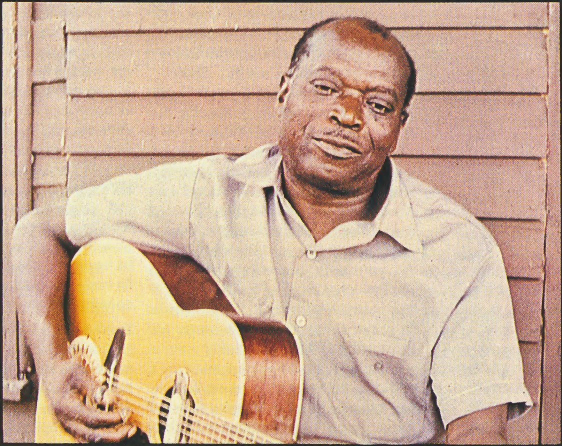
THE LEGACY OF THE BLUES Vol. 9

A series of recordings by the great blues artists

ROBERT PETE WILLIAMS

A new defining of his life and music by the great Louisiana bluesman



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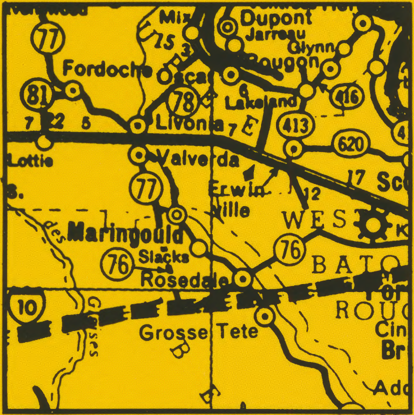
Dupont
Jarreau
Glynn
Rougon
Mix
Fordoche
Oscar
Lakeland
Livonia
Lottie
Valverda
Erwinville
WEST
BATON
ROUGE
Maringouin
Slacks
Rosedale
Grosse Tete
77
81
78
416
413
620
76
10

1. Woman you Ain't No Good
2. Come Here, Sit Down On My Knee
3. Angola Penitentiary Blues
4. Late Night Boogie
5. Goin' Out Have Myself a Ball
6. Poor Girl Out On the Mountain
7. Graveyard Blues
8. You're My All Day Steady and My Midnight Dream
9. Keep Your Bad Dog Off Me

Recorded at Capitol City
Sound Studios, Baton Rouge,
Louisiana.
Engineer Bill Triche
Produced by Sam Charters
Photo by Sam Charters
Design Co-ord P. Viking

Distributed by P.R.T.
Sonet Records,
121 Ledbury Road,
London W11 2AQ

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The country's flat around Rosedale, Louisiana, the small town west of New Orleans where Robert Pete Williams lives. It's flat and wet, in its own way hard, relentless country. When you drive out from New Orleans the first stretch of the road goes under the soft, hanging belly of Lake Ponchartrain, the land around it swollen with water, crisscrossed with open channels of dark muddy water. The trees stick up in broken handfuls on the wetter ground, the grey moss hanging in clumps that reach down to the waiting water. Most of it's flooded in the winters, clearing when the weeks get drier later in the year. It turns a rust brown then, and smoke from fires drifts over the open patches. Where's there road work going on the dredgers are out in the swamp, sluicing through the tangle of weeds that choke the streams, heaping the mud in long sloping levees that become the base for the new road.

Beyond the lake the land is still as flat, but it's a little higher, drained a little, and on the back roads you drive for miles down dark massed tunnels of trees and bushes, then the clumped spindles of sugar cane, thick tufted rows of it down the cleared fields. At the crossroads, or strung along the open areas beside the plowed ground you get the first houses – oblong wooden frames, with raw openings for doors and windows, some with sagging porches, others with steps up from the trampled, bare dooryards. The boards are dark with old shadows of paint, the doors gapped and uneven. The only signs of life on a wet afternoon are the television aerials jutting out from the roofs, the glistening cars pulled up outside, and the thin blueish straggle of smoke strung out above the chimney.

A little further to the west, where the ground is dry enough for pasture land you come to knotted bunches of houses around the usual grocery stores, two or three bars, a gas station, and the post office. The small Louisiana country towns. A church, too – usually more than one, but both of them in wooden buildings, not much different from the houses. One's Catholic, since this part of the state still has something left over from French New Orleans, the other Baptist, the church most of the black families go to. Robert Pete's town is beyond Rosedale – four or five streets of newer houses straddling the railroad line. On a drenched, pouring afternoon, water spewing away from the car wheels in wavering eddies, the few people out of the houses can't tell where he lives. Two men in yellow slickers using a hoist to get the last of a load of slickly glistening wet cane on to a truck splash over through the mud, but can't remember ever hearing the name. In a little grocery store the woman behind the counter breaks off her low whispers of talk with the grinning man who delivers the bread – truck parked under the trees outside – and shakes her head. But at the post office the clerk nods wearily. He's been asked for the same directions many times. "Go back where you were, a block in behind the main road there."

Robert's house is one-storey, almost against the street in front of it. He did it himself with materials he found around the country; so it has a loose, easy feel to it. The school's just out, the bus letting the students off – books and jackets, calling to each other, walking down the middle of the black asphalt street to keep out of the streaming water on the white shell walkways. Robert's sitting inside, looking at television, in his undershirt, back in a chair against the wall. When you first see him you expect him to be as hard a man as he looks. He's tall, solid, barrel chested, with a kind of physical insistence about him. It's in his face, the same heavy presence. He's dark skinned, his mouth, when he's sitting by himself, has a brooding set to it, his eyes half closed in a still watchfulness. Then he begins to talk, the eyes open as he turns to smile, and you feel his openness, his sudden sensitivities.

Robert – the "Pete" was added later – is almost the archetype of what a blues singer should be. He grew up working as hard as a man when he was still barely in his teens – sleeping under sacks, coffee and bread for breakfast, and $12 for a months work. Then the years of working as a labourer – a moment of desperation when he killed a man and was sent to Angola Prison for a life sentence – someone – Dr. Harry Oster – recording him in the prison, and within a few years free, working jobs again and singing everywhere in the United States and Europe. Out of this he makes his songs, with a pint of vodka close to his feet, letting them come to him in the kind of earth poetry that is the blues. A rhythm, a pattern in the fingers coming to him as he sits looking down at the guitar, then the shape of the verses coming together in some suggestion he feels in the accompaniment. And the material of the verses coming out of the juke joints, the laboring jobs, and the prison years that have all been part of his life.

Even in the house – as his wife Hattie Mae cooks supper and his children come in from school, get themselves a can of cola and sit down to watch the television – there is the same feeling of his as a bluesman. The guitar's never far away – even if it's in its case the case is usually in the room, or just inside the door of his bedroom. In his talk there's the long kind of free extension that goes into the blues, and the things he talks about are the things he sings about – with the guitar and the rough forms of the verses turning the looseness of his experience into the tighter structure of song.

But as you sit with him he talks about the things that have happened in the last day – the afternoon. "I have my little business, you know, and if the good Lord lets it be nice weather then I go out with my truck and collect scrap metal. But it's been too wet today . . ." When I say I didn't know he was in the scrap metal business he looks serious. "The town'll be having these old cars on the street and the streets will be getting messed up behind that and I be the one that get the cars off. Slim Harpo – the blues singer – he was a friend of mine. We never did play together, but he did the same as I did. We both played music and sold scrap iron and tin at the same place. Thomas Scrap in Baton Rouge. I'd come up to be unloaded, and there he'd be in his truck under a tree to keep out of the sun, waiting just the same as me."

Then when he plays some blues out in front of the house all of this is there, as well as all the things from a thousand country dances and juke joint nights. What a blues man does – to create out of what he knows, out of what has happened – even when the words have been used before, still part of what the singer himselt is trying to say. When the blues is finished he names it after the first line of the last verse – not from the first verse as most blues men do. For Robert it isn't shaped until the last of the words have been fitted into place. What he tries to explain is something else, but it also tells about what he does in the forming, the shaping of the song. "The blues is something that jumps on you, just like a preacher. When it hits you and you in the juke and people dancin' – the blues hits you so hard you start makin' blues you don't even know."

He gets up to get dressed before dinner, changing to an open collared shirt, striped flaring pants, shiny cowboy boots, and a western, broad brimmed stetson hat pushed back on his head, and for a moment again there is the sense of hardness, of a rough strength. Then he sits down at the table, takes off his hat, smooths back his gray-tinged hair. "I don't eat so much. I have high blood pressure and the doctor says I have to stop all that." The soft, careful voice. "I talk it over with Hattie now I'm getting old and she say all that's coming down on you from when you were young." "All that" comes down on him from those years when he was young – but the blues come down from the same place, and with Robert Pete Williams there is the awareness that the two things are at the center of the quiet – almost still – life he leads in the small clump of houses just west of the bayous in southern Louisiana. There's no place to tell where the life leaves off – he opens the guitar case and gets out the guitar, looking for the metal slide he uses on some of his numbers – and the blues begin.

Sam Charters

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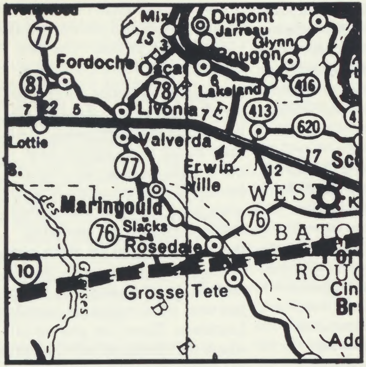
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Rosedale
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1. Woman you Ain't No Good
2. Come Here, Sit Down On My
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