TESTAMENT RECORDS

PHILADELPHIA STREET SINGER
BLIND CONNIE WILLIAMS

Traditional Blues, Spirituals and Folksongs

Despite its large and longstanding black populace, Philadelphia, Pa., is not generally considered much a blues town. In the area of black music, the city is much more widely known as a gospel music and jazz center, having produced over the years many prominent figures in both of these idioms. While Gotham Records—despite its name located in Philadelphia—issued a number of recordings by blues performers, some of them strongly rural in musical orientation, the only local blues musician they seem to have recorded was singer guitarist Doug Quattlehaum, who made but two sides for them in the early 1950s. Even Lonnie Johnson, long a Philadelphia resident was not recorded by them. (Apparently the bulk of the blues material in Gotham's lists was recorded elsewhere, or were master recordings purchased from producers outside the Philadelphia area.)

Possibly the chief reason more recording of local bluesmen was not done by Gotham—or other record firms, for that matter—was that this music was not especially visible. The city apparently never has supported any extensive blues performing activity; at any rate, in the 1950s and early '60s there were no local blues clubs or bars to compare with those of Chicago, St. Louis, Memphis or Detroit. And while down-home blues records were to be heard on the jukeboxes in black taverns throughout Philadelphia, live music by local or visiting blues musicians was not.

Still, blues and other forms of traditional music were abundantly if covertly present in black Philadelphia, providing a sort of contrapuntal accompaniment to the everyday lives of large numbers of the black community, particularly its older members or those recently arrived from the South. Yet this music was not to be heard in any formal or commercial setting. Rather, it was informal, natural and spontaneous in character and habitat, music performed for and among friends and neighbors, in houses and apartments, at parties, picnics and other social gatherings or simply when a few people would get together of an evening to pass the time in conversation, gossip and reminiscence. Because of its informal, intimate setting, this folk music-making activity largely went unnoticed by the average Philadelphian. To hear it, even to know of its existence, one had to be admitted to the households in which it took place.

It was Connie Williams who was responsible for introducing me to this rich fund of living folk music, the existence of which I, like so many other white Philadelphians,

was wholly ignorant. It was through him that I met other black folk musicians and it was as a result of his kindness, indulgence and great natural courtesy, all of which I in my eager naiveté must have tried time and again, that I began for the first time to come to some tentative understanding of the music and the meaning it had for him and his friends.

I first met Connie one cold spring day in 1961. I had been canvassing for records on South Street, a major thoroughfare in the black belt just south of the center city area. Above the sounds of traffic I heard the wheeze of an accordion and snatches of a clear, high penetrating voice performing what sounded like an old spiritual. As I made my way to the knot of people clustered on the corner, I saw seated on a small folding stool a slight middle-aged Negro hunched over an accordion which he was playing vigorously and, as one elderly lady observed appreciatively, "singing to beat the band," his head whipping back and forth with the strain of making himself heard over the sound of the instrument. As he paused between numbers I could see he was blind; he moved his head with the quick birdlike motions of the sightless and, drawing closer, I noticed a milky blue film clouding his eyes. He performed a few more spirituals and gospel songs, singing with an intense emotional fervor that more than compensated for the halting accordion accompaniment, before rising to move to a new location. Offering to carry some of his gear, I introduced myself and told him how much I had enjoyed his singing and his selection of music, remarking on the age and quality of some of the spirituals he had sung so movingly. We chatted for some time and Connie invited me to visit him at his home later in the week.

Over the next few weeks I became a frequent visitor to his one-room apartment in an old Lombard Street tenement. Between songs he told me of himself and his life. Mentioning in passing that he was a much better guitarist than accordionist, he stated that he used the latter instrument on the street because of its greater volume and carrying power. The accordion, he said matter of factly, produced a much greater sound volume with comparatively little effort on his part than was the case with guitar. While he preferred the sound of the guitar, which he had used for many years of street singing, he finally had given it up when he found that several hours of playing at the intensity necessary for maximum loudness literally exhausted him. He no longer was a young man, he explained, and had to conserve his strength.

Hearing this, I determined to find him a s guitar and shortly after was able to present him with a steel-bodied National resonator guitar in tolerably good condition. Connie was delighted with it and within a very brief time much of his fluency returned to him, for he practiced diligently and eagerly. And as his instrumental skills sharpened, so too did his repertoire deepen. The guitar seemed to draw forth a flood of old songs—blues, spirituals and folksongs—he hadn't remembered, let alone played, in years. His street repertoire consisted solely of spiritual and gospel material. Though he knew and could play many traditional secular songs as well as popular songs, he performed only sacred songs when singing on the street. The police, he explained, rarely would bother him if he confined himself to this sort of material and, as he needed the additional income his street singing brought in, he didn't mind at all. Besides, he added, he liked spirituals, enjoyed singing them.

He had been singing on the streets since the early 1930s, mostly in Philadelphia, to which he had moved in 1935. Connie had been born blind about 1915 in a small farming community in southern Florida. As they followed the seasonal work patterns of the itinerant farm laborer, Connie's parents moved frequently and as a consequence Connie's education was intermittent. He started playing guitar when he was quite young, he recalled, having been attracted to music through the playing and singing of various amateur performers he had heard on his family's many moves. As a guitarist he largely was self-taught, though occasionally he would persuade such older guitarists as he encountered to show him various techniques they had developed.

At one point in his teenage years Connie attended the St. Petersburg School for the Blind, one of the finest institutions of its type in the South and celebrated for the high caliber of its music instruction (one of its more renowned alumni is Ray Charles), and he was able to broaden his musical education some what. As a result of this experience his music took on its present harmonic character which, due to the richness of its altered chord voicings and its extensive use of passing chords, is considerably more sophisticated than most traditional black folksong. However, as the performances in this album demonstrate, Connie's music is no less vigorously traditional for all the suavity of its harmonic underpinning, which in any event expresses itself primarily through his striking instrumental work and which has little if any effect on the melodic

contours of his song materials. In this respect, traditional black music comprises by far the bulk of his repertoire—blues, blues-ballads, older folk songs and spirituals as well as more modern styled gospel songs—and he performs them in substantially traditional manner.

One of the great strengths of traditional music is its ability to support a wide range of individual handlings of its forms; the tradition accommodates and sustains equally the conventional and the innovative performer. It is the latter, of course, who initiates the process of change so necessary for the growth, extension and incorporation of new elements that every traditional expression must undergo constantly if it is to serve any viable functions in a dynamic, ever-changing culture. Many of the harmonic ideas to which Connie Williams was exposed in the late 1 920s and which he incorporated into his music over the next few years have become commonplace through wide spread use in the decades since. Nor was he alone, even at the time, in his harmonic experiments. Other traditional musicians were pursuing similar goals and at least one of them, singer-guitarist Lonnie Johnson, achieved great success as well as the admiration of many blues musicians country and urban alike, with the brilliance and strength with which he broadened the harmonic base of traditional blues.

During the lean Depression years Connie began performing music on the streets and he continued this practice after moving to Philadelphia in 1935. Then as now it was one of the few means available him of supplementing the meager income his blindness compensation brought in (his ever present, and not entirely groundless fear is that discovery of his street singing income small as that is, will jeopardize his compensation payments). In the late 1930s Connie made frequent trips to New York City where he met and often joined forces with Gary Davis, the superb Harlem street singer whose music Connie greatly admired and from whom he learned a number of guitar techniques he was able to incorporate into his own music. Eventually, however, the two had a falling-out and Connie gradually discontinued the visits to Harlem. Since the early 1940s he has remained in Philadelphia, where until a few years ago, when increasing frailty cut heavily into his activities, he could be heard performing throughout the South Street area the traditional black religious music he sings so affectingly.

This album offers a broad and, I believe, representative sampling of the more than

40 complete songs he recorded, along with fragments of others, one memorable day in 1961.

Most of the secular material consists of fairly old, well-known blues and folksongs and requires little in the way of commentary beyond noting that Connie prefers 8- or 16-bar blues to the more widespread 12-bar form. The unusual inclusions are *Stop by the Woodside,* a song written by a friend so many years ago that Connie can no longer remember the composer's name. His only firm recollections of the piece are that it was composed before his move North and that it is "a true song"— that is, his friend wrote it as a result of an actual experience that befell him one dark country night. Connie apparently learned the traditional *One Thin Dime* after his move to Philadelphia, or has forgotten where and when he learned it prior to that, for he honestly believes the song has a Philadelphia locale; he told me the Cater Street mentioned in the song was only a short distance from his apartment, as indeed it is. *Tell Me Why You Like Roosevelt,* not strictly speaking a secular piece, is the most recent composition on the side, having been written during World War II by gospel singer Otis Jackson as testimony to the great regard in which Franklin D. Roosevelt was held by many American blacks.

A similar song is *What A Time,* which comments on the bombing of Pearl Harbor; the piece, in various guises, was recorded a number of times after the influential recording, *Pearl Harbor,* by the Soul Stirrers. The remainder of the material consists of spirituals, a number of them of great age and several of rare, touching beauty, among which are *I Can See Everybody's Mother, Can't See Mine,* with its allusions to his blindness, and *Mother Left Me Standing on the Highway.*—Pete Welding

Recorded, edited and produced by Pete Welding.
Compact disc mastering by Paul Stubblebine at Rocket Lab, San Francisco CA
Art Direction by Brian Walls at E Con, Berkeley, CA
Reissue supervised by Frank Scott & Bruce Bromberg

1. St. Louis Blues
2. Careless Love
3. Trouble In Mind
4. Tell Me Why You Like Roosevelt
5. See See Rider
6. One Thin Dime
7. Stop By The Woodside
8. John Henry
9. Crossed The Separated Line
10. I Can See Everybody's Mother, Can't See Mine
11. Will The Circle Be Unbroken
12. Take Your Burden To The Lord
13. Oh, What A Time
14. Mother Left Me Standing On The Highway
15. Through The Years I Keep On Toiling
16. Motherless Children
17. I Shall Not Be Moved
18. Milky White Way
19. Gonna Talk For My Savior
20. When The Saints Go Marching In
21. He Watches Down Over Me
22. I'll Fly Away
23. He's The Lily Of The Valley

Blind Connie Williams - vocals, guitar, and accordion
Recorded, Philadelphia PA, May 1961

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Tracks 11 and 18-23 Previously unissued
Tracks 1-10 and 12-17 were previously issued on Testament 2225

Florida born Blind Connie Williams was the first of many outstanding traditional singers discovered and recorded by folklorist/writer/record producer Pete Welding. Although recorded in 1961 the recordings were not actually issued until 1974 on Pete's Testament label. Williams was discovered singing for change on the streets of Philadelphia, accompanying himself on an old accordion. As with other street singers like Blind Gary Davis (an old friend of Connie's) or Blind Willie Johnson, Williams had developed a powerful and gruff vocal style to enable himself to be heard on the streets. Likewise, though he preferred guitar, he played accordion on the streets for it's greater carrying power. After his discovery he started playing guitar again and proved himself extremely talented and adept performer on the steel bodied National guitar. His playing showed a debt to Gary Davis with whom he worked the streets of Harlem in the 40s. The material recorded was mostly traditional blues and gospel songs along with some wartime topical pieces like *Tell Me Why You Like Roosevelt* and *What A Time*. This CD reissue features 7 previously unissued tracks.

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The enclosed booklet features original liner notes by the album's producer Pete Welding.

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