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BIG BILL BROONZY

THE MIDNIGHT SPECIAL: LIVE IN NOTTINGHAM 1957

SIDE ONE

1. THIS TRAIN
2. TROUBLE IN MIND
3. WILLIE MAE
4. IN THE EVENING
5. GLORY OF LOVE
6. THE MIDNIGHT SPECIAL
7. WHAT KIND OF MAN JESUS IS

SIDE TWO

1. KEEP YOUR HANDS OFF IT
2. NOBODY’S BUSINESS
3. HEY! BUB
4. THE FEASTING TABLE
5. C.C. RIDER
6. SWING LOW, SWEET CHARIOT
7. GOODNIGHT IRENE

If blues legend Big Bill Broonzy (1893-1958) plied his trade in the 21st century, he’d probably be an Uber driver. A gig-economy practitioner in his day, to make ends meet Broonzy was employed as a sharecropper, dishwasher, cook, foundry worker, coal miner, piano mover, college janitor, and preacher. His bosses included an undertaker.

Born in Mississippi, “Big Bill” – the name refers to his 6’ 6” physical stature – remains largely unsung as far as a household name, despite recording several hundred songs, many of which he wrote. As a teenager in Alabama, he entertained kids by making music from cornstalks, and later played a homemade fiddle at white folk’s parties. Broonzy eventually moved to Arkansas, but left in February 1920 for Chicago, switching to guitar when the opportunity arose. He made his first record in 1927, and quickly fit in with the burgeoning blues scene as a session player. He often sat in with the first harmonica player known as Sonny Boy Williamson.

From the late 1920s through the late 1950s, this immensely prolific blues performer won over fellow musicians and “race music” fans alike. Nearly every label – notably Okeh, Paramount, and Vocalion, in the early days and later Folkways, Mercury, Victor, and Columbia, among them – released Broonzy records during and after his lifetime.

Yet he couldn’t support his family solely with music, despite far exceeding the recorded output of more revered contemporaries, such as the relatively short-lived Robert Johnson (1911-1938), Charley Patton (1891-1934), or Son House (1902-1988). In 1939, renowned producer John Hammond sought Johnson to be a featured performer for his “Swing to Spirituals” concert in New York’s Carnegie Hall, only to find out that the author of “Crossroads” was deceased. Broonzy took his place.

Mentoring Muddy Waters, Broonzy implored: “Do your thing, stay with it, man; if you stay with it, you goin’ to make it.” His disciple recorded an all-Broonzy tribute album in 1959.

Some of his aforementioned occupations found their way into Broonzy originals, such as “Night Watchman” or “Mopper’s Blues,” the latter a pillar of the pre-famous Rod Stewart repertoire. Without Broonzy, the world would be devoid of the rock staple, “Key to the Highway.” Eric Clapton, who studied Big Bill’s guitar technique as a teenager, included the song on his Derek & The Dominos’ *Layla* album. If Clapton was two decades older, or Broonzy two decades younger, I have no doubt they would have collaborated.

Keith Richards, in his autobiography *Life*, mentions that he listened to Broonzy as a child: “Big Bill Broonzy realized he could pick up a bit of dough if he switched from Chicago blues to being a folksy bluesman for European audiences.” Big Bill first landed on the continent as a WWI soldier.

Indeed, the concert you’re listening to here from March 1957 in Nottingham, England, brandishes a folk-blues that would soon become mainstays at Newport’s folk and blues festivals.

As with other bluesmen, Big Bill’s material came from his wanderlust, fondness for women and whiskey, and societal racism, which he experienced at a Nottingham hotel in 1955 when he was told “coloreds” were not allowed; Bill eventually received an apology from the management.

This solo performance captures (for posterity) Big Bill’s affable personality and ability to hold the attention of an appreciative audience with his storytelling, acoustic guitar licks, and a strong singing voice that leaves an indelible impression that this man had experiences in the fields, the factories, and the railroads. The 1957 Nottingham setlist largely consists of folk standards including “The Midnight Special,” and “This Train,” on which you can hear a little Elvis Presley swing, as Broonzy’s introduction slyly alludes to some “rockin’ and rollin’” cultural appropriation; we know what came first.

Exhibiting the talent of any great song stylist, Broonzy makes all his own “The Glory of Love,” an often-covered chestnut since the 1930s. In introducing “Trouble in Mind,” Big Bill notes a former roommate, Richard Jones, wrote the song. “He was a man,” he laughs, nothing wrong with that. On “What Kind Of Man Jesus Is,” Broonzy harks back to his religious roots. He’s self-deprecating on “In the Evening,” quipping that it killed its composer, another friend. “I hope it doesn’t kill me.” Three months after this concert, Big Bill learned he had lung cancer, to which he succumbed at 65 years old in August 1958.

It’s no wonder American folklorists Alan Lomax, Moe Asch, and Studs Terkel (a pallbearer for Big Bill, as was Waters) picked up on Broonzy’s chameleon knack for absorbing the cultural zeitgeist and influencing others.

As with today’s musicians making due with pennies from Spotify streams, he needed to supplement his live gigs with other labor because he never collected his proper share of recording royalties. “I always worked at all kinds of hard jobs,” Broonzy told an interviewer in 1956. “I was never able to alone rely on my own music ‘til 1953.” We’re all the poorer for that.

LARRY JAFFEE

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FRONT PANEL

BIG BILL BROONZY

THE MIDNIGHT SPECIAL: LIVE IN NOTTINGHAM 1957



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