



# Peter Stothard

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## Screw and pique

In the music clubs of Texas George W is not just the name of the President.

The first George W is the ragtime pianist George W Thomas, brother of Sippie 'Mighty Tight Woman' Wallace.

In a new book, *All Over The Map*, music critic, Michael Corcoran, describes how Sippie Wallace, with a few other Texas jazz and blues pioneers, have been helped to enjoy a late revival in the age when the state is better known for politics.

Sippie, who was born in 1898 and worked in the same clubs as Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet, got her great new lease of 'Mighty Tight' life courtesy of the rock-singer Bonnie Raitt. The sixties dance-man Archie Bell owed a second round of fame to Janet Jackson.

But many blues artists are forgotten as fast as failed politicians. Corcoran's book is the work of a 'rock and roll detective' who, with the random hopes formed by 'singles bar and slot machine' has tried to bring a few more of them back.

This is no easy assignment. The truth has to be sought through an almost permanent fog of drugs, alcohol and pique. Sometimes the pique is the greatest barrier of the three.

Although the current Soul Stirrers still do a decent job at a Sam Cooke revival (I saw one at Laura Bush's Texas Book Festival last month) R.H Harris, the band's founder, once felt himself so neglected that he claimed credit for the 'first true gospel song', the vocals of Duke Ellington' the yodelling of Tex Ritter and teaching falsetto to the Inkspots. Not that Bush biographers can always avoid the same problems.

To describe the oil-capital, Houston, as the 'City of Syrup' suggests a certain way with metaphor. But for the Texas remix maestro, DJ Screw, the syrup was codeine, valium and PCP, a tincture to be 'sipped lean' with the purpose of slowing the man and his music down.

DJ did, at least, leave his name behind. As Corcoran points out, in the zones of remixing, chopping and copyright misappropriation (where a royalty statement is merely something the Queen might say) the legacy of the man who slowed himself down too far is that in his home state the slowed-down music is still a 'screw'.

Michael Jackson's sister, Janet, has not quite done for Archie Bell and the Drells what Bonnie Raitt did for the first George W's sister. But both Ms Jackson and REM have used snatches of the Drells' 1967 hit *Tighten Up* - for homage and for profit.

Bell himself, Corcoran recalls, took a long time to hear his own record since the original session was not even over when he was shipped off to Vietnam. He heard himself first on the radio only in Germany after the Tet Offensive while recuperating from a wound in his leg.

In 1977 a copy of Blind Willie Johnson's *Dark Was The Night* was chosen to go to the end of the universe with the spacecraft Voyager One. Johnson wrote Eric Clapton's *Motherless Children* and other songs used by Led Zeppelin and the Rolling Stones which brought huge sales and lawsuits. His own *Complete Blind Willie Johnson* did not sell so well.

In 1982 Stevie Ray Vaughan played parties for the Rolling Stones and backing tracks for David Bowie. In 1986 his nose was almost boneless and his ambition to die like Jimi Hendrix, as well as play guitar like him, was almost fulfilled. In 1990, he had been almost four years without cocaine or alcohol, revived by his own efforts rather than cover versions, when he died in a helicopter crash.

There are more stories like these, always well told, from the musical and political pulse of America.

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