



From *Living Blues*, September/October, 1997.

***A Rough Rugged Road: From Georgia to Chicago to Hollywood with Bumble Bee Slim***

By Jerry Zolten

My entree into the world of bluesman Bumble Bee Slim came not by choice, but by chance. It happened a few years ago in the least likely of places--a yard sale in rural Central Pennsylvania. There tucked among the Doris Days, Lawrence Welks, and Perry Comos was a grainy old 78 on the obscure Paramount "race" label--"Rough Rugged Road Blues" b/w "Honey Bee Blues." The record, as it turned out, proved to be the only known copy of Slim's previously unheard first recording. There I was, suddenly and unintentionally the steward of a rare piece of blues history, and that made me want to dig a little deeper into the man's life and music.

There was some intrigue about Slim's career. Why did he call himself "Bumble Bee Slim?" What was his guitar playing like? After all, he'd only played on his first records and, until now, almost no one had ever heard them before. And most of all, why, after cutting over one hundred eighty sides, did he walk clean away from his recording career in 1937?

The answers were out there, but scattered. Pete Welding's 1962 production on the Pacific Jazz label--*Bumble Bee Slim/Back in Town!*--turned out to be a goldmine of

information. The liner notes were nothing less than an unedited ramble by Slim about his life in music. All of the Bumble Bee Slim quotes used here were culled from those album liner notes.

**"That kid, he's a good barber, go!"**

Bumble Bee Slim was born Amos Easton on May 7, 1905, in Brunswick, Georgia, a coastal town halfway between Savannah and Jacksonville, Florida. The Atlantic seaboard railroad passed through, and that made Brunswick a jumping-off place, not only for cotton, lumber, tobacco, and turpentine, but some 25 years later, for Easton himself.

Longtime resident Geneva Lyde remembers Brunswick back then. Life was good within the black community. Some people worked their own farms out in the country or cut pine for construction or turpentine. Others worked in town on the docks or in the railroad yards. "We hardly knew about the white community," Geneva told me. But life in Brunswick was nothing but trouble for Amos Easton.

Life came along so tough, so hard. My dad passed when I was just four years old...My mother, she said, "Well, I got six kids here, so its useless for me to battle on. There's more men around, I guess I can hang one." So she got one. That turned out to be my step-dad. Wasn't long before two more kids showed up. So there you was...eight in the family. It takes tough diggin' to take care of eight. That meant I had to get out and work early in the game. I didn't take to that so well.

Easton was an habitual runaway starting at age nine. Hawking peanuts and cutting hair were his stock in trade.

Had me parched peanuts, you know, down South they call them goobers. "Let the kid cut your hair, come on, come on, that kid he's a good barber, go!" That went on till they found out where I was. My step-daddy was there with the mule wagon and tied me down and took me back.

Easton felt like he was "his own man" when he was on the run, so he kept at it and kept on being hauled back home. Somewhere during that time, probably inspired by traveling medicine shows and circuses, he added singing and guitar picking to his list of marketable

skills. "I was writing songs--I started when I was about ten--and stashing the songs away." Slim was content to stay around Brunswick, but that changed when he got married in his twenties.

The outcome...was kinda bad...After my wife and I separated, I decided to do something with this material and took off for Chicago hoboin',...a little guitar swingin' on my back. This was right during the time the Scottsboro Boys were in a jam. I was hoppin' freight...Went into Cincinnati, from there to Indianapolis...I wound up with the Ringling Brothers circus there. I took the little guitar and got me some of the circus performers and they took me down to where they was loadin' to leave and I scuffled up a few quarters...I got to Chicago. ...It was durin' the depression time and nothin' much was happenin'....So I had to make it around Chicago, giggin' with the guitar and playin' in dives and places....I used to listen to Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and all of them, and I said, "Well, I believe I can do the same thing."

### **"Got to travel this lonesome rugged road..."**

Amos Easton was 26 when, in October, 1931, he cut his first sides--including "Rough Rugged Road Blues" and "Honey Bee Blues"--for Paramount at their Grafton, Wisconsin studios. They were the only sessions on which he played his own guitar. Paul Oliver has said Easton was a "poor guitarist," but these recordings reveal a spare, servicable style, heavily thumbed rhythm on the bass strings, bottlenecked high notes slid in between the vocal lines. Slim may not have been complex, but he got the job done.

"Rough Rugged Road Blues" draws on the darkside of Slim's road experience.

I got to travel this lonesome rugged road in the dark,  
Got to swim this deep wide ocean,  
And dodge the dangerous sharks.

"Honey Bee Blues," on the other hand, is an up-beat double-entendre romp that reveals the strategy behind Easton's "Bumble Bee Slim" stage name. The song is an answer to Memphis Minnie's successful 1930 recording, "Bumble Bee Blues." Minnie's "He's my big bumble bee,...Stung me this morning," becomes "Honey bee, I stung you this morning," in Slim's song. Minnie's "I've been lookin' for him all day long," becomes "You flew away from home, I'm wonderin' and worryin' where my little honey bee done gone," in Slim's answer.

But Easton's "Honey Bee Blues" may have been more than just an attempt to cash in on the success of Memphis Minnie's recording. Howard "Louie Blueie" Armstrong, who knew Slim back then, remembers that Slim and Minnie had been, as Armstrong puts it, "involved." While "Honey Bee Blues" may have been a shot at a coattail ride, it may also have contained a kernel of truth about what was going on between the two--or at least what Slim wanted people to think was going on.

Slim's first records came out in 1931, a tough time for anyone to launch a recording career. Record companies took a beating during the Depression. Even a mainstream label like Victor experienced a drop in sales from over 105 million in 1921 to less than 5 million in 1931. Hard times, however, seemed to be the ongoing state of affairs within the black community. A label like Paramount that catered to blacks measured a record's success by sales in the thousands. They could get by because production values were nil, materials poor, and artists barely paid at all.

But Paramount, too, was eventually done in by the Depression. Easton's first sides were near Paramount's last. By 1934, new labels with better distribution through ties to larger companies started targeting black record buyers. Bumble Bee Slim went along for the ride.

### **"One of those good old Georgia boys,...a prolific songwriter."**

After Paramount, Easton hooked up with Lester Melrose, a music biz entrepreneur with production ties to labels like Vocalion, Decca, and Bluebird. Melrose was white, but he had a flair for black music. By the early Thirties, he and partner, J. Mayo Williams, were tapping into a pool of Chicago blues talent that, with Easton, included Big Bill Broonzy, Roosevelt Sykes, Peetie Wheatstraw, Robert "Washboard Sam" Brown, Dr. Clayton, Jazz Gillum, Yank Rachell, and Tampa Red, just to name a few.

"I made my audition...down at 666 Lakeshore Drive on the eleventh floor." The contract "wasn't much. It couldn't be, cause in those days you could buy a record for about 25 cents." The deal called for "forty tunes a year," and Slim delivered. He cut a phenomenal one hundred eighty four sides between 1932 and 1937.

As a singer and a song writer, Slim was a double-barreled talent. He built his sound around piano and guitar. Slim's regular back-up included Jimmy Gordon, Myrtle Jenkins, Black Bob, Honey Hill, or, on occasion, Peetie Wheatsraw on piano. Willie Bee James was a regular on guitar, but Bill Gaither, Casey Bill, and even Scrapper Blackwell and Big Bill Broonzy sat in at times. Once in a while, there were departures from the formula. In 1934,

Slim crossed paths with three Tennessee instrumentalists, guitarists Carl Martin and Ted Bogan, and mandolin/fiddle player Howard Armstrong. Armstrong remembers their meeting.

Bogan, Martin, and I fluctuated between Tennessee and Illinois...In Chicago, we used to go out "pullin' doors,"...no particular job, not even an organized group,...just go out on the North side of town where the taverns were,...walk in and ask if we could play...That's how we ran into Bumble Bee Slim.

Easton joined Martin, Bogan, and Armstrong in a pickup group called the Four Keys. In turn, Easton used them as back-up on a number of his recordings. Armstrong remembers Easton as "one of those good old Georgia boys...well liked, nice looking,...a prolific songwriter" who "overnight would write two songs sometimes."

As to the sessions, Armstrong recalls that "we recorded at the Merchandise Mart in downtown Chicago. Sometimes we rehearsed and sometimes we just popped them out. We only did one take. No royalties. If there were any, I never got any."

Bill Barlow writes in *Looking Up At Down*, that Easton, though "the most prolific" blues artist of the period, "had the least impact on Chicago's blues culture, in part because, though he did most of his recording in Chicago, he never lived there for long." But Slim's legacy might also have been impaired because he was, alas, derivative. He owed his success in part to his ability to sound like Leroy Carr.

### **"Got the news that Leroy Carr was dead."**

Amos Easton and Leroy Carr resonated in a number of ways. Both were born in 1905. Both ran off at a young age and toured with a circus. And both were in Indianapolis in 1928, the year that Carr and partner Scrapper Blackwell recorded their first sides for the Vocalion label. One of those sides, "How Long--How Long Blues," became a blues classic.

Did Easton know Carr in Indianapolis? No one knows for sure. But Carr had been singing "How Long" around town years before he recorded it. The odds seem good that Easton, still three years away from his own recording debut, had at least heard Carr's music enough to be influenced by it.

Though Easton sounded like Carr, his music, as Paul Oliver put it, seemed more an "echo" of Carr's "fatalism." Carr drew his songs from the hard life he lived. Easton was more an observer who reflected what he saw in song. Carr was deep into alcohol, consuming,

according to Scrapper Blackwell, as much as three quarts of whiskey a day. Easton may have enjoyed the high life, but he played it safe, sustaining his career well past the age of 50. Leroy Carr, on the other hand, died in 1935 at age 30 of nephritis brought on by acute alcoholism.

Easton was quickly positioned to capitalize on Carr's death. Carr died in April and by July, four "tribute" songs were issued, two as Bumble Bee Slim, and two as "Leroy Carr's Buddy." "I woke up this morning, couldn't hardly get out of bed. Well, I got the news that Leroy Carr was dead," sang Slim in "My Old Pal."

Slim soon followed with a number of covers of Carr classics, some with Scrapper Blackwell on guitar, including "How Long--How Long," "Sloppy Drunk Blues," and "When the Sun Goes Down." But Slim was not without some good moves of his own.

### **"Sail on, little girl, sail on."**

Trains figured prominently in Slim's life, and he wrote a lot of songs about them. "B & O Blues" was the first, recorded at his Vocalion sessions in 1932.

I wrote the song around the idea of a lady leavin' her man....but she's in the country so she has to flag a train. Now,...I didn't know there was a B & O railroad, I just imagined there was...A couple of years later, a box car was goin' along, I say to my manager, "I noticed B & O just like...on the record." He said, "Yeah, that's the Baltimore and Ohio...." So I said, "I didn't know there was a B & O railroad. I was just writin' a song." That's the way it happened.

Slim wrote some great slice-of-life tunes and even parodies. "Wet Clothes Blues" is a bit of both. In it, Slim plays the bluesman facing one of life's more mundane burdens.

My wet clothes in your washer, and your washboard on your shelf,  
If I change this morning, I'll have to wash my clothes myself.

(Spoken) You won't wash my clothes anymore. I'll have to wash 'em myself--if I change. Got no way to dry 'em, so I just won't wash 'em. But that's alright. I'll have to leave here walkin' with my wet clothes in my hand. When my load gets heavy, I'll have to get down on my knees, wet clothes in my hand, rain fallin' down on me.

Easton recorded his best known tune, "Sail On, Little Girl, Sail On," for Bluebird back in 1934. Over the next few years, he reworked and recorded it at least three more times. The song eventually became a post-war rhythm & blues classic in the form of T-Bone Walker's 1943 Rhumboogie remake, "Sail On Boogie."

Sail on, Sail on, little girl, sail on,  
You gonna keep on sailin', 'Til you lose your happy home.

**"You hear one number, you hear them all."**

Amos Easton did his last recordings for Lester Melrose in 1937. A couple of marathon sessions yielded twenty sides, and then that summer Slim walked away from it all.

Almost thirty years later, he talked about it to Don Kent. He told Kent that in spite of all the recordings, royalties were not much and performance opportunities were scarce. What he didn't say was that he was also unhappy with his sound.

Each time I go to the studio, I have a piano player and a guitar player. Piano and guitar, piano and guitar, you hear one number, you hear them all...They wouldn't give me the accompaniment I wanted...So, to get away from the piano player, guitar player, bang, bang, bang, same thing, I just took off for California. If they got a recording studio in California, I'd finish my contract out there. That way, I'd have different musicians. Well, (Melrose) didn't come there, and I didn't go (back to Chicago).

But Easton had even bigger ideas. He wanted to make it in the movies.

I came on out to get myself all set up for motion pictures. I thought maybe I'd bump into somebody out here that would take an interest in me. I bumped into Chalky Wright and he says Mae West could use some of my material. But nothin' ever happened. I even got into a studio where Mae West was doin' a scene,...but, I never did get to talk with her or anything. So I gave it up and just began battling on alone.

***Back in Town***

Easton evidently did come back to Chicago because there in 1943 he recorded a few unreleased sides with Little Brother Montgomery. By 1950, though, he was back in L.A., this time tapping into the emerging rhythm & blues scene. Easton signed with Art Rupe's Specialty label. An ad appeared in the September, 1951 issue of Billboard:

Blues singer Amos Easton has come out of retirement and inked a five year term pact with Specialty Records. Diskery's first side on the warbler are "Strange Angel" and "Lonesome Trail Blues" and will be in the racks September 10. Easton's ork (7) backed on the sessions.

Those releases were followed later that year with two more--"Lonesome Old Feeling" and "Ida Red"--on Specialty's sister label, Fidelity. None of them charted. "Didn't get a hit, bang, right off to Rio...After all, I was still rusty you know. So, what is it they say, the world wasn't made in a day."

Easton's last claim to recording fame came eleven years later and was a striking departure from everything he'd ever done before. In 1962, he cut an album for Pacific Jazz, *Bumble Bee Slim/Back in Town!* The session musicians were a who's who of emerging West coast jazz talent, including Joe Pass, guitar, Les McCann, piano, Groove Holmes, organ, and Leroy Vinnegar, bass. Slim said he left Chicago because he was looking for something different. Perhaps he finally found it in the company of these sophisticated musicians. We'll never know because Amos Easton, aka Bumble Bee Slim, with a recording career that spanned the changes from grainy shellac to shiny vinyl, down home blues to urbane jazz, died of leukemia in Los Angeles sometime in the spring of 1968.

□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□