

## **BLACK NOTES**

### **Harpo's Hangover**

**MIKE LEADBITTER**

"Lord, I wonder what's bin happenin'? Ain't nobody here but me. All these empty bottles on the table here — I know I didn't drink all this myself! I must have a blues hangover. What's this? My check! And I don't have change for a grasshopper...and that's two crickets. Oh, Oh... here comes trouble! Sent in for this doggie, but he ain't got no money. Look like he lost everything he ever had. Hey listen... hear me! I done give my baby 20 dollars for a Christmas present — all I got was a slice of jelly-cake ... and Sam, I laid that up! Now that's a whoop-jenny. Well, I believe I'll go on back on the stem now, with James, Rudolph and Tomcat...get my head bad again. Don't seem like nothin' goin' right for me today. All right, here I go...same old thing again. Look out now!"\*

Well, the man who said all that was Slim Harpo and Sam, James, Rudolph and Tomcat made up the band that laid down those solid rhythms behind the wailing harmonica and nasal vocals. Harpo died at the age of 46 on January 31st, 1970 and his reputation seems to have been buried with him in the cemetery at Port Allen, Louisiana, for songs like 'I'm A King Bee', 'I Got Love If You Want It', 'Rainin' In My Heart' and 'Shake Your Hips' — songs that once influenced everyone from the Rolling Stones on up — are now nothing but a memory.

At his funeral was Mrs. Lovell Moore, Harpo's wife, who once remarked, "My husband used to be as skinny as a rail, so when he got his first record in 1957 we called him Slim. The Harpo is for mouth-harp you know, with an 'o' on the end. My man did a little bit of everything before he became a singer, but he finally found what he wants to do most". But even that discovery came a little late.

Harpo did do a bit of everything before he became a record star. Born and raised James Moore, at Port Allen, in the parish of West Baton Rouge, he had little schooling and was forced to work at an early age when his parents died. His life as a field-hand and labourer introduced him to music, but it wasn't until he met Lightnin' Slim in the early 'fifties that his thoughts turned to playing harp as an alternative to breaking his back under the Louisiana sun.

Lightnin' was a relatively old man in 1954, when he cut a record for Jay Miller in "the rice capital of Louisiana", Crowley. One song, 'Bad Luck' became a local hit and he went on the road for the first time, often taking a 30 year old James Moore along as harmonica player. James suddenly needed a stage name, so he called himself Harmonica Slim, but in 1957 Lightnin' took him over to Crowley and everything changed.

Jay Miller liked James' harp playing, but hated his singing. He did, however, like the somewhat naughty song that James tried to interest him in. Getting Guitar Gable's little band into the studio they cut the boastful 'I'm a King Bee' for Excello, forcing James to sing while holding his nose. It was the curiously flat, nasal quality of the voice, coupled

with a hypnotic beat, that led to the king size success. Harmonica Slim became Slim Harpo and he really could sting!

Though 'King Bee' created a lot of excitement in England, it didn't really get anywhere in White America and Harpo had to wait another two years for his first, really big record. 'Rainin' In My Heart' was a sort of hillbilly blues that eventually made the U.S. Top 30, much to everyone's surprise, for it was nothing but sheer corn. Earlier sides like 'Blues Hang-Over', 'What A Dream' and 'Snoopin' Around' with their beautifully controlled harmonica solos and pounding Jimmy Reed-style beat, reeking of the Louisiana swamps, deserved more recognition.

But 'Rainin'" introduced Harpo to the world and while collectors strove to find out something about him he just vanished. A quarrel with Miller over royalties drove him to earth and after an illicit session for Imperial in New Orleans nothing more was heard until 1963 when he turned up in Crowley once again to cut new songs based on old themes. We go 'Buzzin', 'Little Queen Bee (Got A Brand New King)' and 'Still Rainin' In My Heart'. Musically all were good, but the general lack of ideas seemed to indicate that Harpo's lost years would only lead to the end of a promising career.

Another two years of nothing were to pass by and then, in 1965, he struggled on top again. By using a bayou-beat, as he had at the beginning with 'I Got Love If You Want It', developing a more contemporary guitar sound and allowing himself to sing softly and more natural, Harpo turned in such ever-popular dance numbers as 'Baby Scratch My Back', 'Shake Your Nips' and 'I'm Yow Bread Maker Baby', while producing superb, urban blues like 'I'm Gonna Miss You' and 'Midnight Blues'. Somehow Harpo and his band had got themselves up to date with a vengeance while retaining an essential individuality that made them more than just another blues band.

And things were to improve. 1967 saw a final break with Miller and Crowley and a new contract with Excello Records in Nashville. For the first time, Harpo was his own man and 'Tip On In', yet another good-times special, shot him into the B.B. King bracket in terms of popularity outside the Black market. At the time of his death he was at his peak as an entertainer with several albums to his credit and a string of singles. The inevitable: British tour was also planned thanks to the enthusiastic support of all his work by the, London based Blue Horizon, company (now sadly defunct). However, the wailing and: gnashing of teeth that greeted the deaths of pop super-stars like Joplin or Hendrix were not to be his. He went almost as quietly as he arrived, unknown as a person to most of his fans, and with total success still hovering just around the corner.

Slim Harpo saw 62 titles from among the many he recorded issued between 1957 and 1970,; of which most appeared, in one form or another, on Blue Horizon in this country. Though all his Excello albums are currently available in America, British reissues are rapidly vanishing from the catalogue. The "Tip On In" set still survives on President (PTL 1017), there are a few tracks on Blue Horizon's "Excello Story" (available via Polydor), but the fate of the rest is uncertain although most specialist shops appear to have a ready stock of Harpo deletions.

Hopefully, Polydor, who now have the Excello catalogue, will decide to issue a well-thought-out selection of his best material in the near future, for Harpo deserves some sort of a memorial. He may not have been a folk-poet or a true country bluesman, but he was an innovator and let it rock in a manner that many have tried to imitate, but few have ever got close to recreating. A blues hangover takes an awful lot-of getting rid of. Perhaps Slim Harpo's final buzz may still be heard in years to come.

*\* "Blues Hang-Over" by Moore & West. Lyric reproduced by courtesy of Excellorec Music.*

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