

RAY'S RUDIMENTS

by Ray Templeton

'LITTLE BOY BLUE' WALTER HORTON

A career that mixed triumphant music making with some missed opportunities still left a legacy of some of the greatest blues harp recordings of all.



Mississippi Fred McDowell, J.B. Lenoir and Walter Horton, Manchester Free Trade Hall, AFBF Tour 1964. Photo: Brian Smith.

Let's start by conjuring an image to warm the heart and stir the soul – the ten-year-old child prodigy, nervously following his older friends, the members of the Memphis Jug Band, into the recording studio on 9th June 1927, his little fingers protectively clasping his precious Marine Band harmonica. They sit down and get started on their first number, 'Sometimes I Think I Love You', and for the first minute or so the lad hangs back, perhaps diffident about his youthful skills and blowing only a few barely audible notes in the background. Then the Band's leader Will Shade, already an important figure on the Memphis music scene, breaks from singing to nod in his direction, and in the adrenalin rush of the moment, the boy fires off a distinctive and entirely apposite little solo. A legend is born. Or is it? The conventional media effect at this point would be the sound of a stylus scratching abruptly across the surface of a record, followed by a voiceover informing us that actually the harmonica player on that session probably wasn't the ten-year-old Walter Horton at all.

That seems to be the agreed view at present, although I still have a romantic hankering for it to be him. Godrich, Dixon and Rust identify the harmonica player on the Memphis Jug Band's session on 9th June 1927 as 'Shakey Walter', and we know that Walter Horton was known as 'Shakey' (his releases for Cobra and Argo in 1956 and 1957 respectively were credited thus). Also, he is said to have insisted that he was playing on that session.

Reasonable doubters will argue that it's unlikely that a band as well-connected as Shade & Co. would have needed to take such a young and inexperienced harp player all the way from Memphis to Chicago (Horton was born on 6th April 1917) for a session, and that the playing style is very different to that on Horton's post-war recordings (the solo on 'Sometimes' consists pretty much of a similar repeated phrase played across the chords, but it's nonetheless effective). The truth is we'll never know, but you can find the two tracks in question (there's a lot more harp on the other one, 'Sunshine Blues') on The Memphis Jug Band's 'Complete Recorded Works Vol. 1', Document DOCD-5021, and see what you think.

There's also a bit of a question mark over Horton's next purported presence on a recording. By this time, he was 22 years old, and he and his friend, guitarist and vocalist Little Buddy Doyle were known as a regular partnership around Memphis, so it's quite plausible that he appeared on Doyle's two recording sessions in July 1939. Doyle is a powerful and emotive vocalist, firing off tight little runs on his guitar, while the harp weaves in and out of the vocal very effectively, scattering intense little fast arpeggios, bent notes and walls throughout. In my view these are much under-rated recordings – Doyle seems considered at best a minor figure historically, but I'd rank these very highly among the Southern blues of the late 1930s. All eight issued tracks are on 'Memphis Harp & Jug Blowers 1927-1939', Document BDCD-6028. I'll nod respectfully in the direction of the camp who think the harp player on these recordings is Hammie Nixon, but Horton gets my vote.

A dozen years passed before Walter got back in a studio, and the first result was a one-off harp solo which was only to be released many years later under the title 'Walter's Instrumental'. It's a wonderful piece, with Horton blowing around twelve-bar variations with the relaxed abandon of somebody throwing confetti, his attack utterly convincing, his tone confident and powerful. This was, if the dates given in discographies are reliable, around January 1951, a full year or more before Little Walter would turn the world of harmonica blues on its head with his runaway hit 'Juke'. To my mind, on 'Walter's Instrumental', Horton shows himself every bit as creative a blues player as Jacobs, and if he maybe lacks that cool, controlled sense of drama that was one of the latter's most distinctive qualities, he makes up for it with a particular kind of wild inventiveness.

What he hadn't done, at this stage – and what would make the Jacobs recording stand out so much – was to exploit the innovative technique of cupping the harmonica and the microphone together in the hands to give that new, big, electric sound. Horton was blowing towards a studio microphone, which enabled him to use the full range of dynamic effects that can be achieved by moving the hands around the back of the harp. But it was the new technique that would be such a sensation and would dominate blues harp ever since. Horton would learn it and make very good use of it, but on these earliest recordings, he is blowing 'acoustically', and it's very clear that he was a master of that art.

A long session a month or so later produced a dozen sides (including alternate takes) but only one release, 'Little Boy Blue' and 'Now Tell Me Baby' on Modern 809. Here we get our earliest opportunity to hear Horton's voice, and there's no doubt that his smoky vocals would be a lasting part of his appeal. It's probably not unfair to say that there's at least some influence detectable from John Lee 'Sonny Boy' Williamson – nobody who sang blues and punctuated their vocal lines with harmonica phrases was immune from that, but this was a more contemporary sound overall, especially on the latter song.

The whole of this fantastic session with its spare, downhome accompaniment, would find its way out eventually, and can be found on 'Mouth Harp Maestro', Ace CDCH 252, an essential purchase for any post-war blues fan, for such riches as the joyous instrumental 'Cotton Patch Hotfoot' and the lowdown 'Walter's Blues' and much more. The disc also includes Horton's other release for the Modern company, recorded a few months later and released on RPM, as well as two unissued matrices from the same session. This time the band sound is a bit fuller, with the Newborn brothers on guitar and piano and either their father, or just possibly Willie Nix, on drums. Again, this is some of the finest acoustic blues harmonica playing of its time.

All of these recordings were supervised by Sam Phillips at his studio on Union Avenue in Memphis – yet another reason to be grateful for the efforts of that extraordinary man. Phillips was recording blues for Modern Records in California, but the next time he brought Horton into the studio, more than a year later, he passed the results on to Chess in Chicago. Chess prepared one 78 for issue, but then seem to have cancelled it. As one side was an instrumental that had been entitled 'Little Walter's Boogie', maybe this isn't surprising, as by now Little Walter Jacobs was riding high as the company's new star. So, a whole session's worth of brilliant contemporary blues was left to sit on the shelves for a couple of decades. It has been possible for some years to reconstruct the session from various LP and CD issues of Sun material, but the easiest way to get most of it now, along with the scattered bits and pieces of Horton's work in the Sun studio, is on 'Blues Harmonica Giant', JSP 2305. Horton was one of the greatest exponents ever of his instrument, and a blues singer of considerable ability, and there is so much here to testify to that.

For all that ability, recording in Memphis didn't seem to be getting Walter Horton very far, and a trip to Chicago was in order.

It's immediately apparent that, while he might have had to wait to get the chance to record again in his own name, he was soon in demand as an accompanist. In January 1953, he recorded with Gus Jenkins for Chess – nothing was issued at the time, but on 'Eight Ball' (which has appeared since) Horton's harp is like a second voice throughout, and when he takes his solo, he explores a deep, sinuous groove, underpinned by Jenkins's rolling piano – an absolute classic. More reassuring must have been his first session (on the same day) with Muddy Waters, where he proved that he could more than hold his own in the company of one of the biggest names of the day, although again more than half of it stayed unissued. Then, later in the month came one of those great transcendent moments in musical history (yes, it's time for some unashamed hyperbole).

JOB 1010, by Johnny Shines, with Horton on harp

and Al Smith on bass, ranks among the greatest blues records, and it's the near-telepathic sense of understanding between Shines and Horton that raise it to another level.

'Brutal Hearted Woman' is one of the most commanding blues ever recorded, both lyrically and vocally, and Horton's playing complements it with uncanny empathy and power.

'Evening Sun' is quite different, an uptempo boogie in which Shines sings only two verses (magnificently!), bookended by



Walter Horton. From the B&R Archive.

four instrumental choruses by Horton at the start, and another three to finish. Absolutely essential, and available along with great unissued tracks from the same session on 'Evening Shuffle – The Complete JOB Recordings', Westside CD WESM635 (apparently now available for download only).

Back in Memphis, Horton chalked up various other accompaniments, and there was even one release on Sun that partly bore his name, as he played on one side (the other side was by Jimmy DeBerry without Horton) under the rubric 'Jimmy and Walter', on the instrumental 'Easy', a rendition of Ivory Joe Hunter's popular blues ballad 'I Almost Lost My Mind'. Horton deconstructs the tune and reassembles it as a breathtaking display of blues harp technique and expression.

If you ever wondered why he was known as 'Shakey', try the final chorus of 'Easy'! It was a perfect farewell to Memphis, as he was back in Chicago on a long-term basis by the end of the year, when he contributed to Tampa Red's final commercial session, with Johnny Jones on piano and Willie Lacey on guitar – a very fine combination. He blows a strong and very Chicago-sounding solo on 'Rambler's Blues'. At last, in August 1954 he got a session under his own name, for United, but once again only two sides were issued. And yet, 'Hard Hearted Woman' and 'Back Home To Mama' are two more absolute classics of 1950s Chicago blues. Even in the context of a bigger band – two saxes, piano, guitar, bass and drums – Horton's performance is an impressive one. Both sides of the 78 and alternate takes, plus accompaniments to vocalist Tommy Brown (as well as six good unrelated sides by Alfred Harris) can be found on 'Harmonica Blues Kings', Delmark DD-712.

There was only a single release from Horton's next session, two years later, for Cobra, despite – once again – no shortage of quality. His solo soars over the heavy riffing of 'Need My Baby' and it skates effortlessly across 'Have A Good Time', while his confident vocals make good use of his limited, smoky tones. There follows a succession of some of the most extraordinary session contributions ever: for Otis Spann, Jimmy Rogers, Sunnyland Slim and others.

Without exception, Horton plays brilliantly on these sessions, but special mention for his work on Rogers's 'Walking By Myself', for the way he tightly follows the vocal line, then takes off on a solo that seems to take the whole thing apart, shattering the laidback feel of the band's shuffle, before handing it back to Rogers, somehow with all its dignity still intact.

His accompanist work continued into the early 1960s, but there was another single of his own in 1964, with the Chess subsidiary Argo and in fact, this time the whole of the two sessions were released as an album on that label. It's a fine album, with good vocals and outstanding harp playing sustained throughout. The choice of material was a mixed bag: 'La Cucaracha' (not for the last time – he must have loved that tune); 'John Henry' and 'Friday Night Stomp' with its echoes of 'When The Saints', as well as plenty of tough blues and r&b. 'The Soul Of Blues Harmonica' has been available on CD, but doesn't seem to be now, except as secondhand (honestly, I am getting so fed up with how often in this series I've had to say that, or something similar, about Chess material – the situation is just ludicrous).

Later that year Horton and Robert Nighthawk recorded for visiting Swedish broadcasters. Some of this appeared much later on the first volume of the Swedish 'I Blueskvarter' series, which now seems to be out of print, but it's all on the album 'An Offer You Can't Refuse', Red Lightnin' RL008 (the rest of the disc is by the Paul Butterfield Blues Band), which is at least available for download. Nighthawk plays rhythm guitar, but Horton really takes the opportunity to show what he can do, and the result is very listenable. On paper, the next few years look like a time of constant activity, as Horton appeared on recordings by all sorts of people. This isn't the place to list them all, but excellent sessions by Johnny Young, Johnny Shines, Floyd Jones, Big Mama Thornton, J.B. Hutto and many more were made even better by Walter Horton, whose presence almost invariably seems to have added an edge of excitement and brilliance.

He visited Europe and can be heard behind J.B. Lenoir on one of the American Folk Blues Festival shows in 1965. A 1966 session with Wild Child Butler, for Jewel, produced that comparatively rare thing, two blues harpists

HOT!
 "GOING BACK TO MAMA"
 "HARD-HEARTED WOMAN"
 BIG WALTER HORTON
 STATES 145

"FEELS SO FINE"
 "YOU'RE GONNA CRY"
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Walter Horton, Manchester Free Trade Hall, AFBF tour 1964. Photo: Brian Smith.

playing together in good, complementary harmony. He even appeared on a track on a Chicken Shack LP, playing behind Christine Perfect's rendition of 'Mean Old World' in London in 1968.

On that same trip to London, he got to make a whole album, with an odd pick up band, including Jerome Arnold on bass and British rock guitarist Martin Stone, released as 'Southern Comfort' (it's available both as CD or download from Soundlink, but I can't seem to find a number). For my taste, the guitar is often a bit 'heavy' and the echo effect on Horton's harp and vocals gets irritating rather quickly. While there are some good moments on the album (and Horton does seem to be entering into the

spirit of things) it's impossible to avoid the feeling that this fine artist deserved better. Over the next few years, there were many more sessions, as well as recorded radio broadcasts, mostly as a sideman, but occasionally under his own name. Among this proliferation of material, there was bound to be some whose provenance may have been a little obscure, and it seems likely that over the years some of what appeared on albums consisted of private tapes, or other informal recordings.

There was one recorded in Germany that found its way onto a Document album, shared with Sonny Boy Williamson, but that doesn't seem to have made it on to CD. 'King Of The Harmonica Players', Delta 1000 is another – it seems to consist of a rather mixed bag, including informal performances from 1966 and 1970, the former with Johnny Young, the latter with Floyd Jones. Horton seems to have been fairly reliable under such circumstances and there's certainly worthwhile stuff on these ('A Mule To Ride' with Young on vocals is a beauty), although the sound quality isn't always quite as reliable. The JSP set already mentioned ('Blues Harmonica Giant'), also includes a live radio set with a band, recorded either in 1969 or 1973 (the discography favours the latter date). Carey Bell plays second, and while it seems a bit ragged round the edges to me, there are some very good performances, especially their duet 'Walter and Carey'.

Despite all this activity, he must have wondered if he'd ever get another chance to show what he could really do in his own right, and in retrospect it seems extraordinary that it took so long for somebody to get round to it. As with many other great Chicago blues artists, the 'somebody' in this case was Bruce Iglauer, and his label Alligator Records. The good news is that it was worth the wait, and 'Big Walter Horton with Carey Bell', Alligator ALCD 4702 is a fine blues album indeed, maybe one of the best of the 1970s. That looks like equal billing, but it's Horton's album. He's the only vocalist, and Carey Bell plays bass for quite a lot of it. But the latter deserves his cover credit. His harp duets with Horton, like 'Lovin' My Baby' and 'Have Mercy' are master-classes in how it should be done. Eddie Taylor's contribution on guitar also deserves great credit, and this is just a sheer pleasure from start to finish – tight, top-notch Chicago blues all the way, a modern classic.

If that album is positively dripping with real Chicago blues character, a set with the Canadian band Hot Cottage made shortly afterwards is much more in what was then shaping up as standard international blues band mode. It's better, in my view, than 'Southern Comfort', and does include plenty of evidence of Horton on good form, but I could do without the gimmickry and, I'm afraid, the guest vocals. Anyway, it's available on 'They Call Me Big Walter', CoraZong 255047.

Also around this time, Horton renewed his partnership with Jimmy DeBerry for sessions which produced two albums, although Horton only appears on

about half of each. The albums were issued on the German Crosscut label some time later, but so far as I can see have never appeared on CD. There's also a nice album of duets with Floyd Jones from 1975, mostly with the latter's vocals, but with a few featuring Walter's lead. It might not be too unkind to suggest that Jones's guitar sometimes comes across as a little rusty, but Horton's ability seems undiminished – the tone full and powerful, the range of techniques all still intact, and no shortage of variety in what he plays. Well worth checking out, it's now 'Do Nothing Till You Hear From Us', Delta Cat DC-1000. There have been live sets around, too, from this period, from the El Mocambo in Toronto and from the Ann Arbor blues festival, which may or may not be currently available on CD.

Not surprisingly, he was still called upon as accompanist, appearing on recordings by Honeyboy Edwards on Trix and Muddy Waters on Blue Sky, among others, during this period. On Sunnyland Slim's 'Sad And Lonesome', Jewel LP 5010 (out of print, but it's a favourite of mine), his contribution is exemplary. He'd been waiting a few years now for another album under his own name proper, but in the late 1970s, two came along in quick succession: 'Can't Keep Lovin' You', Blind Pig CD BP-71484 and 'Fine Cuts', Blind Pig CD BP-70678. Featuring good, sympathetic accompaniment from the John Nicholas Band, these are both well worthwhile, and I think you could buy either or both with confidence.

The former has a fine, atmospheric rendition of the evergreen 'Tin Pan Alley', a very nice reworking of his old Sun tune 'West Wind', with just an acoustic guitar in support, and a rip-roaring take on 'The Honeydripper' which evokes not only Joe Liggins's original but also Little Walter's exploration of the theme in Muddy's 'Evan's Shuffle'. 'Fine Cuts' ranges more widely over material as diverse as 'La Cucaracha' (not for the first time) and a beautiful stripped-down version of Duke Ellington's 'Don't Get Around Much Anymore'. But if that gives the impression that this is anything other than a blues album, the great thing is that it still feels like blues all the way, and as with 'Can't Keep Lovin' You', you get the sense that Horton felt himself in good company and able to stretch out comfortably in ways that suited him.

After this, the only two albums under his own name are both of live performances. There's 'Pacific Blues', Pacific Blues CD 980, recorded in Minneapolis in 1979, with a decent little group who allow Horton plenty of space that he occupies with confidence and plenty of energy. There's a new version of 'Little Boy Blue' and a laidback 'Shake Your Moneymaker' and he signs off with Ellington's 'Don't Get Around Much'. Seems to me that his voice is a little rougher on this album, and maybe the support plod a bit now and again, but there's no shortage of moments to enjoy.

Finally, there's 'Live At The Knickerbocker', JSP CD 208, with Ronnie Earl. Horton isn't on every track but there is a polish about the accompaniment, and at least some live atmosphere, and Horton rises to the occasion with plenty of outstanding playing. He was only in his early sixties by this time, although he had barely a year or so left to live, so maybe we shouldn't be surprised that the strength of his tone seemed little diminished from his heyday, or that he could still pull out musical ideas that make you sit up and take notice. 'It's Not Easy', despite the title, is in fact 'Easy', and much of the rest of the material is familiar enough, which isn't really a complaint when you consider how Horton's abilities on his instrument could breathe new life into just about anything. The concluding instrumental, 'Walter's Swing', which could be seen as his very last goodnight, shows him keeping it up across eight minutes – dramatically playing across the rhythms with his outstanding phrasing, expert interplay with the guitarist, and a big tone that simply does not fail.

Willie Dixon is said to have described Horton as the best harmonica player he ever heard, and he had heard a few at very close quarters, including Little Walter Jacobs. Comparisons are odious and I have no intention of claiming either to be the greater – there were similarities, as well as great differences (incidentally, since 90% of Jacobs's work was for one label, it doesn't need an article like this, but it's as rudimentary a part of a blues collection as anybody's). At these levels of greatness, any kind of choice would be completely subjective and utterly unnecessary.

I've only been able to scratch the surface, in this article, of Horton's output as an accompanist, but it's undeniable that some of his finest work on record was in that capacity, from classic sides with Willie Nix in 1950s Memphis to the fine 'Old Friends' set with Sunnyland Slim, Floyd Jones and others in 1980. But sticking to albums under his own name, what are the essentials? The Ace CD, certainly, and the Alligator album. I like the Blind Pigs, too, and while I never got the chance to see Walter Horton live, I reckon 'Live At The Knickerbocker' offers a little compensation in that regard.

Note: the research for this article was made a lot easier by the comprehensive Walter Horton discography available on Joe Filisko's website <http://customharmonicas.com>



Label shots courtesy Victor Pearlín.