

Mercy Dee

by Bob Groom

*"Tomorrow ain't promised to no man, all your planning may be in vain (x2),
So sing today and be merry, tomorrow you may be way down in Shady Lane."*

(Shady Lane Bluesville BVLP 1039)

Mercy Dee Walton died eleven years ago in Stockton, California. He was 47. December 2nd, 1962 was a sadder day for the blues world than many people realise, for Mercy Dee was one of the unheralded greats of post-war blues. Although one of his songs, One Room Country Shack, has become a blues standard, even reaching the jazz audience through its inclusion in Mose Allison's Back Country Suite, Mercy Dee's own original hit version (Specialty 458) has received little recognition from blues writers. Mercy Dee was an excellent pianist and had an outstanding voice, qualities enough for him to be highly rated in blues circles, but his real genius was in his talent as a blues lyricist. The lyrics of his 53 issued recordings testify to his inventiveness and originality and I hope to demonstrate in this article why Mercy Dee deserves to be regarded as a major blues artist and composer.

Mercy Dee was born in Waco, Texas (a sizeable city in McLennan County, 85 miles due south of Fort Worth on Highway 81, now Interstate 35) on August 13th 1915. The Brazos River runs through Waco and at an early age Walton had to start earning a living working in the Brazos Bottoms. The punishing labour in the fields was relieved by weekend house parties and picnics out in the country at which local and itinerant musicians performed. There were many fine pianists in the Waco area when Mercy Dee started playing piano in 1928, men like Son Brewster, Pinetop Shorty, Willy Woodson and Pete 'The Grey Ghost', but the one who impressed him most was Delois Maxey. Walton took much of his basic style from Maxey, whose special numbers and interpretations of popular blues were in great demand around Waco. Over the next 10 years Mercy Dee developed his music, playing Waco, Fort Worth and Dallas in the wintertime but returning to field work during harvest seasons. Around 1938 he joined the great migration of Texans to California, making a precarious living from music by entertaining fellow Southerners but having at times to resort to field work again. He played in Los Angeles, Fresno, Oakland, San Francisco, in fact everywhere that blues were in demand.

Immediately after World War 2, independent record labels recording swing music, jazz, jump blues and even country blues proliferated and the West Coast had its fair share of such operations. Mercy Dee's first recording opportunity came with the short-lived Spire label of Fresno, for which he made four issued sides in 1949. A mature artist of 34, Mercy Dee's first recorded composition was aimed squarely at the record buyers who made Cecil Gant (or Private Cecil Gant, as he was described on the label of his massive hit I Wonder) one of the biggest-selling artists of the decade. A clever, catchy piece, Baba-Du-Lay-Fever was locally popular around Los Angeles and might even have been a national hit on a bigger label with distribution.

Now my babe got G.I. Fever and I just can't cool her down

She goes Baba-du-du-lay du-du-lay du-du-lay

My babe got G.I. Fever and I just can't cool her down

Everytime she sees a brown-clad hero, she breaks right down and clowns.

The Baba-du-du-lay line serves as a chorus throughout the song. Verse two runs "Now I can dress up in my finest, she don't even look my way (2), Starts talking about a handsome sergeant, that she saw downtown that day." In the third verse he says that while the G.I. thinks the civilian men are doing fine "They don't know the trouble we're having trying to keep these broads in line." By verse four he has come to the conclusion that the only answer is to enlist:

Now I'm going down to the Draft Board, I'm goin' to fall down on my knees (x2)

I'm goin' to ask them to give me some position in this man's army, please.

On the Spire 78, both sides are given sub-titles; Baba-Du-Lay-Fever is, reasonably enough, sub-titled G.I. Fever while Lonesome Cabin Blues has the apparently superfluous sub-title Log Cabin Blues. Lonesome Cabin, a development of the Lonesome Bedroom theme originated by Curtis Jones in 1937, immediately establishes Mercy Dee as a blues interpreter par excellence:

It's lonesome in my cabin, just me and my telephone (x2)

Lord, I has no one to cling to, no one to call my own.

His rich, musical voice makes the most of lines like "Now these nights are long and gloomy, no one knocking on my door" (verse 2), imbuing them with the sense of desolation that characterizes his later One Room Country Shack hit. In almost all his recordings, the instrumental break follows the second verse and here it is a superb blues piano solo. Lonesome Cabin was much more typical of his repertoire than G.I. Fever but his grasp of musical comedy also crops up in later recordings like Rent Man and Birdbrain Baby.

Mercy Dee's second session came the following year when he made a dozen sides for Imperial, the label which Lou Chudd made into one of the biggest independents of the fifties with artists like Fats Domino and Ricky Nelson. Two of these recordings have been reissued (on Liberty's Blues Uptown anthology); both feature electric guitar and bass accompaniment.

The lyrics of Empty Life create a mood of loneliness and despair and this is enhanced by Mercy Dee's doomy singing and the atmospheric guitar work:

*I live in a world of shadows, it almost drives me insane (x2)
For me life don't hold nothing but an empty hope in vain.
These days are so blank and empty, these nights are lonely and still (x2)
Maybe I'll live again, people, but I doubt if I ever will.*

Danger Zone is an ominous blues with brooding, threatening lyrics that recall the mood of Blind Lemon Jefferson's Dynamite Blues:

*This is my final warning, baby, my mind have reached the danger zone (x2)
Oh before I stand to see you leave me, I would rather see you dead and gone.
It make me bawl just like a baby, just to imagine you with someone else (x2)
I ought to say your life wouldn't be worth a nickel, baby please don't make me commit myself.*

In the final verse he asks for "a chance to cool down" and requests "mama please try and take it slow", ending "...any move may prove dangerous and cause crepe to be hanging on your door."; encapsulating a knife-edge relationship. The normal instrumental break after verse 2 is missing here.

Another song from this session is the tragi-comic Birdbrain Baby (later remade for Arhoolie) in which Mercy Dee is at his most amusing in describing the failing of his woman:

*I got a birdbrain baby, with a heart the size of a mustard seed (x2)
She keeps me on the zoom, trying to get her everything she need.
She thinks money's just a coupon, to be issued every day (x2)
She says if I can't stand the issue, she'll pack and be on her way.*

The concluding verse illustrates the acceptance of reality which permeates Mercy Dee's songs:

*Well I guess there's no use in me squawkin', wringing my hands and crying (x2)
I guess I'll always love that birdbrain baby of mine.*

It was in 1953 that Mercy Dee struck gold with his first release on the Specialty label, which Art Rupe had built into a very successful operation with a roster of notable blues, R&B and gospel artists. Although not the million seller it deserved to be (the song itself has certainly exceeded this figure if other versions are included), Mercy Dee's One Room Country Shack sold several hundred thousand copies nationally and established him, temporarily, as one of the biggest names on the California R&B circuit. Its lyrics are fairly conventional when compared with many of his blues but their very directness and emptiness caused by isolation and lack of companionship is almost unequalled:

*Sittin' here a thousand miles from nowhere in this one room country little shack (x2)
Lord, my only worldly possession is a raggy old eleven foot cotton sack.
I wake up every night around midnight, peoples I just can't sleep no more (x2)
Only crickets and frogs to keep me company and the howlin' wind round my door.*

Following the superb piano break, he expresses his intention to "leave here early in the morning" as he will go out of his mind if he doesn't find "some kind of companion, even if she's dumb, deaf, crippled and blind".

The reverse side of the 78, My Woman Knows The Score, has been neglected but is almost equally effective with its portrayal of a failed relationship:

*I got the blues so bad this morning and my woman she knows the score (x2)
Said her ways have turned so chilly and my love is dragging low.
Nothing I do don't seem to please her, nothing I say won't make her smile (x2)
When she look at me she's so chilly, I could crawl away and die.
When you pick yourself a woman, please try and take your time (x2)
You may be very unfortunate and pick a chilly old girl like mine.*

The success of Specialty 458 enabled Mercy Dee to become a full-time musician and entertainer and for the next three years he toured coast to coast with package shows and bands like Big Jay McNeely's. Although his first love was always the blues, he played and enjoyed other kinds of music and was well able to cope with the demands of dance audiences and the band environment.

The lack of a follow-up hit to Shack inevitably meant that Mercy Dee's days as a national star were numbered. Specialty didn't try very hard to produce one, releasing only two more Mercy Dee records, despite having high-quality unissued material such as the track recently included on UK Specialty's City Blues album (SNTF 5015). Towards the end of 1953 they put out Rent Man Blues, a comedy number featuring a lady dubbed 'Thelma' on the label. It is a genuinely funny routine similar to such efforts as The Coldest/Hottest Stuff In Town by Howe and Griggs (Decca 7085):

(Thelma) "My goodness it's cold this morning. Three sticks of wood in the woodbox and no flour in the barrel. I done told George a hundred times 'stop trying to gamble'. (knocking) Oh my goodness, there's the rent man now, I don't know what I'm going to do". But the listener is in no doubt as to what she is going to do and soon she is making full use of her feminine wiles. After the rent man (Mercy Dee) has threatened to put her out in the street, she responds with "Don't be so cold and cruel, come on in, maybe I can change your mind." The rentman tries to take a stand, "Nothing you can say won't hardly move me, I've got to have cash on the line." but he is already lost and when Thelma presses him to "Take a peep into my bedroom, see how bad it needs repair," he capitulates "OK, you win, pretty baby. . . yes I'm a fool, girl, use me, I don't care."

Fall Guy (the other side of Specialty 466) is solo Mercy Dee and it gives a warning to those who would steal another man's woman:



L.C. "Good Rockin'" Robinson Photo by Robert Scheu courtesy Arhoolie Records

I thought I was wise and witty baby, when I first stole you away from your man (x2)

It all turned out I was the fall guy, I only took troubles and worries off his hands.

I'm so tired of playing detective, trailing you everywhere you go (x2)

My heart's in so much misery and my feet are so doggone sore.

Shades of Blind Lemon "sneaking round corners, running up alleys too" (Pneumonia Blues)! Mercy Dee neatly puts together emotional pain and physical pain without the combination seeming at all incongruous.

The third Specialty, released in 1954, is one of Mercy Dee's most powerful blues, Dark Muddy Bottom

(later remade for Arhoolie as Walked Down So Many Turnrows). The lyrics come directly from personal experience and the bitterness in his voice reflects the years he spent toiling in the fields under the merciless Texas sun:

*I walked down so many turnrows, I can see them all in my sleep (x2)
Sharecropping down here in this dark muddy bottom with nothing but hardtack and sorghums to eat.
At 4.30 I'm out in the barnyard, trying to hook up my poor beat-out raggly team (x2)
Yes my stock is dying of starvation and my boss is so doggone mean.
There's got to be a change made around here, people, I'm not jiving and that's a natural fact (x2)
I'm going to jump up on one of these old poor mules and start riding and I don't give a durn
where we stop at.*

The Drifter, an unissued Specialty side recently made available on lp, is a striking composition, one of Mercy Dee's most brilliant creations:

*Drifting alone through fields and swamplands, with my bedroll under my arm (x2)
Small bottle of Tokay in my pocket, just to keep my poor body warm.
Anywhere the ground is solid I lay me down to rest (x2)
Then blues and demons creep in on me slowly, by daylight I'm a natural wreck.
Sun is peepin' over the mountains, time to roll my bed and go (x2)
My only prayer to sit at another table and sleep under a roof once more.*

A single recording released on Rhythm 1774 in 1954 features Mercy Dee in company with L.C. Robinson, whose steel guitar playing adds considerably to the impact of Trailing my Baby, particularly in the instrumental break where he takes the lead with Mercy Dee and an unknown drummer supporting. (This title has been reissued on Heritage 1003 and Arhoolie 2008). The tension builds up through verses one and two with a statement of utter desperation and the implication that violent retribution will follow when he catches up with his erring woman:

*I've looked all over the city, but my baby she can't be found (x2)
Newspapers goin' to sell for 3 and a quarter, the day I track my baby down.
She been gone 4 days and 2 hours and I'm bound to blow my stack (x2)
If I don't find her pretty soon, people, I'll be a raving maniac.*

Some of the tension is released by the instrumental break and the next line carries a feeling of resignation — "Everywhere I go it's the same old story 'Sorry things turned out this way' " — but the determination returns with the concluding: "I'm on her trail like the North West Mounties, guess I'll bring her in someday" (An effective line which also concludes The Coasters' 1957 hit Searchin'). L.C. Robinson used some elements of Trailing, including the basic melody, for his great Things So Bad In California on a recent Arhoolie lp (1062).

In 1955 the Biharis recorded Mercy Dee in Los Angeles and six sides were issued on their Flair label. Two have been reissued on Kent 9012. Have You Ever is the original version of the song remade for Bluesville Have You Ever Been Out In The Country (the lyrics are identical). A superb blues in which he conjures up a vision of a Texas cottonfield under the hot sun and the exhaustion and frustration of a sensitive musician being forced to toil there endlessly against his will:

*Have you ever been way out in the country, peoples during the harvest time (x2)
Picking fruit or dragging a big, fat sack of cotton and the sun beaming down your spine.
By noon I fall up under some shady tree, trying to figure what move to make (x2)
12.30 I'm right back down between two middles, trying to get my numbers straight.*

The final verse is one of my favourite Mercy Dee specials; the acid positively drips:

*If I ever get from around this harvest, I don't even want to see a rose bush grow (x2)
And if anybody asks me about the country, Lord have mercy on his soul.*

Stubborn woman is a variant of the Birdbrain Baby theme, although only verse three is lyrically the same (mule head woman replacing bird brain baby).

*I got a mule head woman and she really have got me hooked (x2)
She keeps her mind in the gutter and her hands on my pocketbook.
She only keeps me for a convenience, so stubborn she won't do a thing I say (x2)
When she's through I'll be so beat and disgusted, I'll have to give the poorhouse some pay.*

The instrumental break features a nice interplay of riffing guitar and rolling piano.

By early 1956, rock and roll had overtaken Mercy Dee and his fellow Texas bluesmen — Lightnin' Hopkins, T-Bone Walker and Smokey Hogg — and five long years were to elapse before he was approached to record again. During this time, gigs for bluesmen grew scarcer and scarcer and eventually Mercy Dee was back in the fields again, harvesting spinach and picking grapes in California instead of cotton and corn back in Texas. An all too familiar story: the middle and late fifties were lean times for all the blues artists who had achieved fame in the ten years after World War 2.

Things were at a very low ebb for Mercy Dee, who for several years had been living in Stockton, when early in 1961 he was contacted by Chris Strachwitz of Arhoolie Records. Four sessions were held in February, March and April of that year at which he recorded many new songs and some of his greatest performances. These recordings were to form his final musical testament.

(This article will be concluded in BL5. Much of the biographical information included comes from Chris Strachwitz's notes to Arhoolie F1007 and Bluesville BVL P 1039)

Mercy Dee (conclusion) by Bob Groom

On February 5th, 1961 Mercy Dee made ten recordings for Arhoolie, eight of which were subsequently issued on LP (F1007, incidentally the only red vinyl Arhoolie I've seen) the remaining two songs being remade at a later session. Accompanying him were three musicians whom he had played with on occasion during the fifties, guitarist K.C. Douglas, who had come to California from Mississippi in 1945 (look out for K.C.'s three fine lp's — Cook 5002, Bluesville 1023 & 1050), harmonica player Sidney Maiden from Louisiana, and drummer Otis Cherry, who had accompanied K.C. on his 1948 Mercury Boogie hit, (the reverse of which was Sidney Maiden's equally fine Eclipse Of The Sun). They had a complete understanding of Mercy Dee's musical needs and they gave sympathetic support throughout the session.

The first title, Jack Engine, derives from Walter Davis (who recorded Big Jack Engine Blues in 1937 — Bluebird B-7375). Although the lyrics are more conventional than most of Mercy Dee's pieces, their impact is still considerable:

Baby I think I hear, mama that Jack Engine blow (x2)

Lord when I leave this time, well I ain't coming back no more.

Now my home ain't here baby, well it's way out in the West (x2)

Out in those Smokey Mountains now baby, where those eagles build their nests.

Ebony Baby is a beautiful, slightly altered recreation of the Joe Pullum classic Black Girl What Makes Your Head So Hard, first recorded for Bluebird in April, 1934. For this piece, one of the few he recorded not of his own composition, Mercy Dee adopted the cascading piano style of Rob Cooper, Pullum's accompanist on his first two sessions, and Pullum's high-pitched vocal delivery:

Brown girl, brown baby, woman, woman what makes your head so hard?

Ebony baby, ebony baby, woman, woman what makes your head so hard?

It's just like a 2 by 4, babe, when it's laying up in some lumber yard.

Call The Asylum is a Mercy Dee original, a grimly realistic portrayal of mental anguish, culminating in an appeal to his woman to come back to him before he loses his mind completely. The mixture of despair, anger and pleading is reminiscent of several Blind Lemon Jefferson blues:

Oh please call the asylum, well I believe I'm going insane (x2)

Well my little baby have quit me, I'm standing barefooted crying on 5th and Main.

Well I'm so tore up in mind, well I don't even trust myself (x2)

Well it'll be curtains for you baby — catch you jivin' around with somebody else.

Oh please come back to me baby, I can't stand this pain another day (x2)

Well please call the asylum so they can come and take me away.

Mercy's Party provided some light relief after the taut performance of Call The Asylum. Mercy Dee rolls out some lonesome blues on the piano, commenting "Boys, you talk about the blues...I wish some of the cats were here to help me play 'em. A rainy day like today I could really wail", there is a knock on the 'door' and Sidney Maiden 'arrives'. From then on the recording simulates a house party with K.C. Douglas 'arriving' next, singing a verse ("Put your arms around me like a circle round the sun" etc), then Sidney singing a verse and finally Otis Cherry joining in while Mercy Dee sings another verse — "bring me one more half-a-gallon" — and then the recording fades out with a good time being had by all.

Walked Down So Many Turnrows is a remake of the striking blues he recorded in 1945 as Dark Muddy Bottom. The lyrics follow the Specialty recording with only very minor differences. Sidney Maiden's harp adds emphasis to the powerful lyrics.

Eighth Wonder Of The World is an amusing uptempo item with a chorus that runs:

What can you lose, why don't you give it a whirl,

If she stick with you it'll be a miracle and you'll have found the eighth wonder of the world.

K.C. contributes some snappy guitar work in the instrumental break. The lyrics are deliberately outrageous, and certainly it would be an exceptional (ly foolish) woman who would put up with such impositions, but Mercy Dee makes it clear that this is only humorous wishful thinking.

I Been A Fool (possibly the same piece as Romp And Stomp Blues on Flair) has really superb lyrics put to Mercy Dee's familiar medium-tempo melody:

Well I ain't gonna be a fool for you baby no more (x2)

Well I been a fool ever since I entered your door.

Got my boots laced up, wise as the old night owl (x2)

Like a wolf in the moonlight, baby it's my time to howl.

I'm gonna romp and stomp and lush till the moon grows low (x2)

I'm goin' take one cup of coffee and jump back and boogie some more.

The session ends with a stomping Red Light, a bawdy number which includes such old favourites as "two old maids sitting in the bed". Piano, guitar, harmonica and drums generate an infectious rhythm throughout.



Otis Cherry, K.C. Douglas, Mercy Dee, Sidney Maiden — photo courtesy Chris Strachwitz.

A week later a second session was held which only produced two issued recordings (both included on F1007). The first of these is however, a country blues masterpiece of the first water. Mercy's Troubles spotlights a man alone at his piano (Otis Cherry supports unobtrusively on drums), weaving his thoughts, feelings and memories into a blues of exceptional quality and emotional power which must surely rate as one of the finest in the Arhoolie catalogue, or for that matter any post-war blues series. No time constraints were imposed and the recording runs for nearly 10 minutes and comprises eight verses. In the first four he recalls old times in Texas and includes a fascinating reference to Bud Russel. After verses 4, 6 & 7 there are powerful piano breaks. In verse seven, he recalls his disillusionment with California, but his acceptance of the realities of life and his grim determination to take things as they come close verse eight on an almost hopeful note:

*I hate to burden you with my troubles but peoples please, please lend an ear
I have had so much bad luck and trouble and I've lived my whole sad life in fear.
Now since my troubles started early, at the time I should have been home in bed (x2)
I shot a man about a no good woman and she wasn't worth the salt it took to make her
bread.*

*They sentenced me to ten years on Big Brazos, picking cotton and and corn and listen to
the big bell tone (x2)*

Now every time I hear a street light jingle, I start aching all in my bone.

Uncle Bud swore he never saw a man that he couldn't change his ways (x2)

*When I say Uncle Bud I mean Bud Russell, the Kingpin and boss way back in red heifer
days.*

Peoples complain about their troubles, what if their luck had-a been like mine (x2)

*I was raised on scrap candy and regular sandwiches, whole weeks sometime I didn't make
a lousy dime.*

No woman have ever really loved me, all they wanted was to keep my pockets clean (x2)

Says I'd give a million dollars if some pretty baby would really, really love poor me.

I had to freight and move to California boys I really thought things would change (x2)

*But if I ain't cutting spinach I'm picking grapes people, when the fog rolls in I'm right
back down on Skid Row again.*

But I've learnt to thumb and smile at trouble, I ain't goin' to let it get me down (x2)

I'll be drinking Darkport and trying to make it, peoples when the deal goes down.

Perhaps as a result of Chris Strachwitz questioning him about his early life, Mercy Dee reached into his memory to produce a song he had learnt from Bob Jackson of Marlin, Texas nearly 30 years before. The lyrics of Troublesome Mind derive from the great pool of country blues verses current in the 1920's – "Left my poor old mother in the backdoor crying...", "Don't you never drive a stranger from your door..." – with some lines repeated three times in oldtime fashion. The optimistic final verse has the flavour of a Mercy Dee original: "Well I'll find me a tan baby, well and she sure do suit me fine. Well I'll never no more be worried with a troublesome mind." There are two lengthy instrumental breaks, featuring Mercy Dee's relaxed, rolling piano and K.C.'s guitar work. (Interestingly, Bert Mays recorded a Troublesome Mind Blues for Paramount (12614) in 1927 which uses the same tune and very similar lyrics and vocal inflections. Mays was almost certainly a Texas artist.)

Of the unissued tracks from the session, You Don't Know My Mind may well be a version of the blues standard and Mercy's Boogie is presumably an instrumental. The Drunkard was remade two months later.

Exactly a month elapsed before Mercy Dee recorded again, in Stockton on March 12, 1961. The only title to be issued from this session was Birdbrain Baby, a song which I discussed earlier in this article. It includes a really offbeat verse:

Now the more sense I try to teach her, the less I have myself,

More I try to teach and school her, less sense I have myself,

If something don't happen pretty soon, I won't have no knowledge left.

Six of the songs were remade in April but it would be interesting to know what the unissued Fairweather Mama is about. K.C. And Mercy's Wail I assume to be an instrumental.

Mercy Dee's last session was held in Berkeley on April 16, 1961 with Maiden and Cherry (but not Douglas) in support on most titles. The first two titles were issued on an Arhoolie 45(501) and later included in Arhoolie's Mercy Dee lp (F1007). Lady Luck is characteristic of his bad luck blues in that the tale of misfortune is laced with grim humour, as in verse one:

Lady Luck have never smiled down on me, I have never saw her wonderful face (x2)

*If it was raining soup I'd be caught with a fork people, tired of living in this mad, mad
atomic age.*

The second verse vividly evokes the effects of an alcoholic haze:

I got drunk to forget my troubles, so lush the street cars looked like toys.

He is so high that "I flagged down the heat (i.e. police) and they throwed me in the

tombs..." Verse three contains a gem of ironic humour:

Well they tell me not to be impatient, they say every dog has its day (x2)

But I don't belong to the Canine family yet I'm beginning to live and look like one everyday.

The traditional ballad Betty And Dupree has been reworked and revamped many times and sometimes turned into a new song. Mercy Dee's Betty Jean is one of the liveliest adaptations of the theme and melody. The recording has the pounding insistence of a Domino/Dupree New Orleans rock blues:

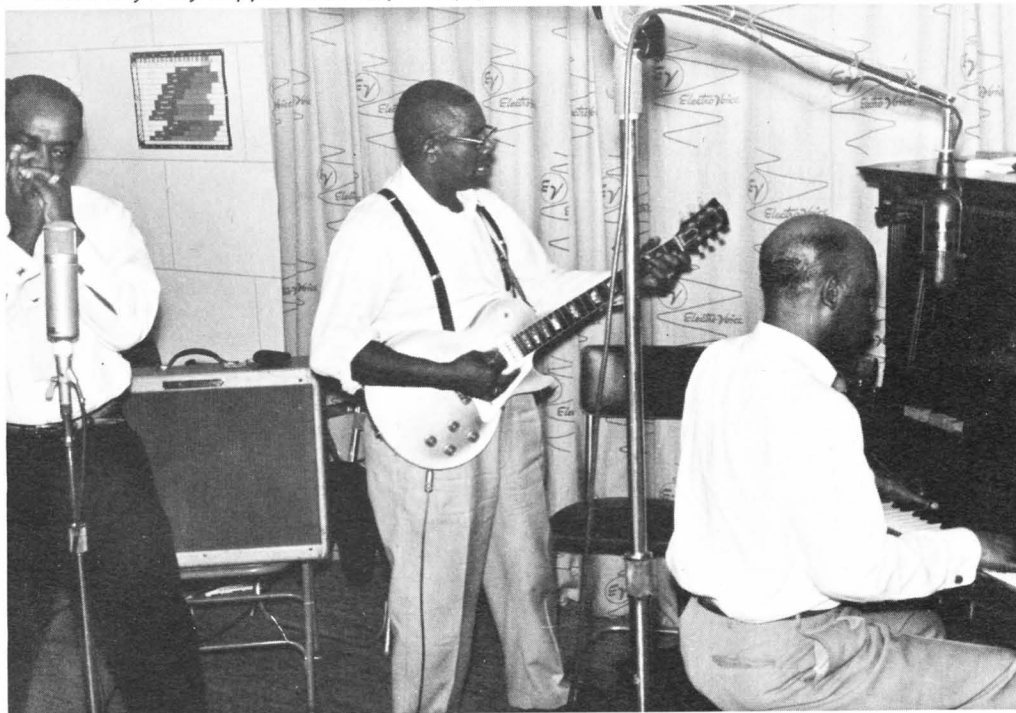
*Betty Jean, Betty Jean is my weakness well I don't care what in the world she do,
What makes me love Betty boys will make you love her too.*

Well she's long, Jean and lanky, clothes fit like paper on the wall,

When you see Betty strolling boys you're bound to fall.

Now if you ever, ever back in Texas, now please stop in Abilene,

Ask if anybody happen to see my Betty Jean.



Sidney Maiden, K.C. Douglas, Mercy Dee – photo courtesy Chris Stachwitz.

Ten of the titles made at the session comprised the lp Prestige issued as PITY AND A SHAME on Bluesville BVLP 1039, with notes by Chris Strachwitz. The title track is one of Mercy Dee's best efforts. In the first verse he comments on the perversity of some women in leading a man on until he is hooked and then leaving him flat:

Now it's a pity and a shame, the tricky actions of a woman's brain (x2)

Soon as you find you want her and her only, right away she'll go and make a change.

Verse two repeats this sentiment, a woman will fight to hold her man but when the competition is over, she'll leave him. Sidney Maiden contributes some really fine harp in the instrumental break. In verse three he regrets that "you can't case a woman" but advises "Be sure she's yours and yours only, when you got her layin' up in your arms". The conclusion emphasizes "It's a pity and a shame that a woman will never see the light". Shady Lane is a doomy reminder of the mortality of man:

Well do your hear the churchbell toning and the peoples begin to sing (x2)

Well it's just another good man gone way down in Shady Lane.

You may be a wino or a gambler or have your picture in the hall of fame (x2)

Take your pick, one is as good as the other when they lay you way down in Shady Lane.

Since tomorrow ain't promised to no man, all your planning may be in vain (x2)

So swing today and be merry, tomorrow you may be way down in Shady Lane.

The final verse expressed his philosophy of life, to make the most of life whatever the cost because "I don't want the world to owe me nothing, when they take me way down in Shady Lane". The stabbing piano and emotional singing suggest that he may have known that he hadn't long to live. (Walter Davis recorded a very similar blues for Bluebird, B-6996, in 1937 under the same title, although only the concluding line of verse 1 is common to both recordings).

"Ten years I worked and I can't show a dollar, and I slaved both day and night" Mercy Dee sings at the beginning of *After The Fight*. He goes on to express his resolve to have a good time regardless:

I'm goin' stay up all night and drink and gamble, stumble home and take a nap (x2)

I wouldn't tell a mule to get up, people, if he was sitting down in my lap.

(The Mule line is a favourite in Texas country blues and crops up in Lightnin' Hopkins' *Goin' Back To Florida* and many other recordings). The feeling of having given up trying is repeated in verse 3 "...I wouldn't hit a lick at a snake" and concludes in verse 4 that though he'll always love a woman and try to treat women right, "Before one of them marry me off to a job, it'll be a long, long time after the fight". (The significance of the title phrase is obscure.)

Your Friend And Woman examines the eternal triangle man-woman-friend. He cannot understand why his woman should go out of her way to get his friend "when there's plenty other mens around" but "nothing you can do short of murder will stop her, when she's made up her mind to drag him down":

You may play Peepin' Tom, watch her closely both night and day (x2)

But if she's got her mind set on him, you can bet that she will find a way.

He ends with a warning "Don't watch your friend, watch your woman, she's the one that's going to make the play". The long piano solo midway contains some unorthodox, Alex Moore-like phrases.

The Bluesville version of *One Room Country Shack* matches the Speciality original for quality of performance. Mercy Dee stretches out on piano in the instrumental break with Otis Cherry in support. Lyric variations are slight (e.g. "rest" for "sleep" in verse 2).

The lyrics of *The Drunkard* paint a grim picture of frustration and despair. Taking refuge in alcohol eases the pain but is no solution:

Now since hard times drove me to drinking, trying to drive my blues away (x2)

I'm going to just keep on drinking, people, maybe I'll make the grade someday.

The long instrumental introduction and break after verse 2 are dominated by Sidney's harp. Mercy Dee's troubles are compound — "now my house blowed down" and "all my neighbours are kicking" — and he sings in resignation:

Well what's the use of getting sober, when you know you going to get drunk again (x2)

I'm all alone in this world and the bottle is my only, only friend.

Now bring me one more half-a-gallon-, I declare that will be allright (x2)

Well I'll be back after another one way late night.

A stomping harmonica-piano exchange introduces the uptempo gambling blues *Five Card Hand*:

Well I got a five card hand and I don't know which way to play (x2)

I need a Queen like you to make my hand OK.

Well the Kid drew aces and he stacked them back to back (x2)

Now I looked at my hand and not a smile did I crack.

When the deal went down, I'd only drawn one card (x2)

Now if you've ever played Poker, you know that sure is hard.

Well the Kid looked at his hand and then began to blush (x2)

His face turned pale when he saw my Queen High Flush.

Have You Ever Been Out In The Country is a superb rendition, with piano accompaniment only, of the atmospheric blues Mercy Dee had first recorded for Flair some six years earlier. The lyrics are identical.

My Little Angel is another blues associated with Walter Davis, who recorded Angel Child for Bluebird in 1937 (B-7064) and again in 1938 (B-7693):

I've been looking for my little angel, I been looking for my little angel child (x2)

Lord I like to look into her face, man I like to see her smile.

Sidney's Sonny Boy Williamson-style harp playing is prominent in the instrumental accompaniment and the whole effect is reminiscent of a 1930's Bluebird session and very pleasing. Mercy Dee's only mention in Paul Oliver's Story Of The Blues is as a disciple of Leroy Carr. Personally I can detect few similarities between their music. Such influences as there are on Mercy Dee's highly original music from pre-war recordings seem to come from Walter Davis rather than Carr.

Mercy Dee's final recording was the affecting Sugar Daddy, in which he admits to being "the softest touch in town". Because "good looking womens can get my last quarter", people "call me a chump and say I'm crazy" but he repeats his intention (expressed in several songs) to "have my kicks while I can", another indication that he knew his time wasn't long. Sidney Maiden does sterling work on harmonica, as on most of the titles from this final session. The last verse is well worth quoting for the insight it gives into Mercy Dee's approach to life:

Sometimes I get so thrilled and excited, holding some fine chick in my arms (x2)

Then I get sad thinking about all the foolish bachelors whose money'll be spent long after he's gone.

Mercy Dee did not live to take part in the blues revival of the sixties and since his death his records have tended to be overlooked. I hope this appreciation will help to establish Mercy Dee Walton as one of the major figures of post-war blues and will prompt both newer collectors and longtime blues lovers who do not know his music to give a listen to his Arhoolie lp and, if they enjoy it, seek out some of his recordings. The splendid Bluesville lp is long deleted but letters to Transatlantic (Lawrence Aston) might get it reissued on Xtra. Mercy Dee has gone down 'shady lane' but his recordings remain to remind us that he was truly one of the great blues artists.

NOTES

1. The sleeve notes to Arhoolie F1007 are apparently in error. According to Chris Strachwitz's records, Mercy Dee was born on August 30th. 1915 as given in the notes to Bluesville BVLP 1039.
2. "Blues Records 1942-66" (Leadbitter/Slaven — Hanover Books) list two takes of a Mercy Dee Blues recorded on June 3rd. 1963 by Roosevelt Sykes for Spivey but unissued. It would be interesting to know if this is, as the title suggests, a tribute to Mercy Dee Walton, who had died six months earlier.
3. Mercy Dee's big hit One Room Country Shack is available on a Specialty anthology album entitled THIS IS HOW IT ALL BEGAN VOL. 1 (U.K. Specialty SNTF 5002).

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