

The St. Louis Piano Blues Of Walter Davis

Guido van Rijn previews his forthcoming book



Walter Davis, taken on 19th February 1936 for the RCA Victor Company. Courtesy Frederick O. Barnum from the collection of RCA Victor negatives, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, Delaware.

"A blues feeling is just, I don't know, it's, I don't know if one could really describe it. It's something that, that gets over, comes over an individual. You sit down at the piano, you start to touching the keys, softly. Next thing, look like you can just see yourself some place you never been before. And then that's what make that blue feeling come over you. That's the way it has always appeared to me." Walter Davis, interviewed by Paul Oliver, Albany Hotel, St. Louis, Missouri, 25th August 1960.

After the publication of my recent book on Smokey Hogg ('The Texas Blues Of Smokey Hogg'), I decided to turn my attention to the great Walter Davis, another blues artist who was extremely popular, but about whom little is known.

It was obvious that nearly sixty years after his death in 1963 the details of his life would be hard to pin down, which only made the challenge more enticing.

Walter Davis also offered a different approach to the blues, and a different career pattern, from those of my previous subject.

Smokey Hogg was among the most open and personal of blues singers; Davis seems to have been determined to exclude his private life from his recordings (unlike the alcoholic Hogg, he was also a near teetotaler).

Hogg went from record company to record company without regard to contracts; Davis stuck with RCA Victor/Bluebird, apart from a brief engagement with Bullet Records between 1949 and 1951. In total 184 sides.

Where Hogg was content (or more likely, was only able) to play in G, Davis's recordings feature no fewer than eleven keys.

Walter Davis has always fascinated me because of his voice, dry and laconic but somehow emotive as well; his clever, often insightful lyrics; and above all his idiosyncratic piano style. It was probably to his advantage that Davis could not read music; unfettered by rules and conventions, he developed a unique modal style which influenced many blues pianists, and continues to impress.

The book on Walter Davis is scheduled for publication later this year and will contain a biography, a musical analysis of his voice, dry and laconic but somehow emotive as well, and a chapter on Walter's musical influences, with a foreword by Karl Gert zur Heide.

It will be accompanied by a CD including Paul Oliver's interviews with Walter Davis; both sides of Bullet 328 (the only Davis 78 still unreissued); and a selection of the best-sounding Walter Davis test pressings and 78s from the collections of Paul Swinton and Dave Williams.

As with the Smokey Hogg publication, every entry in the Lyric Analysis chapter will contain discographical details, the song lyrics, plus an analysis of the recording - for example:

SOUTHEAST MISSOURI BLUES

(own v, Roosevelt Sykes p) (Key of Eb)

(Rockefeller Block, 952 N. Michigan Ave, Chicago, 29th September 1931) (67575-1)

(Session supervisor: Ralph Peer)

(Victor 23355) (JSPCD 605)

(293 copies sold)

*Southeast Missouri is the lonestomest place that I've ever seen,
Because the people in Southeast Missouri treats poor me so mean.*

*Down in Missouri Valley, you know that really is my home,
But I can't stay there, people, and get along.*

*I'm going to cross the river, going over in old Tennessee,
Because the people in Southeast Missouri really don't welcome me.*

*People, have you ever been mistreated in your own hometown?
Seems like none of your friends really don't want you around.*

sp: Ah, play it for me!

*So, bye-bye-bye, bye-bye, baby, bye-bye-bye,
I'm gonna leave you and I ain't gonna even tell you the reason why.*

The Missouri Valley runs from Montana to St. Louis, where the river joins the Mississippi, but Davis seems to be using the term loosely. Southeast Missouri is 'the Bootheel', bordering on Kentucky, Arkansas, and Tennessee, which as Davis says, is across the (Mississippi) river. Cotton growers had moved into the Bootheel, staying ahead of the boll weevil infestation; they brought in many African-American sharecroppers, altering the area's demographics, and making it culturally more Southern than Midwestern. There was considerable racial tension and violence in the Bootheel, and this seems to be reflected in Davis's lyrics.

Walter is dreaming nostalgically of Tennessee, although perhaps life there is only better by comparison with the Bootheel. From around 1922 to circa 1925 Walter was probably living in Tennessee, possibly in Paris, Henry County.

The St. Louis Piano Blues of Walter Davis will be published by Agram Blues Books, Overveen, The Netherlands. An accompanying CD will be issued on Agram Blues ABCD 2027.



Label shots courtesy Guido van Rijn and John Tefteller.