

766



The Big DooWopper

Feel the Spirit

A TRIBUTE TO MAHALIA

DON'T BE PUT OFF BY CORNELL H. WILLIAMS' sobriquet, "The Big DooWopper." This man's musical interest and most certainly extraordinary vocal abilities encompass more than the recreation of the simple pleasures of singing hallway harmonies. "I'm a traditionalist," says Big. "Because of my strong ties with my roots, my music takes in all forms of the popular African American experience. In my act I cover blues, doowop, gospel, R & B and jazz." Indeed, having spent forty-five years off and on in the streets playing and singing music, Big can master anything.

Born November 13, 1953 in Grenada, Calhoun County, Mississippi (between the railroad tracks and the Grenada swamps, as he likes to put it), young Big grew up in a family steeped in sacred and secular choral harmony singing. An outfit composed of his mother Elizabeth Louise Pratt, his father Ivory Williams, himself and a bunch of stepbrothers and friends practiced close harmony and sang on street corners.

Elizabeth, in the role of church soloist, traveled both as featured vocalist and duetist with the late great Mahalia Jackson. Elizabeth also toured with B.B. King who affectionately looked upon Ivory's wife as his own "little sister." Big was born with the disadvantage of only being able to see with one eye. By puberty, cataracts had taken away what little sight he had left.

B.B. King expressed concern for the blind boy

who, quite early in life, displayed an enormous talent. King bought the boy clothing and looked after his general welfare when he could. King became Big's "play-uncle." In 1964, Big wrote a tune for B.B. King entitled "Don't It Make You Feel Bad." (But B.B. King never recorded the song.) The chart ended up on The Big DooWopper's first Delmark release, *All In The Joy* (DELMARK 742).

In 1957 the Williams family relocated to Chicago. They attended the Greater Harvest Baptist Church at 5125 South State Street, whose flock fell under the stewardship of Elder Louis Drive. The G.H.B.C. is the home of the famous Greater Harvest Baptist Radio Choir, trained and tutored under the direction of Rev. Louis Boddie. Big took a place in the choir. The noted G.H.B. Radio Choir recorded behind Mary Clay for Savoy Records in 1962 and over the years nurtured many fine singers. These included Maurice McAllister of the Radiants and Joyce Davis of the Dutones.

Once in Chicago, Big started listening to deejays like Herb Kent who played the dusty old gospel and R & B nuggets of the past over WVON. One day Mahalia Jackson came to the Williams' house. Jackson wound up cooking dinner. "I'll always remember it," says Big. "Her Southern dishes were the best any man has ever tasted. Her gumbo just melts in your mouth. She made a whole mess of stuff, and we ate like wolves." After dinner Jackson sang a few songs at the family

piano. "That was when I picked up a few things," says Big who was trying to find his own way around the keyboard at the time.

On the secular side, Big made two important neighborhood friends, singer Duke Savage, best known for his 1959 single on Argo called "Your Love," and John "Stormy Blue" Cooley. It all began one day when the Williams family caught a Duke Savage performance at the Royal Theatre. Big was introduced to Savage through drummer Cozy Cole who was in Savage's band. Big was extremely impressed with Savage's real hip bebopper get-up—thick horn rims and Gillespie-like beret included.

Savage gave Big his autograph and a copy of his current single. The two became friends. It was Savage and Cooley who came up with Big's moniker, "The Big DooWopper," as Big was in the habit of humming and singing some of his old vocal group favorites. Soon Big and "Stormy Blue" got together to write songs. Savage took Big around the club circuit. Pep's Lounge was a regular favorite. When it came time for Savage to go out on the road, Big wanted to go with him. But this did not sit right with the family who insisted young Big stay in school.

In 1961 The Big DooWopper started taking Hammond B3 organ instruction from Prof. Joseph Henderson and Edward Robinson. Jack McDuff, Jimmy Smith and Earl Grant became his keyboard inspirations. In between school work, armed with a cup, Big started standing out on his local street corner, singing for coin. After a while he found better

pickings down at his local train station at Wilson and Broadway. From here he graduated to musical duets with Lucky Lopez, a street musician with whom he wound up sharing a living space. Now equipped with a keyboard, he began to increase his income. He recorded demo cassettes and passed them out to people in the music business.

When Mahalia Jackson passed from a heart seizure at Chicago's Little Company of Mary Hospital in Evergreen Park on January 27, 1972, Big swore that one day he would cut an album tribute in commemoration of this great Queen of Gospel whose large body of work influenced the development of all popular African American musics. He had to wait thirty years, but in his heart he knew his time would come.

The iron-encased voice of The Big DooWopper reflects a combination of stylistic influences, the principal three being the sadly departed Clara Ward of the Famous Ward Singers of Philadelphia, Brother Joe May, the Mississippi-born "Caruso of Gospel," and Prof. Alex Bradford from Bessemer, Alabama. All three are key figures in his musical imprint. In addition, Big has the amazing ability to make his voice sound like a female contralto. To prove this, take a listen to his dynamic and lyrically outstanding cover of Doris Aker's soul-stealing "Lead Me, Guide Me" on which he multi-tracks (as with all the tunes on this collection) all the vocal parts.

Big's cover of "God Put A Rainbow In The Sky," on which his voice is accompanied by his own

choral background and separate vocal quartet, is an amazing work of the imagination not just for its fervent, anointed vocal lead but for its stunningly constructed production work. On his clever interpretation of Mahalia Jackson's "Rusty Ol' Halo" you could swear you were listening to a female second vocalist. His quartet-supported "Let The Church Roll On" is put together with such masterful skill even the additional spoken interjection, as lifted from the original, sounds perfect.

Big's personal sanctification on his "reconstruction" of "In The Upper Room" follows Mahalia's original vocal patterns. Even the tight, Southern Harmonaires backgrounding is carbon-copied down to the last phrase. The old, traditional Baptist hymn "Come To Jesus" comes across just as Mahalia must have intended it. This is old-time gospel, sung in down-home country fashion, not just technically proficient but rendered with warmth, power, compassion and firm conviction.

Big currently plays in the tunnel between the Red and Blue lines near Washington and State. "I want to try musicals and stage plays. I've started making commercials." Whatever The Big DooWopper does, he's going to amaze us and, what's more, he is going to give it 101 percent.

— Opal Louis Nations, August 2002

Based mainly on an interview with the artist.

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1. Dig A Little Deeper 2:36
2. Everytime I Feel The Spirit 3:20
3. Lead Me, Guide Me 5:08
4. I'm Going To Walk All Over God's Heaven 2:37
5. God Put A Rainbow In The Sky 3:28
6. Rusty Ol' Halo 2:55
7. These Are They 2:48
8. Elijah Rock 3:32
9. Let The Church Roll On 1:37
10. He Calmed The Ocean 2:57
11. Didn't It Rain 2:40
12. Soon I Will Be Done With
The Troubles Of The World 4:35
13. The Answer Came 2:54
14. Walkin' To Jerusalem 3:01
15. In The Upper Room 6:35
16. I'm Getting Nearer My Home 2:54
17. Come To Jesus 2:53
18. I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody 5:36
19. Bless This House 4:02

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