

## **WALTER 'SHAKEY' HORTON Neil Slaven**

Until October 11th of this year, Walter Horton was one of the cherished 'names' of blues discographers and collectors. His work, mainly as an accompanist, is treated with awe and excitement. With Sonny Boy gone, previously the only one to equal him on the harmonica, Horton must surely be the champion of the blues harp. His staggering instrumental "Easy", on Sun 180, points to this fact, as do his accompaniments to such singers as Johnny Shines, Willie Nix, Muddy Waters, Jimmy Rogers and Tampa Red. It is paradoxical that the man who produces such virile music should in his appearance look so physically broken. Life has not used Walter Horton well during his 47 years, but he is proud of what he has accomplished in that time, and this proudly defiant manner is echoed by his unique mastery of the harmonica.

Walter Horton was born on a farm near Horn Lake, Mississippi on April 6th, 1918. When he was one year old the family, including older brother Albert and sisters, Katy, Maggie and Bernice, moved to Memphis. The first musical instrument that Walter tried to learn was the piano, in this case a very expensive one bought specially for him. But this was forsaken when his father brought home a harmonica. Soon Walter was accompanying the blues records on the family gramophone. Soon after buying Walter's first harmonica, his father had died, so, after two years of practice, Walter decided to help with the upkeep of the family. And so he took his harp into the streets of Memphis, earning up to eight dollars a day, which he took home to his mother. The small boy and his harp soon became well-known to the other blues singers and street musicians, some of them young like himself. It was here that Walter struck up friendship with Floyd Jones, Johnny Shines, Jimmy DeBerry and a host of other men resident in or passing through Memphis. His reputation brought him to the notice of Will "Son Brimmer" Shade, who invited Walter to record with his Memphis Jug Band. Walter remembers little of the occasion (he was only nine at the time), but does recall he recorded a version of "Kansas City Blues" with Shade, Dud Crawley and Charley, the "Ukelele Kid". This disagrees entirely with the Godrich/Dixon Blues Book - another mystery probably never to be solved.

As he grew older, Walter graduated from the streets to the juke joints and bars, and to dances both in and around Memphis. At one of these, in Handy's Park on the corner of Beale and 3rd, a certain Nat D. Williams saw Walter and suggested that he enter the local amateur talent contest at the Palace Theatre on Beal Street. Winning his own contest J Walter and Williams stayed at the Theatre for the next three years. But the itinerant spirit of the other bluesmen with whom he played got into his head and one day Walter took off for New Orleans. Immediately on arrival, he boarded a banana boat and worked his way back to Memphis. Over the next few years he undertook several other treks around the Delta country, one of them in the company of Floyd Jones and Big Joe Williams. During this time, Walter claims to have cut the first "Baby Please Don't Go" with Big Joe for Bluebird, although this once again disagrees with existing information.

Returning to Memphis, Walter got a job hauling ice in the daytime, playing for country dances in the evenings with such people as Willie Love and Jack Kelly, the latter also having Will Batts and Dan Sing in his band. In 1938 Walter states that he recorded with

the midget blues singer, Little Buddy Doyle, remembering two titles, "Grief Will Kill You" and "Workin' With My Coffin On My Back". Walter worked with Kelly for eight years and then quit music altogether, devoting himself to the bitter task of hauling ice. This proved even more taxing on his health, which had never been good, until he was forced to return to playing his harp for a living. He got Jobs working at the Cheska (?) Hotel and the Cane Cotton Hotel, mainly as a solo artist. Once again his reputation soon spread throughout Memphis, securing him a daily programme on the local radio station, WDIA, along with Willie Love, Joe Willie Wilkins and Willie Nix. Sam Phillips heard Walter and invited him to record with one of his boyhood friends, Jimmy DeBerry and Joe Hill Louis. The first two were sold to Chess Records, the next four (using the name, Mumbles) to the Bihari Brothers, and the last two on his own Sun label. Walter also played harp on Willie Nix's recording of "Seems Like A Million Years". He states that he and Nix alternated on the vocal, claiming that the two of them could not be told apart.

In 1952 Muddy Waters, through Eddie Taylor, sent for Walter to replace Little Walter Jacobs in his band, which consisted of Muddy, Otis Spann, Jimmy Rogers and Elgin Edmonds. As a member of Muddy's band, Walter appeared, then and later, on several of Muddy's records. The ones he remembers in this instance were "Hoochie Coochie Man", "Rock Me", and an unissued title, "Going Back To The Army". Walter stayed with the band until his health failed once more. After a brief rest, he formed his own band, consisting of Johnny Shines on guitar, Johnny Young on mandolin and Kansas City Red on drums. They had a full-time job, seven nights and three days a week at 1145 West Madison. While this band was together, Shines and Walter recorded for JOB (incidentally, the initials stand for the owners, St. Louis Jimmy and Joe Brown), the majestic "Evening Sun" and "Brutal Hearted Woman".

This band did not last long and Walter then enlisted the help of Johnny Temple and Joe Clark, both guitarists, and drummer Robert Whitehead, to play at the Cosy Inn, on the corner of 43rd and State. Here he was more successful and the band stayed at the Inn for three and a half years. It then transferred to Turner's Blue Lounge at 4012 Indiana, where it resided for another three years, finally breaking up in 1961. Then Walter once again retired from the blues world, doing little but play for his own pleasure, until recently he began to take part in blues sessions and festivals around the Chicago area, which in turn has brought him to Europe, where he is thrilling audiences with what seems to be such "Easy" playing.

Walter Horton is a strange person to talk to; his eyes have a wild, faraway look which makes one believe him when he states that his mind isn't on it". In the inevitable comparison with Sonny Boy Williamson, I think it will be found that though they share(d) a common desire to shun the world, Walter does so willingly, for no other reason than that of his incredulity of the world around him. The ravages of a hard life have added ten years to his forty-seven, but deep in those wild eyes lies the spark which explodes into vivid life whenever he picks up his harmonica.

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