



'ROCK MR. BLUES' WYNONIE HARRIS

A massive voice, a charismatic personality and music filled with the joy of living and the undying appeal of good times



Wynonie Harris promotional photo from the Billy Vera Collection.

In the early 1940s the Lucky Millinder Orchestra was making its mark with a series of big band releases on Decca. Swing was hot, on both sides of the colour line, but while some white bandleaders, like Glenn Miller, were deliberately trying to smooth out the swing sound to widen its general appeal, Millinder seemed to like to sharpen his popular, modern sound with something a little bit more unruly, something with a bit of edge. Maybe it was just about finding something that would distinguish his music from that of others, or maybe as jazz became whiter, he wanted something that sounded a bit more black.

While with some bands, the craze was for the crooners, the 'microphone singers' who could communicate intimately with an audience through the new amplified medium, at this stage Millinder seemed more interested in going back to the kind of vocalist who could stand out in front of a big band and hit an audience with the power of lungs and vocal cords. For the first couple of years, the Orchestra's most commonly featured

vocalist on record was Sister Rosetta Tharpe, whose earthy quality was very different to what you'd normally hear with a big band (not to mention the jubilant content of her songs), but by 1944, Tharpe had resumed her successful solo career, and Millinder was trying some new singers. One of these would also soon take off on his own, but with Millinder he cut two sides – issued on two separate Decca discs under the bandleader's name. His own name appeared further up the label in much smaller type: Wynonie 'Mr Blues' Harris.

Harris was no crooner. In fact, he's now one of the first vocalists whose name springs to mind at the mention of the description 'blues shouter', but in 1944, before the r&b age of honking and shouting had quite got properly under way, this concept was still at quite a formative stage. Not that it was actually so new: on disc, you could trace it back at least as far as the women blues singers who dominated the blues recording scene in the 1920s – big voices shouting the blues over boisterous jazz bands in cavernous vaudeville theatres.

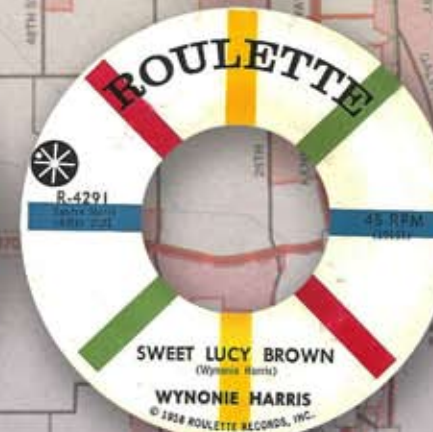
At the time when Wynonie Harris came along, the best known of the big band blues vocalists, famous for his work with the Count Basie Orchestra, was Jimmy Rushing. In the latter half of the 1930s, Rushing had made his name with Basie, either by taking the lead with a song or, often, by adding a vocal chorus in much the same way as Buck Clayton might take a chorus on his trumpet, or Lester Young on his tenor sax. Basie's band at the time included a dozen musicians or more, so it hardly bears saying that a vocalist had to have considerable vocal power to offer. Rushing seemed able to summon his extraordinary vocal resources, to be heard over the band accompaniment, but although he is often described as a 'blues shouter', he rarely sounds much like he's shouting (also, his recordings with Basie feature standards and pop songs as often as blues).

Harris would have heard all sorts of other singers whooping and hollering the blues, whether in person or on disc, throughout his formative years in the music business. Born in 1915, he would use his singing and dancing skills as his ticket out of Omaha, Nebraska (not a city we normally associate with producing great blues singers). In the meantime, he would surely have been familiar with any number of big, brash singers, running a gamut from Dr. Clayton to Walter Brown (who made his mark with the Jay McShann Orchestra, and the hit 'Confessin' The Blues'), to Rosetta Tharpe herself. In Kansas City, he heard Big Joe Turner and Jimmy Rushing. Eddie Vinson's first record with Cootie Williams was cut around the same time as Harris's, in 1944, and with those another key part of the blues/r&b style fell into place.

This extended bit of context is by way of trying to focus on what, in an age of very different kinds of singers, all of whom now get called 'shouters', made Wynonie Harris stand out? For one thing, his repertoire was very strongly blues-based, both in terms of twelve-bar structures and verse forms, and of lyrical content – songs of booze and good times, of sexual boasting and wild women. Also, maybe you could argue that he was a shouter who unashamedly made a virtue out of shouting. While others, like Rushing, seemed to take pride in being able to produce the required volume without the kind of overt effort that would run the risk of turning his vocals into screeching, with Harris, the fact that you could almost tangibly experience the power as he hurled his voice out there was all part of the appeal. This isn't to suggest that he replaced singing with some kind of coarse bellowing. On the contrary, Harris's shouting was always (or nearly always) musical – he really did make an art out of it.

'MR. BLUES IS COMING TO TOWN'

Wynonie Harris 1944-1960





From Galen Gart's *First Pressings*.

You can hear it on those two first recordings, with Lucky Millinder. The first of the two songs was 'Hurry, Hurry', a straightforward blues, and you immediately get a close look at some of his technique, which is based around using each open vowel sound to get his voice to take off. It's no accident that the very first thing we hear Wynonie Harris sing is the word 'Well...', deliberately inserted at the start of the first line, so that he can launch the song (and his recording career) by shouting out a wide-open, extended vowel. This is, of course, an established technique for singers, who know very well how much harder it is to get the required projection with a consonant. (The actual first word of the song would be "The" – try singing that out loud.) But Harris exploits it prodigiously and to great effect, and he would do so again and again on record over the next decade and a half.

In 'Hurry Hurry', the lyrics lament the absence of his lover, calling for her to come home, and it's almost like Harris is trying to cover the distance between them with his voice. The second song he cut with Millinder

introduced another aspect of his musical personality, the boisterous, irreverent side. 'Who Threw The Whiskey In The Well' was an adaptation of a rather tamer song which had been previously recorded by a white band. Harris turns it into a tale of two clerical gentlemen, Deacon Jones and Elder Brown, and the accidental effects of alcohol. The comic potential of this pair would make them useful archetypes in some later songs, including his highly successful 'Good Rockin' Tonight', where they had been planted by the song's composer, Roy Brown. Now, it gave Harris his first taste of major success, with a huge popular r&b hit.

The success of the whiskey song enabled Harris to leave Millinder behind and put out his next couple of records under his own name – four sides for Philo with the Johnny Otis All Stars. 'Around The Clock' introduces another key factor in the singer's appeal, although in quite a restrained way compared to some of what would come later. Not to put too fine a point on it, it's all about sex. It never mentions any such thing, but everybody who bought the record would have known, and Harris would no doubt have made it abundantly clear to any audience he was singing it for (there isn't one on the record, but you can almost hear their hoots and cheers, as in Jimmy Witherspoon's live cut of 'No Rollin' Blues').

Despite the implicitly vulgar content, 'Around The Clock' comes with a very stylish jazz accompaniment, led by jagged piano chords, and a nice, relaxed tenor solo. On the other two Philo sides, the bop trumpeter Howard McGhee is featured, so record buyers got two greats for the price of one. We get another jazz immortal on Harris's next outing, on Apollo, as the bass player was no less a figure than the young Charles Mingus, and Illinois Jacquet adds a fine tenor solo (to mention just two of the fine musicians who appear). 'Wynonie's Blues' is a compilation of stock blues verses, the kind of thing that a singer like Harris could probably string together indefinitely on the bandstand, to keep an audience going, with solos from the band members interspersed. His eight releases on Apollo through 1945 followed a similar pattern – big blues bursting with bonhomie and innuendo, with no shortage of musical talent in the accompaniment, and you can find them all on 'Everybody Boogie!', Delmark DE-683 (with a couple of unissued into the bargain) or compiled together with the Deccas and the Philos on 'The Chronological... 1944-1945', Classics 885.

After Apollo (or somewhere in the middle, depending on which discographical chronology you believe), Harris cut a short session for the Hamp-Tone label, which Lionel Hampton had set up as a side project

to his own band's contract with Decca. Accompanied by members of Hampton's band, Harris sang Hampton's 'He Ba Ba Re Bop'. The vibes-player's own reading of the song had been a kind of hipster litany, but true to form, Harris took the opportunity to insert a bit of rudery: 'Jack and Jill went up the hill, to get a pail of water/Jill come down with a five dollar bill – what! – no water?' The song was released in two parts, over the two sides of a 78, although Harris doesn't have much to do in Part 2, as a band full of talent evidently decides to have a bit of fun with the tune. Interestingly, though, the next track cut was a version of Leroy Carr's poignant 'In The Evenin'" ('When The Sun Goes Down'), accompanied only by Milt Buckner's very un-Carr-like piano, plus rhythm section. Harris can't resist shouting a bit, but still conveys the subtle pathos of the lyric.

There was another interesting piano player on Harris's next session, what sounds very much like a casual pick-up date with Bullet Records in Nashville. Here the keyboards featured one Sonny Blount, whom the world would later come to know as the visionary jazz composer Sun Ra. There's nothing very Martian about his playing here, though, as Harris sticks to boogie and blues and Blount obliges. 'Dig This Boogie' sounds pretty much improvised on the vocalist's part, and there's plenty of plums from the big bag of blues verses in the other songs, too, including – despite the striking title line – 'Lightnin' Struck The Poorhouse'. This is a fun session, but you feel that it's the kind of thing Harris could have done in his sleep.

The next few sessions, for Aladdin, were more professional, with worked-out arrangements from a good band and songs with proper lyrics, often featuring the kind of one-liners that would have added to the records' appeal, and also no doubt offered great opportunities to stir up a live audience (the scantily veiled references to transvestism and prostitution in 'Big City Blues' would be just one example). Harris's fast rise to celebrity status as a vocalist is reflected in the fact that in July 1947 Aladdin brought him together with Big Joe Turner to cut a two-part 'Battle Of The Blues'. It's good-humoured but still exciting stuff, as the two men take turns to yell the blues, and Harris more than holds his own beside the more experienced Turner. 'The Chronological... 1945-1947', Classics 1013 brings together the Hamp-Tones, the Bullets and the Aladdins.

Later in 1947, Harris started his association with King Records, the label that would release more of his records than any other. The first few sessions resulted in a string of consistently well-produced, powerfully sung and excellently arranged blues and boogies, but it was right at the end of the year that he laid down the song that would arguably become his best known of all (although as already noted, written and first recorded, by Roy Brown), 'Good Rockin' Tonight'. After a kind of novelty riffing introduction, it slips into an irresistible, hand-clapping beat with a basic accompaniment of boogie piano, bass and drums. Of course, as usual, 'Rockin' is a sexual metaphor, but it could just as well be a celebration of dancing and general musical good times. The ambiguity might even have helped it commercially, and it had little difficulty in reaching number one in the r&b charts.

Over the next few years, there would be hit after hit. 'All She Wants To Do Is Rock' would also get to number one, while several others made it into the top ten. The repertoire concentrated less on the slow blues and more on comedy skits like 'Grandma Plays The Numbers' and any amount of *double entendre* stuff like 'She Just Won't Sell No More', 'Sitting On It All The Time', and 'I Love My Baby's Pudding'. Inevitably, King sometimes seemed to be trying to recycle some of Harris's most successful themes, but then it would be a less obvious idea that would propel him back into chart action, as when in 1951 he covered 'Bloodshot Eyes', written by Western Swing singer Hank Penny. In 2015 its lyrics might seem startlingly cruel and misogynistic, but they were evidently just the kind of thing that record buyers both black and white loved in the early 1950s ('Your eyes look like two cherries in a glass of buttermilk') as Harris's fans sent it into the r&b top ten.

However, if you ever needed to prove that Wynonie Harris wasn't just a rocking, dirty, good-time singer, you could hardly do better than use the 1952 'Drinking Blues', a pretty stark confession of chronic alcoholism, or 'Here Comes The Night', a beautiful, despairing slow blues which Harris sings with great emotional, as well as great vocal, power. Of course, aided and abetted by the Todd Rhodes Orchestra, he followed the latter in the studio with a classic rocking dancer – 'Lovin' Machine', is musically quite similar to 'Good Rockin', and just as irresistible, providing Harris with his last entry into the top ten r&b singles. So many of these recordings just grab you and compel you into their good-time orbit – like 'Rock Mr Blues' from 1950, which finds Harris in the company of a vocal group, egging him on, and as he cries out 'Rock, rock, rock', you genuinely feel there could be no more powerful voice in all blues history. Or take a song like 'Oh Babe', back briefly with Lucky Millinder's Orchestra; propelled by the band in full cry, Harris's magic somehow turns a fairly trivial lyric into three minutes of triumphant, joyous music-making. Performances like this, and plenty more of his King recordings, can still fill dance floors in the 21st century – imagine what they'd have done in the middle of the 20th.

One of the consistently interesting things about Harris's repertoire, apart from the original songs, is in spotting connections that root him into the blues tradition, or reference points into other kinds of African-American music. We've already touched on his easy way with stock

blues verses, some of which went back a long way, and his use of songs like 'In The Evenin' that derived from the pre-war days of Race records. Another example of a song with a long blues pedigree, from April 1954, is 'Shake That Thing'. It gets a fine, swinging r&b treatment, but its tune and lyric is pure pre-war-style Hokum. The previous year there was 'The Deacon Don't Like It', a reworking of 'God Don't Like It', a song recorded by Blind Willie McTell as far back as 1935, although probably more usually associated with the woman who had been Harris's predecessor as vocalist in the Millinder band, Sister Rosetta Tharpe (not to mention other great versions, such as one by Reverend Anderson Johnson). Those others are unambiguously sacred songs and treated accordingly, however colourful the renditions might be. Harris's is, not surprisingly, a comedy routine. From the same 1953 session is the bizarre 'Song Of The Bayou', which consists of ensemble moaning and chanting over a thumping, droning beat, with Harris calling out in despairing tones, 'Oh Lord, take away the darkness'. Is this some other authentic throwback to deep African-American culture? Probably not – to be honest, it sounds more like the kind of thing you might have seen on the soundtrack of a movie depicting Hollywood's idea of a voodoo ceremony. Only a lot weirder.

There were four sessions in 1954, and these include some of my personal favourites of Harris's recordings, possibly because of the outstanding accompaniment from Sonny Thompson's Orchestra, with Thompson himself on piano, Clarence Kenner on guitar and a small but potent horn section. It starts with a couple of tracks driven along by an un-credited vocal group, who lend an unusual edge to the performances, quite different to the sound that Harris had been best known for, but very satisfying. 'Christina', recorded in November, uses an eight-bar blues format with the same tune as Professor Longhair's 'Tipitina', in which he adapts the girl's name to rhyme with 'machine', but otherwise keeps his tongue out of his cheek, while 'Man's Best Friend' makes the most of the same comedy situation as Hank Williams's 'Move It On Over'.

'Wine, Wine, Sweet Wine', is a tribute to the reliability of alcohol as a comforter and consoler, delivered with an uncharacteristically poignant edge ('You're the only friend I ever needed'). As a kind of companion song (although not issued on the same disc) 'Git With The Grits' is about haranguing his lover into cooking him a hearty breakfast the morning after. If you really worked hard at it, you could make *double entendres* out of it, but a song about bacon and eggs works just fine for me. Maybe that's a sign of age. 'Mr Dollar', takes the very unusual step (for a Harris record) of leaving out the horn section, giving it a more traditional blues sound, underlined by Clarence Kenner's excellent blues guitar accompaniment, which he caps with a fine solo.

There are two outstanding official CDs of Harris's King recordings, 'Lovin' Machine', Ace CDCHD 843 and 'Women, Whisky And Fish Tails', Ace CDCHD 457, or you can find the first few years of this era covered in 'The Chronological... 1947-1949', Classics 1139, and the later on 'The Chronological... 1950-1952', Classics 1289.

In 1956, not having cut a single track for King in two years, Harris sang on a few sides for Atco, the subsidiary of Atlantic Records, which had been enjoying such success with Big Joe Turner. 'Destination Love' is evidently aimed at the growing rock'n'roll market and rocks nicely along, while 'Whale Of A Tale' uses a minor key – fairly unusual in Harris's recorded canon – and adds a female vocal chorus to the background. Age wasn't necessarily a problem in the early days of the rock'n'roll – Joe Turner was certainly selling into that market and he was older than Harris, while Bill Haley, for example, was no spring chicken. Nor is there much elderly about Harris's voice, which seems almost as robust as it had been a decade earlier. But the fact that this was his only release on the label seems to tell its own tale about how much it appealed to the new teenage record buyers. One of his calling cards had always been the *double entendre*, and in fact often enough these had been only notionally double – in the 1950s, you couldn't expect to aim at a market of teenagers singing a song like 'I Want My Fanny Brown' or 'Keep On Churning Till The Butter Comes' (the teenagers themselves might not have a problem with it, but the guardians of young people's morals – already beside themselves at the sight of a shaking hip – still had a lot of sway). Harris should have had enough talent to allow him to rise above such things, but the times were against him.

He was back with King for a couple more singles in 1957, but these are a rather mixed bag – on 'That's Me Right Now', he sounds as if he's having to work a little too hard to achieve effects he used to be able to handle as a matter of course, but a few months later, Hal Singer's band seems to lift his spirits a bit, and his very last King single works much better.

In 1960, his last released single appeared, on Roulette. 'Sweet Lucy Brown' is another straightforward twelve-bar, and Wynonie shouts it out grand style, with a vocal group adding a more contemporary aspect and Hal Singer energetically booting the band along. The flip was a remake of 'Bloodshot Eyes', pretty good, but never going to recapture the magic of the original. There were a few more sides cut for the label that year and the next, although these stayed unissued until the CD age, when they turned up on a Sequel CD 'Roulette Rock & Roll Volume Two', Sequel NEM



Wynonie Harris promotional photo from the Billy Vera Collection.

CD 670. Some, with their poppish r&b sound, suggest that somebody is thinking about selling Harris to the same market as Fats Domino, but others, like 'Saturday Night' aren't all that different to the kind of material he would have done in his heyday. He carries them off well, but this was 1960, not 1950, as the market no doubt made quite clear – Roulette never released any more singles. Nor would anybody else.

In 1964, Harris cut his final session, consisting of just a few tracks for Chess. The first of these was entitled 'The Come Back', which might have reflected some optimism on the singer's part, but if so, it was misplaced. Chess did not issue them, and they remained unavailable until turning up on an r&b compilation album in the Chess Vintage series in the 1970s, alongside tracks by other shouters such as Rushing and Witherspoon. Whether these tracks would have helped revive Harris's reputation, if they had come out as singles, we'll never know – probably not, as they were surely not what buyers of 45s were looking for in the early 1960s. Also, there is no denying that on these performances the power of Harris's voice is not what it once was, noticeably rougher in character than it had been only three years before. Having said that, he delivers the slow hoodoo blues 'Conjured' with confidence and conviction, and even manages some near-shouting in the rueful hard luck story of 'Buzzard Luck'.

However, you can hear the strain, and he even seems to run out of breath at the end of verses in a couple of spots. As we're in Chess territory, it's worth remarking on Buddy Guy's excellent guitar-playing as one of the highlights of all three cuts. The compilation album did make the transfer to CD: 'Shoutin' Swingin' And Makin' Love', MCA 9327.

With these, Wynonie Harris's recording career was well and truly over. He lived only a few more years, dying well before his time, at the age of 53. It's true that his discography doesn't fill all that many pages compared to some of the people this series has covered, but he is undeniably a giant of the blues, with one of the mightiest voices, and most ebullient personalities, in the history of recorded American music. His job was to make people happy, to show them the best of times, and he certainly seems to have succeeded in that. But as I've also tried to show in this quick canter through his work, his repertoire had a bit more breadth than he is sometimes given credit for, as well as some pretty deep roots.

There's been a four-CD box around for some years that covers Harris's career pretty thoroughly, 'Rockin' The Blues', Proper Records 1020, and more recently, there's a very satisfying two-disc set, 'Jump Mr Blues', Fantastic Voyage FVDD115 (which winds up with the Roulette sides). There's also a single disc collection that picks up later King material and ends with the Atco pairing, 'Rock Mr Blues', Rev-Ola CRBAND 19.

Notes: (1) There is a very useful Wynonie Harris discography, with enthusiastic commentary, on the website 'This Is Vintage Now', www.thisisvintagenow.com/. (2) The Chronological volumes noted were superseded by the later 'Complete Jazz Series', but as both are available to download, it scarcely matters.