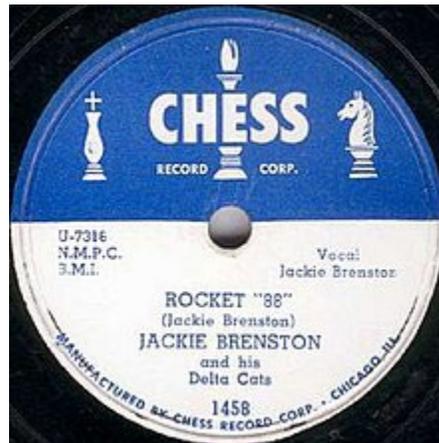


# “Rocket ‘88”--Jackie Brenston & his Delta Cats (1951)

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Essay by Steve Propes (guest post)\*



*Original label*

America was apparently ready for the next big blues sound which was created in a March 5, 1951 session at Sam Phillips' legendary Memphis Recording Service studio. Piano player Ike Turner showed up with his Kings of Rhythm who then recorded enough material for two records. The first was credited to Jackie Brenston & his Delta Cats: Ike Turner, piano; Willie Kizart, electric guitar; Willie Sims, drums; Raymond Hill, tenor sax, and Brenston, tenor sax and vocals on the raucously influential "Rocket '88," to which blues harmonica specialist James Cotton claims to have contributed.

"Ike Turner was the original writer of it, but by him playing with Howlin' Wolf and I was playing with Howlin' Wolf also, before the song come out, I put a few lines in it, 'V-8 motor is smart in design'." Cotton also said of Memphis Recording Service, "they had a small studio, but they didn't do any record pressing. Most of the Memphis people who recorded hadn't had the chance before and were ready to jump on it. Living in the south, you play two days a week if you're lucky, Friday and Saturday."

Key lyrics suggested a party mood, "everybody in my car's gonna take a little nip." The suggestion of drunk driving was likely not considered an overly serious offense in '51.

Kizart's loud and accidentally fuzz-toned guitar (legend has it that his amplifier fell off the roof of the band's car, somewhere along Highway 61, inflicting irreversible damage on its speaker) pushed "Rocket '88" into rock and roll territory.

During the 61-mile trip from Clarksdale, Mississippi to Memphis, Turner said, "We had the bass on the top of the car. It blew off. We had a lot of trouble that day. It was raining. I wasn't even thinking about a Rocket '88.'.... We got to Memphis. We didn't record that day and we had to stay there until that night." The ending of the record was the "sound of the guitar, slap down on the guitar cord." Guitarist was "Willie Kizart from Tutweiler, Mississippi playing guitar. This

guy, man, this kid we got with me, he was always running off, you never knew when he was going to show up on the date. We were just putting something together to get some gas to get back home because we didn't think we were going to record. They gave us \$20 apiece and that record was a big hit."

"I went to West Memphis, that's where I met Joe Bihari, he was at Sam Phillips studio," said Ike Turner. "I was standing, just peeping in, you heard of Phineas Newborn? They was recording somebody, trying to get the guy to do the piano part, anyway, I went in when they took a break. I was sitting there, messing with the piano. I had some shorts on, shirt hanging, looked like I didn't have any pants. I started playing the piano, he said, 'that's what I want.' He wanted to know my name. That's how we got in. We cut 'Rocket 88'," with an opening much like Jimmy Liggins' "Cadillac Boogie" from 1947.

During these spring months of 1951, "Rocket '88'" by Jackie Brenston & his Delta Cats competed for the top spot in the R&B charts with another spectacular recording, "Sixty Minute Man" by the Dominoes, which ignited the singing career of tenor Clyde McPhatter, who later gained fame with the Drifters. Turner couldn't have been pleased his name was missing from the label without credit to the Kings of Rhythm, Brenston ended up with a free Olds 88 given to him by GM.

In 1951, "Rocket '88'" was covered western swing style with fender banging novelty sound effects by Bill Haley & the Saddlemen, three years before he came up with "Rock Around the Clock." "Rocket '88'" also influenced Jesse Allen's "What A Party" in 1954 and Little Richard's "Good Golly Miss Molly" in 1958. In 1975, James Cotton recorded an up-to-date version of "Rocket '88'" for the Buddah label.

The recording was so successful that Turner became the Memphis area talent scout for two labels, Chess out of Chicago and Modern/RPM out of Los Angeles from where co-owner Joe Bihari would take long trips visiting distributors and small studios labels in search of new mainly blues material.

Ike Turner had a hand in having Joe Bihari sign B.B. King to the RPM label, but ran into problems when he placed bluesmen like Roscoe Gordon and Howlin' Wolf on both Chess and RPM at the same time and with the same compositions.

"In those days, Leonard Chess was coming down to Memphis. We would cut a song like 'Moanin' At Midnight' on Wolf. Soon as Chess would leave town, we would send the same record to L.A. to the Bihari brothers," said Turner. "We would get the money double. I don't know if they ever knew, they never said anything about it. Because the artists down there, nobody ever signed no contracts."

Joe Bihari of Modern / RPM recalled, "we had an agreement with Sam, we had first refusal on anything he recorded like Joe Hill Louis" who recorded the very similar "Hydramatic Woman." "We didn't like what he was sending. Louis was playing on radio WDIA, sponsored by Pepticon.

"I was using Phineas Newborn, nothing was happening on the session. Ike Turner came to me. Phineas was playing jazz; Ike Turner was playing blues piano. Ike had a tremendous range on that B.B. King session, I hired Ike, bought him a car, bought him clothes, 200 dollars a week, plus he got gas and oil. Leonard Chess happened to be in Memphis at the time, Leonard bought

‘Rocket “88”’ right there, Sam was getting ready to send it. We had a run-in with Leonard, we had Wolf at that time.”

Both labels settled the dispute, Gordon went to RPM, Wolf to Chess and Bobby Bland who was heard on Modern and Chess as a duet partner to Gordon went to Duke. And Ike left town for new adventures in St. Louis.

In the summer of 1951, Brenston was credited on an “answer” to his “Rocket ‘88”” hit, “My Real Gone Rocket” on Chess, with less than real gone results. Nowadays ‘Rocket “88”’ is often billed as the first rock and roll record, but rock and roll was the product of a gradual evolution and there are earlier competitors for this distinction.

In 1951, few called it rock and roll, but it’s fair to infer that a lot of record buyers sensed something different and liked it. The record was a big hit, and in 1954 the company even gave it a belated release on 45rpm, most likely to compete with Bill Haley’s cover on Holiday. That Chess label reissue 45 now commands a price in the four to five figure range; the original 78 in three figures.

*Steve Propes has collected rhythm and blues and rock and roll roots records on 45rpm and 78rpm for decades and wrote the first book about rock and roll record collecting, "Those Oldies Bu Goodies" in 1973. He was a dee jay/interviewer at KLON-FM88 and Charter Cable in Long Beach from 1981 through about 2000, interviewing the likes of Ike Turner, Bo Diddley, Joe Turner, Curtis Mayfield, Freddy Fender, Ray Manzarek, George Carlin, Ruth Brown and Wilson Pickett as well as others at the Long Beach Blues Festival.*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.