

GABRIEL BROWN

1943 - 1945

Florida has been poorly documented for its black secular music and particularly its bluesmen. By the time of the recordings on this album, no commercial recordings had been made on location in the state and few known Florida bluesmen had ever been recorded. Gabriel Brown alone holds the distinction of having been recorded in Florida, going on to carve a brief but significant slice out of the New York blues scene.

Black folklorist, Zora Neale Hurston, had been undertaking fieldwork research in Florida, particularly around her home town of Eatonville. Really she was trying to drink in experiences and the atmosphere for a novel, which became *Mules and Men*, but she became joyfully carried along with the music which was to be heard. One of the musicians she ran across was a Babe Brown. Some years later in 1935, she was invited to join Elizabeth Barnicle (a New York professor) and Alan Lomax to collect and record black folklore and folksongs. She was given a free hand in selecting the area and contacting the subjects; naturally, she led the others to Eatonville on one of her stops. Lomax recalled that she was "almost entirely responsible for the success" of the trip, during which she introduced him to the finest guitarist he had heard; "he was better even than Lead Belly although of a slightly different breed." This was Gabriel Brown.

A number of sides were recorded from Brown, on some of which he was accompanied by a guitar-playing neighbour, Rochelle French. Among these were some magnificent blues, especially EDUCATION BLUES and TALKING IN SEBASTOPOL. All eighteen titles can be heard on FLYRIGHT-HATCHBOX SDN 257, OUT IN THE COLD AGAIN: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS FIELD RECORDINGS FROM FLORIDA BY GABRIEL BROWN, ROCHELLE FRENCH AND JOHN FRENCH. After this, nothing more is to be heard of this fine guitarist until he recorded for Joe Davis' New York-based Beacon Record Company. How he came to be in New York and how he came to meet up with Joe Davis are not known but it is highly probable that Gabriel Brown's arrival in the city was in some way due to either Hurston or Lomax. Actually, Brown lived not in New York City but in the coastal resort town of Asbury Park, in New Jersey, some considerable distance from the City and from the industrial areas of Elizabeth and Newark, where many bluesmen from the southeast were later to take up residence.

Joe Davis had been in the music business as a singer, promoter and music publisher since the 1920s and saw opportunities in the early days of World War II to enter into record manufacturing. In April 1942, resulting from an order by the War Production Board, the non-military use of shellac - the basic ingredient of the 78 r.p.m. record - was cut by 70%. Davis set up a deal with Harry Gennett, one of three brothers whose Gennett label was one of the major labels for jazz and blues issues in the 1920s. Although Gennett had ceased release of such material in 1934 it continued to issue special records, such as of sound-effects, until November 1940. Clearly, Harry Gennett still had his quota of shellac although was no longer using it for his own pressings. Indeed, the majority of Gabriel Brown's releases were scheduled for release on both the Joe Davis and Gennett labels but to my knowledge, none of the later supposed Gennett issues have reached collectors' shelves. As Davis' parent company in 1943 was Beacon Records the first three Gabriel Brown issues were also pressed with Beacon labels, assuming the identical release number as the Joe Davis and Gennett issues.

Gabriel Brown's place in the New York blues scene remains something of a mystery. It seems that while Brownie McGhee had established himself across one club circuit, Brown operated in another by mutual agreement, to avoid unnecessary competition. There is no doubt that McGhee was a shrewd businessman and was himself recording extensively in New York during the mid-1940s. It seems odd that we should know so little of Brown under these circumstances. His records found a way to the burgeoning "folk" scene and are firmly in the blues tradition; basically solid country blues with that overlay of sophistication that Brown had shown in 1935. His slightly plaintive, strongly rhythmic playing style reminds one somewhat of another Florida bluesman, Tallahassee Tight. Joe Davis appreciated that an audience remained for such records; even more so in view of the curtailment of recording at the major companies as a result of the Petrillo ban.

In 1942 the American Federation of Musicians, fearing the loss of jobs through the extended use of juke-boxes, decided at its June convention to implement a recording ban. This commenced on August 1st 1942 and is usually referred to as the Petrillo ban, named after the AFM's President. The ban presumably remained in force until Decca signed an agreement with the AFM in September 1943, whereupon recording began again. However, as both Columbia and RCA held out against the agreement until November 1944, it permitted the rapid rise of small, independent concerns which swiftly took advantage of the major labels' absence from the field and their lack of specialist knowledge as to the market's needs. By late 1944 the independent boot was firmly jammed in the door of what the majors had presumed to be their music business.

Although it is usually acknowledged that Decca's signature to the AFM demands in September 1943 opened the floodgates for the welter of small record companies, Gabriel Brown's BAD LOVE, the flip of his third release for Joe Davis, was recorded at the Empire Broadcasting Corporation's building at 480 Lexington Avenue in New York City on August 26th, 1943. It was clearly a union session which means it is unlikely that all six sides required for these initial three Gabriel Brown issues were cut at one time; subsequent contracts operate for "1 session" or "five titles". This presupposes an even earlier session than that in which BAD LOVE was cut.

Almost a year later, Joe Davis wrote Brown with reference to securing membership of Local 802 of the AFM in New York stating that he was sure that a member known to Davis would be able to "get you through the union without any difficulty". It obviously went through with no problems for Local 802 secured a contract for member 3253 to cut a session of 5 sides for Davis on September 15th, 1944 between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. at WOR, 1440 Broadway. For this Brown received \$80.00. Clearly Davis was impressed for he wasted no time in booking a further session the following month, this time held back at the Empire Broadcasting Studios on Lexington Avenue. The date was Thursday October 26th and the session was in the evening from 6 p.m. until 9 p.m..

On November 2nd, 1944, Davis wrote to Gabriel Brown offering a contract renewal stating:

"This contract covers another year with your option and you will notice that for the second year I have again increased your recording fees."

This intimates that there had been two year-long contracts by this date. Brown was clearly content with the contract and fees certainly were increased at the next session. This was again held at the Empire Studios, from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. on May 2nd, 1945. Against the price and time on the contract blank, Joe Davis had written respectively "each date"

and "2 sessions". It seems unlikely that these notes referred to an extended session on that date, as another AFM contract would have been required, and probably were notes from an agreement made at that time to have a further session. At least, Gabriel Brown was back at the same studios an hour earlier on the afternoon of June 27th, 1945 for another \$100. 00.

Presumably Brown's contract was not renewed. Davis probably felt that having released 26 sides over two years by Brown an extension was unnecessary. It is also quite probable that by this time other recordings by East Coast country bluesmen were beginning to cut into Davis' market, and that he was finding it difficult now to sell Brown. Certainly the couplings released from the last two sessions are extremely hard to find and may well denote poorer sales, whereas the first two or three releases are relatively common among collectors. Maybe Brown grew tired of the Big Apple's winters and headed back for the sun of his home state. It was not quite to be the end of the Gabriel Brown story in New York for two further records were released on him, a coupling in 1949 on Coral and a further coupling in 1950 on MGM. Whether these were from new sessions or from leases involving previously unissued Joe Davis material is not known. Either way, it is almost certain that Davis was involved in some capacity for the details of the label copy for Joe Davis 5006-B, BAD LOVE, was written on an MGM Records sheet, and the music publishing credits on both sides of the MGM release are credited to Beacon Music.

The actual mechanics of marketing these records remains somewhat blurred. In exchange for Gennett's shellac ration, Davis lent him money to refurbish his pressing plant, whereby the Gennett Trade Mark was saved. Gennett appeared as the manufacturer and Davis the national distributor, to whom Gennett sold pressings for 20c each plus excise tax of 2c. Initially, at least, the records were shipped in old Electrobeam Gennett sleeves. The Gennett ledgers do not show production after 1940 but it would seem that initial pressings were undertaken in Richmond Indiana, and it is probable that Gabriel Brown's first two couplings were issued first on Gennett. 5003B and both sides of 5004 of both the Gennett and Joe Davis pressings use the same Gennett stampers but the Joe Davis pressing of 5003A is a dub from the Gennett, while Joe Davis 5004 was audibly pressed from slightly worn stampers giving inferior sound reproduction. This might suggest that Gennett pressed off some for use from his own store on South First Street in Richmond, and then pressed - or shipped to Davis in New York to press - from the same stampers the Joe Davis and presumably Beacon issues. The dubbed side might be explained because a stamper broke or was too badly worn, and a dub from the Gennett side had to be made up. As the third Gabriel Brown coupling (5006) dates from August 1943 and copies on Joe Davis are shown with a different stamper marking, none of them obviously originating at Gennett, it could mean that the two earlier issues were from a previous session, possibly dating from 1942, which was when Davis' initial Beacon and Celebrity records were issued.

Speculation remains rife. However, no other Joe Davis record, from which the remainder of the sides on this album were transferred, is aurally a dubbing. Just how far the deal between Davis and Gennett continued is not known. All Joe Davis releases with one exception up to and including 5020 have credits on the labels to "Gennett Record Division The Starr Piano Co. Inc. Richmond Ind.", after which there is no such reference. To add confusion, copies seen of 5015 are on a Davis label, with no reference to Gennett! Perhaps, in the final assessment, a logical explanation of these incongruities simply does not exist and they were merely the results of ad hoc decisions taken at the time. Whatever, thanks to the excellent quality of the records from which to produce this album, and careful sound transfer, Gabriel Brown has not been heard before in such fidelity, given that these are wartime pressings.

What the file information shows is that perhaps the first country blues to be recorded and issued in New York after the outbreak of World War II was by Gabriel Brown. Even more fascinating is that Davis had cut a minimum of three sessions by him before Brownie McGhee even cut his first post-Okeh, which was for Savoy on December 12th, 1944. There can be little doubt that Gabriel Brown deserves a more significant slot in the ongoing pattern of Piedmont blues which was scarcely upset by the progress of international war. Whereas the war can be said to have facilitated a major shift in black secular music in the migration termini of all other mass movements of black labour from the Deep South, the independent record scene in greater New York actually exposed a wealth of fine rural talent. Older established musicians like Brownie McGhee, Sonny Terry, Blind Willie McTell, Gary Davis and Curley Weaver were but some who recorded; superb but otherwise unknown bluesmen like Boy Green, Ralph Willis, Carolina Slim and Tarheel Slim were but some of the new men to be recorded. It is worth stating that Joe Davis and Gabriel Brown are to some degree partly responsible for assisting this to come about. It cannot have gone unnoticed that country blues from the southeast still sold well. The sales of Gabriel Brown's early discs can only have been an encouragement to other small operators to try for a slice of the action.

Clearly Gabriel Brown sold very well, at least at first. A Billboard ad has him billed as "Mr. King of the Blues", while Davis' promo sheet for the coupling 800GIE WIDGIE GUITAR and HOLD THAT TRAIN claims it to have been "His Best By Far", calling it "something different in the blues line." He seems to have kept most of his discs in catalogue for the reverse of this sheet has them listed on an order blank, but oddly NOT NOW/TAKE IT EASY and STICK WITH ME/STOPPED GAMBLING are not listed. It might partly explain their scarcity. 75c they were but only listed as being available on the Joe Davis label at this date.

If his later years are shrouded in obscurity, it is known that he returned to Florida, drowning there is a boating accident in the early 1970s. Considering he is the only known Florida bluesman to have been recorded on location and to have followed the logical migration pattern north to the New Jersey - New York conurbation, where he gathered a considerable career about him, we know remarkably little about him as a person. Mind you, were it not for Zora Neale Hurston's initial interest and the Library of Congress follow-up, non-one would ever have heard of him. Were it then not for the fact that Joe Davis' files held some fascinating data knowledge of his commercial period in the north would have been little more than conjecture. As it is, be thankful that the bulk of this most interesting bluesman's recorded legacy can now be heard.

Having drawn some of the background to these recordings, sit back and enjoy the material but bear in mind that they were never conceived as anything other than couplings on 78 r.p.m. discs. Sixteen tracks of solo Gabriel Brown may not be the easiest listening experience but the album permits these sides to be drawn together for separate evaluation. Don't look for an album of marked variety, but listen to the man's undoubted playing skills and to his highly personal lyrics. Every record I have seen by him lists him as a writer; a credit to both the artist and the record company. Treat them individually.