

Big Walter Horton And Alfred 'Blues King' Harris □ – Harmonica Blues Kings (1954)

Written by bluesever

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1 *Back Home To Mama* 3:07 2 *Hard-Hearted Woman* 3:00 3 *Southern Woman* 2:38 4 *Remember Me* 2:27 5 *Card Game* 2:43 6 *Nosey Neighbors* 2:49 7 *Hard-Hearted Woman (alternate)* 3:04 8 *Back Home To Mama (alternate)* 3:04 9 *My Life Blues* 3:01 10 *Up Side The Wall* 2:24 11 *Gold Digger* 3:25 12 *Sundown Boogie Blues* 3:07 13 *Miss Ida* 3:23 14 *Great Lakes Boogie* 3:03 15 *Blues And Trouble* 2:47 16 *Up Side The Wall (alternate)* 2:04
Bass – Willie Dixon (1 to 8) Drums – Fred Below (1, 2, 7, 8), James Bannister (9 to 14) Guitar – Earl Dranes (9 to 14), Lee Cooper (1 to 8) Harmonica – Alfred Harris (9 to 14), Big Walter Horton (1 to 8) Piano – Lafayette Leake (1, 2, 7, 8), Memphis Slim (3 to 6) Tenor Saxophone – Harold Ashby (3 to 6), John Cameron (1, 2, 7, 8), Red Holloway (1, 2, 7, 8) Vocals – Alfred Harris (9, 10, 12 to 14), James Bannister (11, 15), Tommy Brown (3 to 6), Big Walter Horton (1, 2, 7, 8)

For those who prefer the vintage Chicago Blues sounds, the tough tracks laid down by Windy City harmonica players from the 1950's forward leave many choices; Little Walter Jacobs, Sonny Boy Williamson, James Cotton, Snooky Pryor, Billy Boy Arnold, and plenty of others come to mind, but one of the oft-forgotten heroes is Big Walter Horton. Never garnering the recognition he deserved, Horton exemplified what blues harmonica is all about; tone, taste, and timing. Ask many present day players who influenced them and Horton's name will be heard, but for someone who mastered the instrument as few others had before or since, he missed out on the credit he was due.

Born in Horn Lake, MS, in 1918, he played around the South with many well-known bluesmen including Robert Johnson and Honeyboy Edwards, and claimed to have recorded with the Memphis Jug Band in the pre-war years, although no proof of these statements has come to light. He'd visited Chicago by the late 1930's and early 1940's and returned to the Memphis area where he took up residence, supposedly blowing amplified harp by then. By 1951, he'd come to the attention of Sam Phillips, who was running the Memphis Recording Service and waxed a number of exceptional tracks including "Easy," perhaps one of the finest harp

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instrumentals ever cut, issued under the heading of Jimmy & Walter on Sun 180, in 1953. The earlier tracks Horton recorded for Phillips were primarily for lease to other labels and wound up on a few other imprints, including RPM, Modern, and Chess. By 1954, he'd moved to Chicago, and landing at Maxwell Street on Sundays, he became a familiar figure and was soon offered a shot with Muddy Waters, when Junior Wells (then holding the harmonica chair in Muddy's band) was drafted. However, showing up for rehearsal under the influence of alcohol didn't set well with Waters, who ruled with a tight fist. Muddy quickly ended the association, but Horton would later go on to record with Waters, and numerous other Chicago players, including Jimmy Rogers, whose biggest selling record, "Walking By Myself," featured Horton. Scuffling to make ends meet was never easy for Big Walter, but he continued to record occasionally and landed with the States label, where these tracks stem from.

While "Harmonica Blues Kings" boasts 16 tracks, only four of them belong to Horton as bandleader and frontman. It's been said that he did his best work while in the company of others, certainly true in some respects, but his superb "Hard-Hearted Woman," a muscular and masterful slow blues, and the loping shuffle of "Back Home To Mama," remain as classics of post-war Chicago Blues. Along with the two issued sides (States 145) are a pair of alternate takes that remained in the can, but these are nearly as brilliant as their issued counterparts with the thick, greasy, harrowing tone Walter was known for. With Willie Dixon handling affairs for the States label while on sabbatical from his usual ship steering at Chess, Horton was placed alongside Tommy Brown, a vocalist with one of the more versatile voices in the annals of Chicago Blues. Previously having recorded for Savoy, Regent, and other labels, Brown had never worked with a harp player on sessions, but Horton's contributions to Brown's four sides here are remarkable. "Southern Women" finds Big Walter blowing thick, rounded swells and swoops all around Brown's fine vocal, and "Remember Me" offers more incredible harmonica work, but this record hardly made a dent in the market when issued. The slow and grinding "Card Game," with its stop-time groove and fabulous dynamics, and "Nosey Neighbors," both remained unissued for years, although Horton was again in top form. The stellar band included Harold Ashby's tough sax, Memphis Slim on piano, Lee Cooper handling the guitar chores, and Willie Dixon holding the bottom end together on bass.

James Bannister and Alfred Harris, the other featured artists here, are still little more than asterisks in Chicago's rich blues history. Bannister was a drummer and vocalist who had recorded with Dennis Binder for Sun in 1952 (first released on the Sun Blues Box) prior to his States session in 1954, but available information, while scant, points to Bannister preferring sax players for the urban approach he seemed to favor. Alfred "Blues King" Harris supplies the gritty, amplified harp work for the remaining 8 tracks, and takes the vocals for a small handful, including "My Life Blues," the romping "Up Side The Wall," and the easy-walking "Sundown Boogie Blues." Bannister's one issued recording (States 141) coupled "Gold Digger" with "Blues And Trouble," both in a rumbling Chicago style, and it is indeed Bannister who provides the drilling drum work on the second half of this disc, while Earl Dranes supplies the brutally distorted guitar. Although only two of these eight titles made it onto record in 1954, the balance

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is vital and gripping blues by two little-known purveyors who sadly recorded very little.

Big Walter continued to eek out a living through the remaining years of his life, recording and playing with a number of artists, including Johnny Young, Peter Green's Fleetwood Mac, Willie Dixon's Chicago Blues Stars, Ronnie Earl and others, until his death in December of 1981. Although he may have managed too sparse a recording itinerary of his own, his playing was always top-shelf and immediately recognizable, and when he was placed on sessions for other artists, his work was superb and stunning. The pairing of James Bannister and Alfred "Blues King" Harris was much more in a down-home groove when compared to the Horton and Brown tracks, but everything here is valuable and well-worth finding. Unfortunately, liner notes by Jim O'Neal shed little new light on either Horton or the others gathered for this CD, and major drawbacks include little in the way of discographical details, and at only 47 minutes, when 75-to-80 minutes is available on CD's now, it certainly seems short. However, when there's precious little available from Big Walter Horton's premier years of the 1950's, this becomes essential listening. www.delmark.com will provide more on the label's activities and their full catalog of jazz and blues releases. ---Craig Ruskey, mnblues.com

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