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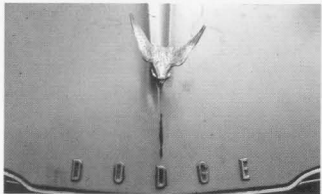


# WARNER **BLUES** Highway

Live **WILLIAMS**  
with JAY SUMMEROUR



Smithsonian Folkways Recordings



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# BLUES HIGHWAY

Warner Williams Live  
with Jay Summerour



- |   |  |      |    |   |      |
|---|--|------|----|---|------|
| 1 | <b>Step It Up and Go</b><br>(J. B. Long/Universal Duchess Music Corp., BMI)                          | 2:38 | 8  | <b>Mouse on the Hill</b><br>(Arr. Warner Williams)  | 3:44 |
| 2 | <b>Ain't Gonna Pick No More Cotton</b><br>(John Henry Barbee)  | 3:47 | 9  | <b>Hey Bartender, There's a Big Bug in My Beer</b><br>(Vern Orr/EMI Unart Catalog Inc., BMI)      | 2:43 |
| 3 | <b>Digging My Potatoes</b><br>(Big Bill Broonzy)   | 3:37 | 10 | <b>Worried Life Blues</b><br>(Maceo Merriweather/Universal Duchess Music Corp., BMI)              | 3:08 |
| 4 | <b>Bring It On Down to My House</b><br>(Bob Wills/Anne-Rachel Music Corp., ASCAP)                    | 2:01 | 11 | <b>I Got a Woman</b><br>(Robert Brown)  | 4:29 |
| 5 | <b>Key to the Highway</b><br>(Big Bill Broonzy-Charlie Segar/Universal Duchess Music Corp., BMI)     | 4:18 | 12 | <b>I Feel So Good</b><br>(Big Bill Broonzy/Universal Duchess Music Corp.-Wabash Music Corp., BMI) | 1:59 |
| 6 | <b>I'm Confessing That I Love You</b><br>(Al Neiburg-Doc Dougherty-Ellis Reynolds/Bourne Co., ASCAP) | 2:34 | 13 | <b>Honeysuckle Rose</b><br>(Fats Waller-Andy Razaf/Anne-Rachel Music Corp., Razaf Music, ASCAP)   | 2:05 |
| 7 | <b>Good Morning Little Schoolgirl</b><br>(John Lee Williamson/Arc Music Corp., BMI)                  | 2:48 | 14 | <b>Little Bit a Blues Theme</b><br>(Jay Summerour)  | 3:25 |



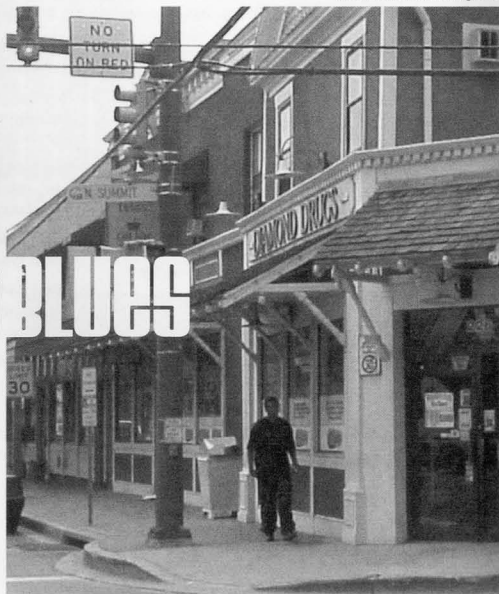
Farm view from Mt. Zion Rd,  
Gaithersburg, MD

# Piedmont BLUES

and Beyond

by Nick Spitzer

Downtown Gaithersburg, MD



The Piedmont region runs from Maryland to Georgia, bounded on the west by the Blue Ridge mountains and on the east by the Tidewater lowlands. In this rising landscape of verdant foothills, eighteenth-century colonists established relatively modest plantations. Small farms still abound in the area, never completely dominated by the hierarchical, feudalistic society characteristic of the Deep South. Partly as a result of this, black and white economic and cultural patterns overlapped to a greater degree here than further south. The Piedmont blues is the musical expression of this cultural mingling. It includes gospel, fiddle tunes, blues, country, ragtime, jazz, and popular songs.

Piedmont blues guitarist Warner Williams grew up in a large family in Takoma Park, Maryland, just outside Washington, D.C. His father played guitar, fiddle, and piano and preferred spirituals. On records Warner heard artists ranging from Lightnin' Hopkins, Blind Boy Fuller, and Muddy Waters on the blues side, to country performers Gene Autry, Ernest Tubb, and his favorite, Hank Williams. All eight brothers and three sisters sang or played instruments. Blues, dance tunes, country, and popular songs entertained at parties and family picnics, the "house-hops," and juke joints. Spirituals were sung at home and church. When Warner was a teen in the late 1940s, he played on the streets of Washington, D.C., and increasingly added blues and jazz to his repertoire; he also began to play the city night spots.

More than a bluesman, Warner Williams is sometimes described as a "songster," owing to the complex mix of styles and sources, songs and other entertainments at his command – many that predate the blues. Given this varied repertoire, one is tempted to call him a musical almanac. Perhaps the best term is his own – *GUITAR MAN* – which is adhered with paste-on letters to several of his vehicles, most notably a white van that is also decorated with cow horns and good luck charms over the hood. Indeed, Warner Williams the guitar man brings consummate playing to his eclectic repertoire, complete with unexpected jazz chords, jaunty single-string work, ragtime strums, and basic Piedmont finger-picking – all complementing his warm, gravely voice.

Music became a part-time vocation for Williams as he raised a family and worked a variety of jobs from ditch-digging to truck-driving. Today, over a half-century later, his eight children are grown, and he is retired from a day job driving a truck for the Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission. Now Warner devotes much of his time to tinkering with a fleet of older cars and playing at blues and folk festivals, at clubs, schools, and wherever else he's invited to perform. Blues—Piedmont style—popular jazz songs, country music, hymns, and humorous songs come effortlessly and with a high level of virtuosity. For the last sixteen years Warner has been joined on most of these gigs by his good-humored, harp-playing sidekick, Jay Summerour— noted for his vaudevillian whistling and supporting vocals. Together they are a sort of latter-day Sonny Terry and Brownie McGee, or a more countrified John Cephas and Phil Wiggins (the latter duo being good friends of Warner's and Jay's as well as fellow artists from the region).

At a place like the Music City Roadhouse in Northwest D.C., Warner sits Buddha-like on a small stage, wearing shades even in the dark club. His brother's World War II cap that reads "U.S. Navy" across the band in faded gold makes him seem like a sailor from another time. Dutifully, Williams handles requests for "Danny Boy" or "Happy Birthday" and, in odd juxtaposition, comes back with his choice of country or blues from Hank Williams or Big Bill Broonzy.

This CD, Williams' first on a major label, plays to his strength as a live performer, capturing the energy of a *Folk Masters* stage show at the Barns of Wolf Trap in Vienna, Virginia (Williams is the only performer to appear three times on the program, in 1993, '94, and '95.) Fans have hoped for this recording over the years as they've followed Warner's local club gigs from the American Legion hall in Frederick to the Cozy Corner in Gaithersburg, Maryland, to triumphant walk-ons at the National Folk Festival and appearances on the National Mall for the *American Roots 4th of July*. All the recent attention does not faze Warner Williams. He maintains at once a rough and tender presence at big stage shows, dressing in a cowboy hat rolled up at the edges, and wraparound, almost therapeutically large, dark sunglasses. A rodeo belt buckle and wide-cut suit add to the impression of a Depression-era country gentleman out for a sporting night.

It is not a calculated look. When the shades come off, you recall from his soft, weary eyes that Warner Williams has come up through hard times, done roadwork, carried a mud hod, washed dishes, played music at the tough joints and on street corners, fought off the hoodlums and the rednecks. Through it all, self-respect in hard labor has been as important to him as playing music. More than his own labors, Williams reveres and remembers his parents for their selfless work raising a big family: "My mother, she was a house

cleaner. And my daddy was a cement finisher. And we survived some kind of way, but we made it." While it was Warner's father who played country fiddle and the spirituals, it was his mother who made it possible for the youth to sharpen his blues and jazz abilities, taking him and his guitar on her trips to town and letting him play. "My mother would be in the store shopping, she'd come out, I'd have people all around me." By the time he ventured out as a teen onto the streets of nearby Washington to make a living with the blues, Warner could hold his own.

"We'd stand on the corner anywhere. We wouldn't sit down, we'd stand up playing, people would come by, give you some change. The police would run you off one corner, you'd go to the next one. 'Can't stand still.' Just like the song says, 'Gotta step it up and go.' I walked the street with the guitar; and people stop and ask me to do a tune. I do it and the next thing that I know, I got a crowd of people."

Musing on his birth as the seventh son on May the 7th, 1930, Warner doesn't claim any special power other than God-given talent. "I can hear a song and just about pick it up. If I hear it a couple times, I can just about play it. That's what I call gifted. I can't read music. I play by ear. So that comes from the good Lord above." When asked if God minds him playing the blues, he adds, "As long as you make people happy, you can play anything. I can get in a crowd of people and play what they like, and make them happy. Then you know you're doing something. If you got a bunch of people sitting in front of you and looking all sad... you ain't doing nothing. That's the way I look at it."

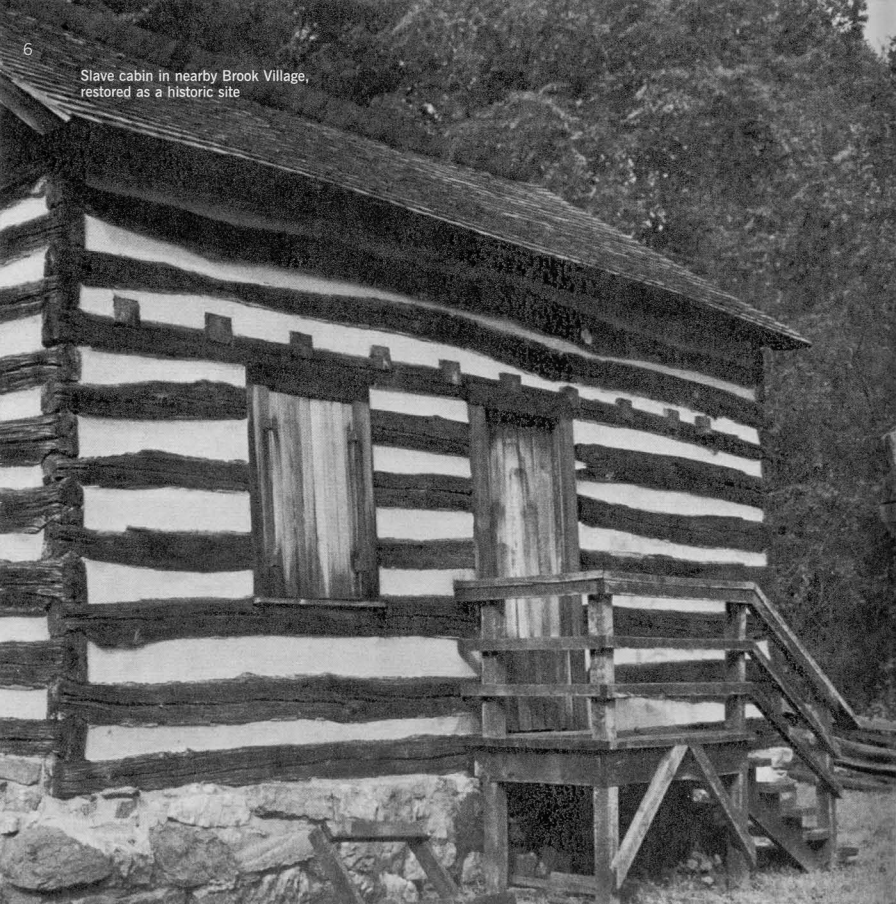
Today in his seventies, Williams still has an ear for a great blues guitar run or a nifty jazz chord, and for a song as road-wise as "Key to the Highway," as raw as "Good Morning Little Schoolgirl," as urbane as "Honeysuckle Rose," or as endearing as "Mouse on the Hill"—all of which are on this CD. As the cover photo suggests, Warner's mix of country demeanor and city sophistication is never more engaging than when he pilots one of his large, well-decorated old vehicles to a show. Backed by his younger fellow traveler Jay Summerour, this really is Warner Williams live on the Blues Highway.



Jay and Warner at The Barns of Wolf Trap, Vienna, Va (1995), photo courtesy of Smithsonian Institution



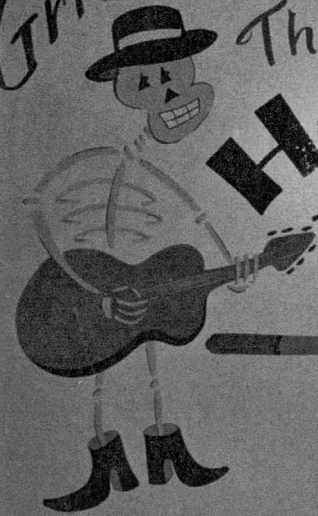
Slave cabin in nearby Brook Village, restored as a historic site



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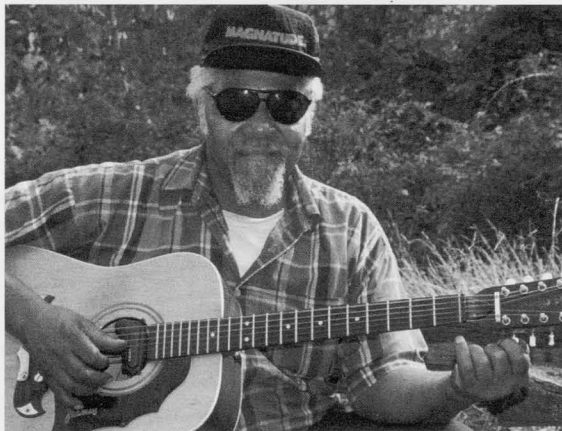


**HONKIEST  
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BEER JOIN  
IN TO

The back wall at Griff's roadhouse on Highway 108, Gaithersburg, MD



# In Their Own

Warner Williams

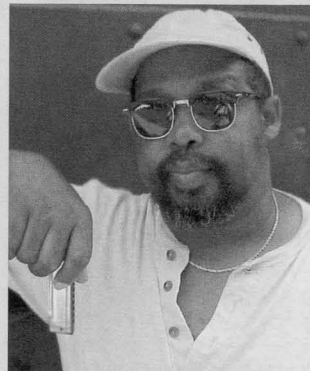
**Since I was four years old I've been picking guitar.** I was gifted for it and my daddy was a music teacher. He always had an old guitar around the house and I used to pick it up and fool with it until I learned. I could sit and watch him and when he put it down I'd take it and do something with it. I got kids of my own can play now. It runs in the family. My daddy was a fiddle player, a musician. He taught me everything. He died at the age of 91. He taught music all around through Maryland. He always brought us up to try to play gospel music but we used to stick to blues, buying records and things. Mostly what he played was church music. He never did play blues. He did play then what you call "hoedown music" back in them days. Like he'd play for them barn dances, him and another guy.

# Words

Jay Summerour

**I knew Mr. Warner's son and I decided to get with him because I liked the style he played.** It was more like what I wanted to do because I always wanted a band like Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee. Those were my idols. That was the type of stuff I used to like to play because my grandfather played. He's passed now. But I always grew up around the blues. His name was Smack Martin. He was an old blues player just like Mr. Warner, except he played guitar and harmonica. He used to live in this little neighborhood in Rockville [Md.] behind the courthouse, in a place called Monkey Run. That's where all the black folks used to hang around. It was a section of Rockville that was an alley, had a little juke joint, a little pool room, and people used to hang out and play music and shoot craps and everything down there.

And I used to go visit him and my grandmother all the time, because my uncle, his son, they lived right beside my grandma and them. So we used to play and lift weights and build cars together and stuff like that. And my grandfather always played music and I always loved music, so I used to sit down and watch him all the time. I just was amazed at the fact that, you know, how many people enjoyed him. And how he used to sit in the back yard all the time and enjoyed what he was doing. He was just entertaining himself, but then so many people would hear him and after a while it would be anywhere from 50 to 100 people out there, you know. So that's what I always wanted to do



## Warner Williams (cont.)

He learned how to fiddle when he was a baby. Yeah, he said an old man taught him how to fiddle named John Lee, way back. Fiddlin' John Lee they called him. Him and my daddy used to go around to these, what you call barn dances and play. See, my daddy was born and raised back in a place called Blue Mash. That's where he fiddled, all through there and all over in Howard County. I never did get to hear Fiddlin' John Lee. They played hoedown music like: "Meet up with your honey, and pat her on the head/She don't like biscuits, give her corn bread." They would dance. I've seen them jump around and kick up their heels. They would call sets. My grandmother used to walk miles to them barn dances. She used to walk from here to Howard County and back, twelve and one o'clock at night.

My family all lived in Takoma Park [Md.]. The old home place is still in Takoma Park, on Sligo Mill Road. I was born and raised right there. I was born in 1930. My mother raised 11 of us and all of them were musicians. Everybody in the house could play something. My mother played a little bit of accordion. She played hymns. My sister played the guitar. She's also a piano player in church right now. And I got a brother; he's a professional piano player and they all got their own choirs and things. I got a little choir I play behind at the Oak Grove Church. I've been doing that every Sunday. Daddy was a cement finisher but we still played music on the side. We all learned each other.

I used to go up in Takoma Park with mother and she would take me around to different stores and I'd stand on the corner and sing. I wasn't bashful or nothing. People used to give me money to hear me sing. Me and my brothers and all, we used to walk the streets with guitars. And I had some brothers that played better than I did. Of course, they had a few [other musicians] around but couldn't none of them outplay us. We used to play up there in a place on Carroll Avenue called Slater's Hardware. We got the whole family picture of us up there, my brothers and all. Mandolin, guitar, five-string banjo, we played all that kind of stuff. All you have to do is say the Williams brothers from Takoma Park: Elmer, Harold, Ed, Clayton, Raymond, and Russell. Then me and my brother, we come up playing all over D.C. with guitars and things. And I used to play all over D.C. by myself. All around different corners. Back when I was about 16 or 17 years old, I used to play all around Prince Georges [County, Md.]. I used to carry my guitar everywhere I went. I played in a couple joints but I was too young to go in there unless some of the people take me in there and I played. Most of my playing was on the streets.

## Jay Summerour (cont.)

was hurry up and get old and play the blues. I thought you had to be an old man to play the blues because that's what I heard.... I'm getting old, but I'm not that old. Not as old as I thought that I had to be. But my grandfather, after I got older, I would go to visit him and sit down and play with him, and that was a treat. He used to talk about stuff that I remembered when I was little. He didn't know I was really paying so much attention. Then when I got older and went and talked to him, he was telling me about these things and I would start talking with him and say, "I remember." Mr. Warner says I'm the same way. He says, "Boy, you sure remember stuff from a long time ago. You must be older than you say you are."

My mom used to have shows. She was in this club and they used to have bands like James Brown, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Etta James, Koko Taylor. It was ten women had a club. They were called the Wonderettes. They were a social club and they used to book these bands into these parks and stuff and have dances. My mother's club had concerts in different halls. It used to be one in Rockville called Fishman Hall. They used to have them there and they had a place in Emory Grove called Johnson's Park, and then they had one in Boyds called Oak Haven Park. So it was like you'd have baseball games, then they would have functions afterwards. Have a little ball game and serve food and beer, and there was a place where the guys used to bootleg and, you know, those were good times.

And I was a little kid, so I've met a bunch of these people when I was a little bopper. I would get people like Sonny Terry and James Cotton and sit in the dressing room with them. They liked the fact that I loved [blues] too, and they didn't mind sitting down and messing around with me. I found out that Sonny Terry was my cousin's mother's first cousin. So that really excited me, too. So I started looking into family trees and whatnot, and I came to Georgia, to Atlanta and Marietta, to one of my family reunions and I found out that a lot of my family played harmonica.

I really respect Mr. Warner and his music. I mean, when I ran into him, he was playing in the backyard for \$25, \$10, whatever somebody would give him. He'll still do that sometimes. He just loves his music more than he does the money. When we get off the road and finish a gig, we'll run over to Good Hope or somewhere like that out in the country and sit in the backyard on a porch and play music and everybody enjoys it. It's that old downhome blues feeling. But really, he was doing that for years. And people need to know that he's there. Because there's a lot of people I admire playing the blues, but he's the real deal. ■

## Warner Williams (cont.)

The most music that I come up with around here, some people call it "hillbilly music." I could play that better than I could a blues because I was raised up with white people and that's all we sung together. I remember doing a lot of tunes like "Sunny Side of the Street," "Forgive Me"; Gene Autry, I could play all of his songs, "I Left My Gal in the Mountains," and I can play some square dance music like "Golden Slippers" and all them. I could play any old song back then because I was always messing around with that old Victrola we used to wind up.... Like I said, I'm mostly gifted for it because I can't read no music or nothing. Anything I hear, I pick it up and just go on and play it. A whole lot of songs I'm playing now were out before I was born, but I still remember them. But I'm gonna stick all my blues up to my older brothers. They went in the service, come back with a lot of blues and I played them. I had a brother that played downhome blues like Lightnin' Hopkins and all of them.

I was about 22 when I won that first prize in D.C. on Jackson Lowe, he used to have a radio program [on] WWDC, and I won the first prize over a song called "Walkin' the Floor Over You" by Ernest Tubb. Way back then they didn't have no shows; they might give a little street party once in a while. But where we played, we went house-to-house right here in Maryland. All down in Takoma Park, there used to be house-to-house with guitars and things. That's the onliest music you had back there then. I'd be somewhere and they'd give a party, they say, "Go get your guitar and come back." See, because there wasn't no music in the house. Then I come back and they probably give me a couple of dollars and something to drink and I'd have been satisfied. Most everybody knew each other, white or black. They all come in and enjoy themselves 'cause there's just as many white there as black. And they would dance by it.

House-hops was like somebody give a big dinner or something. You know, probably selling booze or something and you're in there playing music for them. People paid us, or if you get paid you drank it up. I used to have whiskey all around my feet that they had given me. But I wouldn't touch it, though, because I never did get too drunk where I couldn't play. Some people say that you give them a drink they play better, but sometimes you miss a whole lot of music when you drinking. You can't play. You can't function right. But I'd just keep enough in me to keep myself going when I was drinking... I used to play for house-hops and people get to fighting and carrying on. You might have a little party at your house and you invite everybody and everybody in the neighborhood come. Bring your little music and have you a little fun. And back



Warner at the railroad station in Gaithersburg, MD

at that time, people dance with your wife or something. Some people get mad because you're dancing and it turns into violence. They wouldn't hardly bother the music man, but the music man get hurt by being in there. I've been in a whole lot of these places where people get shot right down and I'm still picking music.

I never played with a slide but I've been around guys that would do that. Take a bottleneck and put it on their finger and do it. I mean guys that I used to run around with. One guy come from Raleigh, North Carolina, up here. He was a blues player. He learned a lot of my chords and I learned a lot of his chords and that's the way that we kept it. And we used to go around to house-hops and play. His name was George Hart. Yeah, there were some other blues players around. They were a lot older than I was. One called Ernest Taylor and James Ross. I didn't travel with them but I used to be around where they were playing.

We played at juke joints and house parties. Some of the juke joints was in a place called Bladensburg, Brentwood, and Bowie, and up in Montgomery County, a place called Emory Grove. You couldn't have amps so the guitar could take place then. I mostly played there by myself. I used to play all up and down in those clubs on Seventh Street in D.C., over in Georgetown, a place called Foggy Bottom. They had places lasted until four or five o'clock in the morning. They was down like next to Fifteenth Street, nightclubs, U Street, all them places. When you walk in all the dim lights, it wasn't no dancing. Everybody would be sitting down and listening to music.

See, nightclub music is different than playing for a party. Nightclub music is something like slow music all the way through. Give you a chance to talk to your date. Back at the time I used to play with the Moroccos, Sammy Fisher and the Famous Moroccos. And I was their lead guitar picker back then. And I also used to play with a guy called Billy Camera. He was pretty good back there then, too. He blowed sax. I played in a lot of bands, you know, where I fill in for them. When I was young, a man wanted to take me away to New York. But my mother, you know, back at that time you listened to what your mother and father said. So they wouldn't let me go. But the man begged her to let me go. And I might have been dead or I might have been living, I don't know. In one way I'm glad I didn't go because there's so much crime going on and I might have been right in it. Because music can get you hurt. ■





At The Barns of Wolf Trap, Vienna, VA  
(1995), photo courtesy of Smithsonian  
Institution



Griff's Place outside Gaithersburg, where Warner plays the blues occasionally



## KEY to the BLUES Highway

at Home on Mt. Zion Road

by Nick Spitzer

It's a fall Sunday afternoon up on Mt. Zion Road, an historically black community on high ground north-west of Olney, Maryland, in the rolling rural landscape of Montgomery County. The encroaching suburbia with its shopping malls and subdivisions is still several miles away. While a few gentleman horse farms and plantations are scattered about, the area remains mostly agricultural fields and woodlands dotted by small workers' settlements and holdings like Mt. Zion. At the crossroads, the visitor is greeted by men in the street waving, bouncing a basketball, and throwing a football, between sips. Cars from near and far line the shoulder for an informal homecoming party to watch the Redskins play on television. Women sit back on nearby



Oak Grove Church, where he plays gospel

porches, willfully ignoring the increasingly spirited talk of their men in the street. Mothers and daughters quietly watch children playing hide-and-seek in the yard.

Word on the street is that "Mr. Warner" Williams has gone out for a spin in a favorite old car that he's recently brought back to life. Moments later a low distant rumble is heard and a chorus of voices shout: "That's him! He comin'!" The rumble becomes a growl as a weathered 1967 Dodge Monaco lumbers around the curve, accelerates slowly toward the group, and passes in a kind of regal whoosh accentuated by the flying eagle hood ornament. The driver in old style shades and a new ballcap reading "Magnatude" passes with a slight smile of satisfaction. He slows at the next bend to laboriously turn the large vehicle back in our direction and now cruises past to dock the car up the gravel driveway by his mobile home. "Mr. Warner" – as all hail him – steps out of the massive driver's side door in triumph. He's just put a good, old car back on the road and nods in agreement to all who recognize that fact.

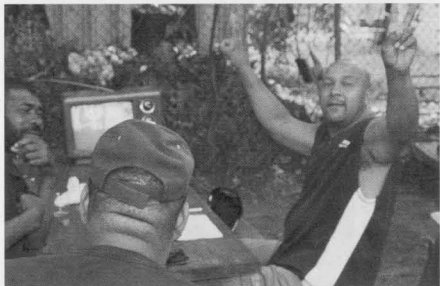
Warner Williams has lived on Mt. Zion for about forty years, having moved his family from Takoma Park out deeper into the Maryland countryside in the early 1950s – first to Coatesville and then here between Gaithersburg and Olney. He and wife Caroline raised eight children in the pale blue mobile home that he now shares with his son Michael. The trailer is part of a line settlement of older sharecroppers' dwellings, mostly modest one-story, frame clapboard buildings. Across the road is open farmland – corn, hay, and fallow fields, dotted by fruit arbors, barns, and silos and the larger farmsteads of white landowners. Many of the Mt. Zion Road folks have worked on these farms over the years as hands, woodsmen, cow tenders, and housemen. In the nearby bottom lands, about a half mile away, is a slave cabin made of logs – part of another historic settlement called Brookville. Warner knew the late Logan Johnson who once lived in the now restored cabin, and casually notes that his own father's mother, Liddy Bowens, was born a slave. She lived to 104 and told Warner as a child of her early life. Warner's trailer home is on her land – having replaced Grandma Liddy's old cabin. Down the road is the modest Oak Grove A.M.E. Mt. Zion Church where Warner has played Sunday services for many years. The cemetery holds family, friends, and kinfolk as the literal record of this small black settlement – one typical of the rural southeastern seaboard, especially the Piedmont. Eyes fixed out over the cornfields, Warner softly reels off the names of the families in the Mt. Zion community, living and dead: Dorsey, Russell, Snowden, Selby, Gant, Carter, Bowie, Bourne... Williams.

Moving here to family land after growing up in Takoma Park was a way to escape the increasingly suburban life near the District of Columbia line. At Mt. Zion outside Olney you could fish, catch turtles, hunt for

squirrels and rabbits. To this day Warner relishes cooking local game. "You skin him [a rabbit]. You can fry him, stew him, anything you want to do with him. Mostly I fry them, like you do a chicken, put him in that gravy and flour, and heat." And for a squirrel: "Skin him and do him the same way. That squirrel gravy is better than the whole squirrel is." Warner's live-off-the-land aesthetic is one of many ways he keeps to the countrified side of his upbringing. Musical partner Jay Summerour grins as he recalls that, en route to gigs, Warner sometimes stops the car for fresh, edible roadkill of possum or pheasant. Jay laughs, "That's his blues lifestyle!"

The young men who'd been hanging out on Mt. Zion Road have by now retreated up the hill to a picnic table at the side of Warner's trailer, not bothered by the constant bark of a watchdog chained nearby. Surrounded by old tools, lawnmowers, cars awaiting repair, the men are deep into boasting, toasting, and betting at a high level of excitement. Cigarettes, beer, and BBQ animate the conversation. Wads of bills hit the table in a flurry of football speculation as the Redskins kick off on a small, blurry television perched on the table.

In the midst of this ramshackle scene, Warner strikes the removed pose of an affable curmudgeon. He possesses an experiential knowledge of the world and musical talent and style like few others – especially the younger men around him. While he shows occasional frustration at the next generation's lack of awareness of the old ways, especially the blues, Mr. Warner maintains a cool dignity about his special gift. Speaking about the blues, it's clear that the music – its meanings and the lifestyle – are philosophically and artistically intertwined with his role as a player.



Touchdown!

"Blues come from the people that did hard work back in slavery. Like people in cotton fields, things like that. That's where the blues comes from. Way back in slavery, people used to get in fields and sing. Bunch of people. That's the way I understand it. I got it from my brothers on down the line – people older than I am – that's where I got it from. It's passed right on down the generations.

"People seen hard times... and maybe somebody done them wrong. All that crossed their



Watching the game in Warner's yard

mind. They get down and think about it, yeah, that's where it comes from, that's the way I look at it. Love is in there, yeah, love's in there, too. That's why they're singing it [blues]. 'Cause you love somebody, they done them wrong. That's when the blues come up, singing a song about that.

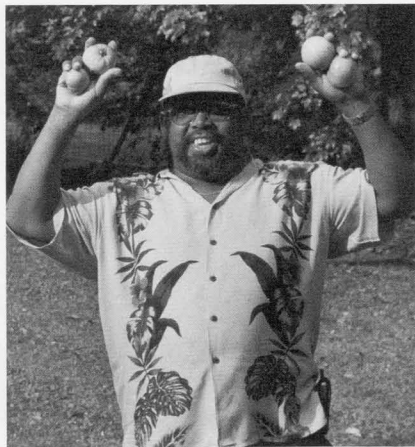
"Blues is something you can sit down and listen, it tells a story about itself. See, I could jump up and play a song, but if it ain't got no meaning to it, it don't sound right, see? Blues make you wonder what's happening here."

While there is a tendency to view blues as mournful music, tunes are often upbeat, and even the most dire songs can be cathartic in their sense of shared experience or even humor in the face of misery – "Laughin' to keep from cryin'." Asked if playing blues makes him sad, Warner responds: "No, blues makes me feel good. It's got a meaning to it. It reminds you of something you done in your life. That's what it do to me. Like a hard time. I can feel it inside of me, the feeling that I've got about what I'm playing. Maybe

blues makes some people sad. I've seen them jump up and cry, and say, 'Don't play that no more!' Yeah, I've sung blues, people say, 'Don't sing that song no more!'"

The immediate causes of blues feeling in songs are often the problems of romance or finance (or both) gone bad. The larger context for blues as a despondent mood (if not a despondent music) is historically associated with black Southern men in the harsh grip of the Jim Crow era – with few economic alternatives, denied an avenue of freedom to rise up in the social order. Still, the Piedmont was less of a harsh plantation zone than the Deep South. Accounts of black and white farmers on a somewhat more even footing in the region are combined with consistent references in oral histories to cultural sharing and even socializing at parties and dances. The reels, ballads, and country songs in the Piedmont repertoire express this kind of crossing over.

Warner Williams has a clear-eyed view of how tough things can be between blacks and whites, but he also has a soft spot for his many white friends and their mutual love of country music: "Country music IS blues, it's just sung in a different way. Everything that's got a meaning to it is something like a blues. I played for all kinds, white and black. Played for as many white as black. In fact, we was raised up with white people. We all was neighbors. We all got along. They liked our music, and we liked their music. We used to have a white friend come to our house, he played the fiddle and my daddy played the fiddle, and they used to get in the front yard and they used to play together. And he liked the way I played, and he used to take me with him. The places he took me I couldn't get in, on account of my race. But he'd make me get in there anyhow, see. After people'd find out I could play, they wouldn't bother me, you know. If I could play their kind of music."



Jay gets his green tomatoes.

Performance places and times allowed boundaries to be crossed, created social intimacy... up to a point, but I asked Warner how he felt when he couldn't get in at the nightclub door. "Kind of bad. We all come up together. It was some hatred down the line there somewhere. I don't know how it come. They got it from people that are way older and kept it in their blood, I guess. Something their foreparents have done, and they keep it inside of them. That's the only thing it could be. My brother and me, we used to run around together, and we used to play music all over Takoma Park. Then we had a white guy who used to play along with us. He would come to our house with his guitar, and we'd all sit down and play together. It's certain people, you know, we didn't just go out and look for fights or nothing. Somebody call you a name, you take up for yourself, that's all.

"Where I live at right now, years back, we couldn't go in that place there. We'd come around the window, the side window, and get our food, but we couldn't go in there and sit down or nothing. When I was a kid, we used to fight all the time, yeah. It was dumb things. They see I'd be walking the street and a bunch of them'd jump on me, and I'd go get my gang and jump on them and all that. I think there's still some hatred out there. I can get along with anybody, I try to anyhow. But some people don't want you to get along with them."

Times have changed a bit. Griff's, the nearby roadhouse on Highway 108, is still mostly white and working-class. Local country acts are booked alongside a touring honky-tonk star like Dale Watson. Most days it's smoking, drinking, talking, flirting – and on a recent Sunday, like the men out on Mt. Zion Road, the folks at Griff's were also watching the Redskins. Williams, who drops by Griff's occasionally with Jay for jam sessions, is invariably received like country blues royalty. These days the kitchen service and bar are open to all comers.

Warner does not dwell on what an outsider might view as the ambiguity of social relations. If there is a sadness in his life today, it is not about past racial injustice but more a sense of loss for the old days when his stomping grounds were more rural and close-knit communities in ways that transcend easy assumptions about race relations. Warner's wife of 45 years, Caroline, died in 1995. Of his 10 brothers and sisters, only two survive – Mary Ellen, age 85, who largely raised him as a boy, and younger sister Loretta, 70. The good memories and just surviving – that's what matters most.

On this fall Sunday, the guitar man looked on stoically as two of his sons joined the revelry around the football game on TV. He declared quietly, "I got a son named Curtis, he play the blues; and I got one called



Michael, he play the blues. Bill plays. Then I got a nephew plays all over town. They call him 'Pie' for a nickname, but his right name is Everett Williams."

Gazing out across Mt. Zion Road to cornfields ready for picking, Warner decides to pull his own late harvest of green tomatoes from the kitchen garden to give to visitors for frying. It's also a time of bounty for his blues. Williams has more invites for neighborhood house-hops and picking parties than he can remember. Strangers are calling him to appear at festivals and concert halls into next year. An assortment of old cars await his attentive hands, but for today they are quiet. After photos for this CD cover, Warner sits in the driver's seat of the massive Monaco, playing his guitar. A few tunes later, he gingerly leans the instrument on the passenger seat, reaches for the ignition key, and fires up the faded gold Dodge. Six...seven...eight cylinders haltingly come to life and rev to an explosive crackle. Heads snap away from the football game and respond in a chorus of approval. The guitar man says goodbye and roars off for a sundown drive. Mr. Warner is at home on the blues highway.



Blues before a sundown drive

## Little Bit a Blues

A Songster's Selection

by Nick Spitzer and Scott McCraw

Warner Williams worked many years as a solo, on street corners or in clubs. Today he's usually joined by Jay Summerour as "Little Bit a Blues." True to his reputation as a songster, Williams mixes audience requests for pop and jazz standards from the 1930s to the '50s with country and gospel songs. Because this CD is composed of live concert recordings, we've tried to give you the variety and progression of a Warner and Jay set with Piedmont blues as the backbone of any performance.

1. **Step It Up and Go** is long associated with the Piedmont blues and presents the classic image of a police raid on illicit gambling or drinking. "Step It Up and Go" was recorded by one of Williams's favorite guitarists, Blind Boy Fuller, in New York in 1940 – accompanied on harp by Sonny Terry with George Washington on washboard. The song is credited to Fuller's manager, United Dollar Store manager and American Record Company A&R man, J.B. Long. Apparently Long heard a song entitled "Touch It Up and Go" in Memphis. He rewrote it as "Step" and presented it to Fuller. Warner says he likes the "scene" in the song with the gamblers' money on the floor. Having been a street performer chased by police, he's experienced in quickly vacating the scene. It's a tune that often kicks off a set.

2. **Ain't Gonna Pick No More Cotton** was originally recorded by John Henry Barbee, a Tennessee-to-Chicago country bluesman who made records briefly in the late '20s and again during the '60s revival. The song recalls the blues as social protest against hard, underpaid work, as well as a more personal statement about an unappreciative lover. The references to mules and mule skinnners invoke the rural agrarian landscape of early blues. Warner says he learned it from a man named "Pink" from North Carolina who visited their house in his youth.

3. **Digging My Potatoes** “Digging My Potatoes” is an upbeat, country blues standard – first recorded by Little Son Joe (accompanied by Memphis Minnie) in 1939. Popularized by Big Bill Broonzy and Washboard Sam, it was also recorded by Lead Belly, and Sonny Terry and Brownie McGee. The song’s sexual metaphors of potatoes and vines humorously tell of an outside man caught with the protagonist’s girlfriend. Warner says he heard it when he was a young teenager.

4. **Bring It On Down to My House** As is most often the case on their sentimental pop and jazz numbers, Jay joins Warner for harmony vocals. This gentle version of Bob Wills’s 1936 recording of “Bring It On Down to My House, Honey” has some different lyrics, but keeps baking as an analogy for sex.

5. **Key to the Highway** is most often associated with Big Bill Broonzy. The song was first recorded in 1940 by pianist Charles Segar and later that year by Jazz Gillum. Broonzy cut “Key” in 1941, after working as a sideman at the Gillum session. He adapted the melody while keeping most of the original lyrics. The line “I walked from New York all the way to Newport News...” resonates with Warner’s own East Coast blues homeland. It also invokes the redoubtable blues theme of ambivalence about freedom versus hardship on the road. The existential traveler wears out his shoes – walking away from a love gone bad and finally, “back to the barnyard.”

6. **I’m Confessing That I Love You** is given a gruffly tender vocal treatment that recalls Warner’s appreciation of popular music. This 1930 Tin Pan Alley composition by Al Neiburg (words) and Doc Dougherty (music) was made famous by Rudy Vallee. It became a jazz standard (Monk, Armstrong, Lester Young), also interpreted by guitarists Django Reinhardt and Les Paul. It was a mainstay for 1950s pop music vocalists like Peggy Lee and Dean Martin. Like most of his jazz and pop numbers, Warner learned the song from radio, and tosses in a few quick jazz chords for effect.

7. **Good Morning Little Schoolgirl** John Lee (Sonny Boy) Williamson recorded “Good Morning Schoolgirl” for the Bluebird label in 1937 at the Leland Hotel in Aurora, Illinois. The song was closely “adapted” from a Sleepy John Estes number, “Airplane Blues.” As a blues topic the split between the educated and those outside school is enhanced by the image of an older man pursuing a younger woman. “Schoolgirl” doesn’t

conform to current notions of acceptability, but like much literature, blues addresses verities that are both a part of and transcend a time, place, and culture. Warner’s tough solo guitar licks prove a powerful partner in conveying the sensuality of the song.

8. **Mouse on the Hill** is a wonderful contrast to the previous blues in words and music. Known to many as “Froggy Went a-Courtin’,” and with a 17th-century English pedigree, the song has been heard from Anglo-American singers like Almeda Riddle in the Ozarks and Doc Watson in the Appalachians. Warner Williams says he learned “Froggy Went a-Courtin’” off the radio from Tex Ritter – the university-educated cowboy singer. Williams made the frog into a mouse and changed the title, but the procession of characters and the wedding depiction are similar to other versions.

9. **Hey Bartender, There’s a Big Bug in My Beer**

Warner is joined on stage by guitarist Eddie Pennington of Princeton, Kentucky, for this country comedy song. Pennington is a Merle Travis-style thumbpicker who became friends with Warner at the 1992 National Folk Festival. He was on the 1993 “Guitar Wizards” program with Warner Williams. “Big Bug” demonstrates their compatible sensibilities of country and blues. It was written by Vern Orr and recorded in 1952 by honky-tonk piano player-vocalist Merrill Moore as “Big Bug Boogie.” Warner learned the song off the radio and creatively changed the words to focus on the bug’s red, blue, and green eye colors, and the fact that it’s “drinking all my brew,” “drinking all the foam,” and “tried to bite my lip.”



Eddie Pennington

10. **Worried Life Blues** was recorded by Big Maceo Merriweather in 1941 and redone by many artists, including Honeyboy Edwards and Sleepy John Estes (as “Someday Baby”).

11. **I Got a Woman** is completely unrelated to the R&B hit of the same title recorded in 1954 by Ray Charles. A paean to female form and style, the song here was first recorded as "River Hip Mama" by Washboard Sam (Robert Brown) for Bluebird in 1942 with Big Bill Broonzy (guitar) and Roosevelt Sykes (piano). The lyrics here differ a bit; most tellingly Warner changes the B line of the first stanza from "If she ever leave me, she might as well be dead," to "Every time she kiss me, boy I might as well be dead."

12. **I Feel So Good** is a Big Bill Broonzy song recorded in 1941. It contains a reference to "ballin' the jack" which has an undercurrent of sexual innuendo, but historically referred to laying track, and is found in railroad work songs for doing exactly that. "Ballin' the Jack" also debuted as a dance in the 1913 Harlem revue, "Darktown Follies." A song of the same title was written shortly afterward (words/music by James Henry Burris/Chris Smith – black songwriters), capitalizing on the growing popularity of the dance. The Burris/Smith song – which describes the dance – appeared in the 1915 "Passing Show," an annual Broadway revue. The Bill Broonzy song is Warner Williams's likely source.

13. **Honeysuckle Rose** is a Fats Waller/Andy Razaf composition (1929) that became a standard. The song has been a favorite on guitar for various "clean pickers" from Chet Atkins to Willie Nelson, Django Reinhardt to Charlie Christian. Warner has said that it's the kind of popular jazz song he'd use to serenade on the streets of Washington. Together he and Jay Summerour create a cheery – almost Mills Brothers-like – antidote to the blues. "Honeysuckle Rose" reflects their choice to be eclectic entertainers rather than strictly bluesmen.

14. **Little Bit a Blues Theme** is Warner and Jay's show closer as a duo. It allows Jay to do what he does so well: pitch the group and manage their appearances. Warner digs out some swingy maverick verses to leave an overall impression of the wiley blues troubadour he is.

### About *Folk Masters*

From 1990 to 1996, *Folk Masters* presented 175 American traditional artists or ensembles in over seventy concerts, which were recorded and produced for public radio. The full-house performances at Carnegie Hall's Weill Recital Hall (1990) and The Barns of Wolf Trap (1992-96) explored the use of the proscenium stage and intimate concert hall to serve a variety of cultural aesthetics, setting production standards for the field of public folklore presenters. The live concerts were edited, re-mixed, and presented with commentary for radio audiences. *Folk Masters* was distributed by Public Radio International to over three hundred stations here and abroad. The programs received multiple awards from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting for technical and artistic excellence as well as community impact.

Directed and hosted by folklorist Nick Spitzer, *Folk Masters* concerts unfolded as remarkable variety shows of joyously diverse but ultimately connected forms of music. Some highlighted cultural kinship; others featured a single instrument as played by masters from different traditions. The artists were assembled both through original fieldwork and with the help of numerous advisors. *Folk Masters* emphasized virtuosity as defined by the artists' communities and used local outreach to attract members of these groups, as well as supporters from the outside, to the concerts. On any given night the approach might combine Chautauqua with the Grand Ole Opry, concert hall with church service, or dance hall with pow-wow, but it always put the music and musicians first, presenting them with intelligence, humor, and respect.

Bringing together the diversity and spirit of folk festivals with concert hall and recording studio production values, *Folk Masters* created a fin de siècle gathering of many of the finest traditional performing artists from America and beyond. Many of these artists either emerged from or went on to appearances at the National Folk Festival. Some had been or became National Heritage Fellows of the National Endowment for the Arts. *Folk Masters* was a ground-breaking collaboration between traditional artists, Wolf Trap, Radio Smithsonian, and Nick Spitzer. The *Folk Masters CD Series* on Smithsonian Folkways Recordings presents great performances selected from these wide-ranging and influential concerts.

*Folk Masters* artistic director Nick Spitzer received his B.A. from The University of Pennsylvania and Ph.D. from the University of Texas in anthropology. Known for his work in cultural creolization, public folklore, and the media, Spitzer served as Louisiana's first state folklorist. A former senior folklife specialist with the Smithsonian, he has contributed to NPR's *All Things Considered* and hosts *American Routes*, the weekly two-hour Public Radio International program devoted to vernacular music and culture. Spitzer is Professor of Folklore and Cultural Conservation at the University of New Orleans, College of Urban and Public Affairs.

Produced by Nick Spitzer

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### *About Smithsonian Folkways*

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings is the nonprofit record label of the Smithsonian Institution, the national museum of the United States. Our mission is the legacy of Moses Asch, who founded Folkways Records in 1948 to document "people's music," spoken word, instruction, and sounds from around the world. The Smithsonian acquired Folkways from the Asch estate in 1987, and Smithsonian Folkways Recordings has continued the Folkways tradition by supporting the work of traditional artists and expressing a commitment to cultural diversity, education, and increased understanding.

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|----|--|------|
| 1  | Step It Up and Go                              | 2:38 |
| 2  | Ain't Gonna Pick No More Cotton                | 3:47 |
| 3  | Digging My Potatoes                            | 3:37 |
| 4  | Bring It On Down to My House                   | 2:01 |
| 5  | Key to the Highway                             | 4:18 |
| 6  | I'm Confessing That I Love You                 | 2:34 |
| 7  | Good Morning Little Schoolgirl                 | 2:48 |
| 8  | Mouse on the Hill                              | 3:44 |
| 9  | Hey Bartender, There's a<br>Big Bug in My Beer | 2:43 |
| 10 | Worried Life Blues                             | 3:08 |
| 11 | I Got a Woman                                  | 4:29 |
| 12 | I Feel So Good                                 | 1:59 |
| 13 | Honeysuckle Rose                               | 2:05 |
| 14 | Little Bit a Blues Theme                       | 3:25 |

Produced by Nick Spitzer

# BLUES HIGHWAY

WARNER  
Live WILLIAMS  
with JAY SUMMEROUR



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Guitarist and songster Warner Williams of Takoma Park, Maryland, is one of the greatest unsung heroes of the Piedmont blues, an Eastern seaboard style that incorporates fiddle tunes, ballads, country and popular songs, ragtime, and gospel. With a jaunty, rhythmic, finger-picked guitar style and an eclectic repertoire that ranges from blues to honky-tonk, jazz crooning to children's songs, Warner Williams is an old-style community entertainer of national significance. He is joined by Maryland native Jay Summerour on harmonica and backing vocals. Together they conjure up a historic Piedmont duo like Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee as they make their own way on the blues highway.

Produced in collaboration with the Wolf Trap Foundation for the Performing Arts and the University of New Orleans, College of Urban and Public Affairs. Underwritten by The Wallace Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.



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