Marvin Rainwater Sings Again

By Leif Enger
June 26, 1998

Marvin Rainwater is 73 now, living in a turquoise trailer house behind a burned-out convenience store on the flats of Aitkin County. A sign on the store says "Bluebird Corners" - a nod to his hit song from 1957. There were no trailers or hillbilly songs in Marvin's early dreams; growing up in Depression-era Oklahoma, he felt chosen for the classics, despite his father memorizing whole works for hometown recitals. Then, at fifteen, a mishap removed part of his left thumb - and his concert ambitions.

Rainwater: Yeah, Momma took in washin' so I could have a piano and take classical lessons when I was 6 years old. I was studyin' Rachmaninoff and Beethoven and Paderewski and all those, when I was 6 years old. I lived for it, I couldn't think of anything else. I'd sit on that piano bench eight hours at a time. My Daddy'd come home say "Stop that noise. Go. Get outta here," and I'd have to go out and play.

Rainwater won a contest on Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts - the 50s version of "Star Search" - a performance that brought him national exposure and eventually a recording contract. He played regularly on Godfrey's popular morning show and on Red Foley's Ozark Jubilee. He toured with conviction - and temporary disreputable record labels; the companies dubbed new tracks over the demos and released them.

Rainwater: They sold a million of my albums at $.88 apiece, and it destroyed my career, my credibility was shot on account of those cheap records, they were demo tapes, not even actual recordings, and they dubbed music in on top of it, got out of meter, didn't know the melody or anything. It was horrible, and the sound was real cheap you know; on account of me having "The Bluebird", this was after I did "Bluebird", then they put all this stuff in the market, see, flooded the market with these cheap albums - and my credibility was shot.

"Gonna Find Me a Bluebird" went to number three on the country charts and 18 on the pop charts at the same time - one of the earliest crossover hits. It made Rainwater an attraction overseas as well - another hit, "Whole Lotta Woman," pushed Elvis Presley out of number one for six weeks in England in 1958.

But success was slippery. After he began hitting the charts, a small studio where Rainwater had recorded early demo tapes sold the tapes to a number of disreputable record labels; the companies dubbed new tracks over the demos and released them.

Rainwater: They sold a million of my albums at $.88 apiece, and it destroyed my career, my credibility was shot on account of those cheap records, they were demo tapes, not even actual recordings, and they dubbed music in on top of it, got out of meter, didn't know the melody or anything. It was horrible, and the sound was real cheap you know; on account of me having "The Bluebird", this was after I did "Bluebird", then they put all this stuff in the market, see, flooded the market with these cheap albums - and my credibility was shot.

"Gonna Find Me a Bluebird" went to number three on the country charts and 18 on the pop charts at the same time - one of the earliest crossover hits. It made Rainwater an attraction overseas as well - another hit, "Whole Lotta Woman," pushed Elvis Presley out of number one for six weeks in England in 1958.

Photo Credit: Leif Enger, MPR By the mid-fifties, Rainwater had started mixing straight-ahead country and western with the emergent, big-beat rockabilly sound. It cost him some fans, but in 1957 he recorded the song he's best known for - the song he refers to simply as "the Bluebird."