

“Statesboro Blues”—Blind Willie McTell (1928)

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Essay by Brian Bader



Blind Willie McTell

Blind Willie McTell was born May 5, 1901 in Thomson, Georgia. Though there is some uncertainty about his birth year, his comparatively long life (he died on Aug. 19, 1959, in Milledgeville, Georgia), his prolific recording career, the memories of numerous acquaintances, and McTell’s own recorded reminiscences, allow for a full picture of his life. His skillful fingerpicking guitar style ranks high with the playing of other acoustic blues artists, both blind (Blind Boy Fuller, Blind Blake, Reverend Gary Davis) and sighted (Josh White, Brownie McGhee). Hard to categorize, McTell embodied Piedmont blues, as well as ragtime, and gospel/spiritual/religious music, and may best be described as a mid-twentieth century American songster.

One of his tunes--“covered,” or more accurately freely adapted, in a powerful electric blues rendition by the Allman Brothers Band-- is his legacy. This number most familiar to modern blues and rock fans: “Statesboro Blues.” Recorded by McTell and self-accompanied on twelve-string guitar in 1928 for Victor records, it showcases his distinctive voice and his talented guitar playing. The Allman Brothers later credited their cover of the song to “Will McTell” on their live two-record album “At Filmore East” released in 1971 on Capricorn Records. Guitarists Duane Allman (using a slide) and Dickey Betts cut loose with their trademark twin lead guitar line up in a memorable reading as a jumping blues shuffle. In an analysis of the history of “Statesboro Blues,” however, it is important to note that between the McTell recording and the Allman Brothers, there is a version from 1968 by Taj Mahal on his debut album. This electric blues version by Taj Mahal, which features slide guitar, unquestionably informed the Brothers much more than the original and indeed, into the 21st century, it is the basis for the “Statesboro” version performed by the Allman Brothers Band and other artists.

McTell was born Willie (or William) Samuel McTier. His birth name, McTier, is theorized to have morphed on recording credits into McTell due to the musician’s pronunciation (i.e. it being delivered in what has been described as a nasal or Southern drawl). By any name, he is the subject of a lengthy 2009 biography by British popular music writer Michael Gray. Gray did extensive research on his subject, traveling to the United States and to McTell’s old stomping

grounds, and he consulted important sources such as Alan and Ruby Lomax's 1940 recordings of songs and spoken memories from McTell himself. Atlantic Records's Ahmet Ertegun encountered and recorded McTell in the late 1940s, and, in 1956, an Atlanta record store owner named Ed Rhodes discovered McTell on the streets of the city and taped what turned out to be McTell's last recordings. Valdosta State University Archives and Special Collections also produced an excellent biographical documentary on McTell.

Though there is the to-be-expected uncertainty and mystery associated with many bluesman, the life of this eclectic early "roots" musician does not share the obscurity of his younger contemporary Robert Johnson or some of the more modern bluesmen such as harmonica player Sonny Boy Williamson II (Rice Miller) and guitarist Elmore James.

In McTell's own words and through the recollections of others, embellished and otherwise, a picture of a talented and articulate musician emerges. Born into a musical family, as a youth he took up the guitar and proved to be quickly proficient on it. He was playing publicly by his teens, and, by his own account, attended several schools for the blind. A number of biographies state that he learned how to read and write music in Braille. Surviving photographs of McTell show him neatly attired and with a penchant for being carefully dressed and groomed.

From the beginning, his visual impairment was not a major hindrance to his career and ramblings. To the contrary, some who knew him have described his uncanny ability to get around Atlanta unassisted, even often navigating for sighted companions unfamiliar with the environs. Further, and astonishingly, McTell was reputed to be able to distinguish the various denominations of dollar bills by touch.

His marriage to Ruthie Kate Williams in 1934 proved to be propitious for McTell scholars. Kate McTell lived until 1991 and, in her later life, was interviewed several times about her husband. Whatever other extraordinary faculties McTell may have had, there is no question that he was a gifted vocalist and adept guitarist. He mainly recorded with a twelve-string guitar, more resonant and louder than its six-string relative, used standard and open tunings, and tuned his instrument down from concert pitch. He deftly fingerpicked the twelve-string--no easy feat. McTell sometimes employed a bottleneck. Performing solo, he would deviate from the twelve-bar blues structure but, on recordings with other musicians, he does not meander and adheres to the traditional blues song formula. McTell recorded several songs with his wife Kate, and Curly Weaver, in the 1930s and 1940s, was also a longtime partner of the musician.

McTell's music covers a broad spectrum of genres. As a street musician, he most certainly got around, a familiar presence in Atlanta, elsewhere in Georgia, and outside his home state. His commercial recording legacy on different record labels, both as a soloist under various names and in ensembles, numbers some 80 sides of blues, ragtime, country, storytelling, and religious music—a truly great range of regional popular music of the time. Coming through any style, is McTell's intricate fingerpicking and his interweaving vocals that are intelligible, topical, sometimes witty, or even menacing, as in his song "Southern Can is Mine."

By his own admission McTell stole music from wherever he could. The resulting synthesis proves this in diverse but not haphazard entertainment carried along strongly by his musical skills.

McTell never had a hit record. If it were not for his “Statesboro Blues” and its subsequent blues-rock arrangements, McTell might be far less recognized than he is today outside of acoustic blues circles. The original version, on Victor V38001, with “Three Women Blues” on the “B” side, is just over two-and-a-half minutes in duration.

Statesboro, which McTell once described as his real home, is the town in southeast Georgia where McTell grew up. In seven verses of vocals McTell, variously laments being orphaned, engages in subtle braggadocio about being reckless and wild and in taking one or more “fair brown” to the country, while he also decries the cruelty of his woman, expresses his reciprocated devotion to his woman, and manages to throw in the exploits of a fireman on a railroad locomotive! The song encompasses a hodgepodge of subject matter, all sung in narrative style and with syncopated guitar rhythm punctuated with bluesy fills. With such an expansive list of topics, it is easy to surmise that the lyrics to “Statesboro Blues” were collected from other songs. One suggested source is Sippie Wallace’s 1923 “Up in the Country Blues” which, like “Statesboro,” notes the singer’s grandma (grandma and grandpa I the McTell song) in the corner with the blues and inviting a friend to go to the country, etc.

In 1968, Taj Mahal released his debut album. Born Henry Saint Clair Fredericks on May 17, 1942, this multi-instrumentalist remains to this day a faithful practitioner of the blues. The eponymous LP “Taj Mahal,” on the Columbia label, includes such blues standards as “Dust My Broom” and “Checkin’ up on My Baby” and an electric version of “Statesboro Blues.” The McTell tune is the second cut on side one, with the “Same personnel as Band 1” who include: Jesse Edwin Davis on lead guitar and Ryland P. Cooder on rhythm guitar. Both Jesse Ed Davis (who died in 1988) and Ry Cooder are well known in musical circles and have lengthy and accomplished careers, the former as a session man and the latter as a multi-instrumentalist, composer, and producer. And both have well deserved reputations as slide guitar players par excellence. On the record, Taj and the band commendably romp and shuffle for almost exactly three minutes at medium tempo through “Statesboro Blues,” invoking Elmore James slide guitar licks. As “Arranged by Taj Mahal,” as stated on the record sleeve, the song captures imagery from the original, including grandma and grandpa in the corner, and Statesboro is definitively located (“Statesboro, Georgia, that is” proclaims Taj). There is not, however, a train reference. After Taj, the stage was now set for the Allman Brothers Band and their contribution to the song’s evolution. Substantiated legend has it that Duane’s brother Gregg gave the guitarist a copy of “Taj Mahal” and a small glass bottle of the cold medicine, Coricidin, on an occasion when Duane was sick. Duane woodshedded to perfect his slide guitar chops done on the Taj recording by either Jesse Ed Davis or Ry Cooder.

The finished song is attributed to Will McTell on the live recording from the Fillmore East; it deservedly became and remains an ABB staple. Duane Allman takes three incendiary, loping guitar breaks, band mate Dickey Betts adds two more sans slide, and Gregg does vocal duties in five sung verses. The 1971 live version opens with a catchy guitar/organ riff and includes a stop time motif at the beginning of a vocal verse which uses the same opening notes from the beginning of the song. It all clocks out at four minutes plus and is on par with all the other

excellent music from this seminal rock band's live album. McTell and Taj Mahal characters and events are retained but it is only grandma, without her husband, downcast in the corner, and one invitee for a trip to the country, a carryover from Taj Mahal's arrangement, is named as sister Lucille.

The history of the "Statesboro Blues" has some footnotes. Dave Van Ronk put out a record with it in 1966, keeping faithful to the original acoustic song. An appealing curiosity is the September 1965 version by Taj Mahal with The Rising Sons, a band that included Ry Cooder. This "Statesboro" first came out on compact disc in 1992; "W. McTell" is credited with the song, and its arrangement is by Taj Mahal and J.L. (i.e. Jesse Lee) Kincaid. There are two takes on the 1992 release. They rock at a fast clip, and influences by Little Richard and the Beatles seem to be distinct possibilities. Once again, Statesboro imagery abounds, and Taj mentions Willie McTell by name.

"Statesboro Blues" in various forms has gone on to be recorded or performed by a number of artists, including many of the people first associated with the modern variant in the 1960s and 1970s such as Taj Mahal, Gregg Allman, Dickey Betts, and Ry Cooder. In 2014, Gregg Allman and Taj Mahal teamed together with an all-star music line up and performed "Statesboro Blues" at a tribute concert to Allman later released as "All My Friends" on CD and DVD. The old Willie McTell composition on "All My Friends" earned a Grammy nomination for Best American Roots Performance.

McTell was in declining health when he died in 1959, but his last recordings from three years before his death capture a talented songster still in command of his music. Had McTell lived longer, he would surely have been part of the folk and blues revivals that brought music like his to young white audiences during the 1960s. His serving as inspiration for later musicians perhaps outweighs his influence on musical technique, but his playing did become a model for blues revivalists like Dave Bromberg and Leo Kottke who early in his career often played a tuned down twelve-string.

"Statesboro Blues" is like Eric Clapton and Cream's "Crossroads," which is a Robert Johnson tune in name only. Both are pre-war blues chestnuts interpreted but not replicated by electric guitarists with considerable talent. An English singer-songwriter and guitarist, whose birth name is Ralph May, was so stricken by McTell and "Statesboro Blues" that he adopted the name Ralph McTell. And no less than Bob Dylan penned a song named after Blind Willie McTell with each verse ending in the refrain: "No one can sing the blues like Blind Willie McTell." Inspiration and testimony of such an order assures that McTell and his "Statesboro Blues" deserve a place of honor in American popular music.

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