Baby, I Done Got Wise

By WILLIAM "BIG BILL" BROONZY

The first time I tried to play anything was in 1914. It was a home-made fiddle and I couldn't play it right away. That was in Arkansaw near where the Mississippi and Arkansaw rivers come together. I had first heard a home-made fiddle played by a blues singer we knew as See See Rider. Don't know his name—everybody called him just See See Rider, because he used to sing a blues by that name. Later on Ma Rainey made a record of that tune, but I first heard it down around my home. I never saw anyone else play a home-made fiddle except See See Rider. He was born and raised in Redale, Arkansaw, and he played for everybody around there. Hearing him made me want to do something too.

Me and a boy named Louis made a fiddle and guitar from wooden boxes we got from the commissary. The neck was a broomstick and we'd get broken strings from See See Rider and patch them up. I made me a bow out of hickory wood by bending it and leaving it to dry. We'd cut a tree with an axe and go back the next day for rosin. I kept the fiddle hid because my old man and woman didn't want me to play it. Me and Louis would play every chance we got and one day a man heard us and took us to his house to play a piece. He liked it and said he'd get us a good fiddle and guitar. He sent to Sears-Roebuck in Chicago but it was a long time before I could play a regular fiddle. My home-made fiddle had only two strings and I played two strings on the new one fine, but it took a while to learn to use all four strings. After I could play it, I couldn't tune it. We used to go on picnics and barbecues and I'd play my fiddle, with Louis on guitar and a bass player named Jerry Sanders. But my brother-in-law would have to go along to tune the fiddle.

The first job I had playing music in a public place was in Little Rock. That was after I got out of the army in March, 1919 and lasted until February, 1920. Then I went to Chicago and got a job as yard-man for the Pullman Company. I didn't play any for a few years until I met Charlie Jackson in 1924. He found out I could play a fiddle and had me come around. John Thomas, Theodore Edwards and Charlie were all playing then on the West Side. Later on I played guitar on a record for Teddy Edwards and the tunes were Barbecue Blues and Louise Louise Blues.

Charlie first got me started on guitar at that time and showed me how to make chords, and I played around a little with John Thomas. Charlie was a well-known recording artist at that time and he got me to go to Mayo Williams, who was working for Paramount then. John Thomas and I auditioned two numbers for Williams—Big Bill Blues and House Rent Stomp—but he said we didn't play well enough. I guess it wasn't very good because I was just starting on guitar. I had my job for the Pullman Company and only played once in a while at house parties. We made those two numbers for Williams later on though. That was in 1926 and when we got to the studio, Aletha Dickerson, who was William's secretary, asked me my name. I told her, "William Lee Conley Broonzy," and she said, "For Christ's sake, we can't get all that on the label." She said she'd think of a name for me and later on when she wanted me for something, she said, "Come here, Big Boy." That gave her the idea to call me Big Bill and that's the way I've been known ever since. I think I recorded six sides for the Paramount Company, but the first was Big Bill Blues and House Rent Stomp.

There were a lot of good guitar players and blues singers around Chicago in those days and I knew all of them from playing around at different places. Shorty George recorded the first guitar blues of my knowing. Barbecue Bob was one of the first too—I met him around Chicago. I worked with Georgia Tom about that time—he was the leader of the Hokum Boys and wrote all their tunes, and when we made a record, we'd use a tune that they made, like Somebody's Been Using That Thing. One day in 1930, we all piled into a Ford and drove to
New York. There was Georgia Tom and I, a girl named Mozelle, Lester Melrose—he was the manager of the record company—and two members of the Hokum Boys, Arthur Pettis and Frank Bradwell. They sang but they didn’t play and we made records like *Come On In*, where Mozelle, Tom and I sang and Tom played piano and I played guitar. We also made records for the Starr Piano Company in Richmond, Indiana with Georgia Tom on piano. Later on I made records there with Black Bob on piano. Georgia Tom’s name was Thomas A. Dorsey and he was on a lot of records, including all of Tampa Red’s, until he quit for the church about 1933.

All this time I was working during the day and they’d pay me to play at night. I was making records too and we’d all get together in the recording studio. I always went around to watch when Ma Rainey was recording. Maybe I’d be making records in one studio and Ma in another and others would be there, like Blind Blake, Charlie Jackson, Blind Lemon Jefferson and Leroy Carr. I never worked with him but I think Leroy Carr was the greatest blues singer I heard in my life. I knew him from seeing him around and listening to him and he was the best guy you ever met. He played piano on all his records and usually worked with Scrapper Blackwell. He really could sing the blues and he couldn’t have been more than 30 when he died.

My first personal appearance in Chicago was in 1932. I mean in a public place and playing music for a living. None of us would ever make enough money just playing music. I had to have my day job and play music at night. Friends who were interested in us would pick us out for jobs for parties and maybe in small taverns, like Ruby Gatewood’s and Johnson’s Tavern. The biggest was in theaters. I played off and on at the Regal, Savoy and Indiana Theaters and once for four nights at the Morson Hotel. One fellow had sort of a political job but I don’t remember his name. They treated us swell but it never lasted long. I had my family in Chicago to take care of and bought a home for my mother in Arkansaw. I couldn’t do that on music alone.

I’ll never forget one party I was on in Chicago. It was a musicians’ party at 1112 South Washburn Street. It was free for musicians and the others had to pay. Pinkie Thomas gave the party—she was the landlady of the building—and I went over with Blind Percy. He was a guitar player and I picked him up at his house and took him over. He was really blind and had to be led up the stairs. There were eight rooms and all full of people and everyone cutting up. In those days we used to keep the front rooms dark and lamps in the other rooms. The front door was locked and the musicians used to be in the rear room nearest to the back exit if anything happened. We all had a good time until about twelve o’clock when two guys got to fighting. Then everybody got into the fight and I headed for the door. I got out of there pretty fast but when I got down to the street I remembered about Blind Percy. I started back up the stairs. Somebody said, “You can’t go back up there,” and I said, “I can’t leave a blind man up there in all that fighting.” He said, “There’s Percy sitting over there on the sidewalk.” I don’t know how he got out but he was the first one out when the fighting started. So then we headed for the alley-way to the courtyard in back of the apartment. They used to hang the whiskey out the window and we went after it. A couple of others had the same idea but when we went around, they thought we were the police and ran away, so we got the gallon. By the time the police came, everybody was out, even two guys who had their legs broken, but they picked them up later in a hospital. Windows and lamps were broken and they found a lot of knives laying around and they caught the landlady and her daughter. There was a deaf and dumb girl at that party and before the fight was over, she was talking that night. She is still in Chicago and now when I see her, I can get close and understand what she’s saying, but not before that night.

The first big chance I had was in 1939, when John Hammond was down through Chicago and he wrote me a letter to come to New York. I played in Carnegie Hall and then Café Society for a week. Ida Cox was there and Josh White and Sonny Terry and everybody treated us very well. But I wanted to be with my family so after a
while I went back to Chicago. I had a job in a foundry then. I came back to New York again in 1940 to play another concert at Carnegie Hall and Cafe Society, but went right back home again. I was home most of the time after that until 1945, except for a couple of tours in 1941. I was on the road then with Lil Green, playing guitar for her, with a piano and bass player. We'd be on the road for six weeks and home for two, until she decided to make a change. It was on one of those last trips that I met my wife and married her sixteen days later, on June 7, 1941. We had lived in Chicago ever since until this year, when I got connected with Joe Glaser and he brought me to New York.

I think I must have made about 200 sides under my own name and many others with other artists. Robert Brown—that's Washboard Sam—is my half-brother and I played on all his records. I used to write some numbers, and arrange others, for him, and many times he'd play his washboard on my records. I played guitar on all of Jazz Gillum's records, and he played his French Harp, which sounds like a harmonica, on some of my numbers, like Key to the Highway. I worked with many others, including Sonny Boy Williamson, the Yas Yas Girl (Merline Johnson), all of Lil Green's records before 1945, and on some of Roosevelt Sykes.

My own records are on Banner, Melotone, Perfect, two for Victor, and many on Vocalion and Okeh, besides the Paramount and Champion. All my numbers are ones I wrote out myself except a few, like Shake 'Em On Down, which is Bukka White's number, and My Gal Is Gone, which was written by Tampa Red. On Key to the Highway, the tune is mine and the words were written by Charlie Segar. I made a few numbers like Mistreatin' Mama Blues and Oh Yes by myself, but on most of the records there are other artists accompanying me. Buster Bennett played tenor on a lot of them and sometimes there'd be a trumpet or clarinet, or maybe piano and bass or piano and washboard, besides my
own guitar. I worked with many fine piano players after the early records with Georgia Tom. Aletha Dickerson played piano for me and Black Bob played on some early Melotones and Perfects, like Cherry Hill, Seven Leven and Match Box Blues. After that I worked with Blind John (John Davis), who I think is the best all-around piano player I ever recorded with. But my favorite piano player and the one who worked on all my records from 1936 until he made with Johnny Temple were Seven Eleven piano player I ever recorded with. But my layers after the early records with Georgia Davis), who I think is the best all-around mental. He played a boogie woogie style and he seemed just right for me. I think he was the best blues piano player I ever heard. He wasn’t very big and he couldn’t have been very strong because he died when he was only 30. Josh played for other artists too, like Washboard Sam and the Yas Yas Girl. I know two numbers he made with Johnny Temple were Louise Blues and Beale Street Sheik. Of my numbers, he liked Looking Up At Dawn, but his favorite number, and also my favorite number with him is My Last Goodbye to You. Some other favorites of mine are, Your Time Now, Done Got Wise, Just a Dream and Truckin’ Little Mama, all made with Josh. We made some that were never released, like Rock Me Baby and Hit the Right Lick, because the studio said they were too suggestive. I made them again later on with Memphis Slim on piano, and Rock Me Baby is now called Rockin’ Chair Blues.

After Josh died, I used Blind John, Memphis Slim (Peter Chatham), Horace Malcomb and on my last date on Feb. 19 and 24, 1945, Big Maceo played piano. None of the last ones have been released as yet.

BUNK JOHNSON’S RECORDING ACTIVITIES IN NEW YORK

March 10, 1945—Sidney Bechet’s Orchestra featuring Bunk Johnson, trumpet; Sandy Williams, trombone; Cliff Jackson, piano; Pops Foster, bass, and Manzie Johnson, drums—6 10-inch sides for Blue Note Records (scheduled for spring release), as follows: Miletenjoys; Let Me In the Lifeboat (a spiritual in swing-time); two Blues; Basin St. Blues, and Porto Rico. Bunk Johnson’s New Orleans Band—personnel, Bunk Johnson, trumpet; George Lewis, clarinet; Jim Robinson, trombone; Alton Purnell, piano; Lawrence Marrero, banjo; Alcide (Slow Drag) Paveageau, bass; Warren (Baby) Dodds, drums, while playing at the Stuyvesant Casino, N. Y., from Sept. 28, 1945 to Jan. 12, 1946.

Four 10-inch sides for Decca—Alexander’s Ragtime Band; Maryland My Maryland; Tishomingo Blues and You Always Hurt the One You Love.

Eight 10-inch sides for Victor (scheduled for release in March, 1946 in album form) —Snag It; Just A Closer Walk With Thee; One Sweet Letter From You; Sister Kate; High Society; Franklin St. Blues; Darktown Strutters Ball and When the Saints Go Marching In.

Jan. 1, 1946—Sister Ernestine B. Washington, gospel singer, accompanied by Bunk Johnson’s New Orleans Band—four 10-inch sides, scheduled for March, 1946 release on Jubilee label—Where Can I Go But To the Lord; Does Jesus Care; The Lord Will Make a Way Somehow; and God’s Amazing Grace.

At the Stuyvesant Casino—four sides by the Armed Forces Special Service Division, for distribution to the armed forces on V-Discs—Snag It; I Can’t Escape From You; Coquette and You Always Hurt the One You Love.

THE MAIL BOX

(Manila)—Dear Art: I’m okay and hope all is coming along well with you and the magazine. Manila is a bombed town. The Americans really went to town to get the Japs out of here.

I saw Bill Coleman and Bass Hill, they passed through with drummer Herbie Cowan and band. Lem Johnson was here, also Jesse Stone and band with Francis Jackson on tenor.

The show I’m with is Frances Brock and band. She used to sing with Cab Calloway and then was a singer in the Porgy and Bess show. The band has some outstanding musicians with Chauncey Haughton sax and Otis Johnson and Cookie Mason trumpets. Nicholas Rodriguez is on piano. The acts are a dance team, the Brockettes, a girl vocal trio and me and my act. We’re supposed to play from Japan to Korea until June.—JIMMY BUTTS.