

The music of Rhythm Willie can be at once a blues harmonica fan's most exciting and most frustrating discovery. His recordings reveal a technically accomplished and musically innovative player, with few peers on the standard 10-hole Marine Band harmonica in his day. A strong case can be made for his position as the first truly urban blues harp player; at a time when the harmonica was still used in black music essentially for 'country' adornment, Rhythm Willie was utilizing it with the urbanity of a jazz trumpeter or clarinetist. Yet until recently almost nothing was known of him other than the sound of his harmonica in the grooves of a handful of rare 78s recorded in Chicago between 1939 and 1950. Overlooked by blues researchers and historians for over 40 years, mention of his name draws only blank expressions or resigned shrugs from most blues authorities. Listening for biographical clues in his music reveals virtually nothing about the artist--his only recordings as a leader were all instrumentals. Further compounding the mystery, most of Willie's appearances as an accompanist on the recordings of other blues artists are attributed to "unknown harmonica" or "possibly Lee McCoy" in published discographies (a situation which this article will examine and attempt to rectify.)

In fact, given his extraordinary range and talent, referring to Rhythm Willie as simply a "blues" harmonica player might be slightly unfair, and in retrospect it's easy to imagine that Willie himself may have gone to some lengths to avoid being classified with the blues harp players he probably considered to be his musically less sophisticated country cousins. There's no evidence that he ever played the same club circuit as now-legendary blues artists such as John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson, Big Maceo, Tampa Red, Muddy Waters, Little Walter, Elmore James, et al., all of whom were active in Chicago during Rhythm Willie's time there. Quite to the contrary, advertisements and clippings from the Chicago Defender newspaper (from which most documentary evidence presented here is taken) indicate that when he was on his home turf in Chicago, he played almost exclusively in relatively classy supper clubs, show lounges and cabarets in Chicago's black community--places that had more in common with New York City's legendary Cotton Club than with southern juke joints. While performers like Muddy Waters were defining "downhome" and "back in the alley" blues, Rhythm Willie had staked his claim in a decidedly "uptown" musical--if not geographical--neighborhood. There are Defender reports of Willie

traveling "from coast to coast astounding listeners with his great manipulations of the harp", and being "a favorite with Chicago Loop patrons as well as the first nighters along Broadway", which euphemistically indicates that he also spent at least some of his time playing for white audiences. Willie's technical sophistication on his instrument and the jazzy, horn-like phrasing he employed even led noted blues authority Paul Oliver, then lacking any photographic or anecdotal evidence to the contrary, to speculate that he might have actually been a white jazz player. But the undeniable sound of the blues is present in everything Rhythm Willie ever recorded, and half of the recordings he released as a leader bear the label of "blues" in their titles.

The earliest documentation of Rhythm Willie's appearance on the Chicago music scene occurs in October of 1938, when his name began regularly appearing, often touted as "King Of The Harmonica", in advertisements for the famed Club DeLisa on the city's south side. The Club DeLisa, which seems to have been Willie's most frequent gig for much of the next decade, was black Chicago's pre-eminent nightclub, featuring specially themed floor shows rather than a single performer providing the night's entertainment. A typical revue would feature an M.C./comedian, a chorus line, a few singers in a variety of styles from pop to jazz to light classical, an exotic dancer, and perhaps a novelty act such as a one-legged tap dancer, all backed by a tuxedoed house band, and loosely organized under themes such as "Southern Sketches" or "Christmas Follies". Rhythm Willie's talents were probably looked at as being somewhere between a novelty act and a featured musical act--there's little evidence that he ever backed any of the other performers or was featured for more than a small portion of each show. A 1945 Defender article describes Willie's part in the latest Club DeLisa revue by stating that he "plays the type of music that sets the DeLisa on fire", but even though he was then sharing the bill with blues singer and guitarist Memphis Minnie (who is referred to as a "torch singer" in the same article), there's no hint that Willie or any other DeLisa musical acts were ever backed by anyone other than the house band, which was led for the better part of two decades by drummer Red Saunders.

Between 1938 and early 1954 there is an almost continuous stream of ads in the Defender promoting Willie's frequent gigs, mainly at DeLisa's but also elsewhere around town. Periodically he would work engagements of several weeks or months at other fashionable south side nightspots such as The Crown Propeller, The Cotton Club and Joe's Los Angeles Show Lounge along the 63rd Street entertainment strip, and The Rhumboogie on 55th Street. These

clubs were all from the same mold as the Club DeLisa, and generally were not places that would have featured the hopped-up, plugged-in country blues offshoot we often think of as being the music of Chicago in the '40s and '50s. The performers Rhythm Willie typically shared stages with--people like Lil "Upstairs" Mason, Dr. Jo Jo Adams ("The Sepia Frank Sinatra"), The Red Sims Combo, Lilly Mae Kirkland, Lurlene Hunter--don't generate much excitement now, but in their day many of them received more mainstream attention on the south and west sides than the 'blues legends' who were playing there at the time.

No documentation has been found of Rhythm Willie's performances at the "Loop night spots" referred to in the Defender, but harmonica player Eddie Gordon, a member of the harmonica-playing midget Johnny Puleo's "Harmonica Gang" pop combo in the '40s, recalled playing on a bill with Rhythm Willie at one of the big Loop theaters. Interestingly, as much as Willie may have tried to shun the "bluesman" label, Gordon's only remembrance of Willie is as "one of the blues players who worked on the south side"[1], effectively lumping him in with everyone from Jazz Gillum to John Lee Williamson. Gordon's view was that of someone from outside the black music milieu, so it's understandable if not pardonable for him to think of any black harmonica player not playing "serious" (read: "white") music as a blues player, but in retrospect he was probably correct to categorize Willie as a blues player--he may have been the most sophisticated blues harmonica player of his generation, but he was still playing primarily blues-based music.

A captioned photo from the Saturday, September 20th, 1947 edition of the Defender sheds a small flicker of light on Willie's shadowy biography. The photo shows Willie standing on stage at The 845 Club in New York City, a small table with a birthday cake on it before him, and one hand is obscuring his face--he's either eating cake or playing his harp. Behind him stands a line of chorus girls and an M.C., as a birthday party is held in his honor "on Monday night before a packed house of celebs". First, this confirms that Rhythm Willie did indeed do some traveling, if not from coast-to-coast, at least from Chicago-to-coast. Second, it gives us a pretty solid idea of his date of birth--assuming that the party took place on his birthday, we now at least know that he was born on September 15th, even though the year can only be guessed at by examining the other photos of Rhythm Willie that have been discovered. One such photo published in the Defender on December 23, 1939 shows a dapper man who appears to be around 30 years old, suggesting a year of birth sometime around 1910.

Willie's recording career began on September 14, 1939, less than a year after his name first began appearing in ads in the Defender (suggesting that he may have been a recent arrival to the city, having first honed his musical skills elsewhere). Willie was then in the middle of one of his extended engagements at DeLisa's, playing on the same bill with singers Billy Eckstine and Bertha "Chippie" Hill, when he was called upon to lend his polished playing to a comparatively rough blues session for Decca Records. Although he was a studio newcomer hired only to accompany pianist Lee Brown and veteran bluesman Peetie Wheatstraw on their own sides, Willie's instrumental contributions were spotlighted throughout the session. He opens each song leaning into the mic with an aggressive flurry of notes, and is the only player given the opportunity to solo on any of the nine songs on which he appears, taking the opportunity to display a level of harmonica virtuosity rarely heard on a blues record. With an almost piercing, crystal clear tone, he weaves precisely controlled and at times lightning fast embellishments into the mainly medium tempo blues material that makes up this session. All of the characteristics that would mark his later work are present here: He alternates between long, wavering single note swoops and intricate riffing, relying almost exclusively on the high end of the harp (a stylistic trademark, which he may have developed as a way of cutting through the sound of the horn sections with which he most often worked). He also revealed a trait shared by many blues performers of the time, including the frontmen on this session: Rhythm Willie didn't have a bottomless bag of tricks from which to draw, at least at that point. Like so many of his contemporaries, he was a specialist who had perfected the thing that set him apart from the crowd, and then used it as the basis of most of his playing. There's not a lot of variety in his accompaniments here, but at least when you hear his playing, you KNOW it's Rhythm Willie--a phenomenon that would have undoubtedly been seen as an asset rather than a detriment in those days.

As mentioned earlier, there is some confusion regarding Willie's recordings as an accompanist. This centers around the crediting in early editions of Dixon and Godrich's "Blues & Gospel Records 1902-1943" of "possibly Lee McCoy" (a/k/a Robert Lee McCoy or Robert Nighthawk) as Lee Brown's harmonica accompanist on this date, and oddly, "unknown harmonica" on the Peetie Wheatstraw sides produced at the same session, credits which were repeated unquestioned in many later discographies and liner notes. However, there's nothing to suggest McCoy's presence at this session other than Sleepy John Estes' mention in Blues Unlimited magazine of being

accompanied separately by both Lee Brown and Robert Lee McCoy at various times in his own recording career. Since Estes himself did not play on the 1939 Lee Brown/Peetie Wheatstraw session for Decca, it's only the flimsiest conjecture that places McCoy at that session. McCoy can be conclusively ruled out by comparing any of the other recordings on which he's credited as harmonica accompanist (early '40s sides by Wheatstraw, Estes, and others) to the 1939 Decca session; clearly these are the works of two vastly different harmonica players. As British harmonica authority Pat Missin noted, "any harp player could tell the difference with ease" between the two [2]. Other harmonica performances credited to McCoy show a strong jug-band influence, with the kind of rough and rhythmic playing associated with players such as Will Shade, Jed Davenport and Hammie Nixon [3]. Rhythm Willie's distinctive style is immediately recognizable on all his sides--there simply was no one else playing like him at the time. It's also easily verifiable--a quick listen to the 1939 Decca session compared to recordings released the following year under his own name reveals numerous examples of virtually identical musical conception and execution [4]. It wasn't just a matter of his precision technique; his fundamental approach to his instrument was markedly different from any other player during his time, and is instantly evident in all of his recordings. His was a swinging, 'riffing' sound derived at least as much from the sounds of jazz horn players as from any harmonica player who had come before him. It's also worth noting that Rhythm Willie was exploring this musical terrain on record more than a decade before Little Walter Jacobs built his own legend by taking a similar approach with this humble instrument.

Rhythm Willie's next recording session was his own, and came just over a year later, on October 10, 1940, for Okeh Records in Chicago. Credited to "Rhythm Willie And His Gang", and featuring subtle piano, bass and drum backing on four harmonica instrumentals, it's possible that he was accompanied by part of the Club DeLisa house band led by Red Saunders, who would have been intimately familiar with Willie's repertoire by this time. Whoever the band was, they interacted well with Willie, allowing him to display a sensitivity and attention to dynamics rarely ever heard on the harmonica, and showing why he was being hailed as "The Harmonica Wizard". He was obviously more comfortable experimenting with a variety of ideas and improvisational elaborations on his own session; the overall mood had a jazzy, 'after hours' feel to it, helped in part by Willie's inclusion of some minor-key material. It was on one such song, an instrumental arrangement of "St. James Infirmary" here known as "Breathtakin'

Blues", that Willie demonstrated his facility at playing 'fifth position' harmonica, a difficult and unique sounding method of playing a minor-key melody on a harmonica tuned to a major key--a method that was, and still is, very rarely utilized by harmonica players in any type of music, but one which Willie practiced here with unfaltering mastery and to great effect.

Unfortunately, rather than bringing him more success, these records appear to have sunk without making a ripple in the pond of commercial impact, and Okeh did not follow up with any further recordings of Rhythm Willie. It's possible that the presence of harmonica as the lead instrument labeled these recordings as too 'country' for the jazz fans they might have been intended for, or that their urbane sound may not have been accessible enough to blues fans for whom the harmonica would have been seen as an acceptable lead instrument. At any rate, shortly after these sessions, Willie seems to have disappeared from the pages of the Defender--and the Chicago clubs--for a while. (There are several periods during which Willie was seemingly absent from Chicago's clubs; presumably these were not spent at leisure, but out on the road.)

The next mention of him comes in March of 1942, when a story appeared under the headline "Rhythm Willie Stars In New DeLisa Show". The accompanying text contains this intriguing bit of information regarding his absence from Chicago: "Willie, who is a favorite among nightlifers, came to the DeLisa after a triumphant engagement in Mexico City". There's also this insight into his current repertoire: "He features among his numbers 'Blues In The Night', 'Poor Butterfly', and the 'Saint Louis Blues'". He spent the next several months starring at DeLisa's, and then apparently went out on the road again, playing parts unknown for much of the next year. Willie's next Chicago gig was advertised on November 13, 1943, as the featured headliner in "a brand new show" at The Rhumboogie a few blocks from The Club DeLisa. Willie held this position for much of the next year, sharing the bill for a few months with "the sensational blues chirper", Wynonie "Mr. Blues" Harris. Willie must have acquired a pretty good publicist, because he started getting a lot more press coverage around this time; an article appeared in the Defender under the headline "Let's Give Rhythm Willie, The Rhumboogie Harpist, A Boost", which starts: "Stars may come and go, but the popularity of Rhythm Willie, harmonica ace at the Rhumboogie, goes on forever. Rhythm Willie, for years a solid sender in this section, is improving with age. He is a wow nightly as he swings out with Carol [a/k/a "Cal"] Dickerson's band in the background." By the end of 1944

Willie was back at the Club DeLisa, trumpeted by an announcement that also gives us more insight into the range of his repertoire: "Rhythm Willie, the wizard of the harmonica, is the newest addition to [the latest review at] the Club DeLisa. Willie plays such songs as 'Star Dust', 'Poor Butterfly', 'C-Jam Blues', and many other numbers which you will enjoy. He is accompanied by Red Saunders and his 'boogie woogie' band." Not exactly down-home blues, he was still popular enough during this time to also make appearances at larger South Side venues such as the Savoy Ballroom and the Regal Theater. The second half of 1945 and 1946 saw him playing extended engagements in reviews at the Ritz Lounge and The Hurricane Show Lounge, and in September of 1947 came the trip to New York City that resulted in the birthday party at The 845 Club, and also Willie's next recording session.

Although it's unknown exactly how they joined forces, Willie is the featured soloist on a session with sax player Earl Bostic and his Orchestra, which may have been recorded for Gotham Records but eventually ended up as property of Aladdin Records. This session resulted in four instrumentals, only one of which, a harmonica showcase titled "Willie's Boogie", has ever been released, and then only four decades later on a compilation album. As could be expected given the band and the title, "Willie's Boogie" is a jumping little number, done at a faster tempo than any other recording of his career. It features all the trademarks of Willie's sound, although here he relies a bit less on dynamics and subtle intricacies; instead he seems to be pushing harder, probably in an effort to make his unamplified harp heard over the riffing of the relatively large horn section. Since this session went completely unissued at the time, it had absolutely no effect on Willie's career.

The next mention of Willie appeared on July 2, 1949, when he once again joined a Club DeLisa review. By this time the electrified blues of post-war Chicago was coming into it's own, and this may account for what appears to have been waning public interest in the slickly-produced revues which seemed to be the exclusive forum for Willie--ads for his appearances were becoming fewer and farther between. He did seem to be willing to make some concessions to the times though; his next (and final) recording session in 1950 for the Premium label featured an energetic little band backing his usual swinging but now somewhat rougher and more forceful harp work, although of course there were still no vocals [5]. The titles also hinted at the changing times, even if the influences did not; "Wailin' Willie" was his version of the swing classic "C-Jam Blues", which Willie had been performing since at

least the mid-'40s. "I've Got Rhythm" was the George Gershwin standard, which in Willie's hands became a vehicle for some swinging, spirited improvising at the top end of the harp. (Towards the end of this song, there is what may be a poke at some of rougher-styled blues harp players who were then beginning to make waves in town--in this relatively sophisticated tune, Willie includes a couple of choruses of hokey hillbilly standard "Turkey In The Straw".)

This time he seems to have been able to parlay a record into at least a little work; In 1951 he was headlining at the popular Cotton Club on Chicago's south side, backed by The Red Sims Combo. He spent much of 1952 and early '53 playing at Joe's Los Angeles Show Bar across the street from The Cotton Club. Drummer Charles Walton was in the house band that backed Willie for a time at Joe's, and recalls that Willie was still playing a mix of pop standards such as "Embraceable You" mixed in with more blues-oriented material. He also remembers Willie's prodigious taste for alcohol, and says that after playing and drinking all weekend, Willie and his equally thirsty wife would often head over to the Club DeLisa's famous Monday Morning Breakfast Show to continue their conspicuous consumption [6]. After a lengthy run at Joe's, in February of '54 Willie was briefly on a revue at another nearby club called Cadillac Bob's Toast Of The Town backed by King Kolax's band, and in March he was on the north side at the Evergreen Club, backed by Red Holloway's band.

Just two months later a small article appeared in the Defender announcing his death, and subsequent burial on May 18, 1954, but containing no specific dates of birth or death, and few other pertinent details other than a name behind the pseudonym: Willie Hood. Rhythm Willie Hood was probably around 45 years old at the time of his death, and the fact that he was known to have still been playing regularly at most eight weeks earlier hints at the possibility of an unnatural demise. Whatever trail of clues there was is completely cold at this point, however. The address listed as his residence is now a vacant lot, there were no children listed among his surviving family, and none of the other relatives who were mentioned are listed in the Chicago phone directory today. No official record of his death has been located; the Chicago funeral home mentioned in the story is no longer in business, and an official search of county records failed to turn up a death certificate. The possibility that he died while out on the road, with his body being returned to his Chicago home only for burial, could explain the absence of this documentation, but at this late date it's unlikely that any more hard facts will be

uncovered.

Interviews with those on the Chicago blues scene during the '40s and '50s have revealed precious little more about Rhythm Willie. Billy Boy Arnold met him once as a youngster while playing his harmonica on the sidewalk outside a club near Maxwell Street. Willie approached Billy Boy and asked to see his harp, demonstrated a few "hot licks" for him, and encouraged him to keep practicing. Louis Myers said that he knew who Willie was but didn't know him personally, and confirmed that Willie didn't play the same circuit that most of the blues players frequented. Myers categorized him as "a jazz man", and added that Willie "was one cat [Little] Walter wouldn't mess with on the harp" [7]. Tenor sax man Red Holloway was working on the same bill on Willie's last advertised gig in Chicago, but never even knew his stage name, let alone his real name; Holloway knew him only as "Little Willie". Holloway did however have this to say about him in an interview in Blues Unlimited: "Little small black guy, real ugly. He played the hell out of the harmonica, he was just getting popular." (Possibly suggesting that Willie was beginning to cross over to a 'hard blues' audience?) "Little Willie's stuff was blues but maybe six or seven months before he died he was becoming very popular and people were getting him for gigs and stuff. I was out of town when he died so I really don't know what he died of, but it was rather sad 'cause you say God damn, cat just beginning to make it and cashed in his chips like that. He sure could play harp though." [8]

[1. In a personal correspondence with the author.]

[2. In a personal conversation with the author.]

[3. Robert Lee McCoy's credit as a harmonica player on any record might be debatable. Since McCoy never played harmonica on any record released under his own name, no 100% verifiable precedent exists to use as a test for aural comparison of recordings retroactively credited to him.]

[4. A brief look at basic blues harmonica technique will help to illuminate some of the essential differences between Rhythm Willie and most of his contemporaries, including McCoy. The vast majority of blues harmonica players, both then and now, most frequently utilize a method commonly referred to as either "cross harp" or "second position", which means playing a harmonica tuned five half steps above the key of the song being played; for instance, a blues song in the key of C is played on an F harmonica. The reason for this

is that the 'draw' holes on an F harmonica contain an almost complete C "blues" scale; as 'draw' notes they can also be easily bent or slurred for further 'blues' effect. All harmonica recordings credited to McCoy are played in this "second position" exclusively. Rhythm Willie, on the other hand, never once played "second position" on record; on most of his recordings he played "first position", which utilizes a harmonica tuned to the same key as the song, and calls for a number of difficult 'blow' bends to obtain the 'blues' scale. The only exception to this was his utilization of the almost-unheard-of in blues "fifth position", using a harmonica tuned three half steps higher than the key of the song (for example, a song in the key of F# played on an A harmonica) which allows a minor scale to be played on a harmonica tuned to a major key.]

[5. It's possible that Rhythm Willie may have been backed on his 1950 Premium session by Memphis Slim & His Orchestra, which recorded exclusively for Premium in 1950, with several sessions that year. Although there are no consecutive session matrices linking the two artists, there are consecutive release numbers: Memphis Slim's "Mother Earth" was Premium 867, and like all of his recordings for the label, featured an instrumental line-up of piano, bass, drums and two saxes--a line-up identical to the band backing Rhythm Willie on Premium 866. Furthermore, from what appears to be Memphis Slim's "Mother Earth" session that year is an unissued recording of "Stardust", which was one of Rhythm Willie's featured numbers in live performances--it's conceivable that this might be an unissued Rhythm Willie recording from the same session that produced Premium 866. If the above speculation is indeed the case, the personnel on Rhythm Willie's Premium session would be: Rhythm Willie, hca; Memphis Slim, p; Alex Atkins, as; Timothy Overton, ts; Alfred Elkins, b; and Leon Hooper, d. Coincidentally, Leon Hooper's All-Stars, which may have included others from among the above personnel, are known to have worked at The Club Evergreen, where Rhythm Willie also appeared in the early '50s; presumably they could have worked together on occasion.]

[6. In a personal conversation with the author.]

[7. Billy Boy Arnold and Louis Myers quotes from personal conversations with the author.]

[8. From Bill Greensmith's letter in B&R #74, referencing his piece in Blues Unlimited #117/118.]

(For assistance, encouragement and resources used in this article,

Rhythm Willie, hca; unknown piano, bass; poss. Red Saunders, drums

C-3407-1 New Block And Tackle Blues	Okeh 05856
C-3408-1 Breathakin' Blues	Okeh 05960
C-3409-1 Bedroom Stomp	Okeh 05856
C-3410-1 Boarding House Blues	Okeh 05960

(All above titles also on Wolf WSE 109)

EARL BOSTIC ORCHESTRA--RHYTHM WILLIE, HARMONICA
New York City Sept. 1947

Earl Bostic, as; Rhythm Willie, hca; poss. R. Jones, tp; R. Powell, as/cl; T. Barnett, ts; G. Parker, p; J. Shirley, g; V. King, b; C. Cruickson, d

275	Willie's Boogie	Aladdin/Pathe-
		Marconi 1561321 (F)
276	untitled boogie	unissued
277	untitled	unissued
278	untitled slow blues	unissued

RHYTHM WILLIE, HIS HARMONICA AND ORCHESTRA Chicago 1950

Rhythm Willie, hca; unknown saxes; p; b; d (poss. Memphis Slim & His Orchestra)

UB50-1062 Wailin' Willie	Premium PR-866, Sundown CG708-06(NL)
UB50-1063 I've Got Rhythm	Premium PR-866