

CDCHD 457



WYNONIE

HARRIS

KING
ACE

Women, Whiskey & Fish Tails

Talent and temperament alike made Wynonie Harris a natural for a career in show business. A flamboyant, larger-than-life individual with a reputation for colourful language, Wynonie had a natural magnetism that always made him the centre of attention, on stage or off, and his talents as an entertainer were diverse. His first steps in showbiz were as a dancer. With a partner named Velda Shannon he earned pin money from ballroom, tap and adagio dancing at clubs and theatres in and around his home town of Omaha, Nebraska during the early 1930s. Soon Wynonie had taught himself to play drums, and by 1935 he was dancing, drumming and working as MC at Jim Bell's Harlem, a large, well-appointed club on Lake Street in the heart of the city's black entertainment district. Later in life he displayed his skills as a magician and hypnotist at get-togethers with friends. But, inspired by the examples of Jimmy Rushing and Big Joe Turner from nearby Kansas City, it was as a blues singer that Wynonie left his mark on history.

Wynonie had been building a reputation as a blues singer for 10 years, first in Omaha and then on the West Coast, when 'Who Threw The Whiskey In The Well', a rollicking slice of jump-and-jive, became a smash hit in the summer of 1945 and made him a national star overnight. He had recorded the song during a six-month stint with Lucky Millinder's Big Band, but by the time the record was released, he was working as a single again. Suddenly he was hot property. During the next two years he

made numerous excellent recordings for several of the new independent record companies which sprang up after World War II: Philo, Apollo, Hamp-Tone, Bullet and Aladdin. 'Around The Clock' was a big - and much covered - favourite on the West Coast (and later provided the inspiration for Chuck Berry's 'Reelin' And Rockin'") but only two of these records became national hits, 'Wynonie's Blues' and 'Playful Baby', both on Apollo.

After Wynonie signed with King Records in late November (or early December) 1947, he really hit his stride, commercially and artistically. 'Good Rockin' Tonight', which hit number one on the black music charts in the summer of 1948, was followed by a dozen more top 10 R&B hits during the next three years. For the most part they were uptempo, often ribald, songs of sex and alcohol, which Wynonie sang with a disarmingly cheerful vulgarity; songs such as 'Grandma Plays The Numbers', 'All She Wants To Do Is Rock', 'Sittin' On It All The Time', 'Good Morning Judge', 'Bloodshot Eyes', and 'Lovin' Machine'. Then, like many other R&B stars who first found fame in the 40s - men like Louis Jordan, Charles Brown and Roy Brown - Harris stopped having hit records.

This CD focuses on Wynonie's later, somewhat neglected, King recordings. Not only are almost all the titles new to CD, but eight were never reissued on LP and another track has been unavailable for more than 20 years. These recordings make it clear that the lack of hit records after 1952 was not due to any

drop in musical quality. Producer Henry Glover continued to do an excellent job, Wynonie was singing as well as ever, the material was strong and the bands were top-notch.

'Bring It Back', 'Greyhound' and 'Bad News Baby' are the earliest sides here, recorded in November 1942 in Cincinnati with pianist Sonny Thompson's band. Five horn players had been common on Wynonie's earlier recordings, but here there are just two saxophonists (three on 'Bring It Back'). The slimmed-down horn section and the presence of an electric guitarist point the direction in which R&B was heading: down the highway to rock'n'roll. Tenor man David 'Bubba' Brooks, who is still musically active in 1992 with Bill Doggett's band, takes the solos on 'Bad News Baby', an answer to 'Good Rockin' Tonight', and 'Bring It Back'. The highlight of the session, however, is 'Greyhound', a cover version of an Amos Milburn record. It soon became the highlight of Wynonie's stage act. Purvis Henson, tenor saxophonist with the Buddy Johnson band which backed Wynonie during a tour of the Midwest and South in the summer of 1953, remembers that Wynonie would start clapping his hands until the audience joined in, while the band played the chugging riff behind him: "bop-bop-doh-dee-dah, bop-bop-a-dah-dee-dah".

Wynonie had just begun a tour of one-nighters with Larry Darnell and Varetta Dillard when he returned to King's Cincinnati studios in March 1953.

Trumpeter Frank Humphries' band, which backed the three singers on the tour, accompanied him. 'Mama Your Daughter's Done Lied On Me' was an answer record to Ruth Brown's 'Mama He Treats Your Daughter Mean' which was then racing up the R&B charts. Perhaps the most unusual number from the session was 'The Deacon Don't Like It', a cover of a current gospel record, 'God Don't Like It', by the Reverend Anderson Johnson. Wynonie's version preserves the lyric intact apart from the change to the title phrase. There was an apt symbolism to the title, for Wynonie was no longer recording songs with the raunchy lyrics which had been the trademark of most of his hit records. During the early 1950s disc jockeys were becoming increasingly important as a means of promoting R&B records, and this move away from suggestive material was prompted perhaps by a reluctance on their part to play risqué songs.

Following a New York session in September 1953, from which came 'Please Louise', Wynonie was reunited with Sonny Thompson's band for two sessions in 1954. All four sides from the first date, in April, are included here. An unknown group adds doo-wops to good effect on 'I Get A Thrill' and 'Keep A Talkin'', both of which were composed by the prolific R&B songwriter Rudy Toombs. 'Don't Take My Whiskey Away From Me' is a variation on a theme dear to Wynonie's heart, while 'Shake That Thing' was an old song first recorded back in 1925 by the black singer and banjo player, Papa Charlie Jackson.



By the end of 1954 Wynonie's career was fading fast. He had not had a hit record for more than two and a half years and his personal appearances were becoming less frequent, a trend not helped by his habit of antagonising promoters and sometimes even audiences with arrogant behaviour and profane language. When his recording contract came up for renewal, King Records' boss Syd Nathan did not take up the option. Even so, as insurance, Nathan arranged for Harris to record a final dozen titles with Sonny Thompson's band during the last week of November. Although there were one or two weaker items like 'All She Wants To Do Is Mambo' and 'Good Mambo Tonight' (neither of which is included here), most of these recordings used original songs and they were well up to standard. Wynonie's humour and wit, and the swagger in his voice, are very much in evidence on titles like 'Fishtail Blues' (which anticipates the theme of Chuck Berry's 'Maybelline'). 'Man's Best Friend' and 'Shotgun Wedding', while 'Christina' and 'Wine, Wine, Sweet Wine' show that he had lost none of his ability to deliver a slow blues. On 'Christina' and 'Mr Dollar' Wynonie is accompanied by the rhythm section only, with Clarence Kenner's guitar prominent. The latter title was written by (or at least credited to) Wynonie's girlfriend Gertrude, better known to everyone as Ice Cream. Ostensibly about a Mr Dollar, the song was clearly autobiographical:

"The way he treats his women - low-down dirty shame,

*You ought to hear 'em scream when they call Dollar Bill's name.
They call him Mr Dollar and his last name is Bill,
Well, he lives in a mansion way up on Greenback Hill."*

Wynonie and Ice Cream lived in a large house in the affluent Addisleigh Park district of St Albans, in Queens NY, an area where many black showbiz stars had their homes. But with his career on the skids, Wynonie's affluent lifestyle was not to last much longer.

In the remainder of his life Wynonie managed just five more recording sessions, two of them for King in 1957, from which came 'Big Old Country Fool' and 'There's No Substitute For Love'. Soon afterwards he lost his house, and his relationship with Ice Cream ended. In 1963 he moved back to Los Angeles where he had lived in the 1940s. Here he ran an after-hours joint and took paying gigs when he could get them. An appearance at New York's Apollo Theatre in 1967 was a rare reminder of his glory days. He died on 14 June 1969 of throat cancer. Over 120 people attended the funeral. He was well-loved by a wide circle of friends but just a memory to most of those who had bought his records in his days as a star of rhythm and blues.

TONY COLLINS October 1992

Sources: Much of the material used in these notes was collected during research for a forthcoming biography of Wynonie Harris. I would particularly like to thank Patricia Vest, Preston Love and Purvis Henson for information used here.

TRACK DISCOGRAPHY

Wynonie Harris (vocals); David 'Bubba' Brooks (tenor sax); Wesley Brooks (tenor sax -1); Walter Hiles (baritone sax); Sonny Thompson (piano); Bill Johnson (guitar); Oscar Crummie (bass); Isaac Cole (drums)

Cincinnati, 7 November 1952

K 9209	Bring It Back - 1	King 4593
K 9210	Greyhound	King 4592
K 9212	Bad News Baby (There'll Be No Rockin' Tonight)	King 4593

Wynonie Harris (vocals); Frank Humphries (trumpet); Cornelius Tate (trombone); Rufus Gore (tenor sax); Robert Darby (tenor sax); Walter Hiles (baritone sax); Eddie Smith (piano); Clarence Mack (bass); Bill Warren (drums); band vocal - 1

Cincinnati, 11 March 1953

K 9258	The Deacon Don't Like It - 1	King 4635
K 9260	Mama Your Daughter's Done Lied On Me	King 4620

Wynonie Harris (vocals); David Van Dyke (tenor sax); Wilbur 'Red' Prysock (tenor sax); Sir Charles Thompson (piano); Mickey Baker (guitar); George Duvivier (bass); Gordon 'Specs' Powell (drums)

Fulton Studio, New York City 11 Sept 1953

K 8442	Please Louise	King 4668
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Wynonie Harris (vocals); Tommy Purkson (trumpet), Fred Clark (tenor sax); David 'Bubba' Brooks (tenor sax); Sonny Thompson (piano); Clarence Kenner (guitar); James Royal (bass); Philip Paul (drums); vocal group - 1

Cincinnati, 14 April 1954

K 9402	I Get A Thrill - 1	King 4724
K 9403	Keep A Talkin' - 1	King 4716
K 9404	Don't Take My Whiskey Away From Me	King 4724
K 9405	Shake That Thing	King 4716

Wynonie Harris (vocals); Sonny Thompson (piano); Clarence Kenner (guitar); Clarence Mack (bass); Edison Gore (drums)

Cincinnati, 23 November 1954

K 9533	Christina	King 4763
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Wynonie Harris (vocals); Tommy Purkson (trumpet); David 'Bubba' Brooks (tenor sax); Rufus Gore (tenor sax); Sonny Thompson (piano); Clarence Kenner (guitar); James Royal (bass); Steve Boswell (drums); percussion - 1

Cincinnati, 29 November 1954

K 9537	Man's Best Friend	King 4826
K 9538	I Don't Know Where To Go - 1	King 4839
K 9539	Git To Gittin' Baby - 1	King 4774
K 9540	Drinkin' Sherry Wine	King 4814

Wynonie Harris (vocals) ; same personnel omit Purkson, Brooks and Gore - 2

Cincinnati, 30 November 1954

K 9541	Wine, Wine, Sweet Wine	King 4826
K 9543	Fishtail Blues	King 4789
K 9545	Shotgun Wedding	King 4839
K 9546	Mr Dollar - 2	King 4789

Wynonie Harris (vocals); Hilton Jefferson (alto sax); Lowell 'Count' Hastings (tenor sax); Maxwell Lucas (tenor/baritone sax); Kelly Owens (piano); Kenny Burrell (guitar); Carl Pruitt (bass); Rossiere 'Shadow' Wilson (drums); backup vocals

New York City, 15 April 1957

K 8862	Big Old Country Fool	King 5050, 6011
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Wynonie Harris (vocals); Hal Singer (tenor sax); Leslie Johnkins (baritone sax); Kelly Owens (piano); Les Spann (guitar); Carl Pruitt (bass); Calvin Shields (drums); backup vocals

New York City, 17 July 1957

K 8893	There's No Substitute For Love	King 5073
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