

INSCAPE: THE INIMITABLE BIG WALTER HORTON

December 7, 2014

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

[Note: Here is a more standard biography of my favorite amplified-blues harmonica player. I supervised hundreds of thousands of these kinds of biographies as part of creating the All-Music Guide (allmusic.com).]

(b Apr 6, 1917 - d May 1981) Chicago-style harmonica and vocals.

Big Walter "Shakey" Horton is one of the all-time great blues harp (harmonica) players. Along with "Little Walter" and a few others, Horton defined modern amplified Chicago-style harmonica. There is no harp player (and that includes Little Walter) with Horton's big tone and spacious sense of time. Horton (who was known to have been somewhat shy) was not a natural group leader and therefore has produced few solo albums. His best work is as a sideman; his backup harmonica and virtuoso harp solos have graced many great Chicago blues recordings -- turning an otherwise good cut into a dynamite jam.

Walter is the master of the single note and his characteristic walking base line (usually with a deep tone and selection of notes that is unsurpassed) is instantly recognizable. As an accompanist, he has few equals. His backup harp is always unobtrusive yet bright and fresh -- enhancing whatever else is going on. Give Big Walter a chance to solo and you are in for some of the most tasteful lines Chicago-style harp has ever produced.

The songs are priceless. His original recording of "Hard Hearted Woman" on the album "Chicago Blues -- the Early Fifties" (Blues Classics) never fails to raise the hair on the back of my neck. Walter sings and plays harp on this tune:

"Hard Hearted Woman" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=llud1F7Yu3M>

But if you want to hear Walter at his best, pick up the Vanguard CD "Chicago/The Blues/Today!, Volume 3" and listen to the music Walter lays down. Both as backup harp and in solos, this is not only classic Big Walter, but Chicago blues at its finest -- not to be missed. The music on this album is incredible -- Horton's contrapuntal backup harp seems to float in the background, loping along, always stretching and opening up the time. And Horton's taste in notes and depth of tone is unparalleled in the history of amplified Chicago-style Harmonica. No less an expert than Willie Dixon said: "Big Walter is the best harmonica player I ever heard." I agree. He was the man.

"Black Spider Blues," with Johnny Shines. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MxfKX6sF6pM>

"Layin' Down My Shoes & Clothes," with Johnny Shines. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FzuZguPTC4>

Walter made a specialty of playing entire tunes (often in blues style) on the harmonica ("La Cucaracha,"

"Careless Love," "I Almost Lost My Mind," etc). This might sound trite, but give them a listen. You'll see.

"La Cucaracha" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdFtyqLeiTU>

"Evening Sun," with Johnny Shines https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7FOF_mdS39s

"Tin Pan Alley" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcaXbWdQJMw>

"In the Mood" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2KfYbvZWihk>

As for harmonicas, he used Hohner's Marine Band. He was just as comfortable playing first position (A harp in the key of A) as with the more standard cross harp (D harp in the key of A). He did not do much with chromatic harmonicas. Although Big Walter could play in the style of other harp players (and was often asked to do so), he has no credible imitators. He is one of a kind.

Walter Horton was born in Horn Lake, Mississippi (April 6, 1917), but his mother soon moved to Memphis where Walter taught himself how to play the harp (harmonica) at five years of age. He later learned more about his instrument by working with harp players Will Shade and Hammie Nixon.

In the late 1920s, he performed and recorded with the Memphis Jug Band (1927) and generally worked the Southern dance and juke-joint circuit as well as Memphis street corners. Horton moved to Chicago in the late 1940s, but was often to be found back in Memphis for recording dates with Sun and Modern/RPM labels. He claimed to be blowing amplified harp as early as 1940, which would make him the first. Johnny Shines recalls that Sonny Boy Williamson (Rice Miller) used to come to Walter for lessons. He also says that he used the name "Little Walter" before "the" Little Walter Jacobs did, but gave it up to Jacobs. Jacobs acknowledges that he "ran" with Big Walter in Memphis during the 1940s. Horton later called himself "Big Walter" to distinguish himself. The term "Shakey" came from the way he moved his head while playing.

He recorded four sides in 1951 for the Modern/RPM label under the name "Mumbles," but was not fond of that moniker. It was not until 1953 that he really left Memphis and relocated to Chicago to work as a sideman with his friend Eddie Taylor. He soon joined the Muddy Waters band (replacing Junior Wells, who had been drafted into the military) and played with Muddy for about a year.

Over the next years, Horton worked with Chicago blues artists such as Johnny Shines, Jimmy Rogers, and Otis Rush -- both in the Chicago blues clubs and at record studios. He recorded with Chess, Cobra, and States throughout the 1950s. During the 1960s, Horton continued to work with Jimmy Rogers, Shines, Tampa Red, Big Mama Thornton, Robert Nighthawk, Johnny Young, and Howlin' Wolf. In the 1970s, Walter was active in the blues clubs, in recording studios, and also began to appear at blues and folk festivals -- primarily with Willie Dixon's Blues All-Stars. He died in Chicago on Dec. 8, 1981 and was inducted into the Blues Foundation's Hall of Fame in 1982.

While his early acoustic recordings in Memphis (1951-1954) are excellent, it is the recordings from the late 50s and mid-sixties that are unrivaled. When Horton's music is discussed in print, often the

reference is to his later albums on Blind Pig ("Can't Keep Lovin' You" and "Fine Cuts") and Alligator ("Big Walter Horton with Carey Bell). I don't want to take anything away from these albums, but this is not what has made Walter a legend. Here is what has:

The recording of "Easy" with guitarist Jimmy DeBerry (recorded by Sam Philips of Sun Records in the early fifties) is a striking harp instrumental that remains unrivaled for sheer power.

"Easy," with Jimmy DeBerry on guitar and Houston Stokes on drums. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W26O3Nb5IcY>

For a superb example of Big Walter playing behind Muddy Waters (and soloing), try the cut "Mad Love (I Want You to Love Me)" that was recorded in 1953.

"Mad Love (I Want You to Love Me)" by Muddy Waters, with Big Walter Horton on harp. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ACM-Zk1QCYw>

Walter also plays on the classic Jimmy Rogers' tune "Walking by Myself,"

"Walking by Myself," by Jimmy Rogers, with Big Walter Horton: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhjDXXEcocg>

And on the Otis Rush tune "I Can't Quit You Baby," and many other Rush tunes. Also hear great Walter on the Flyright album "Johnny Shines & Robert Lockwood," "Joe Hill Louis: The Be-bop Boy" on Bear Family, "Memphis Harmonica 1951- 1954" on Sun, and "The Blues Came Down from Memphis" on Charly. This last album contains the incredible instrumental, "Easy."

Walter's singing is seldom mentioned except in an apologetic way. This is something I have never understood. I love to hear Walter sing and his singing style has all the elements of his harp playing, in particular, sincerity and (above all) humor. Make a point to listen to some Big Walter songs like:

"Need My Baby" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dxU4CLpT8A>

"Everybody's Fishin'" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vjNvj9dBb4I>

"Have a Good Time" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2w70X2vWuU>

(3 stars) Horton – " Soul of Blues Harmonica"

His hard-to-find first album for Chess is "The Soul of Blues Harmonica" is also worth a listen. This was Big Walter's first album and with an all-star cast -- Buddy Guy (g), Jack Myers (b), Willie Dixon (v), and Willie Smith (d). Although not definitive, this album is worth seeking out for Horton fans. It features Walter in a variety of musical styles, including a good rendition of "Hard Hearted Woman" and a wild version of "La Cucaracha"

(5 Stars) "Chicago/The Blues/Today!, Vol. 3"

One of the all-time great blues albums. Period. It features Big Walter with the Johnny Shines Blues Band, the Johnny Young South Side Blues Band, and Big Walter Horton's Blues Harp Band (with Charlie Musselwhite). The timing and sense of musical spaciousness is incredible. Walter's backup harp and harmonica solos mark a high point in his career. A must hear.

(1 star) "Live at the El Mocambo" -- Recorded at the El Mocambo Club in Toronto on July 25, 1973, this is not vintage Horton.

(4 stars) Horton -- "Memphis Recordings 1951" -- These are the Modern/Cobra masters --seventeen cuts from the sessions Walter did with Sam Philips in 1951, including several alternate takes.. This is mostly great acoustic harp, but it does contain the songs "Have a Good Time," and "Need My Baby" with Walter playing amplified harp -- and great songs and solos these are! Worth finding.

(4 stars) Horton -- "Mouth Harp Maestro/Ace" -- These sixteen cuts are from the Sam Philips recordings from the early 1950s. Features Walter on acoustic harp. Contains many of the same cuts on the Kent/Crown album, but lacks the amplified songs given there.

(3 stars) Horton -- "Can't Keep Lovin' You" -- Probably from the mid-seventies, this is later Horton, with John Nicholas on guitar and Ron Levy on piano. The album features a variety of material, including a good version of "Hard Hearted Woman." Not vintage, but worth a listen.

(4 stars) Horton -- "Fine Cuts" -- This is perhaps the best of the later Horton material from the late 1970s when he was working with John Nicholas. Horton reworks many of his earlier classics including "Everybody's Fishin'," "Need My Baby," and "La Cucaracha." Not as riveting as the originals, but any Big Walter is worth a listen.

(3 stars) "An Offer You Can't Refuse"/Red Lightin -- An album released on the Red Lightnin label in 1972 consisting of one side of Big Walter Horton and the other side with very early Paul Butterfield (1963)

The Horton side consists of eight tracks of Horton with guitarist Robert Nighthawk (no bass or drums). Nighthawk is playing pure backup here, very little else. It is not clear when these were recorded. Perhaps not classic Walter, but any Big Walter is worth a listen. There are three instrumentals that make for good listening, including a version of "Easy" (not up to the original Walter recording). The instrumental "West Side Blues" has some interesting Walter harp licks that I have not heard elsewhere. The other five cuts are Walter singing. Of these, there is a great version of "Louise" and Walter singing "Tin Pan Alley" which never fails to raise the hair on the back of my neck. If you can find this album, it is good to have.

(4 stars) "Harmonica Blues Kings": Big Walter-Alfred Harris/ Pearl PI-12 -- Six cuts (one side) of an album shared with Alfred Harris. This is very early amplified Walter, recorded in the fall of 1954 for the black-owned United/States labels. On four of the cuts, Big Walter is playing backup harp and solos for singer

Tommy Brown; the other two cuts represent Big Walter's first Chicago record under his own name. Includes the definitive recording of the classic Walter tune "Hard Hearted Woman."



Big Walter Horton