

FROM ORIGINAL ANALOG MASTER



SONNY BOY WILLIAMSON



THE SKY IS CRYING

STORYVILLE

When 'Willie' Rice Miller, aka Sonny Boy Williamson, made these intimate, casual recordings in 1963, he was already (probably) 66 years old. Most of his long career was over; only two years later he would die in his little apartment in Helena, Arkansas. He was recognized as a giant throughout the blues world as a harmonica player, vocalist, songwriter, prolific recording artist, live performer and wildly colorful personality.

Starting in 1951 and continuing into the '60s, Sonny Boy made some of the most influential blues records of all time; Help Me, Eyesight To the Blind, Nine Below Zero, Mighty Long Time, One Way Out, Don't Start Me Talking, Keep It To Yourself, Bring It On Home, and dozens more.

But he had never recorded before like he did on this one night in Copenhagen: in a totally acoustic setting, sometimes with just his voice and harmonica, sometimes with only Matt «Guitar» Murphy backing him, sometimes joined by his old friend Memphis Slim on piano. Drums appear on only one song. These recordings capture a personal, improvisational side of Sonny Boy's music that has been rarely heard on record.



Rice Miller began his career in the 1920s in the Mississippi Delta. He was born near Glendora, Mississippi in 1894, 1897, 1908 or 1909, depending on which of his interviews and documents you choose to believe. Certainly he was a wandering musician from an early age; bluesmen like Robert Junior Lockwood remember him playing on street corners and at dances in the Delta plantation towns around 1930. Sometimes he would be accompanied by a guitar player, but often by nothing more than his own snapping fingers to keep time. He developed a delicate yet rugged style of harmonica that perfectly fit his voice. It's almost as though they were the same instrument. As Paul Oliver put it, "his harmonica spoke a language of our time, tortured, wailing, crying and strangely beautiful; its effect was



powerfully human. His large, calloused lips enfolded the cheap harps he played and he seemed to mold the notes through the long fingers of his hands, which were laid palm to palm as if he were to take a long drink of water from them.

He would utter the words of his blues from the side of his mouth, slipping the harp between his lips as he finished a vocal phrase so that the melody was sustained on the instrument. When he sang, his voice was husky, sometimes almost guttural, at other times near a whisper. And through it all, his impeccable sense of timing pervaded." His sound was entirely his own. He was a tremendous influence on other players; every blues harmonica player since Sonny Boy has struggled to master his style. You can hear his licks played by James Cotton (whom Sonny Boy raised

and tutored), Junior Wells, Howling Wolf, Junior Parker and literally hundreds of other harp players. But one listen to Sonny Boy and you'll know no one else was quite the same.

After years of wandering from town to town in the Delta, Sonny Boy found a home in 1941 at KFFA radio in Helena, Arkansas. The Interstate Grocery Company put him on the air for 15 minutes a day at lunch time to advertise King Biscuit Flour. "King Biscuit Time" became an institution in the Delta; it's still on the air after almost 50 years (and now plays Sonny Boy's records). The sound of Sonny Boy's harp and his swinging little bands, including great guitarists like Robert Junior Lockwood, Joe Willie Wilkins, Elmore James and Houston Stackhouse, could be heard across the Delta at a time when very little blues was heard on the radio. He was a star in the Delta, playing dances and parties every weekend and broadcasting virtually every weekday for ten

years. At some point around this time Rice Miller "borrowed" the professional name of John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson, the extremely popular blues recording artist who himself was a major innovator on harmonica. Miller, being the older of the two men, liked to insist that he was the "original Sonny Boy", even though his recording career didn't begin until after John Lee Williamson's untimely death in 1948.

In fact, for all his popularity in the Delta, Sonny Boy didn't make a record himself until 1951, when Lillian McMurry of Trumpet Records took him and his band into the studio in Jackson Mississippi to cut his first sides - "Eyesight To The Blind", "Cross My Heart", and "Pontiac Blues" among them. When his records began to sell, he was lured away by Chess Records in Chicago, where he recorded into the early '60s. Sonny Boy became one of Chess' great blues stars, along with Muddy Waters, Howling Wolf, Little Walter and his recordings

for Chess, like his Trumpet sides, were masterpieces of small band blues. In fact, few bluesmen could claim to have made so many brilliant records as Sonny Boy; it's hard to think of a single song he recorded not worth listening to again and again.

In the early '60s, when European fans began discovering the blues, Sonny Boy was among the first American bluesmen to tour Europe. He went over with the ground-breaking American Folk Blues Festival caravan in 1963 and found a kind of adulation among the young, white fans that he had never experienced in the States. He stayed in Europe after the tour, gigging with Memphis Slim in Poland and with the Yardbirds in England (including the young Eric Clapton on guitar). He loved the formal British businessmen's suits, and adopted them for his own, sometimes even carrying a rolled-up umbrella on stage. It was during a

swing through Denmark that Karl Emil Knudsen of Storyville Records took him into the studio for one long evening of recording.

After spending months in Europe in 1963 and 1964, Sonny Boy returned to Helena and began broadcasting again on King Biscuit Time. Few of his old friends believed his stories about touring Europe; after all, he was the same colorful storyteller they had known for decades. He died on May 26, 1965 in the Delta where his career began.

– Bruce Iglauer

SONNY BOY WILLIAMSON

THE SKY IS CRYING

- 1 The Sky is Crying 3:15
- 2 Don't Let Your Right Hand 6:10
- 3 Coming Home To You Baby 4:00
- 4 The Story of Sonny Boy Williamson 4:40
- 5 Gettin' Together 3:50
- 6 Little Girl 4:20
- 7 I Can't Understand 3:20
- 8 Slowly Walk Close To Me 3:25
- 9 I Wonder Do I Have A Friend 3:50



ALL SONGS BY WILLIAMSON EXCEPT 'THE SKY IS CRYING' BY LEWIS, ROBINSON & JAMES.

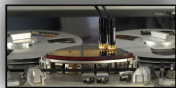
Musicians:

Sonny Boy Williamson (harmonica & vocals)
Matt Murphy (guitar)
Memphis Slim (piano)
Billie Stepney (drums)

Produced by Karl Emil Knudsen
Recorded November 1st 1963 at Ivar
Rosenberg Studios, Copenhagen, Denmark
Engineered by Ivar Rosenberg
Reissue produced by: André Perry
2xHD mastering by René Laflamme
2xHD Executive Producer: André Perry
Album cover & insert design: André Perry
Cover photo: Bengt Malmqvist
Graphics: Sylvie Labelle



THE 2xHD FUSION MASTERING SYSTEM



In the constant evolution of its proprietary mastering process, 2xHD has progressed to a new phase called 2xHD FUSION, integrating the finest analog, with state-of-the-art digital technology.

The mastering chain consists of a selection of high-end vacuum tube equipment. For the recordings on this album, the original 1/4" 15 ips CCIR master tapes were played on a Nagra-T tape recorder, modified with high-end tube playback electronics, wired from the playback head directly to a Telefunken EF806 tube, using OCC silver cable. The Nagra T, with its four direct drive motors, two pinch rollers and a tape tension head, has one of the best transports ever made. A custom-built carbon fiber head block and a head damping electronic system permit 2xHD FUSION to obtain a better resolution and 3D imaging.

The resulting signal is then transformed into high resolution formats by recording it in DSD11.2kHz using a Merging Technologies' Horus A to D converter. All analog and digital cables that are used are state of the art. The 2xHD FUSION mastering system is powered by a super capacitor power supply, using a new technology that lowers the digital noise found in the lowest level of the spectrum. A vacuum tube NAGRA HDdac (DSD) is used as a reference digital playback converter in order to A and B with the original analog master tape, permitting the fusion of the warmth of analog with the refinement of digital.

2xHD was created by producer/studio owner André Perry and audiophile sound engineer René Laflamme.

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