'could never be made by today's engineers' with today's equipment, noting the room sound, microphone placement and the recording equipment itself - at RCA Victor's Chicago 'A' & 'C' studios at 445 N. Lake Shore Drive.

Tampa Red's twenty-year career with Bluebird and then RCA Victor stretched from 1934 through 1953, indicating that he sold well on a regular basis, particularly to the jukebox market. In his time he had four *Billboard* R&B hits, more than any other label mate managed by Lester Melrose except Big Boy Crudup (with six), as follows:

1942 No. 4 'Let Me Play With Your Poodle' (Bluebird)

1945 No. 5 'Detroit Blues' (Bluebird)

1949 No. 9 'When Things Go Wrong With You' (RCA Victor)

1951 No. 7 'Pretty Baby Blues' (RCA Victor)

I am sure I am not alone amongst *B&R* readers in not being aware that 'Pretty Baby Blues' saw U.K. export release on HMV in 1952. As well, '1950 Blues' was a regional breakout in San Francisco and Detroit.

Bluebird Beat and the Kazoo

So why is Tampa Red's legacy misunderstood? There's little doubt his reputation through the years has been affected by two perceived negatives: the so-called 'Bluebird Beat' and his use of the kazoo.

The Bluebird Beat was a term fashioned by Sam Charters in his influential 'Country Blues' in 1959. It implied a conveyor belt-type approach to recording the blues or, as Charters said, it was "a stereotyped product". Mike Rowe was more waspish in 'Chicago Breakdown' when he described it as the 'Melrose Mess' - after Lester Melrose, manager and publisher of not only Tampa but Big Bill Broonzy, Sonny Boy Williamson I, Washboard Sam and other Bluebird-RCA Victor artists.

As fellow Brit expat Bill Greensmith told me recently, some of us fell into the trap of writing off much of the material because of this apparent stigma. We should have known better, bearing in mind many of us were familiar with the excellent French RCA ten inch LPs from the early 1960s by Arthur 'Big Boy' Crudup, Sonny Boy I, Jazz Gillum, Washboard Sam and Tommy McClennan. Typically, there was no Tampa Red LP in the series.

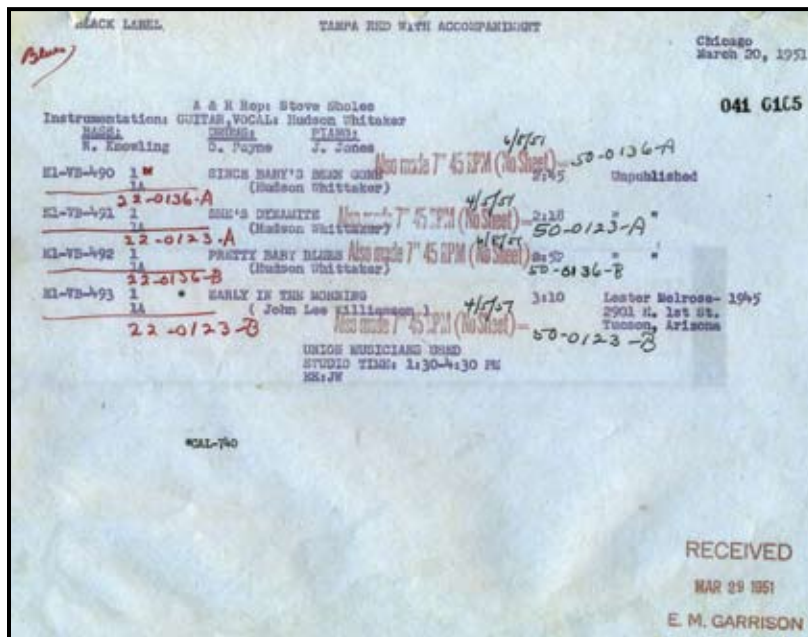
Tampa's use of the kazoo, hardly the sexiest of instruments, has been a big deterrent to his wider acceptance. Happily, the kazoo was supplanted in later sessions by the tenor sax of Bill Casimir, and the harmonica of Sonny Boy II and Big Walter.

By then Melrose had stopped handling the recordings, so an updated sound can be attributed to A&R men Steve Sholes (later connected with Elvis Presley), Joe Thomas and Danny Kessler. The irony is that Tampa Red was not known as the 'Guitar Wizard' for nothing. His slide work, especially, influenced upcoming bluesmen Elmore James, Muddy Waters and Robert Nighthawk.

Still, Tampa earns favourable references in the blues biographies on Willie Dixon, Earl Hooker, John Lee Hooker, Howlin' Wolf, Elmore James, B.B. King, Little Walter, Muddy Waters, and Jimmy Rogers. In 'I Am the Blues', with Don Snowden, Dixon makes reference to Tampa's house being a focal point of the 1940s Chicago blues scene: "I used to go down to Tampa Red's house on 35th and State. ... Tampa Red's house was a madhouse with old-time musicians. Lester Melrose would be drinking all the time and Tampa Red's wife would be cooking chicken and we'd be having a ball".

Plundered Songs

Indicative of Tampa Red's original popularity, quite a few of his songs have been plundered by other artists. There's nothing wrong with that except Tampa's writer credits have been frequently expunged. B.B. King, ever inquisitive as a WDIA disc jockey at the turn of 1950 was a major raider of the Tampa songbook, notably with 'She's Dynamite' (with the wonderful call-and-response lines, omitted by B.B.: "She's dynamite, like Betty Gable (sic)/She's dynamite, she's willing and able); 'Crying Won't Help You' and 'Green And Lucky Blues'; the saga of 'Sweet Little Angel' is a detective story in itself. Twice, in 1957 and 1963, Elmore James dipped into Tampa's 'It Hurts Me Too' (from 1940) and re-recorded as 'When Things Go Wrong With You' (1949), itself based on the melody of 'Sitting On Top Of The World'. Other songs purloined from Tampa include 'I Ain't Fur It' (Boogie Bill Webb), 'Let Me Play With Your Poodle' (Lightnin' Hopkins) and 'Don't You Lie To Me' (Fats Domino, Chuck Berry). These are just a few examples, leading one to wonder why Tampa Red's music publishers haven't taken more strenuous steps to protect his now-valuable copyrights.



RCA Victor session file, 20th March, 1951. Courtesy Sony Music Archives.

The Sessions

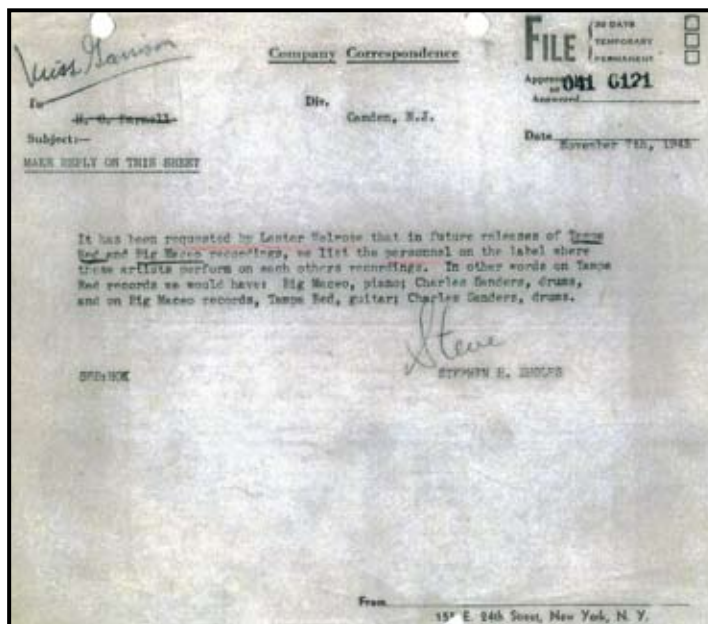
As for Tampa Red's music, there is a *joie-de-vivre* about the sessions, which is a tribute to his artistry and leadership. The Ace compilation is purposely compiled in reverse chronological order, so as to emphasise the later recordings that have not been reissued from master tape and acetate. A real bonus is that there are no less than 31 sequential tracks featuring Little Johnnie Jones' wondrous blues 'n' boogie piano, propelled by Ransom Knowling's upright bass (surely an influence on Willie Dixon's driving bass?) and Odie Payne's relentless drum work. As well, Jones takes an uncredited vocal on a terrific rendition of Sonny Boy I's 'Early In The Morning'. Then, surprise, there are five cuts with a sax section, including the jitterbugging 'Keep Jumping' and a doomy 'Roamin' And Ramblin', which has the urban blue sound later favoured by Memphis Slim and Eddie Boyd. The final fourteen tracks feature the incomparable Tampa Red-Big Maceo partnership, climaxed by Maceo's 1946 release, the swinging 'Texas Stomp' (check out the ringing pre-Chuck Berry lick around 1:25).

Regardless of the great, varied music and the impeccable sound, the 28 page booklet accompanying the Ace double CD is worth the price of admission alone. The lead note is written by Jim O'Neal, who after founding *Living Blues* magazine with then wife Amy van Singel, befriended Tampa with Amy in his lonely twilight years. As a result Jim is able to give a unique insight into the man and his music. For instance, he states perceptively that 'Tampa's recordings on this Ace set, from 1941 to 1953, reflect the many transitions that were in play during and after World War II, in the blues, in the record business and in American society.

Tampa Red navigated the new streams with some success, but like others, including Melrose, he was caught up in the ambiguities of the old and the new. He had already begun plugging his guitar into an amplifier as early as his Bluebird session of December 1938 but his approach was never as defined by electricity as those of postwar guitar icons T-Bone Walker, B.B. King, Muddy Waters or Elmore James'.

The packed booklet includes an introduction by this scribe; evocative photographs and rare illustrations; and thanks to the helpfulness of several established blues record collectors, every record label is scanned – talk about the spirit of *Blues Unlimited*. The track discography is compiled from the Bluebird-RCA Victor session files and shows that Tampa's accompanists are almost a who's who of Chicago blues, also including pianists Bob Call and John Davis, super guitarist Willie Lacey, drummer Judge Riley and saxophonist Sax Mallard.

It is interesting to place Tampa Red's last RCA Victor sessions in September and December 1953 within a contemporary timeframe. Little Walter had come off a massive eight week, number one R&B hit with 'Juke' (Checker) in autumn 1952, leading to a big demand for amplified harmonica players on record, the probable reason why Sonny Boy Williamson II and Big Walter Horton were called upon by Tampa. At the time, Sonny Boy was signed to Trumpet, and Big Walter had already cut for Modern-RPM and Sun. Fascinatingly, Tampa's sidemen, Johnnie Jones and drummer Odie Payne, were still recording together but as the backbone of Elmore James' Broomdusters. Meanwhile, in January 1953, Tampa had moonlighted



Steve Sholes memo, 7th November, 1945. Courtesy Sony Music Archives

BLUEBIRD RECORDS	
LETTER 233 BY BILL ALBANI - Tampa Red	22-0123-3
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-4
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-5
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-6
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-7
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-8
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-9
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-10
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-11
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-12
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-13
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-14
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-15
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-16
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-17
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-18
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-19
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-20
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-21
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-22
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-23
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-24
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THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-26
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THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-31
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THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-35
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-36
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-37
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-38
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-39
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-40
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-41
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-42
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-43
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-44
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-45
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-46
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-47
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-48
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-49
THE BLUEBIRD SINGERS - Tampa Red	22-0123-50

Bluebird catalogue



RCA cover

Label shots courtesy of John Broven Collection, Library of Congress; Victor Pearlín and Richard Tapp. RCA-Bluebird catalogue courtesy John Broven.
 Note: No credit to Little Johnnie Jones, vocal, on 'Early In The Morning'.

for a weird one-off session as Jimmy Eager for Art Sheridan's Sabre label. Then just over a year later, Muddy Waters would score big with 'I'm Your Hootchie Cooche (sic) Man' (Chess) to change the blues landscape forever. Tampa Red, who had contributed so much to the Chicago scene and beyond was suddenly yesterday's man.

Endorsements

B&R's Chris Bentley has been a cheerleader of the Ace project from the get-go. 'It's a quite commonly held belief amongst devotees of the blues that the major labels - Columbia, Decca and RCA - did little or nothing to record the golden age of the Chicago Blues in the late 1940s and the first part of the 1950s', he said. 'That this belief is erroneous in the case of RCA is amply demonstrated by the release of this wonderful new double CD from Ace Records. Why is this release so important? Well, it is the first time that we have been able to hear Tampa's later Bluebird and RCA Victor records that are mastered directly from the original metalwork, acetates and tapes in pristine sound. We can now appreciate not only the great songs that Tampa wrote and later artists such as Elmore James and Junior Wells appropriated, but also the influence that Tampa's tightly knit small group blues had on the emerging Chicago blues sound; Tampa was recording with piano, stand-up bass and drums a good two years before Muddy persuaded the Chess brothers that this format was what the record-buying public of the day wanted to hear.

If you are of the "why didn't Tampa stick his kazoo up his wazoo?" brigade, then I hasten to reassure you that more than sixty percent of the fifty tracks contain no trace of the supposed dreaded instrument. Oh yes, I forgot to mention that there are four previously unissued sides, along with an extended alternative take of an issued side ('Got A Mind To Leave This Town'). Tampa's accompanists, Little Johnnie Jones, Walter Horton and Sonny Boy II, to name but a few, need no recommendation from me. And last but by no means least, buying this CD will help Ace to persuade Sony, the license-holder for RCA recordings, to agree other releases of RCA-Bluebird artists, such as Sonny Boy I, Jazz Gillum, Big Maceo, the criminally underrated Walter Davis and New York-based artists such as Square Walton, Sonny Terry, Melvin Smith and the like. If that doesn't persuade you to start this series off with a bang, nothing will!

If further testimony is needed, look no further than Steve Franz's 'The Amazing Secret History of Elmore James', where Muddy Waters is quoted as saying to the O'Neals: "I liked the Tampa style. Tampa made some of the best records that I can even think of". You couldn't wish for a higher recommendation, could you? It is surely time to reassess Tampa Red's legacy.

Tampa Red's 'Dynamite! The Unsung King Of The Blues' is now available on Ace CDTOP2 1440.

This week's **RCA VICTOR** release!

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> POPULAR	<input type="checkbox"/> Ready, Set, Go!	COUNT BASIE	RCA Victor 30-3023
	<input type="checkbox"/> Seventh Avenue Express	TEX BENDIE	RCA Victor 30-3028
	<input type="checkbox"/> A Woman Always Understands At The Flying "W"	TONY MARTIN	RCA Victor 30-3028
	<input type="checkbox"/> This Is The Moment! Ah, But It Happens	VAUGHN MONROE	RCA Victor 30-3000
	<input type="checkbox"/> If I Could Be The Sweetheart of a Girl Like You	FREDDY MARTIN*	RCA Victor 30-3004
	<input type="checkbox"/> It's My Lazy Day		
	<input type="checkbox"/> Mama's Gone, Good Bye		
	<input type="checkbox"/> Early in the Morning		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> FOLK	<input type="checkbox"/> I'm Gonna Get Tight	CHET ATHENS	RCA Victor 30-3004
	<input type="checkbox"/> Dizzy Strings	ZEKE MANNERS	RCA Victor 30-3003
	<input type="checkbox"/> Easy Payment Blues		
	<input type="checkbox"/> I'm a Tired Cowboy		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> RHYTHM & BLUES	<input type="checkbox"/> I Can't Tell A Lie to Myself	BELTA RHYTHM BOYS	RCA Victor 30-3007
	<input type="checkbox"/> My Blue Heaven	TAMPA RED	RCA Victor 30-3008
	<input type="checkbox"/> I Know My Baby Loves Me		
	<input type="checkbox"/> Roaming and Rambling		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SPIRITUAL	<input type="checkbox"/> Lead Me to the Rock	HEAVENLY GOSPEL SINGERS*	RCA Victor 30-3009
	<input type="checkbox"/> Heavenly Gospel Train		

Billboard advertisement, 31st July 1948. Note the use of 'Rhythm & Blues' - a year before the term was officially adopted. Courtesy Red Kelly.