

PAUL WILLIAMS
& FRIENDS

**IN MEMORY OF
ROBERT JOHNSON**

DELTA BLUES SINGER
ROBERT JOHNSON
WAS FOUND DEAD
IN A HOTEL ROOM
AUGUST 1938. HE
WAS AGED 27 YEARS.
THIS ALBUM IS IN
HIS MEMORY.

Every now and again an LP comes along which outlasts and outstrips anything even remotely expected of it - and **"In Memory Of Robert Johnson"** is very much a case in point. Recorded by a relatively little-known English R&B singer, in 1973 - a full decade or so before tribute albums had become *de rigeur*, and at a time when Johnson's name was largely unknown outside the dedicated, specialist Blues collectors' market - the LP achieved minimal commercial success, passing virtually unnoticed at the time of its release. Yet it has remained in catalogue on various labels throughout much of the ensuing quarter of a century, and has accordingly continued to gain steadily in status and reputation. And now that Robert Johnson has, in the nineties, become perhaps the ultimate coffee table Bluesman - viz: web sites, CD boxed sets, books, magazine articles, TV documentaries, and even a movie, "Can You Hear The Wind Howl" - this album is enjoying something of a renewed lease of life, particularly among hi-fi buffs. Hence *this* special reissue in the HDCD format.

A strikingly well-recorded set, by dint of its musical content the album hasn't dated at all - in fact, if anything, it probably sounds even more contemporary *now*, in an acoustic Blues context, than it did the first time around. So, what of Messrs Williams and his friends...exactly who were they, and just how did this project come to life?

Well, **Paul Williams** himself was an experienced and highly-regarded singer/guitarist/bassist, having put in stints with the likes of Alexis Korner, Zoot Money, John Mayall's Bluesbreakers, the Alan Price Set, Aynsley Dunbar's Blue Whale, Juicy Lucy, and more recently, Jon Hiseman's Tempest. In addition to recording extensively with all of these, Paul had also recorded a handful of solo singles along the way - notably in the mid-60's, backed-up by Zoot Money's Big Roll Band - and had even put in a brief appearance on Immediate's legendary "Blues Leftovers" album in 1969, alongside Albert Lee & Tony Colton. And so eventually, after quitting Tempest in the Spring of '73, he felt ready to try a full-blown solo project.

At that time Williams was managed by the late **Nigel Thomas** (in later years, Nigel would manage the Kinks), and they began to search around for suitable material. The initial problem was, which musical direction should they pursue? In his ten years on the road Paul had handled R&B, Soul, Blues, Prog-Rock, proto-HM - you name it. But his own musical preferences had always drawn him back towards Blues and R&B, and he wanted to try something in this area - although, it must be said, Blues was decidedly unfashionable

in an early 70's Rock scene which was largely preoccupied with Glamrock, self-indulgent Technoflash, and Stadium Rock.

It seems that the inspiration for the project actually came from Williams' music publisher: as Paul recalls *"...no, I wish I could claim the credit for the LP, but it was **Malcolm Forrester's** idea. Malcolm had been with Carlin Music - he was with Getaway Music at the time, I believe - and he suddenly came up with the concept, tribute sleeve and all. We'd barely heard of Robert Johnson at that time, to be honest...we knew songs like 'Crossroads', 'All My Love In Vain', and 'Ramblin' On My Mind', of course, but we knew them by Cream, the Stones, and John Mayall! But Malcolm had a song catalogue and one of Robert Johnson's LP's, and once I'd listened to that I was hooked."* So although, on the face of it, cutting a tribute album to an obscure, pre-war Bluesman can hardly have seemed a sound commercial proposition at the time, they decided to proceed.

Paul arranged the material himself, and a highly-experienced team of backing muso's was assembled, most of whom he'd already worked with at various stages in his career. On guitars were Paul himself, brother-in-law **Eddie Woods** (*"We managed to get his name wrong on the credits, somehow - he went down as Eddie Yarlett. I've had to put up with him moaning at me for the past 25 years!"*), former Juicy Lucy colleague **Mick Moody** (*"Mind you, we left poor old Mick's name off altogether...imagine the grief he's given me!"*), and former Cat Stevens sidesman **Alun Davies**; on acoustic guitars were the estimable **Spencer Davis** and **Jon Mark**, both experienced front men in their own right; on pedal steel and bass respectively were two more former Juicy Lucy cohorts, **Glen Campbell** and **Keith Ellis**, whilst the much-travelled **Pat Donaldson** - a veteran of the UK R&R, R&B, and Folk circuits - also played bass on a couple of tracks; and finally, ex-John Dummer, Savoy Brown and Sunflower Blues Band ivory-tickler **Bob Hall** was on the piano (Bob indeed remains the UK's finest Blues pianist to this very day).

Resisting the temptation to credit the project to "Juicy Lucy" (they did, after all, feature four-fifths of that august band's 1970-71 line-up) they shopped the album around looking for a deal. But by the early 70's The Blues had largely been consigned to Rock music's "Our" tray, having been summarily jettisoned by many of the bands whose initial breakthrough had been on the back of the 60's White Boy Blues Boom (check out F.Mac, TYA, Savoy Brown, etc). Consequently, Williams & co were unable to interest a major label, and

it eventually came out in the UK on **Sonet** (NB: copies of that original LP are extremely rare, and change hands for twenty quid a copy nowadays!), in Germany on **Intercord**, and in the United States on **Black Sun**. But, as Paul recalls, it was no great surprise to anyone when it failed to make any real commercial headway: *"I really enjoyed the sessions for this album...we had excellent musicians, it was great to make, and we were delighted with what we achieved. I believe it's stood up, and it still sounds OK today...in fact, I don't really think we could have improved on it greatly. But to be totally honest, we never really had any great expectations of it...I think we realised at the time it was going to be too left field to be a commercial success..."*

To appreciate just *how* obscure this album was at the time, you have to remember that in 1973 Robert Johnson was by far removed from the easily-accessible, legendary figure that he is celebrated as today. There wasn't even a published *photo* of him! Although legendary enough, he'd never been a "star" - like, say, Muddy Waters or Howlin' Wolf. The complete opposite, in fact. He was an obscure, shadowy, largely-forgotten, travelling Delta Blues singer who'd been dead for thirty-five years. And although there were two CBS Robert Johnson LP's "technically" still in catalogue, they were virtually impossible to get, no matter how many times you ordered them (ironically, a dodgy European bootleg was *far* easier to find).

In fact, an indication of just how little was generally known about Robert Johnson in 1973 might be drawn from this album's original sleeve, and its liner notes. The sleeve contrived to get Johnson's age and the date of his death emphatically wrong (they have, of course, been corrected for this reissue), whilst the liner notes - although evocatively and enthusiastically written - merely served to perpetuate these myths, even going as far as to suggest that the handful of songs contained therein represented Johnson's entire recorded output at the time of his death (he'd actually had eleven 78 rpm records issued during his lifetime). But then again, so what? I'm not too sure *I'd* have been much better-equipped to have written about Robert Johnson twenty-five years ago...

No, the Robert Johnson "industry" never really got going until the 80's, and in the early 70's all we had to draw on were a couple of half-assed essays in sundry Folk & Jazz mags, and the handful of published interviews with his contemporaries, men like David "Honeyboy" Edwards and Rice "Sonny Boy Williamson II" Miller - both of whom were

actually working with Johnson on that fateful night he ingested the poisoned whisky that killed him - and Robert Jr. Lockwood, Johnny Shines, and Son House, with whom he'd travelled extensively during the mid/late 30's. But these interviews hadn't yet reached a mass market, having only thus far been published in "Living Blues" - at that time still merely a tiny, home-produced fanzine, available only either via mail order or from a handful of specialist Blues record stores in the United States, and virtually unknown in Europe. Serious research into Johnson was minimal - for example, although his death certificate had been discovered a few years earlier, it wasn't until Houston folklorist/researcher Mack McCormick's exhaustive efforts in the 70's that a reproduction of it was published. However, this *certainly* isn't the appropriate forum for a précis of Robert Johnson's life and career: anyone in need of further information is urged to check out Peter Guralnick's excellent "Searching For Robert Johnson" (Pimlico Books, 1989) or Stephen C. LaVere's informative liner notes to "Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings" (2-CD Boxed Set, Columbia/Sony Records, 1990).

And what of Paul Williams' subsequent career?: *"I did cut a follow-up album with several of the same musicians - mainly original material - but it was never released. The master tapes disappeared when I went to live in the USA in the late 70's..."* In the 80's he reunited with former Tempest guitarist Allan Holdsworth to form the IOU Band - they were chiefly popular in America and Japan - and in the 90's, still based in the United States, he's hooked up with former Juicy Lucy colleague Mick Moody once again. Paul, Mick, and a handful of other expatriate Brits got together to form Blue Thunder, who gig regularly on the West Coast: their eponymously-titled 1997 album featured guest appearances from former Rolling Stone Mick Taylor (with whom Paul had played in John Mayall's Bluesbreakers) and Police guitarist Andy Summers (who'd been in Zoot Money's band alongside Paul), which led to it securing a release in Europe and Japan - although their proposed European tour in September '97 was cancelled following Princess Diana's sudden death. Paul still occasionally returns to Europe for Blues festivals, and has more recently been contemplating reforming Juicy Lucy.

Roger Dopson

acknowledgements: thanks to Paul Williams, Malcolm Forrester, Neil Slaven.

- 1. TERRAPLANE BLUES (VERSION ONE)**
- 2. CROSSROADS BLUES**
- 3. KIND HEARTED WOMAN BLUES**
- 4. IF I HAD POSSESSION OVER JUDGEMENT DAY**
- 5. RAMBLING BLUES**
- 6. WHEN YOU GOT A GOOD FRIEND**
- 7. COME ON IN MY KITCHEN**
- 8. TERRAPLANE BLUES (VERSION TWO)**

All songs written by **Robert Johnson**

Arranged by **Paul Yarlett**

Published by **Treasure Island Music Ltd**

Engineer: **Ken Scott**

Licensed from **Treasure Island Music Ltd**

Paul Williams - Vocals, Guitar, Harmonica

The Friends: **Spencer Davis** - Acoustic Guitar, **Glenn Campbell** - Steel Guitar

Mick Moody - Guitar, **Eddie Woods** - Lead Guitar, **Alun Davies** - Guitar

Jon Mark - Acoustic Guitar, **Bob Hall** - Piano, **Keith Ellis** - Bass Guitar

Pat Donaldson - Bass Guitar