

Joe Williams, Ben Webster – Havin' A Good Time (2005)

Written by bluesever

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01. *Just a Sittin' and a Rockin'* 02. *Kansas City Blues* 03. *By the River St. Marie* 04. *That's All* 05. *Alone Together* 06. *I'm Through with Love* 07. *The Great City* 08. *A Hundred Years from Today* 09. *Ain't Misbehavin'* 10. *Honeysuckle Rose* 11. *Alright, Okay, You Win* 12. *Have a Good Time* 13. *Band Intro & Goodbye* Joe Williams - vocals; Ben Webster - tenor sax; Junior Mance - piano; Bob Cranshaw - bass; Mickey Roker - drums.

This CD fills an important gap in the discographies of both Joe Williams and Ben Webster. While Williams was in town for a week-long gig at Pio's in Providence, Rhode Island, he and his group (pianist Junior Mance, bassist Bob Cranshaw and drummer Mickey Roker) were surprised to find Ben Webster in the club one night, so he was invited to sit in. A tape of this performance was given to Williams afterwards, though nothing happened until after the singer's widow gave it to Hamilton College, which finally contacted Hyena about issuing it. Everyone on the date is in terrific form and it turns out that this show was recorded on the very same night as Webster's *Enja* album *Live at Pio's*. Williams is masterful throughout the evening, inserting a touch of humor to his receptive and attentive audience as he glides effortlessly through the set. Although he confesses to not knowing all of the lyrics to a request ("That's All"), he tackles it anyway. The vocalist is especially complemented by Webster's robust tenor in a sensitive ballad like "A Hundred Years From Today" or a mid-tempo swinger like "Just A-Sittin' and A-Rockin'." It's hard to pick highlights, but Williams carries off his signature tune in great fashion. Like many club recordings made in the mid-'60s, the sound quality of the rhythm section is a tad muddy, but any fan of Joe Williams will easily adjust to it and groove along with the masterful singer and his special guest. Highly recommended. ---Ken Dryden, Rovi

Havin' A Good Time documents a concert that never should have happened. In the winter of

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1964 Providence was socked with a blizzard that kept eager concertgoers away from the club where Joe Williams was playing. Enough people showed up that he still had to perform a few sets, but the lucky few who were there were given a rare treat; improbably, Ben Webster showed up out of nowhere and asked if he could sit in.

This is the sort of magical encounter on which jazz thrives: no preparation, no rehearsal, just a couple of masters joining together to produce some wonderful music on the spot. According to pianist Junior Mance, this was the only meeting between Webster and Williams, and fortunately it was caught on tape. All of these songs are either well-known or based on fairly simple chord progressions, which allows the band to plug into the numbers without much difficulty.

If Webster hadn't appeared, the set would still have been worth a listen; Williams always did his best work in front of an audience, and the fact that the small crowd had braved the storm to see him no doubt only added to his enthusiastic delivery. Blues songs like "Just A Sittin' and A Rockin'" were tailor-made for Williams' rich baritone and exuberant presence. But the presence of Webster adds a new dimension; he gets ample solo space, really digging in to the slower numbers that he plays so beautifully, and huffs quietly behind Williams as he sings. The rhythm section seems invigorated by the chance to play with the added firepower; Junior Mance in particular carves out a niche with some smoking accompaniment.

Havin' A Good Time is an appropriate title for this new release. Clearly the audience enjoyed the collaboration and the musicians crafted some terrific entertainment. It may have been cold and snowy outside, but it sure was hot inside. –David Rickert, allaboutjazz.com

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