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# HARMONICA FATS

*by Mick Rainsford*



Harmonica Fats, circa 1961.

**When Harmonica Fats passed away on January 3rd last year, it bought to an end the career of a unique artist who, over five decades, had captivated audiences with his 'larger than life' personality and infectious brand of blues.**

Harvey Blackston (aka Harmonica Fats) was born on September 8th, 1927, on a cotton farm, located on the banks of the Red River, in McDade, Louisiana, a town situated about 40 miles from Shreveport. The eldest of thirteen children, he was raised by his grandparents, Geoffrey Adam and his wife, a devout family who encouraged him to sing religious songs, a talent he felt he inherited from his mother. "In

the country, I always tried to sing, so I guess I've taken after of my mother. My mother was named 'The Actress Adam'. My grandmother didn't want me to sing no blues, so it was religious music that I started singing. I got one of the worst whippings in my life when I went round the house singing "Oh I ain't got no mamma now, late last night, I don't need no mamma now", so I must have been about eight or nine years old at that time".

Fats' love affair with the harmonica began when he was about four years old, when, on opening the shoe box he put out for his Christmas presents, he found a harmonica, a present he was to receive each year up till his thirteenth birthday, when he started buying his own. Despite these regular gifts of harmonicas, his attempts at playing were crude to say the least, "I couldn't really play, I never learned how to play until I got to 27 years old, all I used to do in the fields was 'we, wah, we, wah' that's all."

Around the age of twelve or thirteen, Fats

listened to a blues record he found hidden away in his grandmother's house, and was immediately hooked. He started seeking out blues records and performers, eventually discovering the artist who, he said, was the biggest influence on his career. "My grandmother had a blues record from way back before I was born and I started listening to the records and then I heard Sonny Terry. Sonny Terry was my influence with the harmonica. Sonny Terry was my idol of the harmonica."

Bored with life on the farm, Fats moved to Los Angeles in 1946. "Well I didn't want to travel, but I wanted to go somewhere, and my father was back there in Los Angeles. So I wrote him a letter and told him to send me a ticket, not expecting to get it, but I done wrote and told him to send me one, and he sent it and I came to LA".

Finding himself a job with a local toilet seat manufacturer, he continued to practice on harp, but thoughts of making a living from music were far from his mind. This all changed when he was involved in an automobile accident in 1954 that was to lay him off work for some time. "I was on my way home from work. I had my arm sticking out of the window and I was about to make a left turn when a guy hit me from the rear doing about 60 miles an hour and so it messed up my arm and I had to be treated for 4 months. It was in that 4 months I learned how to play harmonica properly."

Pleased with his progress on un-amplified harp, Fats saw his 'new' talent as a source of extra revenue. Invited by a work friend, guitarist Cleveland Weller, to join him on one of his Saturday night house parties, he jumped at the opportunity, but his first attempt at playing amplified harmonica came as a rude awakening, bringing him down to earth with a bang. "The blues scene in LA was good because we had a lot of little, what I call holes in the wall that you go in and play. But I know a guy by the name of Cleveland Weller that plays guitar and he invited me out to his house to play on a Saturday night with him. So I went out there. He gave me a mike and an amplifier and I started blowing through that mike and amplifier and I would hear all my mistakes, and so then I went down town next day bought me a amplifier and a mike and so I went and practised for four months. I didn't do nothing but practice every day."

Gradually mastering and honing his skills on the harmonica, he decided to put his own band together. Intent on avoiding the embarrassment of his first experience of playing in public, he decided the band wouldn't perform in public until they were good enough and had a large enough repertoire to put on a performance that would guarantee them gigs. Two years and 300 songs later the band were ready to launch their musical career in, typically for Fats, an unorthodox style. "When I started putting my band together I brought Cleveland (Weller) in with me, and then I had Jesse Pipkin, he was another guitar player and then I bought in a drummer by the name of Toby Tobias. When I thought we was ready, that's when I went out on the clubs, in 1956. I put our stuff in the car and said 'lets go. I'm gonna find a place for us

to play.' I drove down to 62nd and San Pedro and stopped at this club (Tango Club), went in (it was empty) and asked the guy if we could set up and play there, and he said yes. We started playing and about thirty minutes later the club was packed, it was really lively, and we stayed there about nine months."

Harvey Blackston and the Houserockers soon built up a formidable reputation on the LA blues scene, with their energetic stage act. Fats' talent for writing wry and humorous songs, that were nevertheless true to life, made them one of LA's most popular live bands, giving Fats the opportunity to get to know and learn from many of the bluesmen who plied their trade in LA's bars and clubs.

## I GOT A REAL NAME FOR YOU

One of these artists was George Smith, who was instrumental in getting Fats to drop his real name in favour of something that more aptly personified his ebullient personality. "When George Smith came to LA he said 'You're using Harvey Blackston, but I got a real name for you,' and I said 'what's that?', and he said 'why don't you call yourself Heavy Juice and his Harmonica.' So I used that for a while, and that's how I got the name, from George Smith. Well, when George first came to LA he used the name Little Walter. I had never seen Little Walter so I thought he was the real Little Walter. He could blow like him and he could sing like him, and at the end of the day I had also been trying to get some of Little Walter's notes, so I went down and caught his show, and then we started talking, and after that we became good friends. George also showed me some notes of what Little Walter played on the harmonica because I couldn't get into him and he told me how I could do it and that's how he showed it to me."

Los Angeles, during the mid to late 1950s and early 1960s, was full of great harmonica players including Kid Thomas, Ace Holder and Garland the Great, appearing regularly in the many bars and clubs that made up the city's burgeoning blues scene. "Well I started at the Tango Club and then went to the Hole In The Wall, the Tamarind. At that time I tell you we had a whole lot of different clubs that you could go in, and so you travelled from one to another one, you played here maybe two months and then move onto the next. We did jam sessions together, me, George Smith, Harmonica Slim (Travis Blaylock) and Johnnie Dyer. We would meet up every Sunday morning at a place on 53rd and Avalon, they called it the Elbow Bend, and so we used to jam together because everybody was working around town anyway so we went from one to the other one and sat in with them."

It was, in fact, Fats' association with Blaylock, that was to lead indirectly to him assuming the name with which he became known throughout the blues world, "Harmonica Slim came out with a record called 'You Better Believe It' (Vita 138). Then every time I come to the club to play



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Label shots courtesy of Victor Pearlin (Darcey), and Tony Burke (Fleetville). 'Tore Up' on Fleetville was issued in 1988 by Mike Atherton who leased the tracks from Fats.

and they'd say, 'Hey Fats where's Slim?' So I decided to use that name Harmonica Fats and so it has been with me ever since."

In 1962, Fats was working with the Henry Strogin band, and due to repeated requests from a club owner, who would only give them a gig if they played 'Tore Up', Fats had learned the Hank Ballard tune, investing it with his own variation on the lyrics. The song went down so well live that when Fats and Henry decided to pool their resources and cut a demo disc, 'Tore Up' was an obvious choice to promote their talents. They recorded the session in a studio situated in a garage owned by Ted Brinson, using Henry Strogin's band, and Fats was so delighted with the resulting tape, he decided to try and get it released.

"Well I just loved the sound of the record, it was one of Hank Ballard's tunes, and I changed it around to fit me and it sounded good to me so I recorded it and tried to get a record on the market, so that's what we did. Then we looked in the paper and found Skylark were looking for a new artist and so we taken it up to Skylark Records and they decided to re-record it. They signed me up, two brothers, Ben and Leonard Weisman, they was the owners of Skylark Records."

The session that spawned 'Tore Up' was recorded in 1962 using studio musicians to back Fats with only Henry Strogin on piano retained from the original session. The Weismans, realising they had a potential hit on their hands, leased the single 'Tore Up'/'I Get So Tired' (Skylark 600) to Lester Sill, who had the connections to get it a wider distribution.

It was released as Darcey 5000, the record becoming an success, earning Fats the princely

sum of \$400, "two for being the artist, and two for writing the other side." Darcey also released Fats' follow up, 'Mama, Mama, Talk To Your Daughter For Me' / 'How Low Is Low' (Darcey 5003), which was arranged by Shorty Rogers and featured Earl Palmer on drums. Although this was a commercial success, it was to be, surprisingly, five years before Fats was to record again.

The success of 'Tore Up' helped make Fats a national name and he found himself in demand on the package tours that criss-crossed the USA at that time. One was with Barbara Lynn, who was touring on the strength of the classic 'You'll Lose A Good Thing'.

## SKYLARK AND DOT

Fats' next session was for Dot, in 1967, followed by a release on In-Sound in the same year, and although the Dot release, 'My Baby Didn't Come Home'/'Driveway Blues' (Dot 16978) was released in 1967, it was actually taken from a track recorded for Skylark.

"After I did 'Tore Up', then Ben Weisman, from Skylark Records had these songs and 'Driveway Blues' was a big hit live and they wanted me to try to sing that, so they recorded me. Dot put out 'Driveway Blues' from a track, not from a live session, Skylark, they got that label to put it out and so that's how that came about. 'The Birds And The Bees' - that was one of Jewel Akens' tunes. I was still with Skylark Records and so Skylark Records bought this tune up and so they wanted me to try to sing it and so I sung it and they leased it out as 'The Birds And Bees', with 'The Big Round Wheel' (In-Sound 401)."

It was to be another three years before Fats' next release, on Masai: 'Long Cool (Summertime)



Courtesy of Victor Pearl

Blues' / 'Top Show' (Masai 99982), although he claims to have recorded during this period for Capitol, Mercury and Warner Brothers. 'Long Cool Blues' - I got that from 'Summertime'. You know if you saw the record you would see that it's got 'Summertime' on it but it took me about 10 years to learn how to play that. When I finally learned how to play it, I called it 'Long Cool Blues', but it really was 'Summertime'.

In the same year - 1970 - Fats had two releases on Normar, one side of Normar 354, 'Funky Drop', with Moonshine Willie, and 'Your Mouth Stuck Out' / 'Granny In The Groove' (Normar 358). "My Mouth Stuck Out" and 'Granny In The Groove', that just come to me, you know like you lying on the beach somewhere and wow, like that, I thought I'll write this song called 'Granny In The Groove'. 'Funky Drop' - I was on a show with Moonshine Willie, he was a harmonica player. We met after the show and he said I got some music. So I made up the lyrics for what he got and added it to his music that he had on track, and then he knew Joe Kincaid who had a band called the Soulbrothers and so we went up there and recorded the 'Funky Drop'. I made that up too, wrote it down and got somebody called Jeane Mitchell to write it out for me and so then we recorded it."

Further singles included 'It's Hard To Get Along', 'Harmonica Symphony Stomp' and 'Mind Your Own Business', recorded for Mel Alexander, but the hits had dried up for Fats, although he was still in demand for tours and session work. "I did a tour with Lou Rawls and Sam Cooke, and I played on their records, 'Tobacco Road', 'Somebody Have Mercy' and 'Little Red Rooster'. I also played back up on record for Little Joe Blue, Jackie de Shannon, Bobby Darin ('You The Reason I'm Living'), Bill Cosby ('Six Sides Of Bill Cosby'), Ike and Tina Turner, and Etta James. I did Las Vegas for 10 weeks with Wolfman Jack at a place they call the Bonanza Hotel, more like a country and western hotel. I also recorded a thing with Ringo (Starr) called 'Go Man Go, Go'. I never saw him, this we did from a track, I never got to meet him in person. Later I backed Etta James in the movie 'Taps' and played a beach singer, one of my own songs, 'Every Time I Want To Make Love', in the Doors movie."

Apart from the period 1969 to 1975, which he spent on the road, often sleeping between gigs in his Plymouth station wagon, Fats always held down a day job, spending the bulk of the 1960s working for the Navy Exchange, and on his return to Watts, in 1975, he was hired by

the Clorox Beach Company where he remained until he retired in 1993.

It was this attitude to work and the everyday experiences of working on the production line or the factory floor that inspired Fats to write many of his blues. They show a working man's grasp of reality laced with the wry humour generated



Harmonica Fats circa mid 1970s.

between fellow workers on the shop floor. "I came back here to Watts in 1975 and started working for Clorox, because I believed in eatin' and the only way you can eat, at that time music was up and down, you got a job. I continued performing around the California area, I just didn't go back out on the road no more."

In the early eighties, Fats first came into contact with guitarist and blues deejay, Bernie Pearl - a meeting that was to eventually have a significant impact on the careers of both.

### STEEPED IN THE BLUES

Bernie's career was steeped in the blues. His interest was sparked when his elder brother, Ed, opened the Ash Grove and Bernie saw Jesse Fuller for the first time in 1958. That incident shaped Bernie's career as a procession of blues artists appeared at the Ash Grove. "There was Brownie and Sonny, who were there constantly, and subsequently I began meeting Lightnin'

Hopkins, Mance Lipscomb, Fred McDowell etc and it was at that time, in '58, I became more specialised in blues."

Forever the radical, rather than succumb to these 'pop inflected' changes, he turned instead to the harder electrified blues - Muddy Waters, Albert Collins, Albert King, Willie Dixon, Johnny Shines, Big Mama Thornton and Big Walter Horton.

Bernie had formed his first electric blues band, David and the Parables, around 1964, and although this was not too successful, he persevered and it eventually led what amounted to the house band at the Ash Grove. This band included Curtis Tilman on bass and Nat Dove on piano, with George Smith and Johnny Shines sitting in regularly. Around 1963, Bernie also started playing regularly with country blues singer Luke 'Long Gone' Miles, with whom he was to make his recording debut.

Fats remembered the first occasion he met Bernie Pearl. "I didn't make too many recordings in the eighties, but I did perform around the LA area, Long Beach area. I worked with a lot of different artists at that time and I met Bernie through Blind Joe Hill."

Joe was playing down in Watts and he invited me down to play a couple of numbers with him. When I got there Bernie also was playing guitar with him and that's when I met Bernie." Bernie Pearl also recalled the first time he saw Fats perform. "As I recollect, the first time I saw him was at a show somewhere in LA, at a theatre which is now defunct, Denise LaSalle was on the show. I had met him about '80, '81, but I didn't hear him play at that time. He came in, and I was playing with Blind Joe Hill. I was just sitting in with him, a little low paid gig in Watts, and Fats came in and his wife introduced herself and him. They knew me as a radio personality and knew that I did a festival, but I have to say that they did not hustle, which I very much appreciated. I saw Fats subsequently with his own band and it was okay, he didn't jump out at me, but maybe I wasn't listening at that time." Despite this inauspicious start, this was the beginning of a relationship that was destined to grow into one of the hottest blues bands and duos of the 1990s.

"The original Bernie Pearl Blues Band was formed in '84 and that was at Miss Wiss where I had been working periodically with Sam King of the King Brothers, who is also Freddie's cousin." Says Bernie: "I think he did some drumming, and a local Long Beach guy, he drummed for the first few gigs, but I wasn't real happy with the drumming, so I called a friend of mine by the name of Maurice Miller, who is from near St. Louis. Maurice used to play with Memphis Slim and Matt 'Guitar' Murphy, so he had some blues experience, and he was also a great singer. Anyway Maurice Miller was the drummer for a little while and a man named Dan Fredman was the bass player. I started off with him, and a guy named Jimmy Hinds, from St Louis, he was out here in '84 to hustle some songs for the Olympics. As it turned out he was one of the co-producers on Larry Davis's 'Funny Stuff' album, which was one of my favourite albums of the early 1980s. He was also the bass player and drummer on some of the songs on that album, but he went back to St Louis. He had to go back south, he couldn't stand it out here after the Olympics. Then for a long time I had a guy named Laurence Baulden from New Orleans. I met him at Smokey Wilson's club, where I met a lot of people during the 1970s, the Pioneer Club. Laurence was on the bass, periodically I would have Henry Butler, who played piano with us and also a blind white guy by the name Duane Smith who used to be with Ike and Tina, and Lena Horne. I had Freddie Clarke, who was with Johnny Otis for many years and also Little Richard, Freddie was on sax and then Hollis Gilmore joined me in 1985.

The band's first regular gig became Sunday's at a club called Miss Whiss in Long Beach, a gig set up by Barbara Morrison, who Bernie had met in 1981, when he wrote the music for a play she was appearing in.



Bernie Pearl and Fats. Photo: E. K. Waller.

"Barbara was in the cast and she was working for Johnny Otis who I also knew from the Ash Grove days. Barbara had this gig and she got us in there on Sundays, so every Sunday for at least four or five years we had the Sunday afternoon gig. It was a predominantly black club and they were blues fans. It was very upper echelon kind of a club - very clean, very nice, great people there and so we had a chance to bring in Joe Turner, Charles Brown and Lowell Fulson periodically. I began bringing Fats in and he was very popular with the people and I enjoyed playing with him. I liked his energy, but he was only doing covers at that time and he wasn't doing his original material which is understandable, because he was playing with a band who didn't know the originals. Anyway we became friends and from about 1986 on we worked pretty regularly together. We worked very steady from about 1986 to 1990.

Working with Fats had a profound influence on Bernie, re-awakening his love of playing acoustic blues, a side of his music he had neglected due to the demands of the club owners who booked his band. It was inevitable that Bernie and Fats would record together, although their first release 'Live At Cafe Lido', was only intended as an audition tape. "We had a gig at this Cafe Lido starting in 1989, and we were there until it closed, three years almost every Friday. It was a supper club, it had a nice feel, and the guy was very much for us, paid us decently, and so decided to try and get a decent audition you know, audition dub. I had a friend of mine come in to record us live. We did it with all the wrong equipment, inadequate equipment and we sat down to edit it down to two or three good songs, but found we had about two hours of good songs so we decided to do the best we could with it. We detected the problems, the hums, the inadequate mike and all that and we edited it off the tape, and it was very successful locally, we sold it quite a lot, it allowed us to get together and get into the studio to do 'I Had To Get Nasty'."

'Live At The Lido' mirrored Fats' exuberant stage persona and mastery of raw down-home blues. His giant personality leapt from the speakers, and he attributed the success of the release to several years of pent up artistic frustration, which was allowed to flow out during a live performance, "I was so overdue for a recording, I really caught fire and it sold like hot cakes."

The success of the cassette, which Fats aggressively marketed from the bandstand in his own extrovert style, demanded and ensured that Bernie and Fats returned to the studio to record a full length CD. The session was set up by Cash McCall, a good friend of Bernie's who regularly appeared with the band, and who secured the Score One Studios in North Hollywood for the project, "Cash got a studio that he knew. It was fairly high priced, and he came in and helped set up the first session, then by the second session as I recall, he had had to go out of town, so then the mixing was left up to us. Fats and I sat in

there with his wife and we mixed it down and it went on from there."

The resulting set, 'I Had To Get Nasty', captured the essence of Fats' music as he was able for the first time for many years to record his own songs in his own inimitable style. "I had a lot of songs that I wrote a few years back starting in about 1955, '56. I just let Bernie hear them and we got together on it and we decided to record them from there. Also the last album that we did, called 'Two Heads Are Better', had a lot of my original tunes that I wrote."

Fats' raw and animated vocals allied to his down-home harmonica, with Hollis Gilmore's tenor sax strutting in an instrumental evocation of Fats' vocal delivery, whilst Bernie cut loose in demonstrating his mastery of a variety of guitar styles, ensured the success of the CD. One track, Muddy's 'Louisiana Blues', was to provide a pointer to the musical direction the duo were eventually to take.

Bernie and Fats' third release was a project that never seemed likely to get off the ground. Bernie recalled 'Two Heads', came about by accident. "Fats and I had periodically being doing a duet session, acoustic sessions for private parties, but he was not convinced", a fact confirmed by Fats. "After I met Bernie he always wanted me to do a duo with him, but I tried that out with my own band. I had my own band for five years and so I always liked to be on stage, I liked to perform, I liked to dance on stage and so I didn't want to do that sit down and just play, just play to you." However Bernie was persistent in his attempts to woo Fats, recognising the potential to expand their repertoire.

Bernie's breakthrough in convincing Fats to actually commit himself to performing acoustically came via Fats' wife Johnnie, who after hearing them perform in that style for the first time, realised the commercial potential of the acoustic duo and joined forces with Bernie in putting pressure on her husband. "We started rehearsing to do another album with the band, and it was just him and me, so we sat down with just acoustic guitar and harp in his kitchen, in Watts, and started going through the tunes and labelling them and putting them in order. As we were going through, I began to develop arrangements for the two of us which sounded real good to him and to his wife. Fats and I did a combination concert. We did a duet and then did a set with the band and because of that opening set, his wife had never heard us play together as a duo, she said 'why don't you do the album as a duo,' and I didn't need convincing, I wanted to do it."

## BLOW FAT DADDY

"Between Bernie and my wife Johnnie, they kept saying do some acoustic, do some duets. So finally when we went into the last album, and these were like my regular songs, I decided it was cheaper to make a duo album than it was to play in a whole band. So we decided to try it, so now I begin to like the duo as well, it reminded me of Sonny and Brownie."

Bernie, however felt that the duo had something new to offer, "I thought that we filled a space, we filled a gap, we filled something that's not there. We were not just doing covers of the things that everybody else was doing and with Fats' originality I thought we had a fair shot at making some in-roads."

Fats and Bernie both

revelled in the artistic freedom 'Two Heads Are Better....' gave them, both giving full rein to their musical talents. When Fats spoke about his songwriting skills, he said "To me it's just a God given talent, because since I was about six or seven years old I always could rhyme, even though I had no education." He attributed the humour to a desire to entertain and be entertained, "I enjoy performing for people, and when you can enjoy yourself performing for people then people can inspire you, because performing is like radar it goes out and comes back to you much heavier than when it went out so you it gives you more to enjoy."

The last and final collaboration between Fats and Bernie Pearl was 'Blow, Fat Daddy, Blow!', which was released in 1996. Another acoustic duo session, the title tune was a reminiscence of the first time Johnnie (Fats' wife) had seen her future husband who was appearing at a club where one particular lady continually hollered throughout his performance, "blow, fat daddy, blow." This set was sadly dedicated to Johnnie, who had recently passed away, and included two special tributes, Fats' own 'Blues For Mrs B', a number composed for her in 1990, and Bernie Pearl's guitar instrumental, 'Blues Kaddish'.

Because of his huge personality and dynamic stage presence, Fats secured cameo roles in several well known commercials, including the famous Heineken advert with Lonnie Brooks. It often appeared that Bernie took a back seat to his friend within the duo format.

Bernie acknowledged this without any bitterness or envy when he said: "Although I don't undervalue what I do on my work with Fats, I think he is a very unique talent and finally deserves the recognition, and I think our duet puts his song writing in its ideal context. I also think he is a lot more soulful as a duet. He is a great entertainer with the band, but I think who he is comes up better as a duet and it's not a problem for me, I know what I'm doing. I know who I am so, but anyway I think it's real good for Fats to get the attention."

However the fact remained that Bernie was as important to Fats, as Fats was to Bernie, and it was the security of knowing that Bernie was there playing 'Brownie McGhee' to his own 'Sonny Terry', that allowed Fats to perform at the height of his powers - which was the biggest compliment he could pay to his friend and fellow musician.

Harmonica Fats photos supplied by Mick Rainsford from Fats' own collection.



Courtesy Victor Pearl and John Broven