

Andrew "Smokey" Hogg, born in Westconnie, Texas in 1914, became interested in music at an early age, learning a little guitar from his father, and some more playing behind the Black Ace at parties. By 1937, he was ready to record for Decca, patterning himself on the popular Peetie Wheatstraw, but after that it was 10 years before he faced the mikes again. In the interval, Smokey had served a hitch with the US Army, and the record industry had changed radically. As Bob Shad, who made the recordings on this CD, observed in his notes to an earlier Smokey Hogg compilation -

"In the late '40's a virtual monopoly existed by the big three record companies At this time there was a tremendous demand for records known as 'race' records - a term given to recordings made by rhythm & blues artists The selling of rhythm & blues records was one of the few mediums opened to people wishing to get into the recording industry at this time. Therefore the independent record companies started to record a tremendous amount of rhythm & blues Because the sales of rhythm & blues records were so small percentage wise as compared to that of major pop records, the big companies neglected this market. As a result, along came the independent into the only field available to him."

One of those independents was Bob Shad himself. Shad had done production work for Savoy and National, among others, before founding his own Sittin' In With label in 1948. "It was strictly jazz at the beginning," Shad told Arnold Shaw, "but there was no money in jazz." So it was that Sittin' In With started to record blues. Shad travelled down to Texas several times between 1949 and 1951, equipped with a portable Magnacord tape machine to save on studio hire costs. Among the musicians he wanted to record was Smokey Hogg, who had turned out a number of good sellers for Joe Bihari at Modern, and for Art Rupe's Speciality.

"Herb Rippa, a Dallas, Texas distributor drove me around town looking for Smokey," Shad recalled of his first, 1949 encounter with Hogg. "After locating him, we arranged to have several recording dates that week." (Rippa operated the Blue Bonnet label, and had recorded Hogg; it was the success of these sides, leased by Modern, that led to Hogg's extensive recording career from 1947 to 1949). It seems that all the issued material by Hogg was cut in Houston, despite Shad's recollection that some of the recording was done in Dallas, for the rhythm section was always the Houston based team of Willie Johnson, Donald Cooks and Ben Turner on piano, bass and drums respectively, with Ed Wiley on tenor sax in 1949, and Joe "Papoose" Fritz replacing him in 1950. Donald Cooks was Shad's guide to the Houston scene, and introduced him to most of the musicians, so, it looks as though Shad had set up a backing band in Houston before going to look for Smokey Hogg.

Much of the recording of Hogg took place in a Houston Heights brothel where there was an in-tune piano. "Being much younger in 1949 and '50, I kept wondering why all the women wore bathrobes.

and strange men kept wandering in and out", said Shad. Some of the titles from 1950 were cut at Jeff's Playhouse, a bar on Sampson Street, and Shad remembered that some titles were cut in a crowded store, but the exact detail of what, where and when will probably never be sorted out at this later date.

"I'm In Love With You" and "Saved All My Money" come from the 1949 sessions, and are typical Smokey Hogg: he pays little attention to formal structure, or to blending with the accompanying musicians, who do a vallant job of accommodating their playing to Smokey's spur of the moment decisions. Notice, for instance, how he resumes singing on the first title when Ed Wiley is clearly expecting to continue his expressive solo, and how well Wiley copes. The guitar playing is simple, not given to flights of invention, and yet well suited to Hogg's equally straightforward, uncontrived vocal delivery. He has a neat way with words, though: "I think more of my money than my baby child, ah my baby can't do nothin' for me, oh man but smile".

From 1950 comes "I'm Leavin'", with prominent piano, and no saxophone. It's one of the few titles from this year on which Smokey plays guitar, on most of them, Goree Carter, shortly to be drafted, was brought in to play in his more sophisticated, T-Bone Walker influenced style. The thinking was probably that Hogg was less likely to break time if he wasn't playing, just singing; if so, it didn't always work.

Some of Smokey Hogg's repertoire, and a lot of his style, derives from blues records of the '30's by the likes of Big Bill Broonzy and Peetie Wheatstraw, and 1949's "You Won't Stay Home" (misitled on LP as "Wanna Stay Home") harks back to the hokum craze of the late '20s and early '30s in its use of the "Tight Like That" structure. It's transformed into a romping piece of Texas R&B though, by the tough tenor sax playing. "Why Should I Worry" from the same year is palpably influenced by Broonzy in the lyrics and their hollering delivery; the guitar playing, of course, is much less sophisticated than Big Bill's. Hogg's musical ideas weren't couched in conventional harmonic terms, which partly accounts for the problems he posed his accompanists: his version of the dominant chord, for instance, (transposed to C) was typically GCDBb, rather than the orthodox GBDF, which weakened the cadence, and made his music more modal than tonal.

Goree Carter can clearly be heard to be the guitarist on "I'm So Lonely", with its odd, shifting balance and out of time piano. The song has the feel of a rehearsal; note how the drummer falters during Carter's solo. "Let's Go Back To The Country" is a duet with Joe Fritz, who turns out, as a singer, to have made a close study of T-Bone Walker. "Hit me, man!" commands the much more countrified Smokey, seeking to establish his credentials as a fellow sophisticate.

On "That's My Baby", the band hits the groove associated with Joe Liggins' hit "The Honeydripper", and Fritz plays a throaty solo, followed by a fine effort from Carter; then Smokey crashes in out of time, but somehow it all fits together. "Hello Baby" and "What You Gonna Do" are further attempts at this format, and again both have imaginative tenor and guitar solos.

The supposedly two-part "I Love You Baby" turns out to be two completely different songs: the first is an uptempo dance tune from the older traditional repertoire, and influenced by white country music, but "Part 2" is a 12-bar setting of Smokey's chat up line, with the drummer imparting a delightful lift to the number. "What In the World Am I Gonna Do", having no piano, is the version issued on 78, rather than the alternate take that later appeared on album; movingly sung, and with reflective guitar from Goree Carter, it's surprisingly reminiscent of the sophisticated recordings made around this time by Jesse Thomas, born in Shreveport, but at this time a Los Angeles resident. Far from sophisticated, on the other hand, is "Shake A Leg", a semi-improvised invitation to dance, drink and have a good time, on which Smokey subsides into a mumble at one point, unable to think of a rhyme for "bass".

Drinking and having a good time were pretty much central to Smokey's way of life. His cousin John Hogg, also a musician, recalled that when doing a session for Modern, he'd drink half a fifth of whiskey, record two songs, drink the rest and record two more. After the session, he'd drink apple vinegar, which was supposed to kill the whiskey. It's no wonder his structures and timing were sometimes erratic, as Bob Shad noted:

"When recording Smokey, you eliminate the set rules as to chords and bars. It is not strange at all to have a 13 1/2 bar chorus. Endings and introductions are fantastically worked out - by accident. Sometimes they are delightful; sometimes confused; and sometimes - nothing."

By 1958, when Hogg made his last recordings for Bob, whiskey was killing him rather than the other way about. In 1960 he entered the Veterans Administration Hospital with stomach cancer, and died of a haemorrhaging ulcer, aged only 46. He was buried back home in Westconnie. In his short life, he'd been a very popular recording artist with black audiences, articulating his and their concerns, combining traditional themes with newer ideas of his own, and mixing the recorded sounds of the '30s with those of East Texas to produce a blend that was immediately recognisable as the music of Smokey Hogg: never sophisticated, and occasionally chaotic, but always honest, direct and truthful.

Chris Smith

