

# Reissues



## VARIOUS ARTISTS

### Down Home Blues— Chicago Volume 2: Sweet Home Chicago

Wienerworld – WNRCD5106

Like *Chicago Fine Boogie*, its predecessor in Wienerworld's *Down Home Blues* series, this collection of Chicago blues is a five-CD set enclosed in a slipcase, along with a 90-plus-page booklet. Beginning with James Clark's *Who But You* on Columbia from 1945 and ending with Slim Willis' *No Feeling for You* on C.J. from 1962, the set presents 135 tracks from 46 artists (of whom 25 are repeats from the first volume) drawn from 24 labels in more or less chronological order. The sources include not only Windy City mainstays Chess/Checker and Vee-Jay, but also majors Columbia and RCA Victor alongside such short-lived locals as Marjette, Tempo-Tone, Parrot, and Bandera, and English Esquire, with three cuts from a 1960 Eddie Boyd EP.

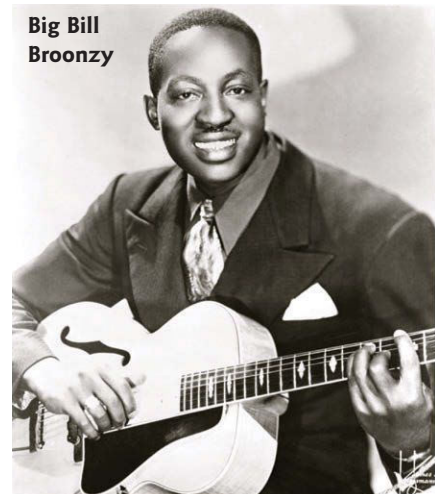
The artist roster likewise covers a broad range. Although the limitation of the set's scope to down-home blues eliminated such torchbearers of the new generation as Magic Sam, Otis Rush, and Buddy Guy even though they recorded well within the 1945–1962 time frame, rock stars Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley check in with three sides each, while mere blues stars Muddy Waters (8), Howlin' Wolf (4), Little Walter (9), Jimmy Reed (6), Elmore James (5), and Sonny Boy Williamson (7) are well represented, and we also hear from journeymen such as Honeyboy Edwards (2), Johnny Shines (3), and Robert Lockwood Jr. (2) and obscure performers including Herby Joe (2), "Blues Boy" Bill (1), and Herman Ray (1). Of the 135 tracks, 25 are alternate takes and a whopping 62 were



**Robert Lockwood, Jr. and Sonny Boy Williamson (II) at a club in Cleveland, Ohio c. 1959. (Left to right) Unknown guitarist, Sonny Freeman (drums), unknown bassist, Robert Lockwood, Jr., and Sonny Boy Williamson (II).**

not originally issued (including Waters' *This Pain* from 1955, with what the notes gently term its "surfeit of Dixonese" that serves mainly to confirm the belief that Leonard Chess knew a barking dog when he heard one), although most have subsequently seen the light of day.

As for the music itself, a detailed discussion of 135 performances is well beyond the



scope of this review, but several observations are worth noting. For one thing, there are a number of pre-war blues icons, including Big Bill Broonzy, Memphis Minnie, Tampa Red, and Johnny Temple attempting to secure a foothold on the new scene—perhaps the most interesting of this group is Big Joe (as Po Joe) Williams, whose 1956 Vee-Jay coupling with Sam Fowler on harmonica and Al Duncan on drums found the king of the nine string plugged in, rowdy,

and raw only a few months before the Delmark recordings that launched him on a new career on the blues rediscovery circuit. At the opposite extreme, there are the debut recordings of a pair of guitarists who would find success in later decades in Hound Dog Taylor, whose 1960 Marjette 45 r.p.m. sounds little different from his efforts for Alligator in the '70s, and Albert King, who is barely recognizable on three 1953 Parrot titles that went unissued at the time.

It is also worth noting that no fewer than 23 piano players are represented, either as leader or accompanist, including not only such familiar names as Otis Spann, Henry Gray, Johnnie Johnson, and Ike Turner, but also such lesser knowns as Willie "Long Time" Smith, Art Sims, Carl Sharp, Freddie Hall, and Malron Jett. Harmonica players are also much in evidence, not only Little Walter, Reed, Wolf, and Sonny Boy, but also the legendary Henry Strong (backing Henry Gray) and Forest City Joe (Pugh), whose five originally unissued Chess titles all bear an uncanny resemblance to his idol John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson, despite Louis Myers' claim that Pugh was the "baddest" harp player he ever saw, able "to play anything that them jazz cats play." Guitarists, of course, abound, but special mention should go to one-time Waters bandman Blue Smitty (née Claude Smith), whose two 1952 Chess titles sound like they came from another planet. Finally, it should be noted that the mysterious Herby Joe's 1956 Abco track titled *Smokestack Lightning* bears no resemblance to Howling Wolf's classic from the same year, instead sounding more like something from the Willie Mabon songbook.

And then there's the book—94 pages including 62 photos (several published for the first time), 32 label shots, four pages of composer credits, an 18-page sessionography (but, oddly and annoyingly, no discography), seven more pages further exploring five of the sessions, and 51 pages of notes from British blues maven Mike Rowe, author of the seminal **Chicago Breakdown** way back in 1973, from which we learn, among many things, the names and addresses of numerous long-gone Chicago blues venues (remember Irv's Boulevard Lounge at 301 North Sacramento?), the make and model of every pictured guitar (isn't Arbee Stidham the unidentified player of the Danelectro UB2 in the incredible shot of Robert Lockwood and Sonny Boy Williamson at a club gig in Cleveland ca. 1959?), and the vaguely disturbing tidbit that Jimmy Reed hit the R&B charts 27 times compared to Howling Wolf's six. Add in superior remastering by Glenn Keiles, and the package should be irresistible even to those who own most of the music in some other form.

—Jim DeKoster



## THE BIG THREE TRIO FEATURING WILLIE DIXON

### Chicago Harmonisers: Their Greatest Recordings

Jasmine – JASMCD 3114

Willie Dixon is almost certainly one of the most influential figures in the postwar transitional period of Chicago blues—across the board—as a performer, songwriter, arranger, talent scout, businessman, visionary, and adapter of African American folk oral traditions to latter-day audiences. Jasmine also assembled a separate sampler CD retrospective of Dixon's career.

But the Big Three Trio was the triumph of three individuals—bassist Dixon, pianist and songwriter Leonard "Baby Doo" Caston, and guitarist Ollie Crawford (and for a short time, Bernardo Dennis, plus many fine drummers). Each member was a master musician with a brilliant grasp of vocal harmony. The Big Three carried forward the traditions of the guitar and piano duos, the likes of Tampa Red and Big Maceo Merriweather and Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell, the "human orchestra" a cappella singers of the 1930s, and "hepcat harmonizers," of the 1940s. The Big Three existed from 1946 to 1956, a scant ten years, and despite their polish and popularity, they were nearly an anachronism by the time of their final recordings in 1952.

As Jas Obrecht expertly delineates in his accompanying piece on the Big Three Trio in this issue, eight of these stunning tracks were recorded at a single session on December 30, 1947. Of *88 Boogie*, he states that this superbly swinging two-and-a-half-minute instrumental was a testament to their skills

and time spent in rehearsal. It's likely that the "rehearsals" may have been live in the clubs where such a short number as this—and the jaw-dropping *Big Three Stomp*—would have been signature break numbers, quick exercises for each member to cut loose on a solo before coming down off the bandstand, and yes, they were meant to be crowd-wowing showpieces for dancing, and they were subsequently jukebox hits.

This release features 28 tracks of the 54 total sides recorded by the Big Three between 1946 and 1952 (50 unique titles, with five unissued tracks). The chosen tracks represent the varied fare of the Big Three Trio's repertoire, covering folksy comedic lyricism (*Signifying Monkey*), traditional blues (*I'll Be Right Some Day*, *Just Can't Let Her Be*, *If the Sea Was Whiskey*), ethereal harmonies (*Since My Baby Gone*, *Money Tree Blues*, *I Feel Like Steppin' Out*, *You Don't Love Me No More*), tight musicianship (*Reno Blues*, *Appetite Blues*, *Violent Love*), plus swinging improvisations (*Big Three Boogie*, *Big Three Stomp*).

While they may have had little appeal to the jukebox and bar crowds of the latter 1950s who were moved by a bigger beat and amplification, the Big Three were, in their time, an extremely popular and successful nightclub act and jukebox sensation appealing to both black and white audiences.

The excellent quality of the remastered sound allows us to fully realize what superb musicians and song crafters they were. With tales of Dixon riding his bass, and performing other physical stunts with the Big Three, we can only hope for some film to turn up as well. In the meantime, this document of this seminal trio is more than sufficient proof of their importance, and one great listen.

—Justin O'Brien

## JIMMY NOLEN

### Strollin' With Nolen: Hot Guitar, 1953–1962

Jasmine – JASMCD 3135

Jimmy "Chank" Nolen earned both his nickname and his place in the pantheon of guitar gods from the distinctive "chicken scratch" rhythm that he famously employed in support of Johnny Otis' 1958 Capitol hit *Willie and the Hand Jive* and countless recordings with James Brown between 1965 and his death in 1983, including *Papa's Got a Brand New Bag*, *I Got You (I Feel Good)*, *There Was a Time*,