# Elmore James

Some blues musicians carve out their own stylistic trademarks: Bo Diddley has his syncopated rhythm riff, Howling Wolf his full-bodied falsetto swoop, Jimmy Reed his repetitive walking bass lines. Elmore James' signature was his thundering full-octave slide guitar opening. Though borrowed from fellow Mississippi bluesman Robert Johnson, that "Dust My Broom" riff laid the foundation for an eleven-year recording career, with nearly 80 titles released on some seven different labels.

The influence of Elmore James' playing and singing reverberated far beyond his own time. Chicago slide players J.B. Hutto, Homesick James (a cousin of Elmore's) and Hound Dog Taylor all recorded at least one version of an Elmore James tune. Future Rolling Stone Brian Jones billed himself as "Elmo James" on some of his earliest public performances. Fleetwood Mac's early albums featured note-for-note Elmore recreations courtesy of Jeremy Spencer. Canned Heat and the Butterfield Blues Band featured Elmore James tunes on their respective debut albums. Slide guitar genius Duane Allman drew inspiration from James' soulful, ringing tonality and made his "Done Somebody Wrong" a fixture of the Allman Brothers Band's repertoire.

Elmore James was born January 27, 1918 in Richland, Mississippi. By age twelve, inspired by the recordings of Kokomo Arnold and the local performances of Robert Johnson, he was playing the one-string, wall-mounted "guitar" common to the region. James eventually settled in Jackson, Mississippi and ran a radio repair shop while continuing to play nights and weekends. One report has him playing with a band including drums as early as 1939; if true, it would put James several years ahead of Muddy Waters in blending Delta blues with percussion and electrical amplification.

James went into the Navy in 1943, and after his discharge teamed up with Sonny Boy Williamson (Rice Miller), the masterful harp player with whom Elmore had played off and on since the Thirties. The duo worked all over the South, eventually splitting up in New Orleans. James returned to Mississippi and was briefly hospitalized with heart trouble.

On August 5, 1951 at Scott's Studio in Jackson, Elmore James backed Sonny Boy Williamson on eight titles for Trumpet Records. Then he stepped from the shadows to sing the final song of the day, "Dust My Broom." Trumpet owner Lillian McMurry added only Leonard Ware's bass to create this classic rendition of the Robert Johnson composition. She mistook the song for an Elmore original, and asked him to come up with a flip side. James had nothing else ready; he and Sonny Boy soon hit the road, and Elmore James never recorded for Trumpet again. Lillian McMurry released "Dust My Broom" by "Elmo James" with a flip side performed by Bobo Thomas and Sonny Boy, and the record was moving into the R&B Top Ten as 1952 arrived.

James went on to cut several different versions of that tune and riff, most notably as "I Believe (My Time Ain't Long)," a #9 hit for Meteor in 1953. But Elmore James was no one-hit wonder, and he brought his impassioned singing and playing to bear on his own classic songs: "Look On Yonder Wall," "Shake Your Money Maker," "Talk To Me Baby (I Can't Hold On)," "It Hurts Me Too," and "The Sky Is Crying." His hard-driving band, the Broomdusters, featured pianist Johnny Jones, tenor saxophonist J.T. Brown and drummer Odie Payne.

For the remainder of the Fifties, James bounced from Chicago to Mississippi and back again, a solitary man known for heading directly from the bandstand to the bar at the end of every set. Heavy drinking and chronic asthma complicated his heart trouble. In late 1959, Elmore went to New York to record for Bobby Robinson's Fire label, sessions which yielded some of his finest recorded work. In 1961, James ran afoul of the musicians' union for non-payment of dues and wound up blacklisted.

He returned to Mississippi and confined himself to local gigs until May, 1963, when he was summoned back to Chicago by disc jockey Big Bill Hill. When Hill arranged a recording session and bailed James out with the union, the now-ailing bluesman looked set for a fresh start. But on May 24, the night before the session, Elmore James died of a heart attack at 41. He left no immediate family, and Bill Hill paid to have the body shipped home to Mississippi for burial.

His recorded legacy is repackaged regularly, and you can hear his signature riff at least once a night from every slide guitarist working. But no one has ever quite matched that vocal intensity which transformed the lonesome moan of the Delta into a Chicago scream. When Elmore James sang, he sang for keeps.

*– Tony Glover*

# Harlem Blues

T*ropical Heatwave:* Robinson as Lindy Hopper at a servicemen's nightclub in Hawaii during World War II.

## Songwriter, Producer, Record Retailer and More, Bobby Robinson Looks Back on a Life in Black Music

By LEO SACKS

Bobby Robinson has been baptizing the faithful at Bobby's Happy House at 2335 Eighth Avenue, on the corner of 125th Street, since 1946. He opened the former hat shop after the war and it quickly became a magnet for musicians. Robinson's "showcase" is only a few feet wide, but it bursts with the sound of music. And it's all rhythm & blues at Bobby's (on Sundays, of course, it's gospel).

"The Happy House," he says, "is where my happiness begins."

Growing up in rural Union, South Carolina, Robinson was transfixed by the blues. He braved knife fights in juke joints just to soak up their sound. To his churchgoing parents, his passion for what they called "the Devil's music" was an embarrassment. But when he wrote "The Sky Is Crying" with Elmore James after a torrential downpour and recorded its lightning bottleneck runs later that night in Chicago, Robinson was sure of his sound judgement and good taste. "We arrived in town on the same day and just happened to meet. Lucky for me, too, or the Chess brothers would have beat me to it!"

Bobby Robinson never became a mogul like Berry Gordy. Yet his story parallels the history of black popular music. When he dropped the "son" from Robinson and launched Robin Records with "Bobby's Boogie" by saxophonist Morris Lane in 1953, he became one of the first African-Americans to control an independent record company. He was a pivotal player on the New York vocal group sound with the Vocaleers, the Channels and the Charts. He set up the Fire and Fury labels and their kindred cousins Red Robin, Holiday, Vest, Whirlin' Disc and Enjoy. He cut blues with Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee and Jack Dupree, and instrumentals with Tiny Grimes. Then in 1959 Wilbert Harrison sang "Kansas City" in two takes and Robinson had his first million-seller. "It was a whole new ballgame," he says. "The spotlight was on me."

There were sessions in New Orleans with Lee Dorsey ("Ya Ya") and Bobby Marchan ("There Is Something on Your Mind"). Robinson brought the Baptist beat to pop radio with hits by Gladys Knight & the Pips ("Every Beat of My Heart") and Don Gardner & Dee Dee Ford ("I Need Your Loving"). He recorded Buster Brown's "Fannie Mae" and a greasy groove by King Curtis called "Soul Twist." His coattails were long enough for Red Prysock, Lightin' Hopkins, Titus Turner and Big Boy Crudup, too. And in the late Seventies he resurrected Enjoy and jumpstarted the rap careers of Grandmaster Flash, Doug E. Fresh, Spoonie Gee and Kool Moe Dee.

*Star Time on 125:* In his 125th record shop with [from left] Fats Domino and Jackie Wilson.

*With Every Beat Of My Heart:* Producing a record with Gladys Knight and the Pips.

Driving his jet-black '69 Firebird north on Malcolm X Boulevard, Robinson points to the housing project where the Mellowmoods, his first vocal group, lived. He stops at an abandoned, crumbling corner where he's heard of some promising rappers. Musical strategies may be different now, he says, but little else has changed: "Rappers assert themselves a lot more than the doo-wop singers did, but the vocal groups were just as mixed-up and confused as the kids trying to express themselves are today."

At Tony's Flash Inn in the shadow of Yankee Stadium, Robinson, who by various accounts is in his early 70s, settles into a corner table and talks about tuning in to the power of a million dance parties.

The happiness begins here:

"I was lucky enough to know all four of my grandparents, who were slaves. Somehow they managed to buy land which we've had in the family for 110 years. There were birch trees

everywhere, and pines and mighty oaks. In the spring the dogwoods bloomed and the flowers smelled like sweet perfume. My father was a truck farmer and my mother worked herself to death, frankly, doing laundry so her four children could get a high school education, which was a rare goddamn thing for poor country blacks. My maternal grandmother was three-parts Cherokee and we grew fruit and vegetables and cotton, which was a great thing in the Depression because people in the shacks around us were literally starving.

I always loved music but my family was very religious and I wasn't allowed to play the blues. So I sang gospel with my cousins in the The Singing Stars and we gave concerts in churches around the neighborhood in a very straightforward style because there weren't any contemporary gospel acts until after the war.

New York was the land of opportunity. I had a cousin who lived on Convent Avenue, and when I came here in 1937 he took me in with open arms. I had about $75, which was a fat bankroll when you realize that a newspaper cost two cents, the subway was a nickel and a meal was a quarter. My cousin met me at Pennsylvania Station, and looking at its domed roof I couldn't believe New York had a top on it!

I worked in a soda shop and a luncheonette and as I got around socially I discovered the Savoy Ballroom. Continuous music all night long! Two bands a night! One on either side of the stage! Seven days a week! Erskine Hawkins, Buddy Johnson, Count Basie, the Savoy Sultans, Cootie Williams – all the blackname bands. I learned to dance with Whitey's Lindy Hoppers, a great dance team. When I was drafted in '42 and shipped off to the Hawaiian Islands, I found out which servicemen could dance and sing and started throwing talents shows for the troops.

When I got out in '45, man, I had the music bug. Louis Jordan and the Tympany Five were at the Elks Rendezvous Club on 133rd and Lenox. Small's Paradise was the biggest and most prominent club in Harlem, at 135th and Seventh. The Baby Grand was on 125th and St. Nicholas. And downtown was Swing Street. Must have been twenty-five nightclubs on those two long blocks. I'd sit at the bar and listen to Billie and the Count and Jimmy Rushing and Charlie Barnett.

I bought the Happy House from two old Jewish gentlemen who made custom hats for ladies during the war. I had my eye on it and when I approached them they asked me if I could put my hands on $2500. Twenty-five hundred dollars! Only the Rockefellers had that kind of money. But I had done a lot of wheeling and dealing in the army as a loanshark to the guys who played cards and craps. My salary was only $80 a month but I came home with about $18,000. My money belt was so big, it split wide open!

I didn't know a thing about the business but music was my religion and the store was my bridge over troubled waters. I was the first black man to own a business on the main drag and I met everybody in the music world because I was located a few doors down from the Apollo. For black entertainers it was a temple, so everyone stopped in to see me. I advised the Shiffmans on who to book there. And since A&R men were always consulting me I figured by book or crook I could make it as a manufacturer. First I got a list of distributors. Then I ordered some Charles Brown and sold 'Driftin' Blues' by the boxful during Apollo intermissions. Frankie Lane had a big record with 'Mule Train' and Louis Jordan was also hot with everything – 'Run Joe,' 'Caldonia,' 'Don't Worry 'Bout the Mule.' It was all trial and error.

*Make It Funky:* With the Godfather of Soul, James Brown.

Sugar Ray Robinson's club was a block south of 125th Street, very popular, crowded all the time. The Palm Cafe was about ten doors down from the Apollo and the jocks used to broadcast interviews there from a glass booth. All the celebrities came: Jackie Wilson, Willie Mays, Sam Cooke. He told me how he was afraid to leave gospel 'cause he made a steady $200 a week. The food was good everywhere. Chicken any way you wanted it. Ham. Roast beef. Steaks. Collard greens, potato salad, green peas, sweet potatoes. The women? Whatever type you liked, they were there.

I made the rounds of the clubs and handpicked my musicians, depending on the sound I was after. My philosophy was, give to others what belongs to them and take what belongs to lantic. Another time Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers were waiting for me at the shop, but I was stuck in a parking lot called the Lincoln Tunnel. Missed them by thirty minutes, so they went downtown and George Goldner signed them. I also turned down a singer who sounded too much like Little Richard – it was Otis Redding.

There was nothing like the Motown revues when they came to Harlem in the Sixties. But James Brown revolutionized the business. Nobody had his intensity. Sounded like he had a hot iron to his ass. James and Nat Cole and Louis Jordan gave black people hope and inspiration.

When Dr. King was assassinated, people went crazy, burning and looting. I stood in front of my store all night and no-

B*lack Moses & Friend:* With Isaac Hayes, in full regalia.

me. I used guitar players who could feel from the jump, really stink it up, like Wild Jimmy Spruill, Ruff Ruffin, Mickey Baker, Eric Gale and Kenny Burrell. I always used King Curtis and arrangers like Horace Ott and I gave Bernard Purdie his start on drums. Whenever I wrote I'd use two tape recorders – one to sing the melody, the other to bang out a beat. We did most of our recording in midtown because there weren't any studios in Harlem. Very few blacks knew the technical side of the business.

So the shop became a focal point in Harlem. Independent labels were flourishing and the groups were always stopping in to find out how their records were doing. I still can't believe I lost two #1 records. Once I was sick with the flu, so the Chords gathered around my bed to sing 'Sh-Boom.' They were chomping at the bit to make a record but the singer didn't have a phone so he gave me his landlady's number. Everytime I called her said she had rheumatism and couldn't walk up the stairs to deliver my messages. . .so the Chords signed with At-body touched me. That spoke volumes. It told me that I represented the community's interests. That I was a black businessman who defied the pressure and the prejudice and the negativity and still stayed on the strip.

The Harlem I remember is a beautiful society. White kids teaching black kids to do the Shag. People having fun, going to movies and nightclubs and restaurants, walking the streets at night, feeling secure. A great place until drugs changed the landscape, wasting lives. It's so sad.

I could have been a millionaire many times over if I had known about the importance of copyrights. But I'm rich in other ways. Rich in knowledge and tradition and the fact that I inspired millions of people. I don't know what life poses after this one, so I wrote a poem: '*I romped up and down the corridors of life and love/I trod where wise men fear/I took the bitter with the sweet and all the fickle fantasies of fate in stride/I answered life's challenge, loud and clear.*' ''