



Jimmy Reed

SEPTEMBER 6, 1925 - AUGUST 29, 1976

BY ANDREW SCHWARTZ

JIMMY REED WAS ONE OF THOSE purely American, so-called “primitive” artists who created a style so perfect in conception and execution that it could never really be improved upon. He was also a prolific hit-maker whose music acted as a kind of down-home touchstone for his African-American audience during the years when R&B turned into soul.

Mathis James Reed was born September 6, 1925, in Dunleith, Mississippi, one of ten children in a sharecropping family. Reed and Eddie Taylor were raised together from the age of seven, and Eddie gave Jimmy his first guitar lessons; the two men played regularly together well into the '60s. Reed moved to Gary, Indiana in 1948, and in the summer of 1950 he quit his job in an iron foundry to devote himself to music full-time.

In 1953, Jimmy Reed signed with Vee Jay Records of Chicago, and by March 1955, his recording of “You Don't Have To Go” was a Top Five R&B smash. It was the prototypical Jimmy Reed recording: Reed and Eddie Taylor on guitars; the laid-back but insistent drumming of Earl Phillips; and Jimmy's unmistakable mush-mouth vocal and piercing blues harp, worn in a metal holder around his neck. At the singer's side sat “Mama” Mary Reed, who whispered each line of the lyrics to him as the song progressed.

Until 1957 and a song called “Honest I Do,” Jimmy Reed hit with nothing but the blues. In his unusually detailed liner notes for the Vee Jay LP *I'm Jimmy Reed*, disc jockey Sid McCoy described the making of “Honest I Do”:

“The session was called [for] 6:00 p.m., April 3, 1957, at Universal Recording Company, Chicago, Illinois. Earl Phillips on drums, Eddie Taylor on bass guitar, Jimmy...and ‘Mama’...assembled in Studio B and ‘tuned up’ under the supervision of A&R chief Calvin Carter with Bill Putnam at the controls. Jimmy normally plays a 12-bar blues—imagine our surprise when he proceeded into a 32-bar ballad form. He had no cognizance of the form he had chosen, it simply fit what he felt. The background, however, seemed inadequate to Jimmy, so he requested a third guitarist. Bill Putnam called Remo Biondi, a most versatile musician, to ‘sit in.’ The change wrought by this simple addition was startling. The background achieved ‘fullness’—Jimmy ‘felt’ his lyric—a ‘pop’ hit was being made by a Pure Country Blues Artist who, in the making, lost none of his soul.”

Reed's success inspired a legion of admiring and imitative blues singers. The relaxed, rural quality of his music

came naturally to south Louisiana bluesmen like Slim Harpo, Whispering Smith, and Lazy Lester with whom he shared roots in the deep South. By 1962, Reed was attracting a new group of fans he could hardly have imagined.

The Rolling Stones covered “Honest I Do” on their first album, and wrote “The Spider And The Fly” for their second LP in direct emulation of Reed. Van Morrison & Them

recorded “Bright Lights, Big City.” The Pretty Things cut “Big Boss Man.” Back in the U.S., Reed's bittersweet high-end harp blowing left an indelible aural mark on the playing of both Little Stevie Wonder and Bob Dylan.

I saw him perform only once, at the 1973 Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival. He arrived nearly an hour late, hustled on stage by the anxious promoters, apparently intoxicated and with his Afro wig askew—a dispiriting sight. But with the first notes of his voice, the first whine of his harp, the long years and hard times rolled away and he was Jimmy Reed, his lazily rocking rhythm intact. He died on August 29, 1976, following an epileptic seizure.

Twelve years later, in December of 1988, Mary Reed and her eight children filed a multi-million dollar lawsuit in U.S. District Court against Reed's publisher, Arc Music, and its principals, Gene Goodman and Phil Chess. The suit

contested the validity of a 1967 agreement in which the Reeds signed away all royalty renewal rights to their compositions. In compensation, Jimmy Reed was purportedly paid a flat fee of \$10,000.

The complaint noted that the singer had only a third-grade education, while his spouse had never gone beyond sixth grade: “Neither of them had the ability to comprehend the complex documents concerning conveyance of copyright ownership, rights to royalties and other benefits derived from the creation of original musical compositions.”

The Reeds' suit was settled in 1990, but the terms of the agreement are subject to a confidentiality clause prohibiting their disclosure. We can only hope that justice has been served in the name of a great American original, Jimmy Reed.

JIMMY REED'S GREATEST HITS

JIMMY REED scored a remarkable 18 Top Twenty R&B hits on Vee Jay Records between 1955 and 1961—a career total greater than that of Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, or John Lee Hooker. Here are ten of his best-loved and most-covered songs, followed by date of chart debut and peak position reached on the Billboard chart:

<i>You Don't Have To Go</i>	March, 1955 #5
<i>Ain't That Lovin' You Baby</i>	February, 1956 #3
<i>You've Got Me Dizzy</i>	December, 1956 #3
<i>Little Rain</i>	April, 1957 #7
<i>Honest I Do</i>	October, 1957 #4
<i>I'm Gonna Get My Baby</i>	October, 1958 #5
<i>Baby What You Want Me To Do</i> ..	March, 1960 #10
<i>Hush Hush</i>	October, 1960 #18
<i>Big Boss Man</i>	May, 1961 #13
<i>Bright Lights, Big City</i>	September, 1961 #3