

**“...RAMBLIN’**  
**by David Evans**

Around the end of 1963 I purchased a copy of one of the greatest blues albums ever issued, **The Mississippi Blues, 1927-1940**, Origin Jazz Library 5. The album contained two tracks each by Bukka White, Willie Brown, Kid Bailey, Robert Wilkins, Mississippi John Hurt, William Harris, Skip James, and Son House. Hurt had just recently been rediscovered, and within a few months of this album's release White, Wilkins, James and House would join him in the ranks of the rediscovered. These five, along with Sleepy John Estes, would form the core of the Deep South blues legends that brought the greatness of early country blues to new audiences at festivals, concerts, and coffee houses.

But what about the other three artists on OJL-5? Son House told us that Willie Brown died in the early 1950's. This left William Harris and Kid Bailey. Both have eluded all attempts at constructing a biography and thus remaining among the more intriguing names in the country blues pantheon. This column will be an attempt to solve the identity of Kid Bailey. I'm prompted to make this attempt after receiving a copy of another superb reissue product, this time a CD, **Masters of the Delta Blues: The Friends of Charlie Patton**, Yazoo 2002. This disc contains six of the tracks that were on OJL-5, including the two by Kid Bailey, but with their sound much enhanced.

Those of us who heard Kid Bailey on OJL-5 were intrigued by the many points of correspondence in music and lyrics to various recordings by Willie Brown, Charley Patton, and Tommy Johnson. Many researchers, myself included, asked Son House if he had ever heard of Kid Bailey and played the two pieces for him. The name didn't ring a bell with Son, but he insisted without wavering that it was the voice of his good friend and partner Willie Brown. Nobody at the time put too much stock in Son's opinion. The voices sounded different. Brown's was rough, gravelly, and forced; Bailey's was lighter and rather airy, suggesting that the nickname "Kid" befit him. Furthermore, the Kid Bailey session took place eight months before Willie Brown recorded under his own name. Why would Brown have used a pseudonym at his first session? Things have stood this way up to the present.

Researchers and writers have noted the similarities in the music and lyrics of Brown and Bailey but have generally assumed that Bailey was some younger associate or disciple of Brown. Persistent attempts by Gayle Wardlow, myself, and other researchers working in Mississippi to turn up information on Kid Bailey have resulted in nothing that even resembles a biography. People sometimes respond to the name, saying he was from this or that Delta town, that they remember seeing him play here or there. But nobody seems to have really known him, been related to him, played music with him, or had much of any association with him. He is some sort of shadow figure, flitting around the Delta blues scene of the 1920's and 1930's with his guitar, perhaps "the kid" that sat at the feet of the masters and got one fleeting chance to lay down two tracks at the Peabody Hotel in Memphis in 1929 before drifting back into obscurity.

I more or less accepted this standard view of Kid Bailey and have expressed my acceptance in print over the years, but I've never been quite satisfied with it. The Bailey tracks are too good, too perfectly realized, to be by some non-entity. If his music is so close to that of Brown, Patton, and Tommy Johnson, surely one of their many associates would have known Bailey and been able to supply a convincing piece of biographical data. Upon relistening to the Bailey tracks on the new Yazoo CD, I am now prepared to agree with Son House in stating that Kid Bailey was none other than Willie Brown. I believe that the various informants who have strained to recall a Kid Bailey over the years were mistakenly remembering some other Kid or some other Bailey or were simply trying to accommodate a persistent researcher. (Everyone who has done fieldwork has run into such experiences.)

The Kid Bailey recordings, *Mississippi Bottom Blues* and *Rowdy Blues*, were made in later September, 1929, during a lengthy blues recording session at the Peabody Hotel in Memphis that probably lasted several days and which resulted in releases on the Brunswick and Vocalion labels. All of the artists were based in Memphis or northern Mississippi, except for Tampa Red and Georgia Tom, who were brought into town from Chicago for a guest appearance on a record entitled Jim Jackson's Jamboree. The Kid Bailey recordings were among the last in the session, following an unissued track by Joe Calicott and preceding two unissued tracks by Jim Jackson. There is, however, a missing master number before the two Bailey tracks and two missing numbers after them. The Bailey pieces have two guitars, the one with the higher pitched part obviously played by the singer. I will try to point out systematically the striking similarities which in the aggregate lead me to the belief that Kid Bailey is Willie Brown.

Let's look first at the voices. On listening to Willie Brown's *M & O Blues* and *Future Blues*, both recorded on May 28, 1930, about eight months after the Kid Bailey session, one is struck by the rough, gravelly quality of the singer's voice, particularly on *Future Blues*. The increasing roughness in Brown's voice might be correlated with what happened in the gap of four missing master numbers between *M & O Blues* and *Future Blues*. Son House has stated that liquor flowed in prodigious quantities at this Paramount session in Grafton, Wisconsin. Possibly Brown was the type of singer whose voice was affected by increasing consumption of alcohol. His only other extant vocal effort, *Make Me a Pallet on the Floor*, recorded at a 1941 Library of Congress session at Lake Cormorant, Mississippi, contains a fair amount of rasp as well. It's unlikely that much, if any, liquor was available at this session (Son House mentioned only Coca Cola), but one has to consider the possible cumulative effect of eleven more years of drinking. Whatever the case, the important point is the increasing degree of rasp between Brown's two 1930 vocal efforts, brought on perhaps by increased alcohol consumption and increased strain of singing over the course of the session. Kid Bailey impresses the listener as having a lighter, breathier, and perhaps younger voice. But listen to the second of his two recordings, *Rowdy Blues*. Especially in the last half of this piece one hears that same snarling rasp that can be heard in Willie Brown's recordings. The degree of rasp in *Rowdy Blues* is just about the same as that heard in Brown's first 1930 recording, *M & O Blues*. Keep in mind that the Bailey recordings were made in the Peabody Hotel, one of the

finest hotels in America at the time and catering only to white guests. It's unlikely that black musicians would have been allowed or would have wanted to recreate a barrelhouse atmosphere there. There is, I think, sufficient similarity in the quality of the voices of Brown and Bailey to advance the hypothesis that they are the same person. Add to this the similarity in vocal range of their four pieces. Bailey's *Mississippi Bottom Blues* spans an octave between two E flats. His *Rowdy Blues* runs from G up to E. Brown's *M & O Blues* runs from E flat up to D, while his *Future Blues* runs from F sharp up to F. Given the differences in the melodies and the use of a capo on Bailey's recordings and possibly on those of Brown, this evidence suggests that Bailey/Brown were comfortable singing in a range of an octave or slightly less, with the high end of the range between D and F. Brown's *Make Me a Pallet on the Floor* also has a range of an octave, but it is between two A notes. It's possible that his normal range lowered over the course of eleven years, but he actually sounds like he is straining somewhat to sing this low. The song is a well known folk blues that W.C. Handy recalled hearing in the Delta almost forty years previously. It may have been requested by folklorist Alan Lomax and may not have been typical of Brown's current repertoire. It is, in fact, quite dissimilar in its guitar work to the accompaniments Brown performed at the same session to blues by Son House, Fiddlin' Joe Martin, and Leroy Williams.

There are also some striking similarities in the melodies of the Bailey and Brown recordings. One is the curious practice of starting the opening stanza on the second line, which occurs on both Bailey pieces and on Brown's *Future Blues*. On all of the Bailey and Brown pieces of 1929 and 1930 there is a strong tendency to use close variants of the same melody in all three lines of the stanza. In fact, the same variant melody is used in both phrases of each line. Three of these blues, the two by Brown plus Bailey's *Rowdy Blues*, all share the same melody in variant form. The basic phrase contour begins on a high note at the major sixth, sometimes straining toward the minor seventh. Sometimes this is preceded by a lower note or two at the tonic or third, depending on the number of syllables in the verse. From the high note, which always falls on the second and/or third of eight beats in the measure, the melody falls to the tonic note, passing through the fifth and the third, all within the first measure. A variant of this melodic contour occurs in the second phrase, which always falls entirely within the second measure of each line. Bailey's *Mississippi Bottom Blues* uses a different melodic contour, one that is quite similar to that heard on *High Water Everywhere* and some other recordings of Charley Patton, the mentor and partner of Willie Brown for some twenty years prior to the recording of these pieces. The 1929 and 1930 Bailey and Brown pieces, then, are remarkably similar in phrasing, in the basic conceptual patterns of melodies, and in three of the four cases in the melodies themselves.

The four pieces from 1929 and 1930 do not share any lyrics in common, but Brown's 1941 recording of *Make Me a Pallet on the Floor* proves to be the lyric "missing link." In stanzas three and four of this piece Brown sings:

3. Now I love you, babe, 'cause you so nice and brown. (3)  
'Cause you tailor made, and you ain't no hand-me-down.

4. Now I love you now, tell the world I do. (3)  
I don't love no one, babe, like I love you.

Kid Bailey's *Rowdy Blues* contains similar verses in stanzas 2 and 5:

2. And I love you, babe, and I tell the world I do. (2)  
I don't love nobody in this whole round world but you.
5. And I love you, baby; you so nice and brown. (2)  
'Cause you put it up solid so it won't come down.

All of these verses have a traditional quality, but the fact that songs by Bailey and Brown both contain a variant pair of stanzas seems more than coincidental, especially when viewed in conjunction with the other evidence linking them.

Finally, we come to the guitar playing. Here we are fortunate to have additional examples by Willie Brown, for he served as a guitar accompanist to four pieces by Charley Patton in 1930, three pieces by Son House, two by Fiddlin' Joe Martin, and one by Leroy Williams in 1941. On most of these he: simply plays bass notes and reinforces the rhythm, but on a couple pieces he plays a fully developed guitar part one of these is his accompaniment to Patton's *Moon Going Down*, where he plays a guitar part featuring moveable seventh chords in an A position. Son House called this guitar part "A Down the Staff," and performed a version that he said he learned from Willie Brown. House's version is close but still noticeably different from Brown's, especially in accenting and phrasing, so that no one would say the two were by the same player. Another variant occurs in Tommy Johnson's *Big Fat Mama Blues*, very possibly learned from Brown also, but again there are noticeable differences. In Kid Bailey's *Mississippi Bottom Blues*, however, Brown's part occurs practically note for note. (The Bailey piece is in the key of C but played in an A position with the guitar probably capoed at the third fret) The correspondence is so close that almost any objective listener would say they were played by the same person. On Bailey's other piece, *Rowdy Blues*, there is another interesting correspondence with Brown's playing. Most of *Rowdy Blues* features variants of a responsorial guitar figure used by Charley Patton in *Pony Blues* and elsewhere. It is played in a E position. (Bailey is in the key of G, again playing in E position and probably capoed at the third fret.) But in Bailey's second line he duplicates the second guitar line of Willie Brown's *M & O Blues*, again virtually note for note.

The great number of similarities and musical and lyrical correspondences that I've noted here lead me to think that Kid Bailey and Willie Brown are one and the same. If so, this still leaves the nagging question of why Brown would use a pseudonym on his first session. My best guess is that Brown was already contracted to record with Paramount Records through the agency of his long time partner Charley Patton, who had himself recorded for Paramount in June, 1929. If so, Brown would have been forced to record under a pseudonym for Brunswick/Vocalion.

One additional bit of information provides a hint at the circumstances of the Bailey session and the possible identity of the second guitarist on the two Kid Bailey tracks. Many years ago I applied to the Copyright Office of the Library of Congress for copies of the lead sheets for *Rowdy Blues* and *Mississippi Bottom Blues* that were submitted by the State Street Music Publishing Company of Chicago in January, 1930. The sheets were prepared by a James Alston in a piano arrangement. (Could this be pianist James Alsten who accompanied Sadie McKinney and Arah Moore on their 1927 Victor recordings in Memphis?) As transcriptions of Kid Bailey's lyrics and melodies they are wretched pieces of work. The interesting thing about these sheets, however, is the composer credits. *Rowdy Blues* is credited to a Bob-Jones, while *Mississippi Bottom Blues* is credited to Kid McCoy! Other registrations of Brunswick/Vocalion material from this period submitted by Alston have incorrect composers listed. Dan Stewart's *New Orleans Blues* is so credited to the mysterious Robert Jones, Robert Willkins' *Long Train* is credited to Kid Bailey, and Charlie McCoy's *Mississippi Blues* is credited to a Jim Smith. McCoy's *It Ain't No Good*, however, is credited to Kid McCoy. All of this hints at a possible connection between Charlie McCoy and Kid Bailey. McCoy had made his first recordings under his own name earlier in the same Brunswick/Vocalion session that included the Kid Bailey recordings. He had started playing music professionally in Vicksburg and Jackson while still a teenager and was the younger brother of another famous bluesman, Memphis Minnie's husband Joe McCoy. Perhaps Charlie McCoy was the one who supplied the "Kid" in Kid Bailey. I would like to propose him as a likely candidate for the second guitarist on the Bailey tracks. This guitarist plays mostly bass notes. The playing on *Rowdy Blues* is more developed, and here one can at times hear guitar figures that sound like some of those that Charlie McCoy played on his 1928 accompaniment to Tommy Johnson's *Maggie Campbell Blues*. I'm not certain of this identification, however. Son House thought the second guitarist might be Charley Patton. This is a possibility, since Patton and Brown had been partners of long standing. Joe McCoy might be another possibility, as he was a skilled accompanist like his brother Charlie. Even Memphis Minnie is a possibility, as she was at some stage in her career a girl friend and playing partner of Willie Brown, as Fiddlin' Joe Martin told me in 1967. Minnie herself was originally known as Kid Douglas (her actual surname before marriage). When she married Joe McCoy, could she have become Kid McCoy before she settled into her identity as Memphis Minnie? Maybe even Robert Wilkins is a candidate, since his *Long Train* was copyrighted in Kid Bailey's name. Wilkins had already recorded at this Brunswick/Vocalion session. There is a strong likelihood that Joe McCoy recorded at this session also, using the pseudonym of Joe Williams, with Memphis Minnie as the second guitarist.

Let me add a couple of final notes to this clouded situation. The fact that the Kid Bailey recordings occur between ones by Joe Calicott and Jim Jackson may also strengthen the case for Bailey being Willie Brown. Calicott was from Nesbit, Mississippi, just a few miles south of Memphis, and Jackson was from a few miles further south in Hernando. Willie Brown was living at the time in or near Robinsonville, which is just a few miles to the west of Nesbit and Hernando. It would have been no trouble for a driver to pick up all three artists in one short trip and bring them to the Peabody Hotel in Memphis for the session.

Adding (I hope) the two Kid Bailey tracks to the pitifully small recorded legacy of the great Willie Brown might prompt the question of whether there are any other recordings of Willie Brown. There are, of course, two Paramount titles yet to surface, *Kicking in My Sleep Blues* and *Window Blues*, and a track titled *Grandma Blues* is assigned a master number that falls in the middle of Willie Brown's Paramount session. Maybe these tracks will turn up someday, as have tracks in recent years by Patton, House and Tommy Johnson. Another possibility is the mysterious William Brown, who recorded in 1942 for the Library of Congress at Sadie Beck's Plantation in Arkansas, more or less across the Mississippi River from Memphis. William Brown recorded three absolutely superb blues at this session and played second guitar behind Willie "61" Blackwell on two others. The three William Brown tracks and one of the Blackwell tracks are issued on the Library of Congress albums AFS LS9, **Negro Blues and Hollers**. These tracks certainly live up to Willie Brown's reputation as a great bluesman, but they fail to exhibit any points of musical or lyric correspondence with Willie Brown. Furthermore, Willie Brown's voice has a light, nasal quality not heard in the Willie Brown or Kid Bailey recordings, and there is no trace of the characteristic snarling rasp of Willie Brown. I'd love to believe that William and Willie were the same person, but I can't without further evidence. Perhaps Alan Lomax will enlighten us in his forthcoming book on Mississippi blues.

I've cited a great amount of material as evidence to try to prove that Kid Bailey was really Willie Brown. I welcome the comments of others who have information or ideas on this matter.

Dr David Evans is Professor of Music at Memphis State University, where he directs graduate degree programs in Ethnomusicology and produces records for the University's High Water Label. He is author of **Tommy Johnson** and **Big Road Blues**

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