Tampa Red, as both singer and guitarist, was indisputably one of the most popular, prolific and influential blues artists of his time, and it was a long time, lasting about a quarter of a century. At the height of his popularity, he was inspiring all sorts of guitar players, from imitators like Tampa Kid to more original interpreters like Robert Lee McCoy (later Robert Nighthawk) and as his own career began to wane, his direct influence was clearly apparent on some of the finest blues artists of the next generation – from the biggest names like Muddy Waters and Elmore James, to the more obscure, but still great, Dan Pickett. Disentangling the history of Tampa Red’s songs is a job for another time and place – he wasn’t the first to sing ‘Black Angel Blues’, and ‘It Hurts Me Too’ is clearly derived from ‘Sitting On Top Of The World’ – but you could easily make the case that it was Tampa who was principally responsible for bequeathing those songs, and many others, to the world.

Record buyers snapped up his 78s, starting in the late 1920s, and continued to do so until the early 1950s. There are so many of them that his complete recordings fill no fewer than fifteen volumes in Document’s Complete Chronological series. And there lies the problem. How many listeners want to buy fifteen volumes by Tampa Red? Some will, to be sure, but most would almost certainly prefer to acquire by selection, and that’s what this article will aim to help with. Tampa Red’s real name was Hudson Woodbridge, but he took the surname of his grandmother, Whittaker. He was born in Georgia, but grew up in Tampa, Florida, and it seems to have been there that he developed his very particular slide guitar style. Unlike many other bottleneck players of his generation, who exploited the excitement that could be generated by slashing the slide across chords, with the strings jangling out in harmony (or exhilarating dischord), Tampa Red developed his own, more carefully controlled style, which involved picking chords and runs with his fingers, and interspersing them with very clean slide lines, on single strings, with rarely an echo from another string to be heard (one exception is on his very first recorded side, the one-off Paramount recording, ‘Through Train Blues’). He recorded a wide range of music (within a broad blues context), and his considerable appeal depended on a variety of factors – including his voice, his way with riche and other comic material, his interplay with other musicians – but his guitar playing was evidently a key factor, a fact that seems clear from his recorded solos. If you want a close look at the Tampa Red style, take his 1929 solo instrumental, ‘You Got To Reap What You Sow’. He had already been recording for about a year at this point, and had already racked up a very large number of sides, and established a reputation as an entertainer, but this was his first outing entirely on his own. Fortunately we have transfers from very good copies, so we’re able to hear...
there is no doubt that the musicians and producers made record after record that aimed for a similar audience. But there’s also no doubt that the audience in question – the record-buying public – loved the records, or they wouldn’t have happily continued to buy them. And with good reason – Tampa continued to sing and play beautifully, he delivered new material that was as moving or as much fun as the old (not surprisingly, as it was often in a very similar melodic and lyrical vein), and there are many excellent recordings from this period – great blues like ‘Kingfish Blues’, ‘Grievin’ And Warnin’ (with its beautiful, and slightly unexpected melodic solo), and ‘Stockyard Blues’ alongside irresistible dance songs as diverse as ‘Swaggerin’ I Could Learn To Love You So’, the raucous ‘I’m Betting On You’ (‘Baby, let’s give a party and let’s have some fun! I’ve got the hot-dog, so you can bring the bun’) and ‘Stop Truckin’ And Suzy-Q’, on which Tampa’s electric style combines effectively with Amett Nelson’s clarinet, skating very agreeably over Black Bob’s piano. There are also songs like ‘Don’t Dog Your Woman’ and ‘It Hurts Me Too’ that – in one form or another – became standards of post-war blues. We even get the chance to hear Tampa’s slide, which (played by Willie B. James) on ‘Nuttin’ And Buggy Blues’, ‘My Gal Is Gone’ and others, and later still we get a small band of trumpet, tenor, piano and drums.

In fact, one thing that is increasingly noticeable as these years wear on is that we start to hear less and less of Tampa Red’s slide guitar. This is likely to be a change that was dictated at least partly by fashion – it was probably felt, whether on Tampa’s part or that of the producers, that the slide didn’t fit so well with small group sound and solo settings. And in the case of all that, there’s the session on October 11th 1937, where after a handful of lively band sides, there’s half a dozen beautiful duets, with an unknown guitar player, mostly with Tampa on piano, but two on slide guitar, including the lovely ‘Swaggery Blues’, mentioned a long way above. I’m bound to add, though, that Tampa also liked to sing a pop ballad or two, and at the very next session after the one described above, he was fronting a jazzy-sounding band and crooning the likes of ‘Happily Married’ and ‘A Lie In My Heart’.


Surprisingly, there was a solo session in November 1940, but this was quite different from former times. Tampa played a good deal of rhythm, with little or no solo, and there seems to be some evidence that uses slide half on of the tracks. His electric style is much more basic than you might expect, given the skills he had shown in his earlier days. He mostly plays straightforward chords, with the occasional bent note for emphasis, and a few runs on the bass strings (not dissimilar in approach to what Lightnin’ Hopkins would sometimes do – more elaborately – later in the decade). The slide comes out on ‘This Ain’t No Place For Me’, ‘Hard Road’ and two others – he keeps it quite simple, but it’s clear that he’s good at it. As with the last session, among others, is included on ‘Volume 11: 1939-1940’ Document DOCD-5211.

Tampa’s partnership with pianists was always a key part of his work, and after the departure of Georgia Tom, it was mostly Black Bob who filled the keyboard role, although there were also sessions with Myrtle Jenkins and later, Blind John Davis, none of which give any cause for complaint. On 24th June 1941, Tampa came to the studio with a new piano player, Mel Movrich, and it reflects not at all badly on those previous keyboard men (and woman), to say that this new partnership was one made in heaven. Maceo’s thundering left hand, and his strong and ever-resourceful right hand work, not only provided quality and vigour to the overall sound, but it also seemed to inject a new enthusiasm into Tampa himself, pushing him to new heights of energy and inspiration.
At the same session, Maceo cut six sides in his own right, revealing a voice as effective as his playing – one that mixes expressive power with a certain sense of vulnerability, balancing beautifully with the emphatic drive of his instrumental work. One of the great blues songs recorded in both straight versions and heavily reworked forms, by many blues artists. It wasn’t virgin material when Maceo picked it up – Sleepy John Estes’s ‘Someday Baby Blues’ was probably his source – but to say he made it his own would be an understatement. Nor was it the only brilliant performance that day – all five of the others are outstanding. The way Maceo’s rolling piano mix with Tampa’s slide guitar on ‘Ramblin’ Mind’ creates one of the great sounds of 1940s blues, with vocal work, its distinctive melodic hook, conveyed the anger and confusion of a sudden encounter with the law. When he sings the stock line: “I know my baby, she’s going to jump and shout/When that train the anger and confusion of a sudden encounter with the law. When he sings the stock line: “I know my baby, she’s going to jump and shout/When that train
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