

“King Biscuit Time”--Sonny Boy Williamson II and others (1965)

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Essay by Edward Komara (guest post)*



Sonny Boy Williamson II

This King Biscuit show is about flour and the blues, not about flowers and rock music.

“King Biscuit Time” was born when the blues harmonica master Sonny Boy Williamson (1899-1965, born Aleck Miller) visited the newly opened KFFA radio studios in Helena, Arkansas. Seeing radio as a means of promoting his upcoming performances, Williamson pitched the idea of a regular show during the noon hour when his working audiences were taking their lunch breaks. KFFA agreed, securing Max Moore, owner of the Interstate Grocer Company and King Biscuit Flour, as the sponsor. “King Biscuit Time” debuted on November 21, 1941 at 12:15 pm, with Williamson and guitarist Robert Lockwood playing for 15 minutes. The success was immediate, allowing the musicians to maintain their time-slot every weekday. They were so successful that, in 1947, while the company’s flour bag continued to have its crown, the corn meal bag began to feature a likeness of Williamson sitting on an ear of corn.

As the show continued through the 1940s, additional musicians were brought in to create a band behind Williamson. Chief among them were guitarists Joe “Willie” Wilkins, Earl Hooker and Houston Stackhouse, pianists Robert “Dudlow” Taylor, Willie Love and Pinetop Perkins, and drummer Peck Curtis. During the early broadcasts, Sam Anderson and Hugh Smith served as announcers. John William “Sonny” Payne filled in once in 1941, but he returned in 1951, staying on as the “King Biscuit Time” host until his death in 2018.

During the 1950s, Williamson roamed widely, making commercial records for Trumpet in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1951-1954, then making them for Chess in 1955-1965. In 1954, he moved north, eventually basing himself in Chicago. His tours of England and Europe with the American Folk Blues Festivals led to extended stays abroad. When his health declined in early 1965, he returned to Helena and “King Biscuit Time,” dying in his boarding house room on May 25, 1965.

The first era of “King Biscuit Time” didn’t last much longer. The live music continued until 1968, when the band was replaced with records, but Sonny Payne remained. Upon Max Moore’s death in 1979, the show went off the air, but it was successfully revived with Payne in 1986. During the meantime, in 1973, D.I.R. Radio Network named its rock concert syndication radio series “The King Biscuit Flower Hour,” running through 2005; the confusing homophone

“Flower”/“Flour” rendered the KFFA show as a now-legendary roots-of-rock predecessor.

There are few glimmers of the King Biscuit entertainers on commercial records. There are the 78s that Williamson and Willie Love made for the Trumpet label in the early 1950s, and those by Williamson with Robert Lockwood for Chess in the mid-1950s. What may be the most representative sparks of the King Biscuit sound captured during the show’s prime may have been recorded by Modern Records in 1951 and 1952. With Williamson and Drifting Slim on harmonicas and Peck Curtis on drums, Robert Dudlow Taylor recorded “Lonesome,” “Old Helena Blues” and “Dudlow’s Blues,” and Curtis himself led “Jerusalem Blues,” “Bus Fare,” and “44 Blues.” All were unreleased at the time of the recording, but a few were issued on the 1969 Kent LP “Arkansas Blues” (Kent 9007) and the rest in the 1990s on Pea Vine’s expanded issue of that Kent LP (Pea Vine CD 3040).

Thankfully, there is Chris Strachwitz’s recording of a May 1965 King Biscuit show. Although it is the only known preserved episode, it is all wheat, no chaff for the blues fan. It is not an air-shot of the KFFA broadcast with the sound compressed by the AM transmission, but instead a straight-to-tape capture of the musicians in the studio. The day’s lineup was Williamson, vocals and harmonica, Houston Stackhouse, guitar, and Peck Curtis, drums. Sonny Payne is faintly audible from an intercom speaker, showing that he was announcing from a separate booth.

The recording was edited by Strachwitz for release on Sonny Boy Williamson, “It’s King Biscuit Time,” Arhoolie EP 530, and Williamson, “King Biscuit Time” [Arhoolie CD 310]. It begins with Williamson, Stackhouse and Curtis briskly playing the “King Biscuit Time” show theme. Payne then comes on and says, “Clean, fluffy and white King Biscuit Flour presents Sonny Boy Williamson and his King Biscuit Entertainers each day Monday through Friday.” After explaining how to submit requests for songs, Payne announces that:

Sonny Boy has just returned from a tour overseas where he played for the armed services and [in] night-spots of London, Paris, Rome, Berlin, and many other cities in Europe. So, to get the show on the road, here he is, the man with the spike-toed shoes, your favorite radio entertainer, the king of the harmonica, Sonny Boy Williamson in person! For the first number today that Sonny Boy will play will be “V-8 Ford Blues.”

“V-8” was a song that was first recorded by Willie Love for Trumpet in 1951 (Trumpet 175).

Before the second song, Payne launches into a lengthy ad for the ten-pound bag of King Biscuit Flour, giving the musicians ample time to prepare for their rendition of T-Bone Walker’s 1947 hit “Stormy Monday,” which Williamson announces on-air is for a listener and her husband living on Franklin Street. After that song, they proceed to play what Payne describes as “a new one now coming up, ‘Right Now,’” which resembles somewhat Williamson’s 1960 “Stop Right Now” (Chess/Checker 975).

Just before the second ad break, Williamson exclaims to his radio listeners, “All right! Now, ladies and gentlemen, just before you come on, you--if you come up--you let me come back on. What you say, huh? Put it down like it’s supposed to be.” Payne then launches into his pitch for the “famous Sonny Boy meal, either the plain or the new cornmeal mix. Just read the recipes on the side panels of any 2-pound, 5-pound or 10-pound bag of Sonny Boy meal and try out the one you like there....”

Meanwhile, Williamson is giving musical directions to Stackhouse and Curtis, stating first the title of the next song: “‘Come On, Come On and Go With Me.’ Same--I want the same beat, same key [as the preceding song “Right Now”]. We gonna do in eight, I want to do it in eight, I want to change the feel some.” This last song of the broadcast, “Come Go With Me,” is an off-the-cuff Williamson original in the 12-measure blues form, and it is not to be confused with the

1948 eight-measure blues with the same title by Sonny Boy Johnson and His Blue Blazers (Murray 305).

But before he begins “Come Go With Me,” Williamson remembers to promote his next show, which is the reason why he began “King Biscuit Time” 23 years before: “Just before we do this number, ladies and gentlemen, tonight is a big night in Greenwood, Mississippi, don’t forget that, yes, sir, to be in Greenwood, Mississippi, tonight and ah, gosh, why? I don’t know, child, but meet me there, beat me there, yeah!”

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.