

BIG JOE WILLIAMS & SHORT STUFF MAÇON HELL BOUND & HEAVEN SENT

Williams in a small, dingy hotel room in New York City's Greenwich Village. Some background material was needed for this album, and I was asked to speculate on why today's young college audience liked old-time country blues.

The most obvious reason seems to be that good traditional blues singers and instrumentalists are generally artists of the very highest order. It is as logical to respond to a blues by Big Joe Williams as it is to appreciate a painting by Cezanne or Renoir.

There are many other reasons: blues singers are often romantic figures to a college-age audience; they are men who live "on the road" and by their wits and music alone; they have lived experiences that most others merely dream about . . . their music is direct, real, and true, as opposed to other "popular" musics . . . they represent the complete antithesis of the American businessman future of the average college graduate; they are not respectable; they do not give a damn . . . in a way, they represent ultimate Experience against the college student's ultimate Innocence when compared to modern fast-buck Experience and corruption; they seem to be something totally honest and uniquely American in an age when, to the youthful, all else is rapidly turning into rot; . . . they seem as solid and straightforward as all those wonderful people in the great old photographs; they look right at you; they aren't afraid; they don't hide; they look like human beings . . . they represent nostalgia in that they are symbols of the death of an age, an age in which men were sometimes kings; from their Hamlets will come (and have come) our Osrics, and we all know and mourn this fact.

Joe answered my knock on the hotel room door. "Short Stuff" sat on the bed, smiled when introduced, and generally let his "manager" do the talking. I asked the usual questions, got the usual answers. Big Joe and "Short Stuff" had just played a few college dates along the Eastern seaboard, and Maçon had faced his first real audiences. "How did you do?" I asked. "He did fine," Joe answered, a smile on his face. "He was a little nervous at first, but then he did real good." Maçon shyly offered that he enjoyed playing for college audiences.

Do you play 9-string? I asked.

"No, only 6-string," he answered.

Bottleneck?

"No, no bottleneck."

Did anyone influence your style?

"No, I made it myself."

Do you make up your own songs, write your own . . . ?

"Yes, all the songs is my own."

And where did they go from here? They didn't know. They were out of work now, low on money, and down in spirit. They had tried to contact several people, but nothing had worked out for them. Nobody, in a city of some eleven million people, seemed at all interested in what they were doing or in giving them a job. Joe, of course, had gone through dry stretches like this his whole life, but it seemed new and strange to "Short Stuff." He didn't know the angles yet, didn't know whom to try to talk to, or who might be hiring. He simply sat quietly and accepted whatever Joe could come up with. Did I know of anything? Joe asked.

We sat around dejectedly, smoked cigars, and called people up. (Since neither blues singer can read or write, an ordinary phone call presented an extraordinary problem to them: either someone had to call for them, or they had to wait to be called.) The results were dismally predictable: no one was interested.

What would they do now? Head west, Joe said, and see if they could get any work there. "Short Stuff" nodded as we shook hands all around. He seemed to know that his odyssey had begun. Where it would end, none of us knew.

This album was recorded after a concert at Bard College on May 18, 1964, and was engineered by Harry Rosenblum, Jr., Dick Duman, and Graham Gibson.

Notes by Paul Nelson
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| Side I | Band 1 — NIGHT CAP BLUES — Big Joe | 2:55 |
| | Band 2 — MY JACK DON'T DRINK WATER NO MORE — Short Stuff | 4:00 |
| | Band 3 — FLOUR DOUGH BLUES — Big Joe | 2:45 |
| | Band 4 — HELL-BOUND BLUES — Short Stuff | 2:25 |
| | Band 5 — BIG-LEGGED WOMEN, KEEP YOUR DRESSES DOWN — Big Joe | 3:10 |
| | Band 6 — SHORT STUFF'S CORINNA — Short Stuff | 2:45 |
| Side II | Band 1 — DON'T LEAVE ME HERE — Big Joe | 3:54 |
| | Band 2 — YOU RASCAL, YOU — Big Joe | 1:05 |
| | Band 3 — MESSING WITH THAT THING — Short Stuff | 2:16 |
| | Band 4 — BUMBLE BEE — Big Joe | 4:12 |
| | Band 5 — IF YOU CAN'T FLY — Big Joe | 2:46 |
| | Band 6 — ROCK ROAD BAD TREATIN' — Short Stuff | 2:18 |

John Wesley ("Short Stuff") Maçon is a small, sturdy, good-looking blues-singer-guitarist from Crawford, Mississippi, a tiny, dusty hamlet that has also produced the legendary 9-string guitarist, Big Joe Williams, "last of the old-time blues singers." "Short Stuff" has played the guitar since he was nine years old; he is now thirty-two. He is a completely self-taught musician who has played his homemade music almost completely alone because there simply wasn't anyone else in his area good enough to play with him. Occasionally, after work, he would play at a few dances, but such jobs weren't plentiful, and the money wasn't good. So, for 21 years, Maçon has played his blues, written his songs, and made his music primarily for an audience of one.

Not that this is especially unusual for the Negro country musician. True, many bluesmen traveled and forged out incandescent careers for themselves throughout the Faulknerian South — but many of them simply stayed in one place and created their music. (Mississippi John Hurt, from Avalon, is a good example of the stay-at-home blues singer.)

"Short Stuff" has now begun traveling the sparse and fickle concert circuit with Big Joe Williams, who, in a trip back to Mississippi, "discovered" him, liked his "deep down" music, remembered his father and mother, and decided to take him with him. Since then, the two bluesmen have been making do with whatever work they could get — living from day to day, hour to hour, on the whims and generosity (sometimes curiosity) of friends interested in blues, college student aficionados, and the small, folk record companies.

Needless to say, this is a highly uncertain — most of the time, highly undignified — life. Despite the avowed folk and blues "renaissance," there are really not that many people interested in the traditional country blues. While it may be relatively easy for the young white urban blues singer to get lucrative dates in coffeehouses and at folk festivals, the old-timer, the country man, being neither young nor white, has a rough time of it. True, he may get an appearance at this or that folk festival, but he is rarely asked back more than once, and there are 365 days to the year. Not many coffeehouses or "folk" night clubs are willing to take the chance that an illiterate, old, and Negro blues singer will be able to keep a typical youthful audience interested and the cash register clinking at the same time. The small, folk and blues record companies do the best they can, but they generally haven't much money, and the blues artist seldom knows even a quarter as many songs as the newest teenage topical-song flash writes in a good week. A man can record his repertoire only so many times for so many (or rather, so few) record companies: the day of reckoning soon comes, often with much anger and resentment on the part of both artist and businessman.

So, I must admit, it was with somewhat heavy heart and a not optimistic mind, that I went to meet "Short Stuff" Maçon and Big Joe