

the sky is crying

PAUL OLIVER

FEW SINGERS in the blues field have so endeared themselves to European audiences as did Sonny Boy Williamson—(number Two) whose death on May 25th this year was reported by Chris Strachwitz. Sonny Boy came to Europe with the 1963 American Negro Folk Blues Festival initiated by Horst Lippmann, little known to the average collector. Specialists knew his remarkable early recordings for the Trumpet label of Jackson, Mississippi, one of which I played on the B.B.C. about eight years ago, and Chess had released his *Down and Out Blues* album on which the almost totally erroneous notes by Studs Terkel appeared to lay the beginnings of confusion about the singer which still persists. His tall, gaunt and dignified figure on the stage was the first that most collectors knew of him and his husky voice, his rich harmonica playing and perhaps above all his extraordinary sense of timing and dynamics were a revelation.

Inevitably he was confused with the "original Sonny Boy"—John Lee Williamson whose Victor recordings of the late-'thirties and 'forties before his murder in 1948 were widely known and admired by a whole generation of blues collectors. It is probable, but now by no means certain, that the late Sonny Boy had taken the name of the younger but more famous man. Undoubtedly he regretted it and to the end of his life protested that he was the "one and only, the original" Sonny Boy Williamson. This was certainly true as far as age was concerned and whether in fact he was known by this name and unintentionally gave it to the celebrated singer from Tennessee will almost definitely remain inconclusive.

When all is said and done it hardly matters, but the Sonny Boy who has just died was a very individual artist who deserved the full credit of a reputation that owed nothing, not even the reflection of a name, to any other blues singer. He was a consummate performer, capable of opening a stone-cold show, as Lippmann wisely noted in using him for the commencement of the 1964 tour performances. He could captivate an audience by his playing—not through demonstrations of virtuoso techniques but by generating a subtle but persistent swing in simply phrased passages which gradually became more complex and more intense. He never gave away too much at first—for this reason he was seldom successful on television which depends on immediate and brief impact—but built up his rapport with his audience. His sense of humour was always evident and his harmonica solos with the whole instrument in his mouth, or played with the nose, added nothing to the quality of the music but considerably to the entertainment. There was a wilful, irresponsible element in his make-up, the gentle comedy of an old man and he could never refrain from contradicting the interviews that he had given to various writers. This meant eventually, that most of the details about him conflict on many points.

As far as I know it was the Belgian writer Georges Adins who wrote, in the *Bulletin of the Hot Club of France*, the first article on Sonny Boy after he had stayed with him in East St. Louis in 1959. As is lamentably customary few American writers took much notice of him at all and he was surprised and delighted when he found an enthusiastic audience in every European city he visited. He was especially fond of England and had

hoped to make this country his home; he returned to play here frequently—too frequently it seemed at the time but already one wishes he could play here again.

The details of Sonny Boy's life I have attempted to sort out in the notes to the two exceptional LP's that he made for Karl Emil Knudsen's *Storyville* label. These are, I believe, the finest recordings that he made, paralleling those for Trumpet and exceeding those made for Chess, with perhaps individual exceptions. Interested readers who wish to know more about him should consult the two probing articles written after the initial tour: John J. Broven's *Sonny Boy Williamson* in the January 1964 issue of *Blues Unlimited*, and Neil E. Slaven's *The Mystery That Is Sonny Boy* in the April 1964 issue of *R & B Monthly*. More recently, Derrick Stewart-Baxter has published an appreciation and comparison of the two Sonny Boy Williamsons in the May and June 1965 issues of *Jazz Journal*. With Broven's article an immaculate discography by Kurt Mohr also appears.

To Chris Strachwitz I am indebted for the following notes on his last months. It is important to note that in spite of his success in Europe Sonny Boy never hit the "folk circuit" in the United States and on his return to America after his tours worked in the usual Negro clubs of Milwaukee, Minneapolis, East St. Louis and points further South where he had played for decades. Writes Chris Strachwitz:

"This morning (June 1st) I got a letter from an attorney in Helena, Arkansas telling me that Sonny Boy Williamson died on or about May 25th. I had visited him just recently on my way back from a long trip which had taken me to the East Coast with Mance Lipscomb and then back South. Sonny Boy Williamson was broadcasting daily over KFFA for King Biscuit—I went with him to the radio station one day. He had a guitar and a drummer backing him up—it was just the way it must have been thirty years ago! And in the evenings he played at little country juke joints around Mississippi—he was in Stovall one night! The Negro who apparently first hired Sonny Boy in Helena—at least, so he told me when Sonny Boy took me to his cafe to meet him—also said that he was the original Sonny Boy and that the other one who recorded for Bluebird came to Helena one day claiming to be the real one but was run out of town. I have the feeling most people know his name as Willie Williamson; no one I asked knew about any Rice Miller. He was his usual self when I saw him but was anxious for me to meet various people, showing them that I had been with him in Europe. They hardly believed him and apparently the general feeling was that he had been part of a show playing for the armed services. A young group of rock-and-roll singers from Canada stopped by one night and had a short chat with him. This made him feel a bit better. He seemed tired during his radio show but otherwise much as usual—drinking hard.

I guess it must have been a fast end. And I am glad since I am sure he would have hated to have spent some time in some hospital in the South."

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