

Ill Folks

The Blog of Less Renown, celebrating under-appreciated unusual, unique, sick or strange Singers, Songwriters and Songs

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WHEN LES PAUL BACKED W.C. FIELDS; AND HOW DID FIELDS DIE?



It happened before Eminem rapped in the middle of a Dido song.

It happened before Les Crane narrated "Desiderata" to musical backing.

W.C. Fields recorded monologues with music over 60 years ago...and who better to accompany the genius of enunciation than that master of the guitar...Les Paul?

Someone wanted to get Fields on wax if it was the last thing he did. And it was.

In 1936, The Great Man had health problems that left him with radio as his only option, delighting fans with his unique voice and cadence. He eventually was well enough to make movies again, but by 1946 alcohol and aging had sent him to a sanitarium.

Hoping to keep his spirits up (no, not spiritus fermenti), Fields' friend Bill Morrow arranged for a visit to Les Paul's new home recording studio. On a hot day in July, hobbling on a cane, and wearing shoes split open to ease the pain in his badly swollen feet, Fields made his appearance. He eyed the way Les Paul was fiddling around amid double-track equipment and control boards, and called him an "octopus." Paul was amused, and named his new machine OCT, short for octopus. Soon after, the recording genius expanded his studio to include a true "octopus," a pioneering 8-track tape recorder.

Fields drank some booze and squinted at the familiar lines he'd performed on radio, but his deteriorating eyesight, and very pickled gray matter, made recording impossible. The lines had to

be literally re-written, LARGE, on a set of cards, so he could handle the strain. Uncle Bill's sight-reading errors could be funny in front of an audience, but not on disc. On radio, he once delivered a boozy version of "The Temperance Lecture" fumbling "pocket-picking school" into "picket-pocking school." The line "I stumbled across a case of bourbon," got mangled enough for him to chuckle and say "I stumbled across that..."

Thanks to the huge cards, Fields was able to get through the session, one that was such a dim memory that Les Paul couldn't recall who the pianist was on "Temperance Lecture," or the names of the actor and actress who helped out in the "Day I Drank a Glass of Water" sketch (for which he ad-libbed guitar accompaniment).

The most exhaustive recent biography of Fields, by James Curtis (2003) digs up a lot of obscure information on Fields, but there are some errors, or at least, some fuzzy recollections, including Les Paul "strumming the guitar" on "The Temperance Lecture," when the background was piano. Guitar was only on "The Day I Drank a Glass of Water." Curtis doesn't mention the two supporting players in that routine. Curtis did affirm that Les Paul handled all the recording, and "set the level, dropped the needle down, ran back into the studio and...started to record" because "Nobody else was engineering that day."

Fields sounds robust enough on these recordings, but this was the last time the public would ever hear his familiar voice. Five months later, he was dead. There had been hope, around Thanksgiving, that Fields could navigate a wheelchair over to Bing Crosby's radio show for a broadcast scheduled on December 22nd. He never made it. The first biography of Fields, by Robert Lewis Taylor in 1949, describes the comedian's sad condition:

"...he had periods of delirium. Occasionally he cursed and railed at things...and once out of a blue sky, he sang what appeared to be a kind of love song...Shortly before midnight (December 25th), Miss Monti took his hand and began calling to him. While she pleaded, he opened his eyes, and, noting the people in the room put a finger to his lips and winked. A few minutes later, as bells over the city announced the arrival of Christmas morning, he suffered a violent hemorrhage of the stomach. The blood bubbled thickly out of his lips, he drew several long sighs, and lay still. "

You'd think this account would be the most accurate, written only a few years after Bill Fields died, and with access to Bill's two closest female friends, Magda Michael and Carlotta Monti.

Monti, Fields' secretary and on-and-off mistress (in his late 60's he was more off than on), published her own book in 1973. Her version has him alive and cursing well past midnight:

"On Christmas Day, shortly before noon, he said to me, "Grab everything and run. The vultures are coming..." At three minutes past noon he...cursed forcefully, his face twisted with pain. "Goddamn," he repeated, his eyes opened wider than I'd ever seen them. His voice was the rusting and crackling of dry leaves. "Goddamn the whole friggin' world and everyone in it but you, Carlotta."

"Those were his last words. He was shaken by a violent stomach hemorrhage. Moments later he was dead, at the age of sixty-eight."

Other biographers say Carlotta Monti wasn't even there when Fields died. The Curtis bio says

Monti merely sent a card that arrived before Christmas day: "My outside men tell me your [sic] the same as ever. And I am always the same as ever - Truly yours, Carlotta."

Curtis writes that Fields was in a coma and "Magda stayed with him through Christmas Eve, maintaining a vigil at his bedside. Denied all powers of communication and the singular wit that had sustained him for nearly sixty-seven years, this most independent of men was now unable to perform even the simplest of tasks for himself, and it must have come as a relief when, at 12:03 on a rainy Christmas afternoon, Death gave him an old-fashioned hug."

Ronald Fields, W.C.'s grandson, also says Monti wasn't around. And in the bio (more a cut-and-paste job) by fanboy Simon Louvish, we read: "Later in the month, he lapsed into a coma. Magda Michael and the nurses kept the death watch. On the morning of Christmas Day...according to Ronald Fields, he awoke. Only Magda Michael and a nurse were in the room. Wrote Ronald: "He brought his forefinger to his lips to signify quiet, winked, then closed his eyes..."

Curtis writes that Carlotta Monti did appear at the sanitarium after Fields died, along with W.C.'s estranged son and wife. Amid the tumult, Fields' son insisted, "I did not strike Miss Monti. I merely pushed her..."

There was no push for copies of Fields' last recordings (issued on Les Paul's own indie label). It had been nearly six years since "The Bank Dick," his last screen success. Billboard's review when the records finally came out in March of 1947:

"Since the recent passing of comic W. C. Fields, many will want to own this six-sided disc book, if for nothing else, for memento's sake. The recordings...are far from being Fields at his best. Written and directed by Bill Morrow (Bing Crosby show's scribe), material is corny despite the sales efforts of the famed bourbon buffoon. Timing with few exceptions, was apparently ignored by scripter Morrow so that too often, the build-up for an obvious gag reveals the punch line long before it comes. As is the case with any waxed humor, after the first spinning there's no desire for replays..."



In the long-play era, the recordings got quiet re-issues on 10 inch (from Jay Records, top corner left in the first photo for this entry) and 12 inch format (Proscenium Records, with Fields on one

side, Mae West vocals on the other). Finally, with "Laugh-In" and Tiny Tim popular in the late 60's, nostalgia made a comeback. Dubbed "anti-establishment," the Marx Brothers and the misanthropic W.C. Fields were hotter than ever, and even Laurel & Hardy got re-categorized as "Naturally High," for a Douglas Records album of voicetracks from their films. Decca issued Marx Brothers, Mae West and W.C. Fields voicetracks (with "Laugh-In" announcer Gary Owens supplying narration). Blue Thumb's 1968 release "Original and Authentic Recording by the great W.C. Fields" didn't tell consumers what exactly they were buying. One might consider this in the spirit of Mr. Fields, who once said "Never give a sucker an even break, or smarten up a chump!"

Being one of the chumps, I bought the album, only to discover I'd been rooked into buying the familiar two Les Paul recordings. The label added Mae West singing "Come Up and See Me Sometime" at the end of the side that had "The Day I Drank A Glass Of Water"...maybe forgetting where to cut the tape on the old Proscenium master.

The album does have a fairly decent colorized shot of W.C. Fields on the cover. Ironically, this time the Billboard reviewer declared it to be "vintage Fields, containing some of his best lines."

Of all the various releases, only the original Varsity Records 78 rpm package has liner notes worth noting. On the front inner sleeve is a photo of Fields along with "The Story of My Life," a scant four paragraphs that mostly talk about how he left home, learned to juggle, toured the world, and ended up in the Ziegfeld Follies..."and finally nosed my way into motion pictures and then into radio. And there you have it." And you have the "ultimo," W.C. Fields' last creative gasps...two recordings, one of them with the uncredited (modest fellow...his name is nowhere to be found as producer, engineer or performer) guitarist Les Paul.

W.C. FIELDS [THE TEMPERANCE LECTURE](#)

[THE DAY I DRANK A GLASS OF WATER](#)

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