

A Load Of Bauls

Big Joe Williams' St Louis Acetates

By Mike Rowe



Sam Fowler. Courtesy Blues Unlimited.

For a city with such a huge blues history, St. Louis is thinly represented in post-war years, with only the peripatetic Big Joe Williams making any serious efforts to redress the situation. The absence of any meaningful recording industry in the city (Bobbin Records didn't enter the lists until late 1958) is the obvious reason for this dearth, and while this was the same in the 1920s and 1930s, field trips, and more importantly, agents like record shop owners Jesse Johnson and Sam Wolff, and artists like Roosevelt Sykes, who also acted as agents for the major labels, lifted the lid on the city's thriving blues activity. But by the 1950s the Chicago labels had enough local talent besieging their doors without venturing out of the city.

Post-war, Sykes continued finding recording opportunities – the Bullet sessions involved St. Louis Jimmy (probably a Chicago resident by then anyway), Sykes (under his own name and, curiously, as Joe Evans), Walter Davis with Henry Townsend and Henry Brown among accompanists, but these had all recorded pre-War; significantly there were no sessions for new St. Louis artists.

As one of them, James Deshay, said: "St. Louis is a pretty bad place to try to get ahead in recording." If Monroe Passis's Random label had lasted more than a couple of issues it might have been different or if the Biharis had shown more interest in the city on their sweeps South but as it was the St. Louis downhome blues was to remain a well-kept secret.

Big Joe Williams who was perfectly capable of finding his own opportunities also had a record on Bullet but it was his wonderful Vee-Jay session in 1956 (see Wienerworld WNRCD 5100, 'Down Home Blues Chicago Fine Boogie' and 5106 Down Home Blues Chicago 2 Sweet Home Chicago') that introduced harmonica player Sam Fowler as the lone representative of St. Louis' new post-war blues.

But who else was there? Well once again it was Big Joe who was the link. In 1951 and 1952 Big Joe and associates Harp Blowing Sam (Fowler), Tree Top Slim and Lee Willmans made some acetates at Baul Recording Studios (actually a radio repair shop at 4376 St Louis Avenue) who had a disc cutting machine for demo purposes. Each had one two-sided acetate (to Big Joe's three) and what resulted were twelve sides of the rawest, most exciting solo and small group post-war Blues.

There was a ghost at this musical feast though – Tree Top Slim and harp blowing Sam's sides were all John Lee 'Sonny Boy' Williamson songs. By contrast Lee Willmans' seem to be original.

Notwithstanding the obscurity of all the artists (excepting Big Joe of course), and the ad-hoc nature of the sessions, they sound as if they'd played together all their lives, such is the interplay between Joe and the other musicians.

The down side and it is a real downer is the condition of the acetates which makes listening and discography very difficult. Joe would keep them in the trunk of his car for demos and it was on the strength of these that he got the Trumpet session but unfortunately no such luck for Tree Top Slim or Harp Blowing Sam. Because Joe played on all the acetates it was assumed, rashly, that the same artists were involved in communal sessions although the three different dates should have suggested caution. Big Joe and Tree Top Slim recorded on 10th September 1951, Harp Blowing Sam on 11th March 1952, and 'Lee Willmans' on an unknown date. This latter may be a mis-spelling for Lee Williams, i.e. Big Joe Williams, who is present BUT the singer is unknown. Finally on 5th April 1952 Big Joe recorded again – this time with a fine, unknown piano player.

The 'Blues Discography' 3rd Edition follows the suggestion of the Oldie Blues 2804 album ('Malvina My Sweet Woman'), that J.D. Short was also involved in the 1951 session.

What then do we know? My interview with Sam Fowler (Blues Unlimited 129) reported that Sam recognised his playing on only the sides credited to him. The harmonica player on the Tree Top Slim sides he identified as 'Trigger' who was a contemporary and associate of DC, a guitarist, and Hollinshead another guitarist. James Deshay said: "Hollinshead he's from a town here in Missouri....he had a brother – harp blower but he's passed...well that was Trigger – so he was playing harp with us" (Blues Unlimited 143).

Sam did not know Tree Top Slim but the piano player he suggested, tentatively, might be Piano James (Crutchfield).

In 1957 John Bentley recorded a few sides by Crutchfield for his Euphonic label – his only known recording. Recently made available on Delmark 'Biddle Street Barrelhousin' (DE739) there seems to be no connection with the pianist on the acetates.

Henry Townsend said Tree Top Slim's real name was Willie Ealy (the name on the Baul acetate) and he was assumed to be the piano player – despite the slight difficulty that there was no piano audible on the Tree Top Slim sides! Previously I had written about the Big Joe coupling with a pianist. "Ealy was a pianist but given the different recording date and probable absence of piano on his own vocal sides there isn't anything to support his presence on 'New Car'/'Taylor Made'. Big Joe calls out to the pianist and while it may be 'Ealy' it sounds more like 'Henry' (Blues Unlimited 129).

Well I was half right! Ealy was not the pianist; Ealy was not a pianist at all but a HARMONICA player as I discovered nearly twelve years later when I talked with Sam Carr! Sam had moved to the city in 1950 and started out on the streets socialising with Tree Top Slim-drinking wine on Biddle. Sam recalls: "We hung around together for about a year or two. When I met him I wasn't playing nothing...and then my daddy (Robert Nighthawk) came along and gave me a guitar – had a box guitar and I learned to play the basses on it. So me and Tree Top Slim sit around, we had a few drinks and play music. Crowd of guys gets 'round, tell us how good we were – but anyway me and Tree Top Slim, our first playing was at that grocery store..." "Come on man we can make \$3 a piece..." So I say: "Oh man I ain't going down there, folks ain't gonna give me no \$3. "Don't worry about it I'll get your money." Anyway we went down there – the man paid us. That's how we got started playing."

The grocery store was on O'Fallon and from there they moved to a club on Delmar and then for a lady in Robinsville, out in the country about fifty miles from St Louis. Sam lost touch when Tree Top went back to his home in Missouri in response to a family bereavement. "I never seen him



Big Joe Williams, Circa early 1960s. From the B&R Archive.

no more. People tell me he drank himself to death. But he was a good artist."

Previously Sam had mentioned Hollinshead so I asked him about him. "Hollinshead?" said Sam. "Charles Hollinshead – Tree Top's brother." Puzzled now I persisted, "But I was told Hollinshead's brother was called Trigger." Sam replies: "That's him – same man! That's Tree Top Slim - but now his real name was Willie Ealy."

We can fill in some biographical details on Willie Ealy and Sam Fowler at least. A couple of the acetates have addresses written on them; for example one of the Joe Williams' has Big Joe's address, 707 N. 22nd Street on it and the Tree Top Slim has an address of 1314a Biddle Street. Willie Earl Ealy Jr. was born 28th August 1926 between Charleston and Diehlstadt, Missouri. On 13th January 1952 he gave his address as 1314 Biddle and occupation (optimistically) as "recorder." About 1951 Tree Top Slim won a talent contest in St. Louis for which the first prize was a recording session – this may have been the Baul or there may be yet another untraced session. My own view is that the prize was never awarded. Chinaman Brown, a drummer brother of Chicago singer Arlean Brown (of 'I'm A Streaker' and 'Impeach Me Baby' fame) also won a contest where first prize was supposedly an Aristocrat recording contract and there is no evidence that this ever happened either. The recording offers were probably just carrots dangled before hopeful aspirants. A guess is that the Baul recording was Ealy's own idea perhaps as a result of a disappointment with the talent contest? Whatever, in 1953 he moved to Ludlow, Mississippi and in 1957 to Las Vegas. Ealy was back in St Louis in 1960 and listed in the telephone book in the 1970s but not alas when I was looking for him!

Sam Fowler certainly deserved more recording opportunities. Born 10th March 1909 in Tallulah, Louisiana son of Samuel and Agnes Fowler, Sam described himself as "one of those plough-boys up from down-home". The family moved from Tallulah when Sam was very young – probably to the Baton Rouge-Lake Providence area before Sam moved to Helena, Arkansas. In 1932 he moved finally to St Louis.

Inspired by John Lee 'Sonny Boy' Williamson he started to learn the harmonica in 1935 and encouraged by Big Joe Williams an association was struck up which lasted almost until he died. Sam worked from time to time as a clothes-presser but more often as a musician and a 'playboy' (his description) around the small bars of Biddle Street. Henry Townsend was another acquaintance but his contemporaries he recalled as Trigger and DC who often played with Hollinshead.

(More confusion here: Sam thought that Trigger & DC were brothers while Sam Carr, as we have seen, said that Trigger and (Charles) Hollinshead were brothers and only vaguely remembered DC. Probably DC didn't exist – he seems to be a mispronunciation for Deshay – who certainly did play with Hollinshead and Trigger.

Eventually in the 1950s Sam opened his own cleaning and pressing business and with his wife to look after it he formed his own band, Harmonica Sam And The Houserockers. Obviously the line-up varied but collectively the group comprised guitarist Otha Perry (possibly Doc Perry who was active in St. Louis in the 1970s but not playing blues), Piano Slim (Robert T. Smith) and bass guitarists Edward Jones and Jimmy ?.

The group played all over the city and the outlying towns like Alton and in Edwardsville, Illinois they played regularly at Phil Johnson's tavern.

The Baul acetate was cut in 1952 and in 1956 Sam went to Chicago with Big Joe to cut the Vee-Jay session. On these sides he displays a wonderfully unique style owing little to anybody else. He remembered one other recording with Big Joe at a studio around 2030 Jefferson where one of the songs recorded sounds like another version of 'King's Highway' according to Sam's recollection of the lyric.

DISCOGRAPHY

Big Joe Williams

Big Joe Williams vo., gtr

St Louis

Highway 49
Baby Please Don't Go

St Louis 10th September 1951

Big Joe Williams vo., gtr; Tree Top Slim hca.; unknown db or gtr -1
Whistling Pines Blues Oldie Blues LP 2804
Mama Don't Allow No Boggin' (sic) All Night Long
Oldie Blues LP 2804

Tree Top Slim

Tree Top Slim voc. hca; Big Joe Williams gtr; unknown db or gtr -1
Thousand Year Blues Oldie Blues LP 2804
She Been Shaking A Little Boggie (sic) -2
Oldie Blues LP 2804

Lee Willmans

St Louis

Lee Willmans vo.; poss. Sam Fowler? hca.; Big Joe Williams gtr
Strange Girl Blues Oldie Blues LP 2804
Early Morning Blues Oldie Blues LP 2804
Harp Blowing Sam

St Louis 11th March 1952

Sam Fowler vo,hca; Big Joe Williams gtr
Shake A Little Boogie Oldie Blues LP 2804
(Early In the Morning) untitled Oldie Blues LP 2804

Big Joe Williams

Big Joe Williams vo.,gtr; unknown pno:
New Car Blues Oldie Blues LP 2804
Taylor Made Stomp Oldie Blues LP 2804

Notes:

-1 There appears to be a double bass or second guitar present.
The notes to Oldies Blues OL2804 suggest J D Short plays wash-tub
bass or guitar on this session It could be anybody.
-2 During the penultimate verse a harmonica seems to be heard over
the vocal!

Again this session is untraced. No other opportunities came Sam's way and when he suffered a stroke he had to give up the band. Since his wife passed he ran his cleaning business but the lure of the music was always strong: "Every once in a while it gets in you, it gets in your mind – it stays. That stuff never get out – no!"

So what are we left with now? The unknown vocalist on the 'Lee Willmans' sides (could he have been a son of Big Joe?) is intriguing given the originality of the songs and treatment. The superb piano player on the one Big Joe acetate deserved to be better known. Infuriatingly Joe shouts "Play it" and "Take it" – but the desperate condition of the disc makes it indecipherable.

"Take it Henry" or "Take it Eddie" would be no more than ambitious suggestions! Some Baul gospel acetates have surfaced but only one other blues recording. Uncredited there is no connection with the foregoing but it is an extremely accomplished singer and guitarist in a very pre-war mould and sounds a lot like Clifford Gibson.

Until anything else turns up the Joe Williams group of acetates remain the only examples of St Louis's underground blues activity of the 1950s. There must be more surely?

This article was originally written by Mike Rowe in 2002 and was updated in late 2019. He recalls: "I aquired the acetates from Big Joe Williams himself. I sent an amateur tape of the acetates to a record collector in St. Louis who was going to research the sessions, artists etc. He did none of this and he sent the tapes to Oldie Blues Records who issued them with new recordings of Big Joe. If they'd discussed it with me they could have issued them with my blessing and I would have been happy to try and get the best sound possible."

Acknowledgements

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