

RAY'S RUDIMENTS

by Ray Jempton

ARTHUR 'BIG BOY' CRUDUP 'THAT'S ALRIGHT'

His inadvertent role in jump-starting the rock'n'roll revolution sometimes obscures his own recorded work, but there's much to enjoy in Crudup's comparatively small discography.



Arthur 'Big Boy' Crudup, circa mid-1940s. From the B&R Archive.

Crudup's easy, isn't he? I mean, he didn't make a massive number of records, especially if you compare him to a Memphis Slim, say, and it's not as if there's a wide variety of types of material or approaches, like you've got with somebody like Roosevelt Sykes. There's not a great deal of ambition or of diversity to be found across Arthur 'Big Boy' Crudup's discography. He favoured pretty standard arrangements throughout his career, and his approach to the blues rarely varied all that much. So, a listener's guide to this guy? What for? The reason is simply that I think he was a significant artist, not just for the obvious reason that he helped to lay the foundations for rock'n'roll (although that's pretty important, and the fact that it was a Crudup number being used at that crucial point was no accident, a point I'll return to later). More important is that I think Crudup deserves to be the focus of attention in his own right.

One of the reasons I think his work has tended to be underestimated by blues historians is that it doesn't fit our expectations of what downhome Mississippi blues should sound like. All those things that have almost become clichés in blues writing – the rhythmic complexities of Charley Patton, the intensity of

expression of Son House, the bold, innovative virtuosity of Robert Johnson, the declamatory authority of Muddy Waters, the sheer energy of Elmore James. You can extend the list on and on, with further names – from Skip James to Howling Wolf – and similar descriptions, never far from that trap of sounding sententious. As we know, of course, these things don't fall neatly into simple patterns – John Hurt is the example usually cited as an exception to prove the rule. But the truth is that there is no rule to prove, because there are just too many exceptions. Arthur 'Big Boy' Crudup, one of the most commercially popular artists from that state, is another. You'd use none of those clichés when describing his music. He played downhome blues, that much is undeniable, but his singing rarely ventured towards any extremes of intensity, his sense of rhythm is about as lacking in complexity as any you could find, and his guitar playing is a long way from virtuoso standards ("If the gift had've been to me for music, as it was for singing", he would say, "I'd have been a hell of a mother..."). But you don't define an artist by what he isn't. Crudup (pronounce it Croo-dup, by the way – he did) was far from being the bland, paint-by-numbers blues singer that such a succession of negatives might imply. On the contrary, his straightforward approach to the music had great attractions of its own, and it was very well-loved in its day. He created a number of songs that would deservedly become standards, he sang them with a cool composure that communicated his words very effectively, and he complemented them with guitar parts that, for all their comparative simplicity, were always highly effective.

The end of the 1930s and early 1940s had seen a brief flourishing of a new tranche of Mississippi blues singers. Tommy McClennan, Robert Petway and Bukka White all enjoyed their recording heydays during this period. But none would have the impact of Arthur Crudup (born, Forest City, Mississippi, 24th August 1905). His first session, for Bluebird in September 1941, produced four sides of quite unassuming downhome blues, starting with 'Black Pony Blues', whose theme harked back to Charley Patton's 'Pony Blues'. It was a long way from Patton, though – Crudup's vocals were a distinctive, melodic tenor and his words were articulated clearly, with his guitar providing a basic, regular rhythm, based around a repetitive riff on the bass strings, and a few apposite flourishes on the treble. Where Patton, as he usually did, used the image of the pony as a starting point for a selection of stock verses, Crudup sustains the metaphor all the way through. For all the stripped-down sound, this is modern, composed blues (although he would later insist, "I never write nothing"). The last title of the four, 'If I Get Lucky' was also a bit of a throwback, as it was based on the '44 Blues' theme, first recorded in the 1920s by Roosevelt Sykes (also known as 'Vicksburg Blues', from Little Brother Montgomery's version), but while as a piano piece, that song's most distinctive quality is the tension generated by the juxtaposition of two contrasting rhythmic figures, there was nothing whatever of that in the way Crudup did it. He took it straight, using the familiar tune, but treating it with one of his standard accompaniments. The result is never as compelling as the earlier versions, but it has a great deal of its own – Crudup communicates his lyrics in ways that are all the more effective for their directness. Again, while it might not be obvious to later listeners, it's much more modern, more urbane.

Blues historians make much of how, as consumers of the music, migrants from the South to the North, from the country to the city, were important catalysts in the development of the music, in its increasing sophistication. It seems to me that Arthur Crudup stands at exactly that fulcrum point, as much as any other artist, and perhaps more than any other, if we're talking specifically about the migration from Mississippi to Chicago. And yet, he still fits the traditional model of the solo bluesman with his guitar (which is essentially what we've got at that first session, even if Joe McCoy contributes a few notes of imitation bass). In that sense, Arthur 'Big Boy' Crudup's first



Arthur Crudup. From the B&R Archive.

recordings represent an important transitional stage for the blues. At the risk of tying myself in semantic knots, you might argue that it is sophisticated in its simplicity. This is a vitally important moment in the history of the blues and at the risk of labouring the point, Crudup's music is as clear an indicator of that transition as any that you'll find.

Seven months later, he was back to record another session, this time with a proper bass player, the excellent and ubiquitous Ransom Knowling, and – another step in the transition – an amplified guitar. Of the six sides recorded, five were good slow blues that pretty much followed the template already set down at the first session, but one was quite different. 'Mean Old Frisco' is the first glimpse we get at a side of Arthur Crudup that is going to be increasingly important. He uses a faster strum, with a light but very distinct swing, that Knowling latches on to and emphasises, mostly by stressing the syncopated beats, but also (as he does at the start of the last verse), shooting up to some unexpected high notes. There's nothing flash or spectacular about this performance, but it has its own distinctive vitality. That swinging sound would become integral to Crudup's recorded music, and be used on some of his best and most famous work. Also, 'Mean Old Frisco' would become one of his most covered songs, with versions by artists as diverse as Jack Dupree, Little Walter and Jimmy Witherspoon, all touched with the same infectious rhythm that Crudup and Knowling conferred on it at its first recorded outing.

Crudup's appeal must also have depended on the way his songs spoke to his audience. 'Give Me A 32-20' was one of many songs recorded in the early 1940s to touch on the burning issue of war service, but few, surely, are quite as nakedly belligerent: "I've got my questionnaire, and they need me in the war / Now if I feel murder, don't have to break the county law... All I want is a 32-20, made on a 45 frame / Yes and a red, white and blue flag, waving in my right hand." The fact that these lines are given the same straight delivery as any of his others about women or travelling somehow makes them that bit more trenchant, and his brittle electric guitar lines, for all the modesty of their ambition, provide a counterpoint that is somehow just right.

The war and its emergency measures was probably what kept him away from a studio for the next two and a half years, but it was still on his mind at his next session in December 1944, insinuating itself into 'Cool Disposition', where his take on the hostilities is more reflective. 'Who's Been Fooling You' and 'Keep Your Arms Around Me' both picked up on the swinging up-tempo character of 'Mean Old Frisco'. This time there was no bass, but added rhythm from Melvin Draper on drums, and Crudup would only very rarely record without a drummer for the rest of his career. 'Rock Me Mama' was based on a Big Bill Broonzy original from a few years earlier, and it's a classic – the electric guitar is a little more distorted than before, which somehow helps build the swaggering sexual tension of the lyrics. Muddy Waters' is the best known cover version, among many.

Another year, another session, with 'Dirt Road Blues' recalling (if only distantly) songs by both Charley Patton and Tommy Johnson. 'I'm In The Mood' points in the other direction, as it was surely the inspiration for John Lee Hooker's song of the same title. Hooker seems to me somebody who was clearly influenced by Crudup – there are certain similarities in style and approach, even if there are at least as many very great differences. By the time Hooker came to record, a few years later, the world of blues recording would be a very different place, and the major record companies would have pretty much given up on downhome blues. What's interesting is that one of the very few exceptions to that situation would be with RCA Victor and Arthur Crudup. Victor no longer used the Bluebird subsidiary that Crudup had started out with, but he would continue to record for, and see releases on, the parent label. The sessions would be regular, rather than frequent – one or two a year for the rest of the decade (except in 1948) and for the first few years of the 1950s. There's not much variation in the pattern of what Crudup was recording, either – the slow blues with their rudimentary accompaniments, interspersed with the odd up-tempo swinger. For all their merits, these are not recordings best heard complete in chronological order, but individually, they are generally very good blues records indeed. Sample a few tracks at a time, and savour the richness and depth of what Arthur 'Big Boy' Crudup was capable of within what seemed like a very limited framework – the swagger of 'So Glad You're Mine', the pointing finger of 'You Got To Reap', the downhome take on jump blues in 'Hey Mama, Everything's Alright'.

Previously successful themes were reworked – 'Crudup's Vicksburg Blues' is one very obvious example – while 'Ethel Mae' became 'Katie Mae'. Who could have predicted that somewhere in there would be one of the most



Label shots courtesy Victor Pearlman and the B&R Archive.

important records in musical history, although it would be in the hands of another, very different performer that 'That's All Right' would tilt the world on its axis. Where exactly Crudup's song 'Dust My Broom' fits into the line of descent that would lead to Elmore James's hit a year or so later is still unclear. It may not be 'great' in the sense that Elmore's record is great, but it's still a fine blues. By this time, the recording trio of Crudup, Knowling and Judge Riley on drums were on peak form. They could get low down when required (which was quite a lot of the time) but their syncopation on the uptempo songs – light, yet still insistent in its invitation to dance – was something really quite special. Jumping, uptempo songs like 'I Want My Lovin'', 'Shout Sister Shout' (an interesting secularisation of a sacred theme), 'Star Bootlegger' and – especially – 'I'm Gonna Dig Myself A Hole', are irresistible to dancers even today. It was this side of Crudup, also, that would capture the imagination of the young rockabillys. As already suggested, it was no accident that it was Arthur Crudup's records that fulfilled this role – they were still straddling that gap between the country and the city, the North and the South, they were straightforward, uncomplicated dance music, comparatively simple to reproduce by strumming chords on an



Arthur Crudup, Edinburgh College Of Commerce, February 1970. B&R Archive.

acoustic guitar, and they were getting major label distribution. And they were great records, too.

But if that was still some way in the future, there are other more immediate ways in which Crudup was contributing to musical developments. 'Chicago, Chicago, is the grandest place on earth', he sang in 'Chicago Blues', and the connection is a seminal one. It seems to me that the most significant influence of Crudup's recordings in the post-war years was almost certainly on the new downhome sounds developing in Chicago. The edgy sound of the electric guitar, the underpinning bass lines (often played by a second guitar rather than a bass, in the Chicago new wave), the newly-emerging role of the drummer, and the very sharp focus on straight blues must surely owe something to Crudup's group sound, no doubt popular on jukeboxes and in record collections around the city.

Unlike most Chicago musicians, Crudup seems to have continued to live in Mississippi, at least part of the time, although still spending time in Chicago, and still recording for RCA Victor. It was in Jackson, Ms. that he got the opportunity for a bit of moonlighting. In 1952, he recorded a couple of sides there that would be released on Checker. For camouflage, the credit was to Percy Lee Crudup, apparently the name of Arthur's brother, and right from the first bar, it's clear that this is quite a different kind of recording. There's the harmonica, brash and assertive, and while the drummer might never have got himself a seat at a Victor session, his rough, strident pounding lends a new kind of excitement to the occasion. The harp player, whose very countrified acoustic sound is such a crucial part of the record, is named as Robert Dees, and apart from his contribution here, he only appears on one more session, again with Crudup – unless he's the same person as Robert Diggs who appeared on field recordings in Mississippi much later (just a thought).

There was no follow-up, but another opportunity presented itself soon afterwards. Lillian McMurry, looking for somebody to take the place of Elmore James, cut two sides with Crudup, and released them under the even less likely pseudonym of Elmer James. This was the first time he had appeared on record not playing his guitar – it's played by Joe Willie Wilkins, there's an anonymous bass player, and Rice Miller (Sonny Boy Williamson II) plays harp. A surprising sound, but unsurprisingly excellent, especially 'Make A Little Love,' based on 'Sweet Home Chicago'. The result is the recording of Crudup's which sounds least like him (though even less like Elmore James).

Again, this didn't lead to anything, but there was one further session, also in Jackson, this time for the Champion label, and credited to Arthur 'Blues' Crump. Four sides were cut, of which only two were issued at the time. Dees was back on harmonica, although not playing with quite as much persistent energy as on the Checker session. There's also an anonymous piano player, plus bass and drums, but even so, the sound is unmistakably Crudup's – his guitar making those familiar regular figures and his voice sounding just the way it did on the Victor sessions.

Victor's interest in Crudup persisted, though, and back in Chicago a year or so later, they tried to update his sound by adding a tenor sax and a piano. Maybe these additional musicians were asked to keep things simple, but if anything, the token tooting of J.J. Jones's sax suggests little interest in the session. He blows a nice chorus in 'The War Is Over', but the rest of the time, he seems to be barely disguising his disdain at such basic music.

"Play it for me", shouts Crudup, inviting an instrumental break in 'Fall On Your Knees And Pray', but nobody bothers. The experiment hadn't worked, so in Crudup's final Victor session, they tried a harmonica player instead. I quite like 'If You Have Ever Been To Georgia' and 'Help Me To Bear This Heavy Load', but I'm left wondering what it all might have sounded like if they'd used a proper blues pianist, like Sunnyland Slim, say. The harp player is more suited to Crudup's style, but seems a bit reticent, especially when you compare him to the full-on approach of Robert Dees. Anyway, once a coupling had been tried on the Groove subsidiary – presumably without much commercial success – the thirteen-year collaboration between RCA Victor and Arthur Crudup was all over.

Everything mentioned so far is available on four Document CDs: Vol. 1, (11th September 1941 to 6th September 1946) DOCD-5201; Vol. 2 (6th September 1946 to 11th March 1949) DOCD-5202; Vol. 3 (11th March 1949 to 15th January 1952) DOCD-5203; Vol. 4 (15th January 1952 to 8th April 1954) DOCD-5204. At the time of writing, a three-disc compilation has just appeared: 'My Baby Left Me – The Definitive Collection', Fantastic Voyage FVDD133, a real bargain at its budget price. There have been various attempts at one-disc selections, of which the official release, in the 'When The Sun Goes Down' series, 'Rock Me Mama', RCA CD 28765-5155-2, pulls together the sides that probably best demonstrate what I've been getting at in this article about his importance during his own heyday, and – of course, given that the series subtitle was 'The Secret History Of Rock'n'Roll' – his influence on what came later. The ratio of slow blues to uptempo rockers is out of all proportion to how Crudup's sessions went, but there's no denying it makes very good listening. Out of print on CD, I think, but available for download.

There followed an eight-year hiatus. When he did get back to the studio, in 1962, it was for Bobby Robinson's Fire label in New York. Everything was familiar: the material, the line-up (bass and drums, plus second guitar on a few), and the general feel of the sessions. If anything, Crudup sounded more relaxed than he had on his later Victor sides, and the results – while they break no new ground – are entirely satisfying. It's as if he has nothing to prove, and has just sat down to deliver a selection of what he knows is his best material. Robinson tried a couple of 45s on Fire, and later an LP, and there were several tracks unissued at the time, which emerged a decade or so later. This material has been reissued time and again in different formats, but one currently available seems to be 'Rock Me Mama', Tomato CD 2003, and there's another version on Collectables.

Of course, the blues revival caught up with Arthur Crudup eventually, and Delmark cut four long sessions with him between 1967 and 1969, resulting in two good albums, 'Look On Yonder's Wall', Delmark DE-614 and 'Meets the Blues Bassists' Delmark DD-621. The latter consists of the original LP 'Crudup's Mood', plus several additional tracks, with Ransom Knowing on about half, and Willie Dixon on the rest. It's all good, even if there's not much new material, and little variety in terms of tempo – it's all slow blues. 'Look On Yonder's Wall' is more varied, a better album overall, to my mind (the spoken quotes in this article derive from that disc). I like this album a lot and, after a good selection of his Bluebird/Victor sides, this is the one I'd recommend most heartily. Eddie El adds some unflashy lead guitar on some tracks, the perfect complement to Crudup at his most engaging, and prompting the thought that it's a shame he didn't record more with good, sympathetic accompanists. If age has lent his vocals a slightly world-weary quality, it only adds to its appeal. The six-minute 'I'm All Alone' is absolutely beautiful, as good as anything he ever did.

With the renewed attention he returned to live appearances, leading to international tours. His last recording session came during one of these, in London in 1970, producing 'Roebuck Man', Sequel CD NEX CD 210 (out of print). One clear intention, whether Crudup's or the producer's, was to make an album that didn't sound anything like what he'd done before. On the credit side, this meant that it included a high proportion of new or less familiar material (including a controversial title track). It also meant that it included some earnest attempts at different instrumental settings and arrangements, using young British blues players. While the discography credits Crudup with playing guitar throughout, a lot of the time it's inaudible. Some of the arrangements seem a bit heavy-handed to me, but the album has its moments (not least an entirely solo 'Blind Man Sees'), and Crudup seems to be enjoying himself.

There's unavoidable irony in the fact that Arthur Crudup cut his last Victor record in the same year as Elvis Presley at the Sun studio made what would be the most successful recording ever of one of his songs. He would never benefit financially from that, although I understand his heirs did eventually. I've always felt that the 'Father of Rock'n'Roll' title seemed patronising, more like lip service than a real appreciation of his own art. I believe his influence went deeper than that, but just as importantly, I believe his work deserves real recognition in its own right, which is what I've tried to point towards in this article.

Two quick notes: firstly, thanks to everybody who has taken the trouble to give positive comments on this series. It is much appreciated, and very encouraging. Secondly, a sort of technical point on the question of what's available and what isn't. If a CD is in stock on Amazon for £10.99, I count it as 'available'. If it's only for sale on Amazon from a Marketplace supplier, I don't, even if it's £10.99. This might seem perverse, but I think it's a distinction that has to be made. I admit it's easier to see it if the Marketplace vendor is asking £35 or more, which isn't uncommon for out-of-print CDs (or £28.76, which is what you'd pay for a 'new' copy of 'Roebuck Man', at the time of writing). Anyway, for the purposes of these articles 'available' means that you can buy a new copy from stock, or a legal download, from a regular retail supplier.