Subject: Today's Recommendation: Blind Willie Johnson
Posted by elektratig on Mon, 18 Apr 2005 23:43:03 GMT
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After a hiatus, I'm back.The first time I heard Blind Willie Johnson, I felt as if someone had thrust an ice pick in my neck; I was, literally, stunned. Then I began to smile and, ultimately, laugh out loud – in amazement, and in joy that I'd found him. He is, simply, the finest old time blues singer and performer I have ever heard. I am apparently not alone. Ry Cooder reportedly called one of his songs the most "transcendent piece in all American music." Bob Dylan and Eric Clapton have also cited him as a major influence.Willie was born near Waco, Texas in about 1902. At age five, he announced that he was going to be a preacher, and his father made his first guitar out of a cigar box. Following the death of his mother, his father remarried. After his father beat his stepmother for cheating on him, she blinded Willie at age seven by throwing lye water in his face (apparently aiming for the father). With few options available, Willie later began performing on street corners with a tin can tied around his neck, singing and playing the guitar in a bottleneck slide style, using a pocketknife. He married in 1927.Luckily for us, also in 1927 Columbia brought Blind Willie into a studio, where he recorded ten of his songs. They sold very well, and later sessions increased the total number of songs recorded to thirty. By 1930, however, the Depression had devastated his audience. After a final session in April 1930 sold poorly, Blind Willie, like many bluesmen of the era, never recorded again.With his wife, he lived for the rest of his life in Beaumont, earning a living as best he could by preaching and playing on the streets and occasional church benefits. In 1947, their house burned down. Living in the damp remains of the structure, he died of pneumonia, virtually forgotten until rediscovered during the folk-blues revival in the 1960s.Although I have termed Blind Willie's music as "blues," he would likely have objected to the characterization. He was devoted to the Bible and the Baptist Church, of which he was a member. Most of his songs are religious – gospel, if you will – and on the streets he preached as well as played his music. But whether you call them "blues" or "gospel" or by some other name, the performances are those of a man fighting for his very life and soul. Sometimes using a sweet tenor, Blind Willie mostly growled and shouted his songs in a raspy, bellowing, moaning – and yet intensely beautiful – low baritone that would make the devil run scared . . . or cause him to get down on the ground and cry out for forgiveness.Comparisons? There are none that I can think of that are not misleading. Tom Waits and Captain Beefheart are sometimes mentioned. Both lack the power and, more importantly, the anguished and yet life-affirming beauty that Blind Willie conveys. This is "soul" music in the literal sense.I have Columbia's two-disc "The Complete Blind Willie Johnson," but if you're unwilling to plunk down $16.99 (at Amazon), Columbia's one-disc "Dark Was the Night" ($9.98 at Amazon) contains sixteen of his finest works, most or all of which are from the earlier sessions. The Columbia recordings are quite good for "race records" of the era and never prevent Blind Willie's raw beauty and power from leaping out at you and thrusting that ice pick squarely in your neck.
Dark Was the Night