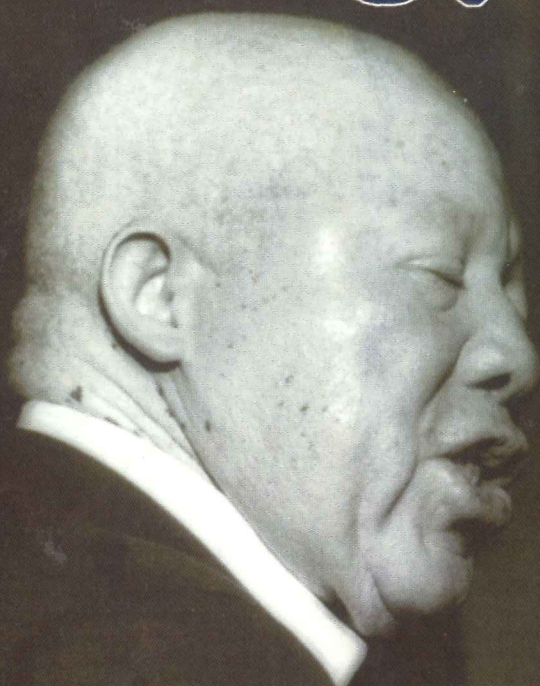


# BLUES & RHYTHM



## Speckled Red



*Miles Grayson*

*L.C. Ulmer*



*Koko Taylor*



# THE DIRTY DOZEN

## The Life And Music Of Speckled Red

By Michael Hortig



Speckled Red at the piano, St. Louis, 1971. Photo: Phil Keily.

**O**n Sunday, 22nd, September 1929, 37 year old pianist Rufus 'Speckled Red' Perryman entered the Peabody Hotel in Memphis to record for the Brunswick Company. Among the four titles he recorded, 'The Dirty Dozen' was not only a big seller on the race-record market, but also one of the most famous numbers in blues history.



Rufus Perryman was born on 23rd October, 1892 in Monroe, Louisiana. His parents were Henry Perryman, a blacksmith, and Ada Westmoreland; together they raised sixteen children. Born an albino, his hair was red, his skin white and around his neck, he had a few scattered specks of darker-coloured pigmentation, which brought him his nickname Speckled Red. In his early teens, the family moved to Atlanta, Georgia, where he helped to support the large family, doing odd jobs. But due to his partial blindness, the fate of all albinos, he started getting interested in music. Around 1917, after he married, he moved into the Detroit area where he stayed until 1927.

During that time, he first met influential piano players like James Hemingway and Paul Seminole, who used to play background music for films in local cinemas, and "was big and fat and his belly would rub against the keyboard".

Red lived next door to a Miss Fat, who ran a goodtime house with a piano in it: "I used to clean up for her, and she let me play, but I had nobody to learn me and my eyesight was pretty bad, so I couldn't take no music lessons."

Soon after, he met a piano player whom he only remembered by the name of Dad: "Dad was just a fellow in Detroit. Me not knowing, what I'm doing, I'm doing nothing,

just keep up a lot of noise. Let the people enjoy yourself and I enjoyed myself, that's the kick I get out of it. But Dad tried to learn me how to play piano, because I didn't know it at that time. That piece he learned me in 1926, the first piece I ever played in my life on piano was in 1926."

During these years Red mostly played for house rent parties in the Detroit area, and even played in a band, called 'The Wolverine Nighthawks'.

But then, something happened! Bob Koester of Delmark Records told me in a letter that: 'Red once told me, that he was involved in something real bad in a whorehouse, but never told me any details'.

Red left Detroit overnight and never returned. He made his way to Memphis, where he met Jim Jackson, a famous guitar player, whose 'Kansas City Blues' was one of the best selling race records at that time.

Jackson liked Red's playing and offered him a chance to make some records. The session was held on 22nd September, 1929 at the Peabody Hotel in Memphis, where Red cut four sides of which the coupling, 'The Dirty Dozens'/'Wilkins Street Stomp', not only was a big seller for Brunswick, but also stayed among the finest examples of early boogie woogie piano.





Above: Speckled Red and John Bentley, St. Louis, 1971. Photos: Phil Keily.  
Below: 100 Club London programme, from June 1960. Courtesy Konrad Nowakowski.

## 100 NEWS

JAZZSHOWS JAZZ CLUB MONTHLY NEWSLETTER



SPECKLED RED

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Red remembered about the origins of the dozens: "They used to have a word they say: 'playin' the dozen'. It was talking dirty, you know, the boys be together and they'd try and out talk one and the other 'till one feller would holler 'you put me in the dozens', because he couldn't think of no more to say. So I made a song out of these words and I called it 'The Dirty Dozens'."

After this session, Red and Jackson joined the Red Rose Minstrels, a medicine show, that 'sold what they call Gen Sing, with some alcohol in it. Good for anything! Fact, it wasn't good for nothing'.

Due to the sales of the 'Dozens', Brunswick called him for another session on 8th April, 1930, when he cut two more versions of the 'Dozens' and 'The Right String, But The Wrong Yo-Yo', which wasn't a big seller in 1930, but it was one for his brother Willie 'Piano Red' Perryman, who hit with the song in 1954.

Speckled Red kept on travelling with the medicine show up to the end of 1931 and for the next ten years, he hoboed

around the South and the Midwest as a solo act, making St. Louis the centre for his travels.

Walter Davis, who besides being a recording artist for Victor and Bluebird, was acting as a talent scout heard him and brought Red to Aurora, Illinois where, on 17th December, 1938, he recorded again in company of Sonny Boy Williamson, Robert Lee McCoy and mandolinist Willie Hatcher, waxing another great piano piece, 'St. Louis Stomp'.

### WORKING AS A TRUCK LOADER

By the early 1940s he found full time work at a company called Food Centre of St. Louis, working nights as a truck loader. In 1945 he lost the job because of his poor eyesight and because he did not have a driving license.

But his prodigious memory helped him, and he got another job at the Withneber Produce Company, where he stayed for the next seven years and he gave up playing completely.

However, he didn't vanish – his early records had been re-issued in the 1940s. In 1951, Red recalled he: "had a girl friend named Mattie Barr, she knew that I could play and she wanted me to start playing again. I'd go down with her to a restaurant where they had a piano, once or twice a week, and finally it kept coming back better and better."

By 1952 he was playing again, but only for a small and local audience. In 1954, upon a request from Bob Koester of Delmark Records, the legendary record collector and police officer, Charley O'Brien, started searching for old time blues musicians in St. Louis.

Charlie discovered Henry Brown, Henry Townsend, James 'Stump' Johnson, Edith Johnson and Mary Johnson. The latter told O'Brien, that she had seen Red in a liquor store only few days before.

O'Brien searched the police records and found that Rufus Perryman had been a victim of a pool-hall brawl a few years earlier.

He also discovered, that Red was still living at the same address, but he was not at home. Next stop was a pool-hall at Franklin Street, where he found a light-skinned man with a hat on – Rufus 'Speckled Red' Perryman.

Red was soon given a job as an intermission pianist at a regular weekly jazz matinee and also got jobs at private parties and several St. Louis Jazz Club programmes.

Between September 1956 and June 1957 he recorded some seventy sides for Bob Koester; the first three being issued on Erwin Helfer's Tone label in 1957. Delmark issued his first solo album in 1962.

### TOURING EUROPE

In 1960 he was booked for a tour to Europe by Harold Davison, whose organisation was then one of the leading European jazz and blues promoters. This period is considered an important period of the





Speckled Red at the 100 Club, London, June 1960. Photo: Terry Cryer.

history of blues in Europe. Blues artists who had already toured here included Big Bill Broonzy, Josh White and Sonny Terry and Brownie McGee. From 1959 pianists followed. First Jack Dupree, then Memphis Slim, Roosevelt Sykes, Speckled Red, Little Brother Montgomery and Curtis Jones. They all lived at Airways Mansions, a hotel near Piccadilly Circus, and it was there, when Red met his one time pupil, Memphis Slim. "To think that I had to come to England to see you, Perryman, you old son of a gun! It must have been in the 1930s, when Red was playing in a honky tonk next door to where I lived. I was very impatient then, but both he and Roosevelt Sykes showed me things!" said Memphis Slim.

Red played many clubs including the 100 Club in London and toured with a number of traditional British jazz bands. At the end

of June he left for an extended tour through Scandinavia, where he cut a recording session in Copenhagen, later issued on the Folkways and Storyville label.

In his 70s, he appeared sporadically in public, mostly around St. Louis only travelling further to the Chicago Folk Festival in 1962, a very disappointing tour to Los Angeles in 1963 and for a longer stay at the Levee House in Minneapolis 1968.

#### LAST RECORDINGS

He recorded again in autumn 1971 for Paul Affeld's Euphonic label, together with Henry Brown and Lawrence Henry, two other veteran piano players from St. Louis.

These last recordings show, that even at the age of 79, he was still in demand.

After these recordings he teamed up with pianist John Bentley, who helped Affeld with his Euphonic Piano Series project, for several gigs. His last public appearance was in October 1971, when he was the St. Louis Jazz Club's guest of honour at a concert held on the steamer 'Admiral'. He

underwent surgery three times in 1972 and died on 2nd January, 1973 at the Homer G. Phillips Hospital in St. Louis.

Speckled Red's music comes directly out of the barrelhouses, juke joints, brothels and the rent-party circuit. In this noisy and violent atmosphere pianists developed a style with hard hitting basses and hammered chords in the right hand. Red's playing could be very disciplined, and he could play with enormous speed. Sometimes he missed a chord or some keys, sometimes the notes seem to be fired from a machine-gun.

Everybody who met Red describes him as a delightful man, good mannered with a great sense of humour and fun.

He always dressed well and always wore a worn brown trilby or a smart cream panama hat, which protected his eyes from too much light. He is also remembered for his fondness for Gordon's gin. Val Wilmer remembers: "I was fortunate to have a friendly and hospitable mother, who always encouraged me to bring home all my friends. I had taken several musicians to the house and she had been to the shows, where she met Champion Jack Dupree and Memphis Slim. But she was unprepared for the sight of Speckled Red and his bottle of gin. And when he poured out our drinks into glasses meant for water, this was all too much for her....!"

Speckled Red belongs to the first generation of piano blues and boogie pianists, born before 1900. Many

of these pianists never got the chance to record and are only recalled by their names, so to have Speckled Red's recorded legacy from 1929 through to 1971 is historically and musically important.

Many thanks to the late Charley O'Brien; Bob

Koester; Chris Barber, Karl Gert zur Heide, Dr. Konrad Nowakowski, Terry

Cryer and Val Wilmer for her

personal memories and for the providing the hitherto unknown article about Red from the magazine 'Tropic'.

**Postscript:** Speckled Red was also featured in B&R 75 pages 4 - 7 'The Trumpet Sessions: Five Pianists Recorded in 1960 and 1961' by Francis Wilford Smith. The feature shows three great Speckled Red photographs and tells the story of his visit to the UK. On a further note Guido van Rijn points out to us that despite the information in B&GR there is no mandolin by Willie Hatcher on 'Welfare Blues' and 'Down On The Levee' by Speckled Red cut on 17th December 1938.

Label shots: Michael Hortig.

