



BLIND WILLIE McTELL

and Early Blues *by Paul Brett*

When the 12 string guitar is mentioned, one always hears the name of Leadbelly as the King of the instrument. Spare a thought however for another Blues great, who in my opinion, deserves at least equal billing with the master. Neither had great technical skill as players, but in the early days of Blues, they were the leaders, the innovators, all else followed. William Samuel McTier, as was his birth name, was born in Thompson, Georgia in 1901. He was blind in one eye and lost sight in the other during childhood. This didn't stop the young Willie from learning braille and more to the point, learning to play the guitar. Like many poor Afro American Blues musicians of the era, Willie went on the road. He became a "travellin' man", playing anywhere he could for a few dollars here and there. In 1927, he secured his first record deal with Victor Records of Atlanta. His pre WW11 years saw Willie McTier become Blind Willie McTell and he made the 12 string guitar, his main instrument of accompaniment

to his self penned songs. Willie was in fact, a better player than Leadbelly and he used a more syncopated style of finger picking than Leadbelly. I think one of the main reasons that Willie didn't expand his appeal was that he recorded for quite a few labels under different names. Had he have stuck to one name, more accolades would have come his way. This of course may have purely been down to necessity. He was "Blind Sammie", "Georgia Bill", "Hot Shot Willie, Red Hot Willie Glaze and so on recording for labels such as Bluebird, Atlantic, Regal, Vocalion, Victor etc, etc.

1934 Willie married Ruth Williams, who later played on gigs with him known as Kate McTell. She traded in this life in 1938 and became a nurse. Willie carried on with his music and the two never really lived in close proximity again. When I played with Elmer Gantry's Velvet Opera (later Velvet Opera) I was first introduced to the music of Blind Willie McTell and Leadbelly by UK 12 string pioneer John Joyce who was at the time playing with the legendary blues outfit The Levee Breakers, fronted by

John Martin's ex wife, Beverley. Bev was widely recognised as having one of the best Blues voices of the day. I will always remember John's 12 string hammering out Blind Willie's "Statesboro Blues". I call this John's signature tune as he played it all through his life. It was the ideal Blues for a 12 string. Many people have recorded this song over the years including the Velvet Opera, The Allman Brothers, Taj Mahal, Bob Dylan, Kurt Cobain etc. etc. and of course, John himself. Willie's lyrics are fluent and memorable " Wake up Momma, turn your lamp down low...have you got the nerve, to drive me from your door ". A Classic and timeless Blues that will live and be played forever by musicians and bands, much the same as Leadbelly's "Goodnight Irene" and "Rock Island Line".

Other Willie McTell songs include, "Broke Down Engine Blues", " Death Cell Blues", "Dyin' Crapshooter's Blues", "Southern Can is Mine ", " Baby it must be love " and literally dozens of Blues based songs all recorded from the 1920's to his last session in 1956. Willie actually outlasted many of his fellow bluesmen, which was quite a feat in itself in those very hard days. The guitar Willie played was nearly always an Oscar Schmidt Stella Guitar. These days, they are highly rare and collectable. They were not built to last as in their inception, they were classed as "Working Man's " guitars. They were affordable, a few dollars and expendable. Those that have survived, are now highly sought after by vintage collectors. Blues players always talk about

"that sound" and to be honest, the recordings in those days were so bad, that it's hard to tell if the term "that sound" is in fact one of wishful thinking or an imaginary and colourful wish of a perfect blues sound. What is for certain, if you own an original Schmidt Stella or Sovereign, then you can conclude "that sound" in reality, does exist as I have never found any modern guitars of any price, to even come close. They are of the era when legends were made and they were played by those legends, so why look elsewhere for "that sound " ? Blind Willie McTell slipped out of the music scene in later life and became a pulpit preacher. Not much is known about his death except he is rumoured to have died of a stroke in 1959 in Georgia. Three years previously in 1956, Edwards Rhodes, who was the proprietor of a Record outlet in Atlanta, came across McTell busking on the street. He offered him a bottle of "corn liquor", set up a





basic tape recorder and captured Willie's last known recording session. Blind Willie McTell and his music, passed into history, yet his name, songs and reputation, grows larger every year.

Blues Legends like Willie McTell and Leadbelly are being kept alive by the research and dedication, not to mention admiration, of many people across the world. Either by playing their songs, writing books and articles or hosting and running websites. I would like to draw your attention to one of the very best sites here in the UK. Early Blues www.earlyblues.com It was started , in October 2004 and initially consisted of Blues Articles and Essays. Over the years, the site has developed into an all encompassing comment on everything "Blues". It's sections are wide and far reaching with contributions from many Blues experts and enthusiasts. It's diversity is indeed wide and one of the added benefits is the list of guitars played by all of the early Blues Pioneers that was compiled by Blues Musician, Di Thomas. This makes an excellent point of reference for researchers and people who seek confirmation of what guitars their early heroes used. There are all the latest UK Blues Festival and Gig Guides, Artistes and Bands, Blues DVD's & Films, Video Clips, Internet Blues Radio, National and County links to all Blues Clubs and events etc.etc.

Alan White, the founder and driving force behind the website says " *The target audience is really (a) those that know little about the blues and are curious to learn about the origins of blues music, (b) those already knowledgeable about the blues but want to know more, and (c) those that are experts and want to do more research or have specialist discussions with like minded people. The main purpose of the website is therefore to provide a reference point for blues education and to ensure the origins of the blues are not forgotten as blues music goes forward in the future. In parallel to this, the website helps promote blues festivals and hence encourage live blues music – "keeping the blues alive".* We at Music Maker are running along similar, but wider lines, by writing about and promoting Independent Artistes , Bands and Musicians of all genres.