

an album of blues from Maxwell St., Chicago

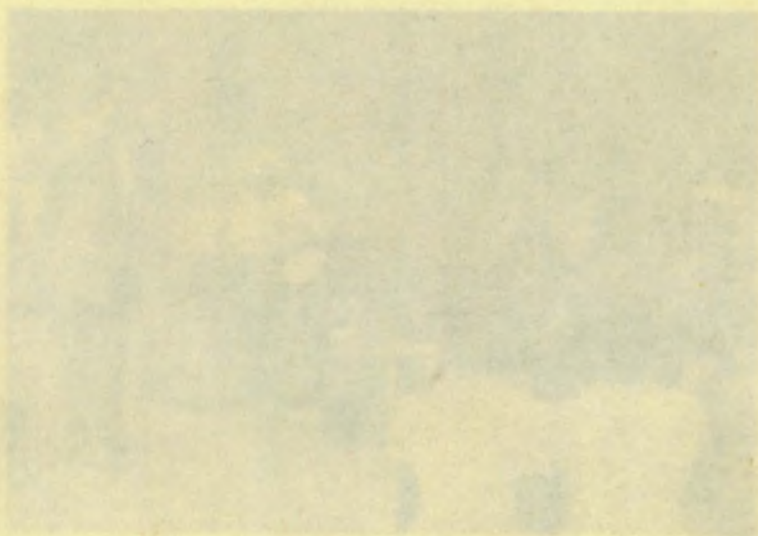


Blind Arvella Grey
King David
Blind James Brewer
Daddy Stovepipe

HERITAGE RECORDS
36a BROOK GREEN
LONDON W.6.

Cover : Blind James Brewer on Maxwell Street, with Gospel group
(Photo: Paul Oliver)

Chicago, Ill. (AP) - Blind James Brewer, a blind street musician, was seen on Maxwell Street in Chicago, Ill., on Monday.



Blind James Brewer
with Gospel group
on Maxwell Street
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Side one: (a) BLIND ARVELLA GREY (vcl,gtr)
(b) BLIND JAMES BREWER (vcl,gtr)

1. CORINNE, CORINNA (a)
2. I'M SO GLAD GOOD WHISKEY'S BACK (b)
3. HAVE MERCY, Mr. PERCY (a)
4. RAILROAD WORK SONGS & JOHN HENRY (a)
5. HAVE MERCY, Mr. PERCY #2 (a)

Session organised by Paul Oliver
Recording by John Steiner

Side two: (a) KING DAVID (vcl,hca)
(b) DADDY STOVEPIPE (vcl,gtr,hca)

1. FANNIE MAE (a)
2. SUGAR MAMA (a)
3. GOOD MORNIN', LITTLE SCHOOLGIRL (a)
4. .38 PISTOL (a)
5. 44 BLUES (a)
6. SOUTH OF THE BORDER (b)
7. TENNESSEE WALTZ (b)
8. OLD TIME RELIGION (b)
9. THE MONKEY & THE BABOON (b)

Sessions organised & recorded by Bjorn Englund & Donald R. Hill.

All recorded July, 1960, Chicago, Ill.

Cover photograph: Blind Grey, corner Maxwell & Halsted (Paul Oliver)
Editing: Bill Leader
Cover: Graham Russell

At 1330 on South Halsted Street there is a minor intersection. The corners are crowded with people and temporary stalls at any time, but especially on Sunday, for the narrow road that cuts across Halsted is Maxwell and on Sunday morning the Maxwell Street Market is at its busiest. Maxwell Street is at once a sad and an exciting place. The walls are blackened and the paint has peeled off the ill-fitting doors; garbage lies thick in the gutters and the narrow side alleys are littered with the refuse of years. To the West, the street loses its identity in the depressing anonymity of the bleak, poverty-struck roads that cross it; to the East it is an almost impassable confusion of market stalls that suddenly give way to a vast, horizonless plain of mud and rubble and debris where an Expressway will sweep Southwards in the undated future. Amongst the rough-clad women who gropethrough the piles of discarded clothes and the tough, unsmiling men who pick their way through the wires, cables and electrical parts laid out haphazardly on the trestles - amongst the loiterers, the occasional sightseers and the pickpockets - are the beggars, as many as there are to be found in the shadows of the churches in a Southern Italian town, or along the shrouded streets of an Arab "Quarter". Beggars - but with one striking, exhilarating difference. These are not wheedling seekers after alms with cries of "baksheesh" or "Gawd Bless yer, guv" but proud men, creative artists, singers of the blues who accept the dimes and quarters as tokens of esteem for their playing and singing.

If the blues in general has tended to become more sophisticated in recent years Maxwell Street exists as a living storehouse of the folk blues, the blues of the rambling man. And in its few hundred yards is pictured the life story of the blues singer of the streets, from the children who stand wide-eyed close to the singers of their choice to the young men who are trying their luck and their talent on the critical audience of the market; from the tough music and manner of the street singer of many years to the fading abilities of the old men who have played in the street in all weathers for more years than they can count.

The introduction to the blues of Maxwell Street was salutary. Descending from the Halsted streetcar brought us within ear-shot of the powerful voice and thunderous guitar of Blind Arvella Grey who was shouting his blues to an unseen audience, tin cup on his chest and white stick held against a sewer vent on the sidewalk's edge so as to orientate himself. The first two fingers of his left hand were missing and his third finger was sheathed in glass bottle-neck which he slid up the strings of his old National steel guitar, picking and plucking rapidly with the case-hardened fingers of his right hand the while. A burly, muscular man he reinforced the impression of great physical strength and fitness with the ferocity of his blues singing.

In contrast to Blind Grey were a number of groups of singers who lined the street in small bands, a lead singer and guitarist being supported by a washboard player, another guitarist, even a rough-hewn trumpeter. Seated on a couple of boxes on a street corner were two young blues singers who took turns to accompany each other. One was Maxwell Street Jimmy, who played a fast and highly rhythmic guitar in which the influence of John Lee Hooker could be heard, though he had much to give that was essentially his own, whilst his companion answered only to the name of King David - playing his harp with an ability that could well be the envy of many a better known harmonica-player, and singing in a gritty, deep voice that seemed belied by his amiable features. Another nearby corner was occupied by a venerable singer three times King David's age, a veritable one-man band who had a harmonica on a frame round his neck and who pounded a cheap guitar on which a length of iron had been tied with a piece of string to act as a capo. Dressed in a royal blue jacket with gold epaulettes, the parade dress of some forgotten lodge which he had probably picked up on this self-same market and in his shiny-peaked cap Daddy Stovepipe was a diminutive but striking character who drew the attention of the passing crowd.

Above the sounds of the many groups of blues singers could be heard a more rocking beat and the volume of many voices singing verses and responses of Gospel songs. In nearby Sangaman Street, within sight of the store-front "Chapel of Hope", an impassioned jack-leg preacher was leading a choir: old and middle-aged men and women beating drums and tambourines and playing guitars. Amongst these could be heard accomplished guitar-playing with more than a shade of the blues in his phrasing of a blind, straw-hatted man seated on a folding-stool: Blind James Brewer. Near him an earnest seventeen-year old boy named Froine, his lead-boy, kept watchful eyes on him whilst he sang the words of the gospel songs. Like a number of other street guitarists on Maxwell, Blind James Brewer was playing, surprisingly, an electric guitar. The owners of the houses that lined the road hired out extensions from their light installations for a dollar a day to the performers below, and as the dimes clattered in the tin cups and plates it was not long before the cost of the hire was met.

The blues singers of Maxwell Street are many, and many are transitory figures, here today, hopping a freight tomorrow. Amongst the best and most familiar figures on the Street are Blind Grey, Blind Brewer, King David and Daddy Stovepipe, and these are the singers who are featured on this documentary of one of the most colourful Negro streets in the United States.

At the time Blind Grey was living in a tall apartment house on State Street which is already demolished. The ancient and treacherous unlit staircase led to the top of the building where in bare but tidy rooms Blind Grey lived with the position of every item firmly fixed in his mind so that he could retain his independence. Born in 1906 in a small Texas township not far from Galveston he was a member of a desperately poor family. When a small child he was set to work on a farm and when his mother died in childbirth

in 1918 he left the large family and rambled from plantation to plantation. His early life was rough, tough and dissolute; he was, he admits, "a roughneck all the way round". He took every form of manual work, from raising tents for a circus to laying track on a section gang. For a time he peddled dope and in the worst years of the depression was not above sticking-up filling stations and even a bank for his money. An inveterate gambler he experienced many changes of fortune, living easy when he was winning and working on the railroads, riding the freight trains when times were bad. Then in 1930 on September 13th he returned to his woman's home in Peoria, Illinois and knocked on the door. Waiting outside he struck a match on the glass of the window to light a cigarette. It was the last thing he ever saw, for his woman's lover blasted away at the reflection on the glass and Arvella Grey lost his sight and two fingers. Stumbling out into the street he tried to commit suicide in sheer despair but the police frustrated his attempt. After being unconscious for two weeks he resigned himself to his blindness and decided to learn to play the guitar so that he could earn a living by begging. For a few years it was a life of near starvation for he could not manage the fingering with his maimed hand but another blind guitarist showed him how to play in Sevastapol tuning with a bottle-neck on his finger. And so, for the past thirty years he has travelled through the Central states, playing and singing his blues and the songs that he learned in earlier years, the work songs he used to sing as a gandy-dancer on a section gang. Amongst these are the work song included here and the superb version of John Henry which must be one of the most forceful on record. For Blind Grey, singing endlessly on street corners, in Greyhound buses and street-cars, his blues are not neatly parcelled in complete compositions but are one, endless song, a continuous commentary on his life, spiced with an ironic humour and satirical appeals to "Mister Percy" - the white man on the street. Recording a man with a stentorian voice and a guitar that can be heard above the rattle and clamour of Chicago's traffic presents many problems to which an echoing location added further difficulty. If these were not entirely overcome the essential dynamicism of Blind Grey's blues which so reflect the man has been preserved in these recordings.

Frequent companion to Blind Grey and by no means solely dedicated to Gospel music, Blind James Brewer was present at the session and recorded a couple of numbers including I'm So Glad Good Whiskey's Back, a tribute to Peetie Wheatstraw whose influence he freely acknowledges. A few years younger than Blind Grey, James Brewer was born in a "flag-stop" town in Mississippi and was almost totally blind from birth. He can see a little from the corner of one eye and says "I never did think too much about my affliction, I've just been thankful for the sight that God gave me." His incapacity kept him from many of the customary forms of Southern labour and there was little attention or assistance for a blind child. He had a yearning for a guitar and his father bought him one. Unable to play it he smashed it against a tree in a fit of anger - and immediately began to save up for another. His second guitar he traded for a shotgun, though it was pride of possession alone for he could not use the weapon. He could not leave music alone and with his third guitar determined to concentrate on playing blues and dance

music for country suppers and Gospel music for the church. Later he wandered slowly northwards, first to Memphis, then to St. Louis. For some years he settled in East St. Louis where he joined many blues singers and admired in particular William Bunch - Peetie Wheatstraw - who was celebrated for both his guitar and his piano playing. Later James Brewer moved to Chicago, where he readily found work in the store-front churches and by playing on the streets, sometimes in the company of Blind Grey. Living in Sangaman Street just off Maxwell he has found that his requirements are few, and most of his life is centred about his guitar and his music. Blind James Brewer punctuates his verses with spoken comments and he shares with Grey a sardonic sense of humour. In Good Whiskey his flowing Mississippi style guitar playing is well exemplified.

King David appears to be in his late twenties or early thirties. A taciturn man, he is reluctant to talk about himself or to admit to any other name than that by which he is popularly known on Maxwell Street. He is proud of being "the King", even if self-styled, and is a dramatic and moving blues harmonicist. Living with his large family he apparently obtains casual work in addition to playing blues, though it is clear that he lives mainly for his music. With eyes closed and fingers fluttering, cupping and muting over the small "harp" he either alternates vocal and instrumental line in the manner of Sonny Boy Williamson or accompanies Maxwell Street Jimmy's singing. It had been the intention of Don Hill and Bjorn Englund, who recorded King David, to have him play with one of the several Maxwell Street groups but in spite of arrangements to this effect assembling the group proved impossible. Equally impossible was a joint recording of Jimmy and King David, for the former's mother refused to have "sinful music" recorded in her home. Eventually King David was recorded solo in his own home in a session which fully demonstrated the remarkable ability of the street singer. For a man who has no accompaniment other than his own harmonica King David sings blues verses of unusual length but the dovetailing of instrument and vocal set against the regular beat of his foot gives unity to his blues, of which Fannie Mae (Don't Start Me To Talkin') and Sugar Mama are original examples.

Most elderly of the Market's entertainers is Daddy Stovepipe, the only one to have appeared previously on record. His real name is Johnny Watson but he has been known as Stovepipe for longer than he can recall. Stovepipe claims to have been born in 1870 though he is a singularly sprightly nonagenarian. Coming from Mobile, Alabama he travelled throughout the South as an itinerant street singer, taking work as a field hand when he felt so inclined. In 1928 he was recorded with "Whistling Pete" in Birmingham Alabama for Gennett and a couple of years later he made a number of sides in Memphis, Tennessee for Vocalion and Bluebird with his wife Sarah Watson, known as Mississippi Sarah". For a time they lived in Greenville, Mississippi but in 1937 Sarah died and Stovepipe was on the road again. He went South to Mexico and worked along the Gulf Coast, playing with zydeco bands in Galveston and Houston. The man who made the exciting recordings of Sundown Blues and Jail Cell Blues some thirty years ago is now old, and the blues are almost forgotten. His recordings of South of the Border and Monkey and the Baboon give only a hint of his former abilities but the spirit is

still present and the blue notes whine on the rusty guitar strings. It is easy to sentimentalise the blues but the life of the blues singer is a hard rather than a romantic one. These recordings of the street entertainers of Maxwell Street Market, Chicago are eloquent testimony to the remarkable way in which these rough, unlettered men have created a folk art form from the harsh, unlovely world in which they live.



left:
Daddy Stovepipe
(Photo: Paul Oliver)



below:
Maxwell Street Jimmy
and King David
(Photo: Paul Oliver)