

A Classic Live Album. Son House, Delta Blues And Spirituals



For a number of years I had vague memories of hearing Son House on the John Peel show. This would have been around 1969 or 1970. Son House was talking about the blues and singing his songs, and playing a slide guitar. He had so much power in his voice. However I came to see it as a figment of my imagination. Then in 2004 after John Peels sad death one music magazine listed what they considered to be John Peel's classic sessions. Amongst these sessions was the 1970 Son House session that I remembered hearing. The power of his performance must have left a great impression on me, for the memory to linger like it did, and every so often for the memory to come to the surface.

My introduction to the blues first came around 1963/64. When John Lee Hooker and the Chicago blues artists came to England they got to appear on television programs like Ready Steady Go, and the Beat Room. Hearing Smokestack Lightning by Howling Wolf for the first time at the age of twelve or thirteen was quite an experience. Those blues harmonica players also left an impression on me. I developed an ambition to play the harmonica. I only started to fulfill that ambition at the beginning of this century. But it is never too late to start. I was young then these were the days of the beat boom. Pop music and soul music also played a part in my musical listening. It is good to try and keep an open ear to different things. But there were many British blues bands at the time. By 1965 soul music started to take over from the blues. Some great records came out of this. Then in late 1967 there was the second British blues boom. This gave us artists such as Peter Greens Fleetwood Mac, Stan Webb's Chicken Shack, The Ainsley Dunbar Retaliation, Duster Bennett, and many others. In the autumn of 1967 when Radio One first started. A chap called Mike Raven ran a rhythm and blues show on Sunday evenings. Like John Peel on a Sunday afternoon, this was something that I had to listen to whenever I could. The first half of the show was taken up with soul music. This included deep soul that you wouldn't normally hear on the radio. In the middle of the show was a session by a British blues band. Then the second half of the show was taken up by the blues. This is where I first got to hear the country blues. I grew to love the sound of those old country blues records. Mike Raven even started to fit in a few reggae records, saying how he felt that reggae was Jamaican blues. This is where I first heard the Israelites by Desmond Dekker, long before the record got played on daytime radio.

During the early 1970s I started to drift away from the blues. I started to move towards reggae. Living in London you heard reggae coming out of house windows. In a place like Brixton you would hear it coming out of record shops. I kept hearing things that I liked. There were those Trojan record samplers, which for me contained a lot of little gems. Hearing Blood and Fire by Niney the Observer on Tighten Up volume four was quite an experience. Then there were Toots and the Maytells and Jimmy Cliff. I used to love that stuttering guitar sound, and there were some great organ players. I heard some great singles, like Book of Rules by the Heptones. Then The Wailers signed to Island records. When I first heard Bob Marley's Concrete Jungle from Catch a Fire, I felt the song could have been about London. With all the tower block estates that were going up at the time. Another standout track on the record was Stop That Train by Peter Tosh. Their second album for Island titled Burning has long been one of my all time favourite records. There were a couple of contributions from Bunny Wailer which I really liked. They had a pastoral feel like some of the songs on his first solo album Blackheart Man. Burning is where some of Marley's anthems started life. One of them Get Up Stand Up he co wrote with Peter Tosh. Peter Tosh was a good guitarist. Listen to his playing on I Shot the Sheriff. This was the last record that the original group made before Peter and Bunny parted company with Bob. As the years rolled on my interest in reggae grew. I saw the toasters as performing an exciting form of poetry. It was hard not to have a soft spot for the good natured Rastafarian evangelizing of Joseph Hill from Culture. Then there was the New Wave, and Post punk. I found myself listening to bands like Public Image Limited who were influenced by more modern forms of music like Kraut Rock and Dub. But all through the 1970s and 1980s one of the artists I listened to the most was Kevin Coyne. An artist who was greatly influenced by the blues. Since the 1970s Kevin Coyne has been one of my favourite artists. I also had a cassette with John Lee Hooker on one side, and Lightning Hopkins on the other side. I found myself listening to this tape a lot. So while I was listening to modern bands of the time, Felt being an example, they were a very talented and underrated band, I was still tuning into the blues. In the early 1990s someone introduced me to Ben Harper, an artist who while working in different styles, had the country blues at the roots of his music. Then came the White Stripes. The guitar drum duo who sang praises to Son House. Those memories of hearing Son House on the John Peel show became very vivid again. I had to go out and buy a Son House record.

I now have three Son House CDs. But the first one that I bought was called Delta Blues and Spirituals. It was recorded live at the 100 Club London in 1970. Very soon we will be listening to the record, but first I will tell you a bit about Son House.

Son House was born as Eddie James House, Junior March 21 1902. He was born in a town called Riverton, which is two miles from Clarksdale Mississippi. He was the middle of three brothers. When Son House was either seven or eight his parents separated. He was brought with his mother to Tallulah Louisiana. As a teenager he picked cotton as a living. However the young lad was determined to become a Baptist preacher. At the age of 15 Son House began his preaching career. However despite the church's stand against blues music, and the sinful world that revolved around it, he became attracted to the blues. In his mid twenties Son House taught himself guitar and moved back to the Clarksdale area. Here he started playing alongside people like Charlie Patton. (Charlie Patton was one of the first blues artists to record). Also Robert Johnson. Son House became something of a mentor to Robert Johnson. Someone else who had a big influence on Johnson was Skip James. Robert Johnson and Skip James never met. But Johnson was influenced by Skip's recordings. Skip James sang in an eerie falsetto voice, he sang both blues and spirituals. In the 1930s he met up with his father who he hadn't seen for some years. His father had become a Baptist preacher, and Skip followed in his fathers

footsteps. However he was rediscovered in the early 1960s and continued to perform and record until he died from cancer at the end of the 1960s. Skip James best known song is probably I'm So Glad. A song that Cream recorded in the late 1960s. To give Cream credit they paid Skip James royalties. I feel Skip James was an influence on Nick Drakes Pink Moon album. I feel he was also an influence on some of John Martyns work.

To go back to the divisions between the church and the blues. Despite the two worlds being separated at the time many blues artists also sang gospel songs. For example Blind Lemon Jefferson was known as a blues artist. He recorded many blues songs. One well known example being Matchbox Blues. (A song that in the 1950s Carl Perkins recorded as Matchbox. The song was recorded by the Beatles in the mid 60s, and became one of Ringo's showpieces.). Blind Lemon also recorded a number of gospel songs. One of his best known songs See That My Grave Is Kept Clean is based on an old hymn. I read somewhere that these barriers broke down a bit during the Depression years. The church had to open up a bit to help the poor. However this conflict has continued over the years. It has had an affect on many blues and soul artists.

Some soul artists like Al Green and Garnet Mimms went back to the church. The same thing happened to some of Son Houses contemporaries. For example Skip James. Also Thomas Dorsey. He recorded blues under the name of Georgia Tom. However Thomas Dorsey went on to write some beautiful hymns, an example being Precious Lord. However it was some years before the church would accept his songs due to his past in the blues. Other artists like Robert Johnson took the downward spiral to an early death. He was poisoned after having an affair with someone else's wife. Robert Johnson might have felt a bit overshadowed by his contemporaries as he was younger than them. He studied Son Houses hands as he was playing. However when he had his first go at playing nobody rated him much. Then he disappeared for about six months. When he returned with a guitar on his back he kept pestering Son House and Willie Brown to let him play. When they finally did, they were amazed at how good he had become. This is where the stories of Robert Johnson meeting the devil at the crossroads came from. That he was given great talent in exchange for his soul. Robert Johnson encouraged those rumours with Songs like Hellhound On My Trail and Me And The Devil. Robert Johnson also wrote tender songs like Love In Vain. It is possible that he might have gone away to practice but due to these stories, and the eeriness in some of his music, his legacy tends to overshadow a lot of his contemporaries. The music he made could be quite disturbing. Son House stood in the middle, and spent his life struggling with the conflicts. He addressed the issues in a song called Preaching The Blues.

In the mid 1920s Son House started playing music. However in 1928 he started a sentence in the Mississippi State Penitentiary, also known as Parchman Farm. The story is that he was playing a gig when someone went trigger happy with a gun and shot Son House in the leg. In self defence Son House shot the man. He was sentenced for fifteen years. However due to his musical skills he was released after two years, and he started his recording career. Parchman Farm is an experience that Son House shared with some of his contemporaries. However it is important that we don't see this as a blues stereotype. I feel this had a lot to do with the tough lives that these people were living in the segregated America of the day.

Son House made his first recordings in 1930. On this session he was accompanied by Charlie Patton. (One of the first blues artists to record). Also by his close friend and fellow blues musician Willie Brown. While he didn't make many recordings, Willie Brown gets mentioned by name in a verse of Robert Johnson's song Crossroad

Blues. Son House continued recording throughout the decade. His recording career continued into the 1940s. However sometime in that decade, (I don't know the date), his friend Willie Brown died. After this he stopped recording and retired from music.

During his retirement Son House moved to New York where he took on various forms of employment. He worked as a barbecue chief, as a school janitor, and a railroad porter. He worked on the Empire State Express, a train that ran between New York and Chicago. This job was to become the inspiration for a future song titled Empire State Express, named after the train

In 1964 a group of blues enthusiasts went out searching for him. After a long search through the Mississippi delta they finally tracked him down in upstate New York. He didn't have a guitar any more, and was unaware of the revival of interest in the country blues. A young musician called Al Wilson taught Son House how to play his songs again. I don't mean that in a patronising way. But Son House had been away from his music so long that he had forgotten his songs. With Al Wilson's support and encouragement Son House started remembering his songs again. Slowly it all started coming back. (Al Wilson went on to become a part of a blues band called Canned Heat. Canned Heat are probably best known for their two big hits, On The Road Again and Lets Work Together. On The Road Again featured Al Wilson on lead vocals. He sang in a falsetto not unlike Skip James. Lets Work Together features their other singer Bob 'The' Bear Hite. A big man as his name suggests. He sang in a gruffer voice.

[Editors Note - lets not forget also Goin' Up The Country and the Boogie filled Long Way from L.A. Sorry Frank, I was a bit of fan and saw The Heat in Hyde Park quite soon after Al Wilson die., I think I'm right in saying that while Bob Hite was known as The Bear Wilson had the soubriquet Blind Owl?]



The classic Heat line up, Bob Hite centre (with hat and beard) and Al Wilson immediately to his left.

In 1964 Son House performed at the Newport Folk Festival alongside Skip James and Bukka White who had also recently been discovered. Son House then continued to record and perform for the rest of the decade. As well as performing in America, Son House also toured England. During this time he sang and recorded a number of spirituals. There is the mighty John The Revelator. Sung unaccompanied except for Sons handclaps. Then there was the childlike song This Little Light Of Mine. He also recorded Blind Willie Johnson's song Motherless Children Have A Hard Time. He still performed Preaching The Blues. Son House was a complex songwriter. For example one of his songs Death Letter linked bereavement with the loss of love. At one time in America when someone died a relative would get a letter with a black band around it telling them the news. This was known as a death letter. In the late 1960s Captain Beefheart and the Magic Band recorded the song under the title of Ah Feel Like Acid. On a radio show in 2002 after playing a version of Death Letter, Kevin Coyne said that when Son House played this song on the John Peel Show, it made John Peel cry. I have difficulty explaining Son Houses slide guitar playing in words. All I can say that it is extremely powerful.

In 1970 Son House made his last tour of Britain. This included two dates at the 100 Club in Oxford Street London. One date was on June 30th the other date was on July 14th. This is where he recorded Delta Blues and Spirituals. Now it's time to stop all this rambling, we will sit down and listen to the record. The record starts with Son House explaining to the audience what the blues are. He says how you can sing the blues in church if you use the words right. He goes on to quote from the bible. "Blessed are the pure at heart. For they shall see GOD." He then tells us how some people get the blues so bad that they want to jump in the river and drown themselves. How some people get the blues so bad that they want to kill each other. When the monologue finishes he launches into between Midnight And Day and his slide guitar starts ringing out . The song is a sad blues that shows both Son Houses strengths and his vulnerabilities as he sings "I cried last night, I cried the night before". After the song he says "Lord have mercy, he then goes into a spiritual called I Want To Go Home On The Morning Train the title is very much related to the blues. The image of the morning train runs through the blues. Trains played a part in a number of songs that were written at the time. And indeed trains did play a part in poor people's lives. People travelled from town to town looking for work. They needed to earn a living. It was very much about survival. However the train sung about here is the train to heaven. How the evening train just might be too late. On both these songs he is accompanied by Al Wilson on harmonica. Sadly Al Wilson died not long after this recording was made. [September 1970]

Al Wilson suffered from depression. He was also very distressed by the way he felt the world was being destroyed by pollution. Indeed we all feel concerned about these things in this 21st century. Al Wilson's death was a sad loss of a talented musician.

After Going Home On The Morning Train, Son House plays Levee Camp Moan. Here again we see both his strengths and vulnerabilities. He sings the lines "I left a woman in backdoor crying I nearly drove her out of her mind", and he sounds like he is confessing to something that he feels bad about. Something that has been playing on his mind. It takes courage for a man to admit to these things. There are many things in Son Houses voice, including the holler of a preacher. After Levee Camp moan he launches into the spiritual This Little Light Of Mine. He sings the song accapella, and the audience starts clapping along, Son House holds church. Then there is another monologue, Thinking Strong. Here he starts talking about religion, "God and the devil, those two fellas don't get along too well together" After a while the monologue stops and we start the second of the two concerts. He starts another monologue also called Thinking Strong. Here he talks about his struggle with his

drinking; he also is talking about being strong and standing up to temptation. The audience is with him all the way. In the end they are sharing jokes. The atmosphere that come across makes it sound like Son House and the audience know each other. Like Son House is a regular guest at the 100 Club. That is the vibe that comes across. It is most heart-warming.

After Thinking Strong he goes into Death Letter. He ends the song with the line from Levee Camp Moan. "I left a woman in the backdoor crying. She nearly lost her mind. After this he plays How To Treat A Man. Here he is accompanied on second guitar by a chap called Delta Dave. He is in fact British guitarist Dave Kelly from Streatham South London. He is probably best known for his work with the blues band alongside Paul Jones but back in 1970 he was guitarist with the John Dummer Blues Band. John Dummer was the bands drummer. He went on to be a part of 70s pop band Darts. Dave Kelly had a sister Jo Ann Kelly who was also a fine blues singer and guitarist. Sadly she died some years back. A tragic loss of a gifted artist.

[Sorry Frank, Ed again but Dave and Jo-Ann both crop again in the Chilli Willi story elsewhere at Big Untidy]

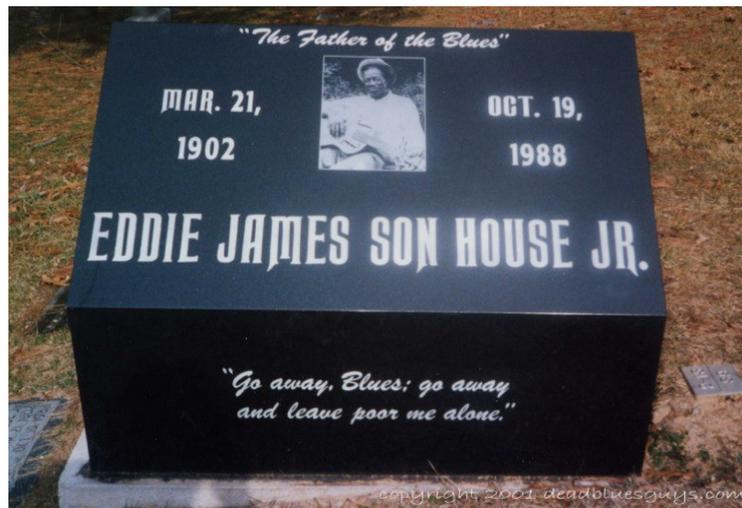
Son House sings about "the blues being a low-down heart disease". He also sings the lines from Levee Camp Moan about leaving a woman in the backdoor crying. Was this something from his past that was playing on his mind? Then he goes into the accapella Grinnin In Your Face and the audience are clapping along again. A few years before he died George Melly did a series of programmes on Radio 2 about the blues coming to Brittan in the 1950s and 1960s. In one of the shows Dave Kelly was talking about the time when along with some other musicians he toured with Son House. While he was their hero he would be walking along behind them. Son House grew up in the colonial days of apartheid in the American South, when a black person was taught to know their place. That is why it is so great to hear Son House and a mostly white audience sharing so much with each other. A wise father figure of the blues, sharing his knowledge and wisdom with a young audience of blues fans. The gig ends with John The Revelator. Here again the audience claps along and joins in with the chorus. Son House adds some extra lyrics to the last verse. On one of my other Son House CDs Son House, The Original Delta Blues there is a powerful version of Son House singing John The Revelator with just his handclaps but this version with the audience joining in, is equally as powerful in its own way. Listening to the record makes me wish that I had been at one of these two gigs

After John The Revelator the MC announces that Son House is going back home to a well earned retirement. It is true that he never toured Britain again. But he did carry on performing in America until the mid the mid 1970s. His memory was getting bad and he started forgetting what song he had just played. He was also getting confused when playing the songs. His manager Dick Waterman decided to retire him while he still had some dignity.

As well as being Robert Johnson's mentor, Son House was also a mentor for a young Muddy Waters. He also knew Rice Miller (Sonny Boy Williamson the 2nd) one of the great blues harmonica players as was Sonny Boy Williamson the 1st. He also knew the mighty Howling Wolf. While the Wolf was playing electric rather than acoustic blues. I often feel that I can hear a bit of Son House in Howling Wolf, especially in his voice. It is important to know that the pioneers of the Chicago blues were born in the American south and grew up there. When they moved up to Chicago they took some of the south up with them. Howling Wolfs recording career started at Sam Philips Sun studio in Memphis. These were the days before Elvis entered the building. Songs like Willie Dixon's Little Red Rooster drew their

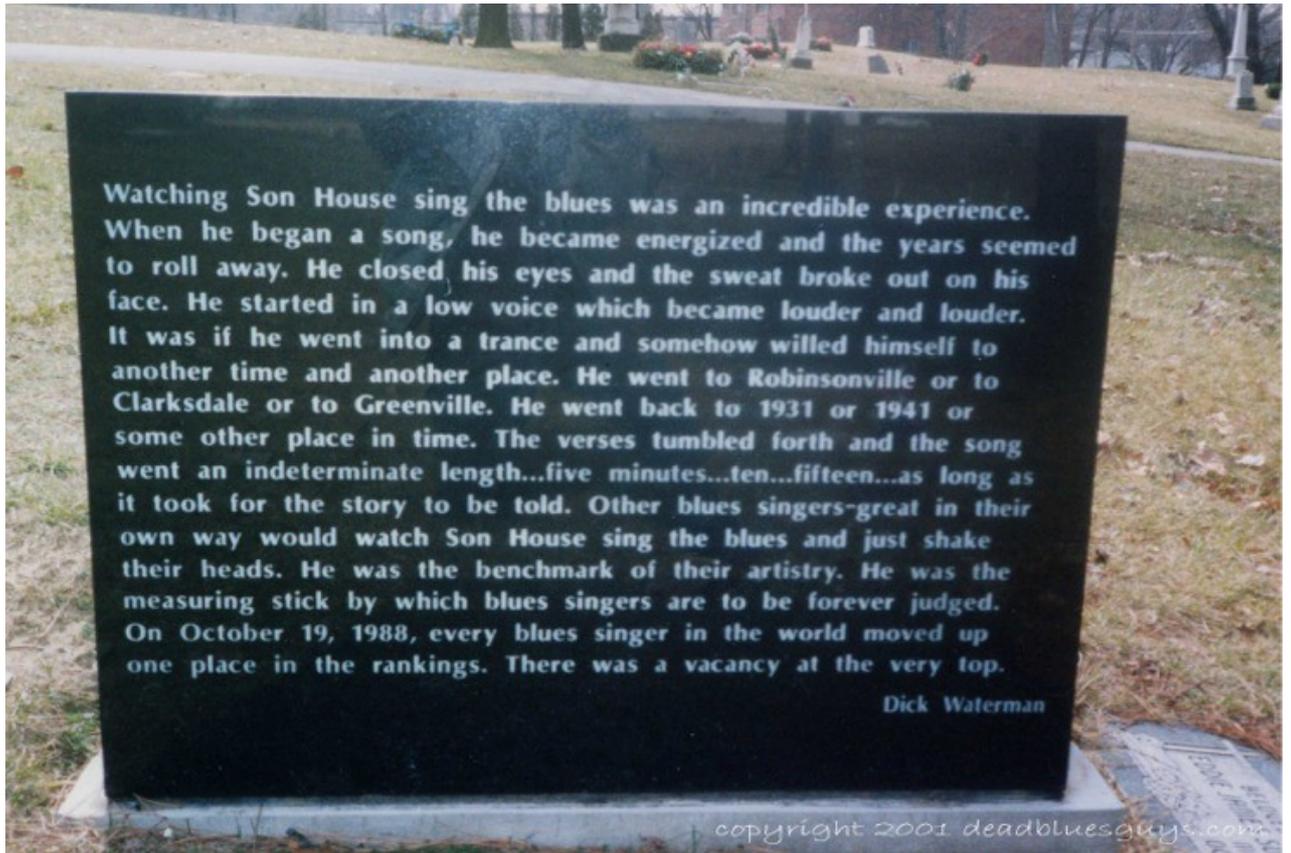
inspiration from the south. Willie Dixon wrote a number of songs that were recorded by Muddy Waters and Howling Wolf. He also wrote Whole Lot Of Love. This has become one of Led Zeppelin's best known songs.

I did read an article on Son House that stated how after his retirement, he went back to the Baptist church. If he did then perhaps he had been able to resolve some of the conflicts that he had spent his life struggling with. Around 1976 he moved to Detroit to be looked after by his family. The last years of life were spent in a rest home in Detroit. A couple of years before he died a fan from Detroit came to visit him there. He brought with him a national guitar. Despite his failing health Son House's eyes lit up when he saw the guitar. He reached for the guitar and tried to play it. However relatives took it from him. It has often been speculated on as to what he would have played. Would it have been a blues or a spiritual?



Son House finally passed away on October 19th 1988, at the age of 86. God Bless you Son House. His passing is now a little bit over two decades ago. Recent enough for a band like the White Stripes to come along singing his praises. In doing so bringing back the memories I had of hearing Son House on the John Peel show back in the day.

Frank Bangay March 2011



For info about Son House go to en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Son_House

also

slidingdelta.com/bluesmen/sonhouse2htm

Another site is

www.wiz.de/music/househtm

There is quite a lot relating to Son House on the internet. One more site is

www.nps.gov/history/delta/blues/people/son_house

For Robert Johnson go to

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Johnson

Also

www.robertjohnsonbluesfoundation.org

There is a lot more as well

For Skip James go to

En.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skip_James

Also

www.nps.gov/history/delta/blues/peopleskip_james

And then there is

www.wiz.de/music/jameskip

For Willie Brown go to

En.wikipedia.org/wiki/willie_brown

For Canned Heat go to

En.wikipedia.org/wiki/canned_heat

Canned Heat have a website at

www.cannedheatmusic.com

A version of Canned Heat is still out there performing and recording. True rock and roll survivors.

There is quite a lot about Mike Raven on the internet. Here are a few websites

[En.wikipedia.org/wiki. Mike_Raven](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mike_Raven)

Another one is

www.radiorewind.co.uk/radio./MikeRaven

As well as being a DJ Mike Raven was also an actor and a sculptor. To see some of his sculptures go to

www.bodminmoor.co.uk/curtonfairman/

For Felt go to

[En.wikipedia.org/wikiFelt_band.](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Felt_band)

This has links with a Felt tribute site where you can find out about Felt. After Felt split up in 1989 Leader Lawrence formed Denim and then Go Cart Mozart. Both bands being quite different from Felt . But both bands are as interesting in their way as Felt was. You can read about them as well on the Felt tribute site. Also on the site is a excellent interview with Lawrence by Lee McFadden.

Now I will unfortunately end on a concerned note. As this article is about a live album that Son House made at 100 Club. I will express my concern over things that I have read about the possibility of the 100 Club closing due to the rents in the Oxford Street area rising. While I hope that the 100 club won't close, it does cause concern. The 100 Club is a surviving part of our musical history. It has seen gigs by many visiting jazz and blues artists. In 1976 it played host to the Sex Pistols, Vic Goddard and the Subway Sect, and many others. For myself and other Kevin Coyne fans. It was Kevin's last ever gig in Britain before he died. A sad and moving experience. I am sure that a lot of us have memories of gigs at the 100 Club. It seems that we live in a society where change comes before people. No matter how much the people might lose out. Lets hope that the 100 Club can survive.

Peace and Love Frank Bangay March 2011.

[Editors Note: The 100 Club has avoided closure thanks to a corporate sponsorship deal struck with Converse, hard to believe that signing on the dotted line with a division of Nike is really a victory though?]

One last note from Ed:

The John Peel session that Frank talks of was recorded July 6th 1970 at The Playhouse Theatre Northumberland Avenue in London and broadcast 5 days later, 3 days before the 2nd 100 Club gig. Produced by John Walters and engineered by Pete Ritzema the recording featured 3 tracks, My Good Gal, Death Letter (with spoken intro) and Don't You Mind People Grinnin' In Your Face (with spoken intro).