

# THE SOUL OF A MAN

by Paul Brett

I watched the much heralded Martin Scorsese's film on The Blues recently <http://www.pbs.org/theblues/aboutfilms/about-films.html>. It starts with a voice over by actor Lawrence Fishburne setting the scene with an American space mission to explore the outer Galaxies. On the space capsule amongst other things, are recording of Blues artistes including



**Blind Willie Johnson's** excellent song "The Soul of a Man." I was quite intrigued by the presentation and the way the film switched back into a black and white re-enactment of Blues artistes, including a lengthy stint on



**Skip James.** It all seemed to be going on quite well until the 1931 recording session re-enactment. It is known that Skip played a 12 string Oscar Schmidt made Stella on these sessions, but strung as a six string. In the film, the actor was presented with said Stella by his record company. Unfortunately, this was the part where I lost interest. For out of the case came not a 1930's Stella, but a 1970's Harmony Stella strung as a 12 string. Having gone to

such detail to replicate the era, how on earth did this one slip through Mr. Wender's net? It's like watching a Poirot film from the Art Deco era, which are excellently researched and presented and seeing Captain Hastings drive up, not in his Lagonda but in a Ford Capri! I emailed the world's most recognised expert on Stella guitars, Neil Harpe, to ask him if he had seen the film in the States and this is what he replied.

*Hi Paul, Scorsese's "Blues" series was shown on public TV here in the States a while back, in several segments. Some were much better than others, but on a whole, the entire project disappointed me. The Skip James reenactment was the final straw! This little "inaccuracy" with Skip playing a 1970 Harmony instrument totally ruined the whole series for me. It was utterly stupid for this to have been allowed to "slip by". It reminded me of when, as a young kid I went to the movies to see a "Tarzan" movie. In one scene, supposedly occurring deep in the unexplored jungle, for a split second I could see telephone poles in the background! The magic was lost and the whole movie was fake after that! Neil [www.stellaguitars.com](http://www.stellaguitars.com)*

So what guitars did Skip James actually play? Well you can research all the guitars the Blues Legends played by logging onto [www.early-blues.com](http://www.early-blues.com) here you will find everything to do with Blues. It is an excellent site compiled by Bluesman Dai Davies and his colleagues. Dai lists Skip as having played a Gibson J-185 and J-45, a Martin D-18 and D28 in his re-discovery period in the 1960's where he took the Newport Festival by storm despite suffering from Cancer. Plus the 1930's Stella 12 string strung as a six. Another interesting guitar that puzzled even



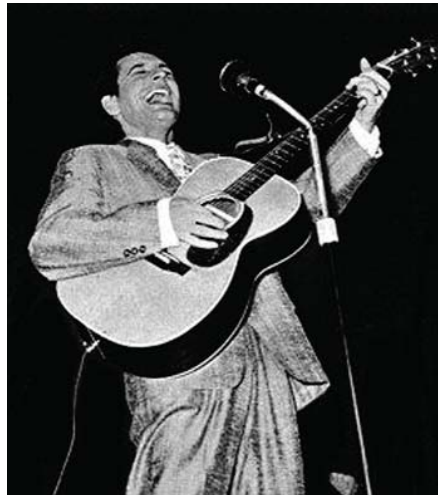
Dai, was the odd beast that **Jesse Fuller** played. I was fortunately able to put that right.

Johnny Joyce played some dates with Jesse in the UK in the 1960's and John told me awhile before he died that Jesse played a modified, very large, Prairie State made by the Larson Brothers.



Great feature however on **J.B Lenoir**. The guy was a natural and wrote some great songs.

Another TV program that I thought was excellent was the BBC's 'Folk Britannia', which traces the evolution of folk music from the end of World War II up to the scene's latter-day revival. [www.tvfactual.co.uk/folk\\_britannia.htm](http://www.tvfactual.co.uk/folk_britannia.htm). I didn't however agree with Peggy Seeger's dis-



missive comments regarding **Lonnie Donegan**. So she met Leadbelly, well good for her. Many people agree that if Lon hadn't recorded Leadbelly's "Rock Island Line" and had such a huge hit with it, British Pop music wouldn't have happened in the way it did. Sure her brother Pete Seeger also did a great version of Rock Island Line, but I sensed her claws were out for Lon, unnecessarily so in my opinion. All three

were great artistes in their own right and all contributed to the historical timeline of popular music, as indeed did Peggy and her late husband Ewan McColl.

I played lead guitar with Lonnie in the early seventies. It came about quite by accident. I was playing guitar with the Cyril Stapleton's Orchestra in Blackpool for a Summer Season, just prior to my first Paul Brett Sage LP coming out which Cyril produced. Lon's guitarist at the time, Les Cocks, suddenly left and Lon asked Cyril if he would let me play with his band. Cyril agreed and I had a very enjoyable six months or so playing with someone whose music I had grown up with and much admired. Lon had a passion for fish and chips before a show in the dressing room, wrapped in newspaper. Very down to earth he was. He was a great banjo player as well, formed from his years with Chris Barber's Jazz Band. Every song we played was a hit song, even the ones he didn't personally have a hit with he published for someone else to have success with. His set was a mixture of Blues, Bluegrass, Cajun, Jazz and fun songs like the classic "My old man's a Dustman" and "Did your chewing gum lose its flavour". During that season I also played for the amazing Clark Brothers. Best goddam tap dancers in the world. Their guitar parts were mind bending. No notes, just chord changes on every beat and at breakneck speed. That was probably the biggest live challenge I ever faced, but still a great and memorable experience. At the end of the season Sage's first single "3 D-Mona Lisa" took off in Italy and Portugal and I left to pursue that avenue. Lon called me over the next few years to ask me to re-join the band. I didn't and to this day I still don't know if I made the right decision.

It is only fair that we pay tribute to those that innovated before us, as we hope that those that come after will do for us. Music is and always will be a melting pot of creative ideas. Sure it gets sidetracked and commercialised by idiots looking to make a fast reputation and buck from artistes. But it's always been that way throughout history. The wandering minstrel played for ale and food and in many cases had more thrown at him than he ate and drank. He never had a contract, but I bet he had a manager! Skip James had both and he never saw a penny from either during his most creative and successful period in the 1930's. So if any alien race ever listens to Blind Willie Johnson's "The Soul of a Man" in some far off Universe, will they have a better idea of what it is than we have?

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