VARIOUS ARTISTS *Down Home Blues Detroit – “Detroit Special”* Wienerworld WNRCD 5095

How many of you know who “Renowned blues researcher and historian” Mike Rowe is? No, not that one! You should be acquainted with his work! Author of the superb book ***CHICAGO BREAKDOWN*** (a/k/a ***CHICAGO BLUES: THE CITY & THE MUSIC***), for one! He was also the long-time editor of the fabled ***BLUES UNLIMITED*** from the UK (without whose example this publication probably would not exist). And quietly, *sub rosa*, he’s probably the most knowledgeable bloke regarding the blues traditions of Detroit.

What we have here is a seriously fine 3 CD collection of 82 post-war blues recordings from The Motor City along with a 48-page booklet packed with info and photos. It is an important contribution to our knowledge of the music from that city in that time period put together over many years of work. Detroit never had an appreciable batch of successful and semi-successful record companies before Motown’s birth – there was no equivalent to Chess Records in Detroit, no VeeJay, no Cobra. Just some small, fly-by-night, usually short-lived labels (many of a vanity sort) cropped up from time to time. Much good music was recorded, but few (save John Lee Hooker) had appreciable sales or massive careers. Mike has gathered a set of rare post-war Detroit discs, some never issued before this. Here, then, are the early (often only) recordings made by 23 artists\* of a “down home” nature done mainly in Detroit in great sound for your delectation (and dancing).

Detroit was one of many Northern cities that acted as a job magnet for Blacks during and after WW II. In some ways there was more work available due to the automobile industries in the region. It was hard work, but the pay was way better than in the share-cropping South and housing could often be found more readily. 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, Los Angeles, San Francisco, a.o. had similar migratory activities in that war-time and post-war time period. Many of the Detroit musicians came from South Central states, folks who also peopled the South Side of Chicago with the same essential musical traditions. Detroit also pulled some from others came from more easterly states like AR and GA.

Obviously, Hooker is a part of it all and well represented by seven early and hard to find sides on small-time local labels (usually). Occasionally a Detroit disc was picked up by a larger record company, but few made big time success, even on better-known labels such as Duke, Excello, Chess, Dot, Checker or Chance!\*\* That lack of sales and subsequent rarity is no reflection on the quality of the music or the musicians, merely that their records did not find their market-place for whatever reasons. Thus it ever was (and is) in this business of music – talent is no requisite for success!

Disc One begins with Hooker, who was musically already the “John Lee” we know and love so well with all his quirks and notable characteristics in place in 1949 - rough, but in a nice way! Rowe has organized the CDs for flowing listening pleasure without academically cramming all the sides by one artist together in one place. This is for aurally savoring! [I especially like the pianism of Charlie Mills on many of the Baby Boy Warren sides.] The contents then give us essentially the “compleat” 78s and 45s by the likes of Baby Boy Warren, Eddie Burns, Bobo Jenkins, Calvin Frazier [Detroit’s equivalent to Robert Lockwood], L.C. Green, with nice helpings of Eddie Kirkland, Little Sonny Willis, a few Dr. Ross, and a mess of singles from a multitude of other lesser-known artists.

This set is proof that US urban areas in the late forties/early to late fifties were fecund with blues performers who were all worth recording. Of course, there were probably hundreds or more who did NOT get recorded of equal or greater ability! Such was the way things always went back in the day – being recorded was often an act of serendipitous dumb luck! The songs are mainly the usual ones bout love won, or love lost, or dancing, occasionally politics – some are solo, some with small bands, but all are top shelf quality.

It is a miracle what we DO know bout this music, but it will always be frustrating what we do not know. There have just not been enough Mike Rowes… or Bruce Bastins, or George Mitchells, or Axel Küstners, a.o., in this world to accumulate greater knowledge for us outsiders. The records are a great boon to us all, but they are NOT the be-all-to-end-all for the music. Folks made the music for other folks’ entertainment and recordings were the icing on the cake, but not the cake itself. Still, a package like this combining actual music with excellent scholarship gives us an extremely entertaining and educational picture of PART of the/a story. If you really care, you should grab this superior release from England… you won’t regret it one bit. Thanks, Mike!

PETER B. LOWRY Sydney, NSW August, 2016

\* artists are: John Lee Hooker, L.C. Green & Walter Mitchell, Baby Boy Warren, Bobo Jenkins, Calvin Frazier, John Brim, Clarence Posey, “Detroit Slim”, Eddie Burns, Sam Kelly, Martee Bradley, Harvey Hill, Jr., Henry Smith, James Walton, Earl Chatman, Detroit Count, Big Jack Reynolds, Little Sonny, Eddie Kirkland, Isaiah “Doctor” Ross, Bob Kelly.

\*\* labels are: Fortune, Palda, Gotham, Checker, Harvey, JVB, Dot, SRC, Chance, Chess, Fortune, Boxer, Bango, Sensation, Duke, Von, Lucky, DIR, Prize, Staff, Sampson, Drummond, Blue Lake, Excello.