

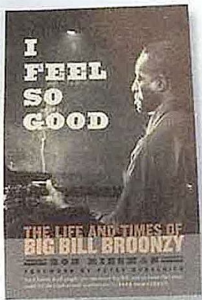


Don't start me talkin': Big Bill Broonzy (right) with Sonny Boy Williamson.

You only live twice

A hitmaker in black Chicago remade himself as a musical ambassador to the white world. By Tony Russell.

I Feel So Good: The Life And Times Of Big Bill Broonzy



Bob Riesman

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AS AN international celebrity in the '50s, Big Bill Broonzy was billed as "a great country blues singer". When he died in 1958, some called him the last of that breed. It wasn't true, as would be proved by a stream of "rediscovered" blues musicians such as Son House, Skip James and Booker White; but the stream only reached us because Bill had undammed it. He was able to do so because he was not a "country blues singer" at all. Compared to a Southern ruralist like Fred McDowell, Bill was as urban as a streetcar. He made his

reputation in '30s Chicago as a prolific songwriter and guitarist, his records bustling small-group playlets of contemporary life.

But when a different spotlight shone upon him, directed by folk song enthusiasts and political activists like John Hammond, Alan Lomax and friend Win Stracke, Bill presented another face. Ignoring a decade of playing for his own community – a past only record collectors would have been aware of – he walked out on-stage as a minstrel for the moment, an all-American folk singer, his song-bag a jumble of blues, folk rhymes and old pop songs.

If he had offered his audiences in Greenwich Village niteries or Belgian concert halls nothing but his own "race" records like Bull Cow Blues or Serve It To Me Right, he would have lost them in minutes. Meeting them halfway with John Henry, drawing them closer with story-songs like Mopper's Blues (as programme notes would have mentioned, Bill worked as a janitor), he could then knock them sideways with another kind of "race" song, his analysis of where he stood in American society:

"If you's white, you's all right – if you's brown, stick around – but if you's black, brother, get back, get back, get back."

It was a brilliant exercise in self-presentation, based upon a skill and fluidity beyond the powers of House or McDowell. So it was lucky that Bill came first, and touched so wide a throng. Riesman's story has

an extraordinary cast, from novelist Richard Wright, director Mike Nichols and radio host Studs Terkel to Eric Clapton, Ray Davies and Martin Carthy. But the revelations in this wonderful book are not Bill's connections but his disconnections: the stories he tried

not to tell, or retold to suit his purpose.

He was born 10 years later than he said, his name neither "Bill" nor "Broonzy". He invented an army past in World War I France. He had companions he hid from each other, and children by them. With skill and sensitivity, Riesman has traced these scattered families and friends, and the letters, photographs and tapes they preserved, to fashion an intricately stitched patchwork of a life, and one of the great blues biographies.

"But if you's black brother – get back, get back."