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

Subject: Re: Today's Recommendation: Blind Willie Johnson
Posted by Manualblock on Tue, 19 Apr 2005 00:08:38 GMT

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Maybe Bukka White? Similar motif and gravelly voice with some old gospel tunes. Good to have you back, My shelf has been conspicuously bare for a while.

Subject: Blind Willie and Bukka White
Posted by elektratig on Wed, 20 Apr 2005 23:33:01 GMT
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MB,I've been sitting here listening to Bukka White and Blind Willie. You're absolutely right: there are marked similarities between their vocal techniques. Bukka's voice is higher, reedier (and I don't think his guitar technique is as distinctive), but they're an obvious comparison I should have drawn.What I can't figure out is why Bukka doesn't have an impact on me whereas Blind Willie hits me like that icepick. When I listen to Bukka, I enjoy it but without any real involvement. When I listen to Blind Willie, even now, I involuntarily start to grin. For me -- and I'm the first one to admit these judgments are totally personal and subjective -- Bukka somehow lacks the incredible emotional depth that Blind Willie conveys. Such is the mystery of music.e

Subject: Re: Blind Willie and Bukka White
Posted by Manualblock on Fri, 22 Apr 2005 00:06:31 GMT
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Thoughtfull reply; and it brings up a point I have been considering. Many people write reviews; with the availability of the internet anyone can become an instant expert on almost anything. But they miss the concept of carefull thought and reflection of which your reviews are made. The personal time put in on contemplation that infuses the true afficianado and is apparent immediately upon introduction of the material.Bukka was an amalgam of different styles; slack tunings and gospel influences among them. Maybe thats the reason you see more depth to Willie. John The Revelator is a harrowing song that touches some kind of nerve; it's raw and deep and I can't hear it without stopping to absorb the music. Thats my example of what may be similar to what you are saying; or maybe not. I find Lightnin' Hopkins to exhibit some of that riveting effect. Skip James does it also. Blind Boys of Alabama before they got famous. Just some of the different styles that I find to be intensely absorbing. As an aside will you do a Lizt sometime in the future?

Subject: Re: Blind Willie and Bukka White
Posted by elektratig on Fri, 22 Apr 2005 07:01:03 GMT
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MB,In the classical world, two of the major review magazines are Gramophone and Fanfare. In Gramophone, the reviewers, being British, tend to paper over their differences, or at least state them politely, but the American Fanfare reviewers make no effort to do so. Sometimes you will see two reviews of a significant release, and more often than not they will be diametrically opposed, one reviewer extolling its virtues, the other excoriating it as a piece of trash. Then the readers pile on, and it goes downhill from there. The fights can be downright vicious -- and highly amusing ("Jane, You ignorant slut") if you don't have an ax to grind. They taught me early on that all opinions about music are intensely personal, and I don't mean to pretend differently. Anyway, at least it means that I'm no LESS qualified to review a piece than anyone else!As for M. Liszt, you've unfortunately hit one of my blind spots. I think I've said that, in exploring classical music, focus on what you like, don't worry about what you don't like. That's really what I did. I sampled a composer; if I liked him, I tried more, if I didn't, I moved on. The result was a series of blind spots -- composers who didn't grab me when I first sampled them. In many cases, with more experience I've gone back and resampled and found my assessment dramatically changed. (Brahms is an example. At first, he left me cold; now I love him.) Unfortunately, I've just never gotten around to resampling Liszt.Do I infer correctly you like piano, or is there something about Liszt in particular? To the extent I feel competent, I'm happy to focus on particular periods, composers, instruments, etc.One other thought on getting one's bearings in the imposing world of classical music. Particularly if you're interested in a particular piece (Liszt's Piano Concerto, for example), you can do a lot worse than slip into the local record shop and take a look at the recommendations in the Penguin Guide to Classical Music. Yes, the authors have their prejudices (they're Brits, and they've never met a Simon Rattle recording they don't love, for example), but they're pretty darned reliable. Each of the three authors must be about 80 years old by now and probably has been writing classical reviews for 40 or 50 years.In addition, Gramophone has a website with a feature (called Gramofile) that allows you to search their reviews. (You have to sign up, but it's free.) It's six months out of date (I think), but that really doesn't matter. Rarely is the latest release the best. There is also a "recommended recordings" section.e

Gramophone Magazine Website

Subject: Re: Blind Willie and Bukka White
Posted by Manualblock on Sun, 24 Apr 2005 23:15:32 GMT
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Thanks Kindly for the offer to answer any questions; I appreciate it. The thing is your reviews simplify the whole process. When first starting out one has no basis upon which to ask questions; consequently those reviews initiate the whole learning process. I know it makes me in particular sound lazy and there I stand accused, but eventually knowledge will seep in and maybe provide the basis for a dialogue.Until then this method you have of writing up a particular composer or piece is very helpfull. I have thoroughly enjoyed the Shostokovich and I'm starting on the Mahler. The Perotin is a bit of a truck but ocassional notes hit the bell and I see where you are coming from.I like Bach and Bartok also.
