

Bukka White

"I just reach up and pull them out of the sky — call them sky songs — they just come to me." That's how Bukka White described his music making. His performances were not polished, finished, slick tin pan alley songs but marvelous, on the spot creations — images and recollections as they come to the artist's mind. He was a man with one of the most vivid imaginations I ever had the pleasure of recording.

When I first met Bukka here in Berkeley, Ca. I was immediately impressed by his overpowering personality. He was intense and full of life — it had to come out of him — and slowly I found out what Bukka was like. This session began one afternoon after Bukka agreed to record for Arhoolie. He was sitting in my apartment having a drink and I asked him to tell me a bit about himself for the

liner notes. The microphone was on. He looked at it for a second then stared out the window at the bright sunny sky and began what turned out to be one of the most delightful folk tales I had ever heard. The microphone was a bit too close to him but I felt this should be issued anyway and the result was a monolog which I called MIXED WATER, (available only on LP 1020).

A few days later I went to hear Bukka play at the Cabale, a local folk music club, hoping to get an idea of which might be some of his better numbers. Again I discovered that Bukka, like most spontaneous artists, would rarely sing the same song twice in the same way. He did perform a few selections which he had recorded long ago and had relearned to please his new audience. His new fans expected to hear the old

songs sung as they were improvised and recorded as he faced a recording microphone in Chicago one day back in the 1930s. Here at the folk music coffee houses in Berkeley, Bukka would often play only three or four songs per set because they turned out to be the kind of long, spontaneous creations which are found in the best of folk art. I'm reminded of the beautiful guitar improvisations of Joseph Spence from the Bahamas, Indian ragas, or the 40 minute rendition of "Wild Side of Life" that I heard played one hot summer night by Aldus Roger and his Cajun band at the old Midway Dance Hall in Breaux Bridge, La. Bukka's Sky Songs are in this class.

John Fahey, a fascinated student of country blues, rediscovered Bukka White when he got an idea from the title of one of Bukka's old records, "Aberdeen, Miss. Blues," and wrote a letter addressed to "Bukka White —

Blues Singer, Aberdeen, Miss." The postmaster there knew him and forwarded the letter to Bukka's then current address in Memphis. A response from Bukka soon found Fahey in Memphis recording a new album for Fahey and Ed Denson's Takoma label. Fahey and Denson told me that if I wished the numbers to be within the three or four minute time limit I ought to tap Bukka on the shoulder whenever the time was up. I've always been more of a documentor than a "producer" and I left Bukka alone to play as long as he wished, which invariably was longer than could be fit on one 7" reel of tape at 15 i.p.s.! Occasionally he would actually finish a "song" when he happened to see me pointing at the few feet of tape remaining on the reel.

The material presented on this CD/C reflects some of Bukka's thoughts, anxieties, and reflections — mostly dealing with the

good times back home. "Jesus Died On the Cross To Save the World" was the result of me asking him if he knew any songs in the same tuning or style as "Poor Boy, Long Way From Home." He said no, but that he would be happy to make me one! On another occasion I asked Bukka if he had ever come across any good gambling songs - I was still not quite hep to his incredible imagination. Again the answer was no, but that he'd try and make one up! I had mentioned Peg Leg Howell's "Skin Game Blues" in the course of our conversation and off he went again - "Georgia Skin Game" was the result! "Bald Eagle Train" is about Bukka's trip to California - no doubt the longest train trip he had ever made. Listen to it carefully and the incredible imagery may shock you.

Booker T. Washington White was born November 12, 1906 (at times he gave the year as 1909)

on his grandfather's farm near Houston, Mississippi. His father worked on the railroad, and Bukka was raised by his grandfather, who played the fiddle and came from Alabama. Bukka's father, when he was home, would teach him a little on the guitar even though his grandmother was against all "devil's music." Bukka's father finally bought his son a guitar but many of the earliest tunes he recalls were fiddle tunes like "Turkey in the Straw" and "Old Man Who Shot the Rabbit" which Bukka's grandfather played.

"Books never crossed my mind," said Bukka, and although he had the opportunity to go through school he preferred to play hooky and court the girls. At the age of nine he tried to leave home to work at a sawmill in Houston, Miss., but his folks went after him and brought him back. Later he went to stay with his uncle in Clarksdale and when

he was fourteen Bukka went off to St. Louis where he told the women he was twenty-one. He was a big boy and would paint on a mustache and, being a good guitar player to boot, he did pretty well in the honky tonks and barrel houses.

From 1920 on Bukka traveled up and down the Mississippi and through the Delta country, and went as far north as Chicago. He remembered, "I wasn't paying the time no attention - was travelin' so fast. In them days it was easy to get jobs playing, but my main job was looking for pretty girls."

In 1930 Bukka was in Itta Bena, Miss. and met Ralph Limbo, the proprietor of a furniture store who had connections with Victor Records and, according to some sources, had his own label. Mr. Limbo wanted some singers to go to Memphis with him to make records and he had a contract to have Bukka perform eight

songs for \$800.00 out of which Mr. Limbo gave Bukka \$240.00 and a new guitar. They went to Memphis along with Bukka's friend Napoleon and a preacher and there Bukka made his first recordings for Victor. After that Bukka continued to do farm work and play around the Delta until he got a letter from Big Bill Broonzy asking him to come up north to record some numbers for a Mr. Melrose, an independent record producer in Chicago who had Big Bill as his talent scout in the South. Bukka went and says he did better by Mr. Melrose than by any other record man he ever met, but Bukka was a country man and he soon returned to Mississippi.

"I had to burn a guy a little and they gave me a little time down there on Parchman's Farm. They treat you-like you treat yourself. They called me 'Barrel-house,' and I seen better days there than I seen at home. On

Sundays girls would come by and take me for a ride — bring me food and cakes. I became famous down there — was of too much service to them to let me go. When I got out I felt like shootin' somebody else! I was in there when Mr. Lomax came by and I figured it was better to give than receive and so I did some numbers for him."

"I like to talk and have a nice time. I'm like a fish — take him out of the water and lay him on the bank in the hot sun and he'll soon dry up and die. That's the way I am, if you don't put me someplace where I can have fun, I won't live long." Perhaps that is the reason that Bukka was often unhappy during his engagements on the West Coast where he had no relatives and found it no doubt difficult to communicate with the young white city blues fans, who came from a very different cultural background.

In 1944, near the end of World

War II, Bukka got a job in a defense plant. His draft classification was 1A and he was in love with a woman named Rebecca. She persuaded him to get a defense job so that they could be together and he could be kept from the fighting. So, Bukka vanished from the music scene and was working in a tank plant when the letter addressed to: "Bukka White - Blues Singer," arrived.

Bukka said he played a steel guitar because "it is loud — I don't need no mike and also I play so rough I would have busted many guitars. This one can stand rain and punishment, I stomp them, I don't peddle them!"

Bukka had a famous cousin: B.B. King, and in December of 1963 he went to see him at Sweet's Ballroom in Oakland, CA where B.B. did a moving song about his cousin. Bukka's favorites in the blues business

were Big Bill and Tampa Red, whom he got to know well during his stay in Chicago. Bukka met many of the others, including Howling Wolf, who played on the streets in Mississippi. He also met the old Sonny Boy Williamson in Drew, MS, and around West Memphis where all the blues men would gather. It was a wide open town with gambling, girls and all kinds of happenings.

These were the blues that Bukka knew best: the blues of the barrel houses, the juke joints, the dusty street corners. He sang of days gone by and a rural life which few of his new urban fans experienced but which has a universal attraction. Bukka White died in Memphis February 26, 1977.

(Chris Strachwitz - edited 1990)
Copy editing by Dix Bruce

For our complete illustrated Catalog listing full details about hundreds of Country, Cajun, Blues, Tejano, and other regional traditions available on our CDs, Cassettes, Video tapes and LP records - send \$2 to cover postage to:

ARHOLIE CATALOG
10341 San Pablo Avenue
El Cerrito, Ca. 94530