

FRED McDOWELL ON CD

Several Compact Discs by Fred McDowell have appeared recently and B&R feel that now is a good time to offer an overview of this great bluesman's work currently available on plastic. Keith Briggs takes the bull by the horns and leads us through the labyrinth.

Whenever blues slide guitar playing comes under discussion it can only be a matter of minutes before Fred McDowell's name is evoked (he hated the "Mississippi" label). His distinctive no-quarter-given exploitation of the 'bottleneck' technique coupled with his warm-toned and expressive voice has fascinated bluesophiles since the early 60s, earning him new fans with each generation. Between his 'discovery' by Alan Lomax in 1959 and his death in July 1972 he seemed to record constantly. His repertoire was not particularly extensive to begin, and he recorded certain titles over and over again, but it stood the strain because of his ability to make each performance unique and to continually inject a slow supply of new/old songs into his grab-bag. He recorded alone, as part of the Hunter's Chapel Singers, with supporting guitarists, harp players and drummers (in various combinations) and dueted with his wife Annie Mae - there are even a couple of recordings of him successfully backing up Big Mama Thornton, of all unlikely people. On his earlier recordings his guitar work was strictly acoustic but in the last few years of his life he turned to an electric instrument, possibly sacrificing some degree of his subtlety but certainly none of his impact. His influence on such artists as Dave and Jo Anne Kelly, Bonnie Raitt and The Rolling Stones (whose version of "You Got To Move" bore Fred's stamp clearly enough to draw royalties for him) has often been quoted in attempts to sell his music to new audiences - it works as an introductory ploy only; once heard Fred McDowell survives purely on his own merits.

Despite his mastery of the devil's music the mantle of the hard-living, hell-raising blues singer with the compromised soul fitted Fred McDowell's narrow shoulders not at all. There are no stories of Fred McDowell getting obnoxiously drunk, pulling a knife, or breaking up hotel rooms. He was a small, seemingly retiring man (one friend who met him describes him as 'a watcher') who was able to get along with everybody because of his mixture of quiet humour and general charm. He was, in fact, a long-time happily married man, and a regular church-goer - but one who saw no dichotomy in drawing on a personal musical reservoir as much secular as religious in content.

The original meeting between Lomax and McDowell at Como, Mississippi, was chronicled by both Lomax and the English folk singer Shirley Collins. Their versions of the event differ somewhat but agree that McDowell was eager to record and was as delighted to hear the results - as were the researchers who knew right away that they had tapped into something special: a major talent frozen in rural isolation since the 1920s.

A selection of those initial recordings made their appearance on record as part of the Atlantic label's LP series 'Southern Folk Heritage'. Their impact was stunning and immediate and Fred McDowell was a blues 'name' from that moment on. The six tracks concerned; including the first versions of Fred's hard-worked standards "Keep You Lamp Trimmed And Burning" (a solo performance), "Shake 'Em On Down" and "Write Me A Few Lines", appear on CD only as part of the four-CD set 'Sounds Of The South' (Atlantic 7 82496-2/ 4 CDs). This makes them expensive for the McDowell collector although the set as a whole is pretty wonderful, presenting a wide range of southern music, both black and white, ranging through children's songs, work songs, religious music, bluegrass,

blues and ballads. Also appearing on the collection are tracks by Fred's neighbours Lonnie and Ed Young, Miles Pratcher and Fannie Davis and impressive recordings by the harp player Forest City Joe Pugh.

The first to react to the issue of these recordings was folklorist Dick Spottswood who took a tape recorder to Como over Easter 1962 and recorded Fred at length. The results languished until 1982 before seeing LP release on Bruce Bastin's Flyright label. The CD version (Fred McDowell/ FLY CD 14/ 20 tracks/ 64.39) came out in 1989 with the original fourteen tracks supplemented by a further six from the same sessions. The same set of titles has recently appeared in America under the Rounder logo with the "Untitled Instrumental" track re-dubbed "Como" (Fred McDowell/ Rounder CD 2138). These are 'field' recordings made in Fred's house; there is background noise and some of the performances are a bit ragged - but they present Fred in his true environment playing for his own people before he adapted in any way to playing for whites in coffee houses, on campus and at festivals. Fred pounds out versions of "Shake" and "Lines" and dredges some blues 'hits' from his memory in such forms as "Kokomo Blues", "Red Cross Store", "Milk Cow Blues", "Someday Baby", "Good Morning Little Schoolgirl" and the venerable "John Henry". Any basic collection of Fred's work on CD needs to include one or the other of these discs.

In November of 1963 Fred was again recorded in Como, this time, under somewhat more formal circumstances, by Norman Dayron for the late Pete Welding's Testament label. A selection of religious numbers, including "Lamp", was cut with Fred being helped out by the singing of his wife Annie Mae. Four tracks were added when the CD version appeared earlier this year but the basic balance of secular/religious numbers was maintained. As both Spottswood and Welding were interested in measuring the depth of Fred's musical well the titles



Fred McDowell. Photograph courtesy Julie Snow.

on this and the previous release clash hardly at all. (My Home Is On The Delta/ Testament TCD 5019/ 17 tracks/ 54.19).

Perhaps the most important of all Fred's LP issues was his first Arhoolie album. Chris Strachwitz recorded it in Como during February 1964. It was around this time that Fred was building up a following in the folk clubs of America and it was in 1965 that he made such a success in Europe touring with the AFBF. Odd performances by Fred appeared on the albums recorded in Europe as souvenirs of this tour and it was in London that he made his two tracks backing Big Mama Thornton. (These appear on Big Mama's CD, Ball and Chain, Arhoolie 305). But the McDowell album to have was Arhoolie 1021. It came out in CD format in 1989 with extra tracks from Fred's second Arhoolie album (1027) two of which appear in 'Blues Records' as having been recorded in Como in 1966 while the CD reveals that they were actually cut in California in 1965. As a bonus this CD includes two impressive blues by Fred's mentor and friend Eli Green and a solo religious vocal, backed by Fred, from his wife Annie Mae. (Mississippi Delta Blues/ Arhoolie CD 304/ 19 tracks/ 64.04).

Around the same time Testament tried a brave new approach by recording Fred as part of the Hunter's Chapel Singers. The songs were all sanctified and the vocals are dealt out among various members including Fred and Annie Mae. Fred's guitar work is upfront throughout. This is a powerful and moving, if sometimes ragged, set but remains one of the least accessible for hard-core blues fans. The CD includes yet another approach to "Lamp" and three tracks that were not on the LP issue. (Amazing Grace/ Testament TCD 5004/ 16 tracks/ 39.10).

Other tracks recorded by Chris Strachwitz and issued on the above mentioned Arhoolie LP 1027 have been matched with cuts from Arhoolie 1068 and odds and ends either previously unissued or used on anthologies to produce the second Arhoolie CD. It is divided into two parts: 'The Blues' and 'Church Songs'. In a way it combines previous ideas by presenting Fred alone on the blues tracks and working with Annie Mae and other 'members of the congregation' on the religious material. Many of the songs had become staples in Fred's collection and he reprises "Little Schoolgirl", "Red Cross Store", "Lamp", "Amazing Grace" and "Few Lines" (as "Early This Morning"). Like most Arhoolie CDs it has a heavyweight playing time. (Good Morning Little Schoolgirl/ Arhoolie CD 424/ 22 tracks/ 77.02).

The next CD for consideration is an odd one which might be hard to locate in the States; Alan Bates was an Englishman who met Fred during his first European tour and arranged to record him. Bates made the pilgrimage to Como in December 1965 lugging a tape recorder borrowed from the jazz pianist Al Haig. The performances he recorded tended to be longer than Fred's previous versions weighing in sometimes at over eight minutes. Again these were field recordings with all the attendant problems: noisy friends, kids, dogs and even Fred's own over-loud foot-stomping. Eighteen tracks were recorded and a selection of seven was issued on LP by Black Lion in Britain and Polygram in Germany. When the material was used on a CD illustrating volume 45 of the British part-work "The Blues Collection", published by Orbis, a further five tracks from the same session were added. This may not be the very best CD of Fred McDowell available but none are *bad* and this one does at least have rarity value as I don't think it is available anywhere else at the moment; at least I have never seen it in the racks. (Mississippi Blues/ BLU NC 045/ 12 tracks/ 61.53).

Pete Welding assumed the producer's role again when Fred was next recorded, a long way from home, at UCLA in 1966. This set (Long Way From Home/ Milestone OBCCD-535-2/ 9 tracks/ 37.58) reproduces the LP on CD in a digitally remastered form. It is short on playing time (even for an LP) but gives us Fred, in strong voice and playing a guitar that comes on like a locomotive, working solo under studio conditions.

Recordings made by Fred for Revival/ Rounder in 1967 and a great set cut for Origin in 1968 have yet to see issue on CD as far as I am aware. As the material he cut for Chris Strachwitz during this time will be dealt with later the next sizeable body of work to be considered is the nine tracks that form Fred's contribution to the Biograph CD which he shares with Furry Lewis and Robert Wilkins. (When I Lay My Burden Down/ Biograph BCD 130 ADD/ 19 tracks/ 60.40). Approximately 27 minutes of the hour long CD are given over to Fred who uses them to work his way through a programme of favourites that, though highly enjoyable, evidences no extension of his basic repertoire. Three are religious songs including "Burden" which is the link-number of the set as all three artists hold up their own versions for comparison. Lewis and Wilkins acquit themselves well and help make the CD, if a little peripheral in this particular discussion, valuable in its own right.

The Biograph recordings were made back home in Como during February 1969 and by March of the same year Fred was laying down

yet more tracks - this time in London for Transatlantic. Two LPs resulted from these sessions and volume two has now turned up as a CD on the American Drive Archive label. On it Fred, to the horror of the purists who didn't realise that he had always favoured the instrument, played electric guitar. (Ain't Gonna Worry/ Drive Archive DE2-41040/ 10 tracks/ 40.11) It is a short but satisfying set and it is hoped that Drive will follow it up with volume one.

During the same visit to England Fred took his hollow-bodied electric guitar along to the Mayfair Hotel where he worked a show with the sometime support of Jo Anne Kelly. Pete Gibson and Al Hooper recorded and filmed the proceedings and Red Lightnin' issued the results on one and a half LPs (the second shared, rather incongruously, with Phil Guy). Now those tracks have been collected together and issued on CD in the States. (Live At The Mayfair Hotel/ Infinite Zero Archive 9 43025-2/ 14 tracks/ 64.03) Fred is on good form, laughing and joking as he introduces and explains each song, and Jo Anne duets with him, in lieu of Annie Mae, on "When I Lay My Burden Down" (rather than "Glory Hallelujah" as listed in Blues Records vol. 2; the confusion doubtless arising from the fact that the two tracks are versions of the same song).

The next step after introducing his electric guitar was for Fred to record with a band. Chris Strachwitz stepped in to oblige by putting Fred together with Mike Russo, guitar, John Kahn, bass, and Bob Jones, drums. The fruits of their combined labours appeared as Arhoolie LP 1046. I reviewed the CD version of this in B&R 104 remarking that I was very taken with the filled out sound and the extra dimension of menace that it brought as it tightened up Fred's delivery. To fill out the CD (which took its title from one of Fred's favourite, defiant, declarations) Chris used previously unissued tracks made in his own house in 1968. Here also Fred is playing electric and is backed by a drummer and, on one cut, a harp-player, but the whole atmosphere is one of relaxation that forms a marked contrast to the fraught feeling of the 1969 band session. There are snatches of conversation and no attempt is made to pretend that it represents anything other than a few friends sitting around enjoying themselves. Altogether, in presenting two such varying views of McDowell, it forms a highly listenable and satisfying CD. (This Ain't No Rock N' Roll/ Arhoolie 441/ 18 tracks/ 77.15)

During the Mayfair set Fred supplied the title for his only LP to be issued on a major label when he tells his audience "I do not play no rock 'n' roll, just blues. I hope you like 'em - if you don't like 'em I'm gonna play 'em anyhow". If the presentation of the IZ CD is handsome that of volume 12 of the Capitol Blues Collection (I Do Not Play No Rock And Roll/ Capitol CDP 7243 8 33919 2 9/2 discs 20 tracks/ 90.58) is super plush. The artwork might not be to everyone's taste but the two discs are offered in a cardboard folder which includes a thirty-two page booklet put together by Pete Welding who was steering the project. It claims that the double CD contains every track recorded at the Capitol sessions in the Malaco studios in Jackson, Mississippi during September 1969 including three that have never seen release before. These recordings made their vinyl debut on the Capitol Album "I Do Not Play No Rock And Roll" and the Just Sunshine LP "Mississippi Fred McDowell 1904 - 1972". However when the Just Sunshine LP was reissued, with the same cover and notes, on the Antilles label it included three more cuts. These are not the ones referred to by Pete Welding as previously unissued, being "Shake 'Em On Down", "Goin' Down To The River" and "Going Down South". Just where these tracks came from I don't know and I don't have the LP to check them out. A minor mystery; were more recordings made than Pete Welding found - or were these cuts pirated from elsewhere?

The last CD to be considered here comprises a live set recorded at the Gaslight in NYC during November 1971. Fred was being backed, most sympathetically, by Tom Pomposello who helped produce the CD and wrote the moving sleeve notes. It presents Fred in a fairly intimate club setting, relaxed and in control. All in all it is a very pleasing, if short, performance which, even at this late date, produces some lesser known numbers to go alongside "Shake 'Em On Down", "John Henry" and "You Got To Move". (Shake 'Em On Down/ Tomato 2696372/ 9 tracks/ 44.01)

I think that just about sums up the state of play regarding CD reissues as of December 1995. I never heard a CD of Fred McDowell that wasn't worth having, but if I was asked to make recommendations I would suggest that Arhoolie 304 and Arhoolie 441, along with the Flyright/ Rounder CD and the new Capitol double (in that order) give great value and show off most aspects of this important bluesman's development over his twelve year period of popularity without too many duplicated titles.