



(May, 1928)

**Booker
White
on
BULLET
WILLIAMS**
by
CAL STEPHENS

A native of Alabama, George (Bullet) Williams recorded four sides for Paramount in May, 1928; that are considered among the finest harmonica pieces of the era. He was probably discovered by Ralph Lembo of the Delta, Mississippi.

"He make your hair start to walk on your head."

"The first time I met George, that was in West Point, Mississippi," Booker White recalled. "...At Baperville, a colored settlement there. I met George in '28, in January; I was real young then; George was a grown man then."

"He was just sittin' there in a café there blowin' for friends, you know; he was gonna play there that night...I had my guitar. And we start to workin' out there. When he put that harp up to his mouth, he make your hair start to walk on your head!"

"I was playin' in open G; that's the first time somebody had ever played a harp with me playin' in open G. He said: 'I don't care what key you get in. If it's a song, whatever kinda song it is, I'll blow the song with you.' He carried all kinda harps."

At the time White met Williams, the latter was a rootless itinerant. He says: "I'm *always* gonna get around. I'm *never* settlin' down." For a time they traveled together and worked as a duet team: "We went through Charleston, went through Grenada, we went through Houston, went to Hickory Flats, went to New Albany, Holly Springs, and all them places like that: from there on down to the Delta." At a Delta barrelhouse in Glendora operated by a man named Eddie Smith, they each made 50 dollars for a night's performance, the most White ever earned as a blues singer. "...I used to play a song then about 'I was broke and hungry, ragged and dirty, too'. That was Blind Lemon's piece...Me and George was playin' the devil outta that. Everybody liked to hear that: that's mostly what we had to play." Williams offered such solo numbers as *The Hounds* (using the shrieking effects he featured on *The Escaped Convict*), and the train song *Frisco Leavin' Birmingham*, which gave White the inspiration to attempt his own train imitations on the guitar.

"He drink denature...which they embalm people with..."

Most of their performances culminated with Williams passed out on the floor in a drunken stupor. "George would go down on me 'fore day," White said. "God knows he'd be in the kitchen *under* the table drunk...He'd drink 'till you could hear it comin' up like a pump, honest to God, I'm tellin' you the truth. He drink denature (i.e., denatured alcohol), which they embalm people with; he drank rubbin' alcohol..."

"Then when he drink that stuff, he get so *evil*! He wouldn't let you say nothin' to him...You tell him to come on, he start cussin' when you get to him; he do that by *anybody's* house." One night as they passed the home of a wealthy Glendora planter, Mike Sterdivant (on whose *Due West* plantation William Harris was reportedly raised), Williams' drunken truculence so frightened White that he shoved his friend in a nearby creek to silence him.

"I said: 'George, you gonna get us both killed!'"

"We got to die somehow, let us die..."

Drunk and disorderly conduct soon landed Williams on the Tallahatchie County road gang, where he labored under the supervision of a man named Arthur Smith. "George hadn't been on there but just three days when George wanna get away from there...George got on that harp there and blowed for this boy Arthur Smith...And George got to blowin' for the boy, *Poor Boy A Long Way From Home*. And I look around there, I look at this boy (Smith) there; his face turned red, and I seen tears commence to gettin' down. I said: 'Smith, he's cryin' over there.'"

"He said: 'Come 'ere...If I let you go, will you make me a promise now you won't be raisin' sand and drunk and everything?'"



This May, 1928 session featured 'shrieking effects.'



This performance inspired Bukka White to try his own train imitations on guitar.

"And George said: 'Yes, sir! I never will do it no more.'

"He say: 'Go head-on, finish that piece!'

"And then George walked on off. And everybody was talkin' about, say: 'George done blowed himself off the road!'

"George sure is makin' a fool outta you..."

By 1930 Booker had married the niece of Williams' wife, Nancy, whom he met in West Point, Mississippi. "That was the time the Panic, you know, come on, in 1930...I said: 'Well, I wanna settle down'...I say: 'I don't wanna come to be just a hobo.'"

"So me and Susie moved to the Delta, and George came down there...He just leaved her, walked off from Nancy; he had a nice-lookin' wife, too, but you know a fella like George, he couldn't stay nowhere. So he learnt we was gone to the Delta; he

come down, in Swan Lake, that's where we was then.

"Me and George went to the man, to make a crop. Susie, my wife, say: 'Lord, George sure is makin' a fool outta you!' Say: 'How George gonna stay with you when he ain't stayed with Aunt Nancy?'

"Me and George were puttin' down some fertilizer that evenin'...that's on a Friday...George is buildin' up his gettin'-away steps then. He in front 'cause his mule would walk faster than mine...and George done took with the highway blues or somethin'.

"His mule commence blowin' farts and George commence cussin'. Say: 'I bet you Monday you won't blow nothin' in my face!'

"So that Saturday me and George went to this side of Moorhead to a place you call Berclair; that's where my brother was livin' at. And George played it so cool that Saturday...Me and George was headin' back to Lita Bena, that's where Ralph Lembo was...we're gonna stop by his store, and I was wantin' him to record George, you know, next time he get a recordin' contract.

"And two colored boys came in with a brand-new truck goin' toward Moorhead. And George flagged 'em...and they stopped. And I tried to hold George. George snatched loose from me and got on that truck; he said: 'Tell my mule I said "Be good!"'

"Just left me by myself there...That made me mad.

"And I ain't seen George from that day to this day."

DISCOGRAPHY

(courtesy of Blues & Gospel Records, 1902-1943, compiled by Robert N.W. Dixon & John Godrich, Third Edition, Storyville Publications)

GEORGE "BULLER" WILLIAMS

"George 'Buller' Williams, harmonica solo/speech; unknown, vocal-1; unknown, speech-2. Chicago, c. May, 1928.

20590-2 Touch Me Light Mama-1 Paramount 12680.

20592-1, 2 Frisco Leaving Birmingham Paramount 12651.

20592-3 Frisco Leaving Birmingham Paramount 12651, Broadway 5085.

20593-1 The Escaped Convict Paramount 12651.

20593-2 The Escaped Convict Paramount 12651, Broadway 5085.

20593-3 The Escaped Convict Paramount 12651.

20596-1 Middlin' Blues-2 Paramount 12680.

Paramount 12680 as by Geo. "Buller" Williams. Broadway 5085 as George Williams. Some copies of Paramount 12680 bear X802B in the wax, referring to a Jay Bird Coleman title, as well as 20596.

"George Williams is either the vocalist or the harmonica player on 20590; he cannot be both, for one overlaps the other. Matrices 20591, 20594/95 are untraced."

A further note from Dixon/Godrich reads: "At least one copy exists of Paramount 12680, which although labeled George Buller Williams Middlin' Blues, plays GEX-802-B." (Save Your Money—Let These Women Go. Black Patti 8052 by Jay Bird Coleman.) Blues singer Wiley Barner has been suggested as the vocalist on Touch Me Light, Mama.