

Bob Geddings And Rhythm Records 1954-1957

by Opal Louis Nations



Bob Geddings circa 1990, courtesy Pat Monaco.

If one were to pick a banner year for the Oakland blues it would be 1954, the year Big Town Records' architect Bob Geddings recorded three of the Bay Area's most significant blues waxings – Jimmy Wilson's 'Strangest Blues' with Jimmy Nolen, Wild Willie Moore and Johnny Heartsman, 'Roughest Place In Town' (Tin Pan Alley) – James Reed with Lafayette Thomas, and Johnny Fuller's 'Johnny Ace's Last Letter'. All were pressed on the Rhythm label, Bob Geddings' first venture into the 45rpm market.

The original Rhythm label was founded by David Rosenbaum in 1945 in San Francisco at 1317 Grove Street. It was set up to service his Rhythm Record Shop. As one of the Bay Area's first indies, Rhythm initially issued four singles cut on Saunders King in 1942 at The Sherman Clay Music Store in San Francisco. The exact date of issue is unclear. After a Saunders King session for AFRS Jubilee in 1943 and two unissued Decca sessions in 1944 and 1945 (one for each year), Rosenbaum issued his second Saunders King session from the spring of 1946. Eight more S.K. sessions followed, punctuated by one shots from three other artists.

In 1954, Rosenbaum entered into a deal with Bob Geddings. He was already having some of his sides pressed at Geddings' plant, so they knew each other well before the deal was cut. Rosenbaum remained in financial control of the company while 'partner' Geddings talent-scouted for Rhythm as well as produced and manufactured Rhythm recordings. The 1317 Grove Street, San Francisco address remained on the white and navy label which for a while did not lose its original scripted logo design. The Geddings/Rosenbaum partnership produced just over a year's worth of releases, at least fifteen, plus a probable amount of unissued test pressings.

When Rosenbaum decided to step back and take a less active role in 1957, Geddings found he needed another partner to bankroll his Rhythm imprint. Record sales were doing as well as ever, and Geddings had acquired a stable of blues artists second to none in Northern California. In fact, Geddings never really had it so good before or after this time. Don Barksdale, a world class star athlete, disc jockey and proprietor of two Oakland night clubs (The Sportsman on Grove Street and The Showcase on Telegraph Avenue) was looking to expand his music interests by getting into the record making business.

Geddings was seeking new financial investment and it was only natural the two should meet and strike up a deal. Approximately 29 Barksdale financed singles emerged over roughly a three year period, many of which were pressed by Bob Geddings. Some of the blue and silver releases

sported the old scripted label. Others carried a newer, more simplified Rhythm black and silver imprint in Roman capitals.

It should be noted that throughout Geddings' involvement with Rhythm Records, as with almost all partnerships concerning other Big Town subsidiaries, he was never in a position of total control. His hand-to-mouth approach of running a business on a handshake basis led to small 'emergency pressings' to sell product at once to whomever came along, especially at times when cash was needed to keep his wife and many children from joining the homeless.

The Geddings-Rosenbaum segment of the Rhythm story kicks off with The Mystery Man (Bob Geddings himself) and 'Maria's Blues' ('Mar-rier') coupled with 'Blues In Italy' ('Loueggie Blues', Rhythm 1762.) This is the only record that Geddings can actually be heard singing and playing a small electric organ. As he has himself mentioned before, Geddings bragged he could mimic many artists, both in music and from the silver screen, and he did excel here with his comic impression of a heartsick, jilted Italian lover. Both sides came off very well and were probably inspired by his good friend Eddie Anderson.

It is my contention that Mercy Dee Walton accompanied Geddings on piano and took the second vocal part on the 'Loueggie Blues' side. This supposition is based on audible evidence and not particularly on the fact he recorded 'Trailing My Baby'/'Main Event' for Rhythm at this time (Rhythm 1774.) Walton was born in Waco, Texas on 30th August 1915. He fingered his way around the piano, picking up pointers from a sundry bunch of local pianists.

Walton moved out to Southern California in the late 1930s where he laboured at farm work during the day and played piano at road houses during the dark hours. His first opportunity to record his barrelhouse piano style and laid back vocals came in 1949 when Chester Lew on Tulare Street in Fresno had him record a double session for his Spire imprint. It is rumored that Walton made test recordings for Little Jessie Jaxyson at Jaxyson Records in Oakland while on a short trip up the California coast.

Walton showed up on Rhythm in 1954 with L.C. 'Good Rockin' Robinson on guitar. 'Trailing My Baby' is sung in Walton's inimitable style, heightened by Robinson's devastating, Elmore-like guitar break. 'Main Event' is an



L.C. 'Good Rockin' Robinson. Courtesy Chris Strachwitz.

audience dubbed, sax-led instrumental blaster. The honking here belongs to tenor Big Jim Wilson. Wilson and Robinson duked it out on their instruments in freak abandon throughout. The session included an equally mind bending third song, 'Trying To Kick The Habit' which only saw light of day on an Arhoolie album presented by Chris Strachwitz in the 1960s.

Jimmy Wilson came to Rhythm after recording secularly for Aladdin, Cava-Tone, 7-11 and Big Town. His first Rhythm release, 'Strangest Blues'/'I Used To Love A Woman' (Rhythm 1765) was supported by Wild Willie Moore on tenor sax, Lafayette Thomas on guitar and Johnny Heartsman on bass. His second release, 'Trouble Trouble'/'Frisco Bay' (Rhythm 1766), was accompanied again by the Johnny Heartsman Band featuring Lafayette Thomas on guitar. 'Strangest Blues' opens with Lafayette Thomas blasting away in Elmore fashion. A Latin rhythm accommodates a finely rendered vocal and a stomping, honking sax delivery. A mighty record from start to finish.

'I Used To Love A Woman' is a dragging blues made stunning by Thomas' clever runs and punctuations. 'Trouble Trouble' is equally enjoyable in the same fashion. One can hear from these cuts why Lafayette Thomas was the Bay Area's most neglected axe-master. The doom laden 'Frisco Bay' demonstrates that the East Bay blues had by then reached its most profound pinnacle.

Rhythm inductee Johnny Fuller was born in Edwards, Mississippi on 20th April 1929. I have clear memories of my friendship with Fuller who during the 1970s hung out Saturdays at the Berkeley Flea Market at Ashby subway station. He used to take along his collection of guitars to show to enthusiasts but turned up mainly to chat amicably with his many local fans. I miss him.

In 1935, the Fuller family moved out to Vallejo, California. Amazingly, Vallejo then had a thriving blue collar, African American community. At aged seven, Johnny was inspired by the guitar playing of his father, Major Fuller. For the next eight years, Johnny listened to blues records and tried to pick up all he could from other players' styles. He was aided by a self-study book as well as recorded licks by country stylists like Chet Atkins. Through his grandfather's encouragement, Fuller played in the Baptist church. His grandfather was a Baptist preacher.

In 1946, Johnny Fuller joined the Teenage Gospel Singers who later evolved into the Golden West Gospel Singers who had a unique way of singing quartet which did not fit with Fuller's more folksy singing and playing. The Golden West Gospel Singers had to cut him loose. Fuller then made his first gospel recordings for Little Jessie Jaxyson at Jaxyson Records on Oakland's West Seventh Street. Billed as the nineteen-year-old wonder, Fuller got himself a Sunday gospel radio show on KWBR in Oakland. His first secular recordings were cut for Modern Records in San Francisco in 1954.

After one San Francisco session for John Dolphin's Money label, he signed with Geddins' Rhythm label and cut at least nine sides for him. He is noted for the celebrated 'Fools Paradise' (Rhythm 1767), a touching, organ driven ballad in the easy, loping style of the inevitable Charles Brown cover version that followed later. It was an easy call to think that Charles Brown would pick up on this song and one is pressed to think that Geddins had planned it that way.

The flipside gave us the wisdom-filled 'First Stage Of The Blues' with Fuller or Lafayette Thomas playing impressive guitar fills. The riotous 'Train Train Blues' (Rhythm 1773) is yet another spin-off of Junior Parker's 'Mystery Train'. Both Fuller's guitar and Walter Robinson's harmonica make this a worthwhile Rhythm effort. 'Bad Luck Overtook Me' (the reverse) is a sad chart about a mistreating woman and a misguided mother. Fuller followed these with 'Lovin' Lovin' Man' and 'Remember' (Rhythm 1777.)

His mournful 'Johnny Ace's Last Letter' (Rhythm 1782) is beautifully rendered with its funereal organ, Johnny Otis-like vibes and Fuller's Johnny Ace impersonation. Fuller's testimony came when competition was strong for the best-selling tribute. Just about everyone got into the act, including Frankie Ervin, Marie, Patti Jerome, and Varetta Dillard among other contenders. It was Varetta Dillard who joined the winners' circle when she took her song to number six on *Billboard's* R&B chart in February 1955.

The identification of 'Pretty Boy' is a mystery. He's not Don Covay but could possibly be Johnny Fuller – but that's just a stab in the dark. His 'I'm Bad' (Rhythm 1768) is another anthem to the mistreatment of women. This kind of mistreatment blues oeuvre survives even until this day in the current black soul music idiom. The flip, 'Find My Baby' is a pleasant ballad with mumbled lyrics but as ably supported, as is the top side, by Johnny Fuller and his band.

Willie B. Huff's 'I've Been Thinkin' And Thinkin' (Rhythm 1770) is a beautiful ballad supported by the tasty guitar licks of Johnny Fuller. The reverse, 'Beggar Man Blues' is a similar melancholic dirge concerning a no-good man. Geddins did not really take to female blues singers and rarely recorded them. Thank heaven for this exception. Fuller remembered Huff as a woman who could sing like a man which may explain Geddins' willingness to record Huff.

Guitarist L.C. 'Good Rockin' Robinson is another Bay Area blues treasure who was sadly under recorded. He spent most of his musical career supporting other artists and only cut one single as leader, two records with The Robinson Brothers, and five album tracks under his own



Label shots courtesy of Opal Louis Nations and Victor Pearlin.

or his family's name (The Robinson Brothers) over the course of fourteen years. He was born Louis Charles Robinson in Brenham, Texas on 15th May 1915. He died in Berkeley, California in September 1976. His brother-in-law was pre-war blues and bottleneck legend Blind Willie Johnson.

Robinson mastered the six string guitar, Hawaiian lap-steel and electric fiddle and nearly always played all three on one programme. Robinson and his brothers grew up in Texas where he fell under the influence of the great country steel players like Leon McAuliffe. He performed with his brother Deacon A.C. Robinson (a once-popular Bay Area gospel singer and preacher) in the Three Hot Brown Boys around the Bay Area during the 1930s. They changed names to the Combo Boys and moved to Oakland at the close of the War.

Robinson played clubs and parties as a solo. Then, in 1957, he switched with his brother to gospel music. Three years earlier he waxed one record for Geddins' Rhythm label. The songs were the haunting 'If I Lose You Baby' (Rhythm 1772) with guitar licks the guitar blues fan can listen to with tireless joy. The underside exposes us to the exquisite 'Why Don't You Write To Me' on which he plays his guitar-like a ringing of bells. Both sides were supported by Big Jim Wilson on tenor sax.

Rhythm's last inductee, K.C. Douglas, was born 21st November 1913 in Sharon, Mississippi. He died in October 1975 in Berkeley, California. Douglas was a Delta bluesman who took his music to the Bay Area during the War. He clung ruggedly to the old acoustic Delta blues style throughout the 1950s and 1960s. His major influence was Tommy Johnson. Douglas mastered the guitar in the 1930s and played parties and juke joints with his hero Tommy Johnson around 1940. Douglas moved to Vallejo in 1945, after his recruitment to work in the naval shipyards. He then moved to Richmond and hitched up with harmonica player Sidney Maiden to form a band. He was noticed by Geddins in 1948 when Geddins recorded his 'Mercury Boogie' for his Down Town imprint. The oddity here is that both guitarist Ford Chaney and drummer Otis Cherry were discographically listed as present on the label, yet their instruments can not be heard on the record.

Six years later, Douglas, with his group the Lumberjacks (piano, bass and drums) were asked again by Geddins to record for his Rhythm label. This resulted in one release, the rollicking 'KC Boogie' (Rhythm 1780) on which Douglas displayed his instrumental skills behind a loud and uninspiring drummer, plus the enjoyable 'Lonely Blues' a plaintive ballad set to a well-balanced accompaniment.

Douglas went on to record for the Cook Laboratories at Stamford, Connecticut (from which an album emerged), Arhoolie and Bluesville. His final recordings were made for Galaxy Records in Berkeley in 1967.

Rhythm signee James Reed came and went in 1954. His first sides were recorded in San Francisco with the Que Martyn Band for Flair Records, a subsidiary of Modern in Los Angeles. Que Martin or Martyn was conducting a lot of sessions work in the Bay Area at the time. This included dates for Recorded-In-Hollywood, Ray Dobard's Delcro label and Big Town, Geddins' flagship label. Reed then went to Rhythm Records and, supported by Lafayette Thomas with what was likely the Que Martin Band, recorded the doom-laden cover of R. Green and Turner's 'Tin Pan Alley' aka 'Alla Blues' (Rhythm 1775.)

The song (here re-titled 'Roughest Place In Town') was first made a



Jimmy Wilson. From the B&R Archive.

major-selling success in 1953 when Jimmy Wilson recorded it for Geddins' Big Town label. The atypical product of a Bob Geddins arrangement, 'Tin Pan Alley' was subsequently recorded by Johnny Fuller for Hollywood, Little Junior Parker for Duke, re-recorded by Jimmy Wilson for Goldband, retitled and recorded as 'Tijuana' by Ray Agee for Shirley Records and renamed again as '5th Street Alley Blues' by Guitar 'Slim' Green on his cover for Kent in 1970. 'Tin Pan Alley' has enjoyed a long, sad and miserable life in many bluesmen's hearts. The reverse of Reed's 'Tin Pan Alley' cover gives us "I Wanna Know" a standard, sad ballad over in the Mercy Dee Walton school of blues.

The remaining two songs from the initial Rhythm session were sold to John Dolphin who issued them on his Money subsidiary. Reed cut one more session for Geddins' Big Town label (from which two songs were issued), then disappeared off the face of the blues map. An early piano version of Reed's song 'The End' turned up on an Ace album in 1987.

When Bob Geddins first came up to the Bay Area from Los Angeles to visit his mother in 1943, he took a trip over to West Oakland to look at Seventh Street. This was his documented recollection: "I never seen so many people in all my life. The street was so crowded you couldn't hardly walk down the street unless you bumped into somebody. There were people from everywhere – Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Texas, Oklahoma, Tennessee! I said to myself, 'This could be a record heaven', because there was no blues records to be heard here in the Bay Area. You could hear some blues in L.A., but there was nothing. There were thousands and thousands of people working in the shipyards, and they were still calling for more."

Geddins then got himself hired on as a burner and welder at the Kaiser Shipyard in Richmond. From there he went on to become the San Francisco Bay Area's leading blues manufacturing and recording czar. He died February 16th, 1991 of liver cancer, a month after being stabbed by two teenagers during a robbery of one of his songwriting royalty checks.

By 1959 Don Barksdale had lost interest in producing records. He devoted more and more time to his sports interests, basketball coaching in particular. He had sold both his nightclubs by the late 1970s. In 1982 he was diagnosed with cancer. He spent his final years in the Bay Area's public school system as a sports instructor. David Rosenbaum died of heart failure in Manteca on 31st December 1997 after coming to an arrangement with Marty Arbunich and Rico Tee of Solid Smoke Records to acquire the Rhythm masters.

An almost complete collection of the Rosenbaum-Geddins Rhythm partnership period titled 'Bob Geddins' Rhythm Records Story' (Acrobat Records) is available for download (for non-U.S. customers only) on various websites.

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