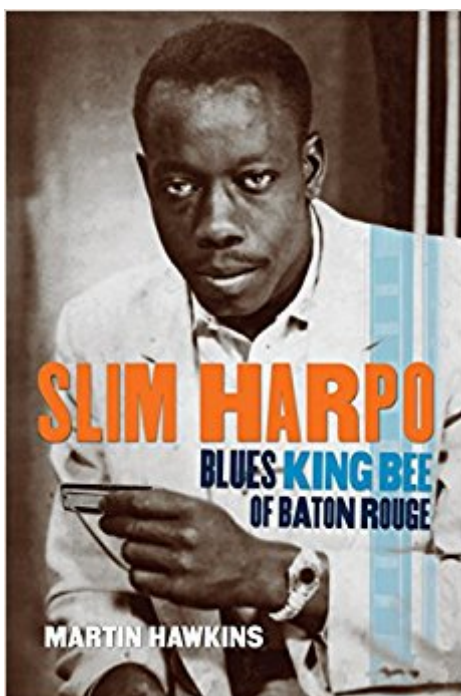


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Slim Harpo: Blues King Bee Of Baton Rouge



Synopsis

As Louis Armstrong forever tethered jazz to New Orleans and Clifton Chenier fixed Lafayette as home to zydeco, Slim Harpo established Baton Rouge as a base for the blues. In the only complete biography of this internationally renowned blues singer and musician, Martin Hawkins traces Harpo's rural upbringing near Louisiana's capital, his professional development fostered by the local music scene, and his national success with R&B hits like Rainin' in My Heart, Baby Scratch My Back, and I Am A King Bee, among others. Hawkins follows Harpo's global musical impact from the early 1960s to today and offers a detailed look at the nature of the independent recording business that enabled his remarkable legacy. With new research and interviews, Hawkins fills in previous biographical gaps and redresses misinformation about Harpo's life. In addition to weaving the musician's career into the lives of other Louisiana blues players—including Lightnin' Slim, Lazy Lester, and Silas Hogan—the author discusses the pioneering role of Crowley, Louisiana, record producer J. D. Miller and illustrates how Excello Records in Nashville brought national attention to Harpo's music recorded in Louisiana. This engaging narrative examines Harpo's various recording sessions and provides a detailed discography, as well as a list of blues-related records by fellow Baton Rouge artists. Slim Harpo: Blues King Bee of Baton Rouge will stand as the ultimate resource on the musician's life and the rich history of Baton Rouge's blues heritage.

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Customer Reviews

"Hawkins applies a scholar's detail and a fan's affection to his exhaustively researched Harpo history. Working from the fragmentary information that exists about the late Baton Rouge musician, Hawkins tells Harpo's story while simultaneously describing the hard world from which he came. . . . His thoroughly researched, painstakingly written and richly illustrated Blues King Bee of Baton Rouge instantly joins the relatively small list of essential books about post-1950 Louisiana musicians." --Offbeat

"Hawkins' well-researched book (complete with some fascinating vintage photographs) traces the Pelican state-based bluesman's decidedly rural raising, his musical development encouraged by the thriving (and still thriving) local blues scene and his national success. . . . A drastically overlooked, never-before-told saga of a little-known corner of the blues and R&B that yours truly found quite engaging." --Big City Blues

MARTIN HAWKINS, author of *A Shot in the Dark: Making Records in Nashville, 1945-1955* and, with Colin Escott, *Good Rockin' Tonight: Sun Records and the Birth of Rock 'n' Roll*, has written over four hundred magazine articles, LP sleeve notes, and CD booklets on roots music since 1971.

"What's the point in listening to us doing 'I'm A King Bee' when you can hear Slim Harpo do it?" Mick Jagger.

Martin Hawkins is certainly qualified to write about Harpo. His book *"A Shot In The Dark: Making Records In Nashville 1943-1955"*, and (with Colin Escott) *"Good Rockin' Tonight: Sun Records and the Birth of Rock 'n' Roll"* are both well worth reading. He's also written many liner notes and articles on the blues. This book largely came about in connection with Hawkins' work on a huge Harpo set on Bear Family Records. The book traces Harpo's life from his early days, his development as a musician, his regional, national, and then international notoriety with classic songs like "Baby, Scratch My Back", and "I'm A King Bee" among other songs. But (as Hawkins admits) there are gaps in Harpo's life that still defy investigation. But using the available previously published information, along with unused video interviews with Harpo's wife, fellow musicians, and friends, Hawkins does get closer than anyone else in shedding more light on this deserving musician. The story is written in a straightforward, non-sensational style. But it doesn't read as a dry history lesson either. Harpo gave few interviews and these were very short and apparently only one of those was ever published. Hawkins has combined both Harpo's life and his music into a pretty fascinating read for fans of "swamp-blues". One of the nice things about this book is the inclusion of other Louisiana "swamp-blues" musicians including Lonesome Sundown, Silas Hogan, and Lazy

Lester. Also important is Hawkins' inclusion of the independent record labels from that region and particularly producer J.D. Miller, who was largely responsible for championing this style of blues music. The book includes 28 pages of period b&w photos in two separate sections which help readers to better focus on Harpo and Louisiana blues. Included are photos of fiddler Butch Cage, Robert Pete Williams, Otis Hicks (Lightnin' Slim), Leslie Johnson (Lazy Lester), a dapper Slim Harpo, Silas Hogan, and a rarely seen photo of producer Miller. There's also a good discography of Harpo's recordings, notes on the chapters, and a much needed index. Harpo and the whole Louisiana style of blues is known for a laid back, almost lazy, sloppy style of playing the blues. But that's what gave their sound its unique qualities that so many blues fans find exciting. Harpo plays in a relatively loose style that's certainly the definition of "swamp-blues", but his harmonica and guitar style are a perfect fit for his laconic vocal style. But his influence on bands like the Rolling Stones, the Kinks, the Grateful Dead, the Doors, the Yardbirds, the Pretty Things (their first two albums are more visceral sounding than the Stones during the same period), Them, Love Sculpture (that first album "Blues Helping" is a scorcher), the Blues Brothers, and on performers like Muddy Waters, Hank William, Jr. Otis Redding, and others proves how Harpo's music and style found its way into so many bands of the late '60s. With so many books covering other musicians and styles of blues--from country blues to postwar big city electric blues--there's relatively little published on Louisiana blues and the musicians from that area. This book goes a long way in shedding some much needed light on both Harpo and the genre known as "swamp-blues". There's occasional errors (spelling, dates) that a good editor on top of things should've caught, but these are largely not detrimental to the story. If you've read this far chances are you're familiar with Harpo's music, and this is a chance to learn more about both him and the "swamp-blues" scene. While never as "popular" as other blues musicians, and that style of blues never really calling attention to itself, both Harpo and Louisiana blues is an important piece of the American blues genre. Hawkins has woven together a good overview of Harpo and the blues from the Louisiana region. And if you can afford it, get the 5 CD box set on the Bear Family label. It has all of Harpo's music and a nice (approximately) 12" X 12" hardcover book on Harpo and all the recording information, all in a thick lidded box..

Pretty good. Could have gone a little deeper into JD Miller and the Excello artists.

Great book!!

I'll never forget hearing for the first time, sometime around late January or early February, 1966, the

most striking-sounding record I had ever heard on the radio up to that point in my young (teenage) life - it almost seemed to be jumping out of the radio with its popping beat and percussion, chicken-scratch guitar, dynamic harmonica-playing, crazy lyrics, and oddly nasal-voiced singer, who I could tell for sure was no teen idol or anyone I had ever heard before. I surmised that the title had to be in the vicinity of "Scratch My Back," but it took a few subsequent listens before I caught that the performer's name was the appropriately unusual Slim Harpo and that the exact title was "Baby Scratch My Back." I couldn't afford to buy more than a couple of singles per month, but that one was going to be, no doubt about it, my first February 1966 purchase. By the time his "Best of Slim Harpo" LP came out three years later (one I couldn't stop listening to), I had pieced together that he was a middle-aged Louisiana blues man, but that was it. (In those pre-Internet times one had to work to acquire, and then cherish, every nugget of information one could come by when it dealt with more obscure matters.) Amazingly, it's fifty years after "Baby Scratch My Back" (and 46 years after its creator's untimely death just before turning 46) and it's only now that we have this phenomenally well-researched, meticulously thorough and in-depth, articulately written and scholarly Slim Harpo biography by Martin Hawkins. It's not easy to capture someone's essence so many decades after their departure from this mortal coil, but Hawkins does it brilliantly. It helped immeasurably to have James "Slim Harpo" Moore's stepson (and other younger-generation relations) as a prime resource, as well as some surviving younger musicians who played with and/or knew Harpo. He was by all accounts an honorable man with a number of fine personal qualities and few vices; and he wasn't shy about standing up for himself and his music when his royalty rights were threatened. Later, in the CD era, I sought out some Excello Records collections and discovered I liked his contemporary labelmates' work quite a bit, as well (although not as much as Harpo's); so I found it to be a real bonus that Hawkins covers a number of them in some depth, while also thoroughly dealing with the entire Baton Rouge blues scene, its history and development up to the present day. One can also learn a lot about the diversity of musical genres of Louisiana from this book (there is no state anything like it, musically), and quite a bit about southern blues and the blues in general. The emphasis, though, is where I wanted it to be: on the "swamp-blues" style emanating from J.D. (Jay) Miller's recording studio in Crowley, Louisiana, with Slim Harpo as by far its most influential proponent. (Hawkins does get into Harpo's considerable influence on the young British blues revivalists of the '60s, such as the Rolling Stones, who did an early cover of Harpo's 1957 Excello d'Or classic "I'm a King Bee." Sadly, at the time of his sudden death in early 1970 Harpo was looking forward to his first trip to the UK and Europe, which most certainly would have been triumphant given his large, enthusiastic fan base there.) Also, and rather importantly, from this book,

one can't help but get a strong sense of the South (with particular focus on Baton Rouge) and its racial divide over the years. Some excellent additional features of this biography:- 28 pages of captioned black and white photos- an indispensable map of the Baton Rouge area- a 23-page discography covering all of Slim Harpo's recordings; plus all Excello releases, as well as other blues labels from in and around Baton Rouge- two pages of recommended listening and reading- a seven-page "musical appreciation" of Slim Harpo by Steve Coleridge- two separate indexes: one general; and one specifically for song titles[Warning for casual readers: when I say this book is "thorough" and "in-depth" and "scholarly," I'm not kidding. There is an inordinately large amount of names, places and events mentioned. The author seemingly wanted to create the most complete document he could. Some skim-reading might be advisable, in my opinion, through some of the more densely detailed parts.]

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