

## VARIOUS ARTISTS

*Down Home Blues: Chicago – “Fine Boogie”*

Wienerworld WNRCD 5100

About a year ago in these pages<sup>1</sup>, I had published a review of a seriously detailed boxed set of three CDs (with stunningly large booklet) of post-war “down home” blues material from the Detroit area. I saw it and heard it, and it was good. Mike Rowe, it’s producer and serious research expert, comes out again with an analogous, but even larger (5 CDs), set of post-war “down home” material from Chicago. Once again, the major labels tend to be ignored – there have been sets over the years of blues material from the likes of Chess, Chance, VeeJay, Cobra, a.o. as sources. Once again, this is mostly relatively obscure and often short-lived companies, but it’s important music that fills out the picture of what was going on in Chicago ca. 1950 or so. If anyone could pull this off, it would be Rowe, and he has done so again. This is the beginnings of a musical trend/scene/style coming atcha with both barrels blazing in over 382 minutes’ listening!

What we have here is a seriously fine 5 CD collection of 134 rare post-war blues recordings by 41 artists from The Windy City, along with an 88-page booklet replete with new info and rare photographs. It boggles the mind that there are still such important musical gems to be located and mined – in this case, obscure is good! There are the expected guys (as usual), but usually with scarce sides

---

<sup>1</sup> *LB* #245; Vol. 47, #5 (Oct 2016), p. 72/73.

or takes, often for other than the label with which they are usually associated. Unreleased and alternate takes also abound hereabouts, and that's a good thing! The time-line here is basically the decade from 1945 to 1956 when things were gestating locally into what we now call "Chicago 'down-home' blues".

The city of Chicago was one of many Northern cities that acted as a major job magnet (or escape) for blacks away from the South before, during, and after WW II. The work available in that segregated world up North was hard, housing was shoddy, cheap, and crammed, but the pay was way better than in the share-cropping of the even more highly segregated Deep South. It wasn't just Chicago that was a final migratory urban destination out of "South America" – St. Louis, New York, Newark (NJ), Baltimore, DC, Boston, Kansas City, Detroit, Los Angeles, San Francisco, a.o. had analogous (but different) migratory experiences in their war-time and post-war time period. But Chicago was the first choice for black movement back in the day, often due to the *Chicago Defender's* suggestive propaganda! Many of the later Chicago musicians came from South Central states, similar to folks who already peopled the South Side of Chicago with similar essential musical traditions in the 1920s.

The so-called "Mississippi Delta" was heavily represented in the growing population of blacks in Chicago – the near slavery of the south-central "plantation" states (Mississippi and Arkansas) being a great prod to movement away. Rail took them up through Memphis, with some dropping off there, but it was essentially the route of the

Mississippi River that was followed through Missouri, western TN and KY eventually to Chicago's south side a/k/a Bronzeville, "The Promised Land", leading to strength in numbers over time. There were waves of migration over time and it was those who came in early the forties who were to become the musical movers and shakers (and consumers) of "their" music from "down home" that was modified to fit the new urban locations of the time. What developed in small clubs and on Maxwell Street became the norm with amplification and P.A. systems developed after the war. This is how revolution began! <sup>2</sup>

The set starts<sup>3</sup> with one James McCain (vo/hca) with Memphis Slim from the Ebony label; he is a John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson wannabe and he did so very prominently back in 1945! He is followed by "Bluesboy" Bill, a very competent Lockwood/Johnson sound-alike with a version of "Take a Little Walk With me" from '47 for the Bluesman label. Johnny Shines, and Muddy's sessions done for

---

<sup>2</sup> "At the end of the 1940s the black population of Chicago was nearly half a million, up 77% in a decade. By then nearly a third if Illinois black residents were born in Mississippi. The war was just over, work in the factories and foundries hadn't slowed down much, farms were mechanizing fast, and black Mississippi was on the move again.

Among them were the last generation of Delta bluesmen who moved into Chicago to serve as the talent base that launched the city's independent record labels, which specialized in selling brand-name 'Chicago blues' to hundreds of thousands of the just-transplanted." *BOOGALOO: The Quintessence of American Popular Music* by Arthur Kempton – University of Michigan Press (2005) Ann Arbor. p. 73.

<sup>3</sup> FULL ARTIST LISTING: Billy Boy Arnold, Big Maceo, Birmingham Junior, "Blues Boy" Bill, Blue Smitty, Eddie Boyd, John Brim, Dusty Brown, Leroy Foster, Pete Franklin, Gray Haired Bill, Henry Gray, Homesick James, Howlin' Wolf, J.B. Hutto, Elmore James, Floyd Jones, Lazy Bill (Lucas), J. B. Lenoir, Little Walter, James McCain, Memphis Minnie, Muddy Waters, Robert Nighthawk, Snooky Pryor, Jimmy Reed, Jimmy Rogers, St. Louis Jimmy, John Sellers, Johnny Shines, Willie "Long Time" Smith, Otis Spann, Big Boy Spires, Sunnyland Slim, Johnny Temple, Mildred White, Johnny Williams, Big Joe Williams, "Sonny Boy Williamson", Johnny Young,

Columbia in 1946 are all great, even though they were rejected by the company powers-that-be at the time – Muddy’s slide work was soon to come to the fore, though, quick smart. Who knew that such late “Bluebird” stuff wouldn’t fly?! John Sellers, and Willie “Long Time” Smith continue in a similar vein with some superb pianists involved. The playing is sometimes sophisticated, sometimes almost down home, as the musicians begin to feel their way into the “newer” approach to the music. The road is wonderful and is well worth traveling with all the sidelights, false detours, and narrow *foci* – much is stuff I’ve not heard before and am grateful to listen to... the hazard of rarity!

Are there any “mistakes” in this package... yes, occasionally, but they are few and far between, and are in no way fatal and can best be ignored. The research has been long, deep, and wide, and the booklet with it all is thorough in all ways – love the photographs. This is one hell of a complete package of Chicago-based blues music from its highly active post war incubator years – note that St. Louis Jimmy’s “Florida Hurricane” is apt for present day climatic conditions! This box is both an education and also a great listen... give it a go, as they say here in Oz!

This massive set is NOT another “Chicago Blues’ Greatest Hits” rehash collection ...that’s already been done many times over. He quits here in 1956 before the “King effect” had taken over and given us Freddie, Albert, Buddy, and Otis – the great impact of T-Bone and B.B. on the many melismatic string-benders! (Not that

there's anything wrong with that!) This is what lead up to those later well-known hits and made them possible. We are fortunate to have Mike Rowe around to lead us up through that time span and educate us properly on that matter! What a great collection of rare (and good - not always the same thing) music – put this on your Christmas list, folks... prod your Santa!

PETER B. LOWRY  
Sydney