E
tlier this year, in B&R 340, I wrote a preview of this box set which was due to go into production, featuring four CDs worth of material from the vaults of Chicago record label owner Cadillac Baby, along with what to expect in the contents of the accompanying book. Michael Frank, the owner of Earwig Records, had sent details of the 100 tracks and the story behind his acquisition of the Cadillac Baby archive and the trials and tribulations of putting the whole thing together. Well, now it's here and a handsome job it is too!

Like many readers I first became aware of Cadillac Baby (Narvel Eatmon) when in 1978 Red Lightnin' released three volumes of recordings under the title of Meat And Gravy From Cadillac Baby, leased from Eatmon and containing issued and unissued sides from Bea & Baby and his other labels. These albums had an attractive and iconic sleeve design and were also pressed on coloured vinyl for good measure.

Tracks from the Red Lightnin' albums later appeared on a single CD on Blue Boar in 1998; on three CDs issued by Austria's Wolf Records around the same time and an excellent double CD issued in 2003 by Castle. B&R's Ray Tempion covered the Red Lightnin' releases in his Ray's Rudiments' series in B&R 317.

And now we have this box set covering Eatmon's entire catalogue, including blues, r&b, vocal groups and gospel with some fantastic records (and some dubious sides) from the Bea & Baby, Miss, Keyhole and Ronald labels, including originally unissued tracks issued on Red Lightnin', new unissued material, plus interviews with the man himself from Steve Cushings's 'Blues Before Sunrise' radio show broadcast in 1983 and with Jim O'Neal in 1971.

Narvel Eaton (aka Cadillac Baby – because he drove a brand-new Caddy and was described by local kids as 'the man from God') was born in Mississippi between 1910 to 1914, moved to Chicago between 1935 or 1939, dependent on which date he used himself and worked as a meat packer and in construction before a stint in the army.

Ever the entrepreneur he wanted to get into the music business but could not afford a tavern license, so he opened an Amvets club (a charitable organisation which helps U.S. war veterans) and hired Little Mack Simmons to provide entertainment. He also opened a meat and grocery store and started the Bea & Baby record label (according to Cadillac - 'around 1955') with 500 pressings of Eddie Boyd's 'I'm Commin' Home (sic)''Thank You Baby'. The Boyd track on Bea & Baby 101 was actually cut in 1956 with Robert Lockwood, Bob Carter on bass, Sonny Allen on drums and Robert Wilson on tenor sax.

Also, among his business interests were his record retail and wholesale shops and a number of clubs. His labels eventually issued sides by Chicago blues stalwarts including Homesick James, Hound Dog Taylor, Lee Jackson, Little Mack Simmons, Sunnyland Slim, Andrew McManus and L.C. McKinley.

Michael Frank says he first came across Cadillac Baby in 1971 when he read Jim O'Neal's ground-breaking interview in Living Blues (re-published in full in the box set book). He finally met the man himself in 1974 when he drove Peter Sheriser to meet with Cadillac Baby. Peter was in Chicago to do the deal for his Red Lightnin' releases.

Fourteen years later (Michael was by then running Earwig Records, and managing Honeyboy Edwards and Jim Brewer) he met Cadillac Baby again. Cadillac was in failing health and had moved away from the music industry – he was selling hubcaps and tyres and the occasional 45 release. Michael tells the full story of his long relationship and friendship with Cadillac and eventual ownership of the entire catalogue purchased after his death from Mrs. Eatmon along with all the relevant paperwork here so I won't repeat it but is a great story – all of which eventually led to the production of this superb box set. It took some time and effort but Michael finally got there.

It is impossible to comment on all the tracks here so here is a disc by disc overview.

"Blues Is My Soul" – Cadillac Baby

Tony Burke checks out Earwig's new box set 'Cadillac Baby's Bea & Baby Records – The Definitive Collection'
Disc One has 25 tracks and kicks off with Cadillac ‘welcoming’ patrons to his Show Lounge. This is the introduction for the album ‘Colossal Blues Volume One’ consisting of ‘live’ tracks (Cadillac says it's 1958). In fact, the studio tracks were cut at a variety of dates and the album has a badly dubbed audience – but the welcome is something else and completely over the top.

Cadillac name checks local radio disc jockeys, boxer Sugar Ray Robinson, and he asks for the audience to stand for B.B. King (‘the greatest man in the world’). Also ‘present’ are Sonny Boy Williamson, Willie Mabon, Willie Dixon, Magic Sam and a host of artists who had recorded for his labels! Nice try but don’t take it seriously.

The first Cadillac Baby releases from 1959 and 1960 include more Eddie Boyd sides from 1959, plus Eddie with vocal group overdubs by The Day Lighters released on Keyhole; L.C. McKinley’s fine rocker ‘Nit Wit’/’Sharpest Man in Town’; a rocking novelty from The Day Lighters on ‘Mad House’; the classic blues track ‘Trying To Make A Living’ by Bobby Saxton with Earl Hooker on guitar from 1960 and Earl’s fine instrumental ‘Dynamite’ (the flip of the Bobby Saxton 45), Little Mac (Simmons) is great on ‘Times Getting Tougher Than Tough’ as is Detroit Junior on ‘Money Tree’.

There is more Cadillac interview material, two sides by Faith Taylor (not quite a teen – Faith was aged eleven) supported by the Sweet Teens which is pure pop and Thurmond Valentine (T. Valentine) who is off the planet on two sides from 1960. In 1985 he recorded the totally inappropriate ‘Hello Lucille Are You A Lesbian’ on the Val label. Disc two has more fine blues sides from 1960 through to 1964 with Hound Dog Taylor’s Key 112 release (the only release on Key and also issued on Mariette); more from Little Mack Simmons (as St. Louis Mac and Little Mac) – including the bizarre ‘Let Hootenanny Blues (Out Of Jail)’ on Bea & Baby; Sunnyland Slim from Miss, the ‘Colossal Blues’ album and sides originally released by Red Lightnin’; Eddie Boyd and Lee Jackson from Keyhole and two fine James Cotton sides from 1963 originally unissued but released on the Red Lightnin’ vinyl series.

Singing Sam (Sam Chatmon) was the bass playing son of the Mississippi Sheiks’ Sam Chatmon. Sam cut the instrumentals ‘Sampson’ and ‘Calvins (sic) Reserve’ (after tenor saxman John Calvin) and the fine vocal blues ‘My Story’ on Miss with some fine guitar from Lacy Gibson. He also bears the responsibility for introducing Cadillac Baby to crooner Phil Sampson who badly warbles his way through the ballad ‘It’s So Hard’. Ronald Records was a

Cadillac Baby’s club ads from the Chicago Defender, July 18th 1959 (left) and September 15th 1959.


In all a wonderful box set covering the wider activities of one of the B&R readers I suspect.

The Cadillac Baby's Bea & Baby Records: The Definitive Collection Earwax CD 4975 Four CDs: (73:59), (74:44), (72:11), (71:12)


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