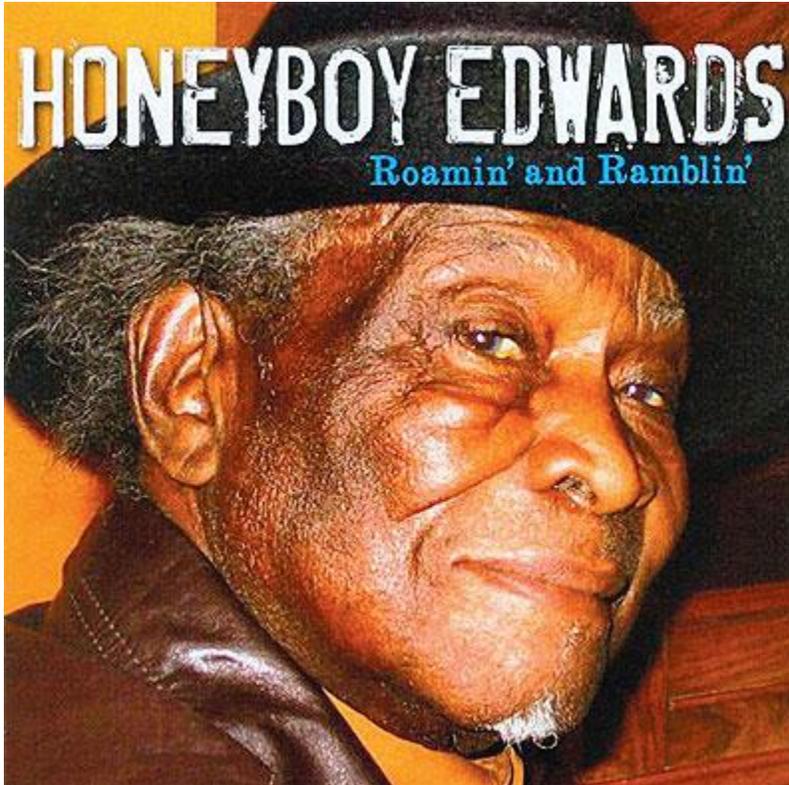


A fitting tribute to the last great Mississippi Delta bluesman

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The last link to the famed Delta blues of the Mississippi Delta, David "Honeyboy" Edwards passed away last week, at the age of 96. Edwards, an edgy slide guitarist with a clear, strong voice, was the last of the great pre-World War II bluesmen from the Delta.



Born in Shaw, Mississippi in 1915, Edwards left home at 14 to follow and perform with Big Joe Williams; he ended up going on the road as an itinerant musician for the next two decades. And as he travelled around the South, he met and played with many great pioneering musicians like Rice Miller (harmonica), Johnny Shines, Charlie Patton and Tommy Johnson. The latter two were amongst the first of the Delta bluesmen to record their songs in the late 1920s but it was the Delta's most famous bluesman, Robert Johnson, who Edwards was asked about as he had travelled with Johnson for several years and was there on the night Johnson died in the 1930s _ reportedly poisoned by a jealous husband.

There is a great deal of conjecture about whether the Delta blues is actually different from country blues although the predominance of solo performance featuring a lot of slide guitar seems to be a defining characteristic of much Delta blues, and Edwards was a master of this style. If you listen to Edwards, Johnson and someone like the early Muddy

Waters (from his Plantation Recordings by Alan Lomax), you'll hear very similar patterns to their guitar-playing.

This sound was developed in the Delta, which is not actually the real mouth of the Mississippi, which is 322km further south, but rather a 322km-long plain that stretches from south of Memphis to Vicksberg.

Here's how Edwards described his wandering minstrel life in Robert Palmer's book *Deep Blues* (Viking, USA, 1981): "Here's how it would go. On Saturday, somebody like me or Robert Johnson would go into one of these little towns, play for nickels and dimes ... And sometimes, you know, you could be playin' and have such a big crowd it would block the whole street. The police would come around, and I would go to another town where I could play at ... Anywhere was home. Where I do good, I stay. When it gets bad and dull, I'm gone. I knowed a lot of places and had enough to go to make it. Man. We played for a lot of peoples."

Despite having a career that stretched more than 80 years, Edwards only recorded 15 albums and there were long periods of recording inactivity between albums. Like Muddy Waters, Edwards earliest recordings were made by Alan Lomax in Clarkesdale, for the Library of Congress, in 1942. He recorded a number of sides under various pseudonyms like "Mr Honey" in the early 1950s and even released one album, *Drop Down Mama* on the Chicago-based Chess label but unlike Muddy and his fellow Delta bluesmen like Howling Wolf, who became stars of the Chicago r'n'b scene (and would later influence rock'n'roll and pop music), Edwards did not prosper as the blues went electric. He didn't record again until 1979. Despite this, he continued to tour and perform and in the 1990s, like other blues survivors such as Pinetop Perkins, he enjoyed a comeback that lasted until last week (he was scheduled to play in Chicago on the day his died and then on to a European tour), recording several excellent albums, including *Don't Mistreat A Fool* (Genes), *Back to the Roots* (Wolf) and his last album, *Roamin' and Ramblin'* (Earwig). He recorded an amazing live album with the other remaining pioneering blues legends Pinetop Perkins, Robert Lockwood Jr and Henry Townsend (ages ranging from 89 to 94), called *Last of the Great Mississippi Bluesmen: Live in Dallas* (Blue Shoe Project), which won a Grammy Award for Best Traditional Blues Album in 2008.

He found time from his busy touring schedule to pen his autobiography, *The World Don't Owe Me Nothin'* (Chicago Review Press) in 1997 and features in many scenes with John Hammond on the latter's documentary film into the myth of Robert Johnson, *The Search for Robert Johnson* (I reviewed this documentary last year). Last year, documentary filmmaker Scott Taradash directed a documentary on Edwards' life, *Honeyboy and the History of the Blues* (Free Range Pictures), which features interviews with Keith Richards, BB King and Robert Cray. I haven't seen the new film yet but it's worth looking out for.

Since Edwards recorded so little and was predominantly a live performer, the best place to start to find the music of this blues legend is on some of the sites like YouTube which has lots of cuts from his albums and some live songs _ play loud!