

Chick Willis

Before 'Stooping Down' – The Early Years

by Opal Louis Nations



Chick Willis circa late 1950s courtesy Opal Louis Nations.

It seems like, in the USA, at least, the support for blues music has fallen on hard times. Sales of the music in its current electrified form and patronage of it, have most definitely taken a turn into what would be accurately defined as 'deep-rouch'. Songs like Theodis Ealey's 'Stand Up In It', Marvin Sease's 'Sit Down On It' and Lee Shot Williams's 'I'm A Nibble Man' seem to tease the black ladies enough for them to want to lay out serious bucks. On the other hand, while most Caucasian folk might think that the blues is going through a serious bout of sex slavery (some call it discrimination and disrespect of women), most black women see it as conjugal honesty and garner respect for these artists telling it like it is. For that, they feel no moral degradation. In fact, there are a few blues women who offer encouragement. Take for example E.C. Scott's 'Missionary Man' and Denise LaSalle's 'Bone It Like You Own It'.

Chick Willis is one of those blues artists who have survived because of his popular reputation for being the 'Stoop Down Man', a shag record.

Although conceived on wax some three or four years earlier, it took the world by the crotch in 1972. "If it were not for 'Stoop Down' I would not have survived as a blues guitarist and singer up to this day. It has helped pay the bills all the while," says Willis, who insists he did not pilfer the song from fellow Atlantan Billy Wright, but modeled the opus on a vaudeville or carnival piece performed on 'midnight rambles', a song with the kind of formula used for Wynonie Harris's 'Round The Clock Blues' – the type one personalises by adding one's own double-entendre verses. Two excellent articles have already been published on Chick in recent years. This one, unlike these, will dwell entirely on his formative years.

Robert L. (Chick) Willis was born 24th September, 1934 in Cabiness, Georgia, south of Atlanta in Monroe County, not far in fact, from Forsyth, Georgia where he now resides. This goes to show that Chick has always been firmly planted in his roots. There were three other children: brother Emmett, who wound up working in home interior supply, Claudia, and then Annie, who became a beautician. His father Ted worked for the Southern Railroad Company driving spikes for the railroad the old-fashioned way. Ted had a penchant for harmonica playing and singing old railroad work songs on the job.

Chick's mother, Hattie, was renowned as a soloist at The Antioch Baptist Church in Cabiness during the 1930s. She was often invited to sing at other Baptist churches in Monroe, Butts, Henry and LaMar counties. Hattie's mother, Fannie, also a church singer, was a staunch pillar of the Baptist church, a church mother who lead most of the hymn singing and arranged many of her daughter's church engagements. Chick's grandfather, Gordon Shannon, who lived to the ripe old age of 108, was a head deacon who carried the keys and attended to the duties of the church. Hattie made sure that the children always had a dark suit, white shirt, black tie and shoes just to go to church on Sunday. Fannie would not allow the singing of secular music around the house. The family was blessed with an aunt who sang and played piano.

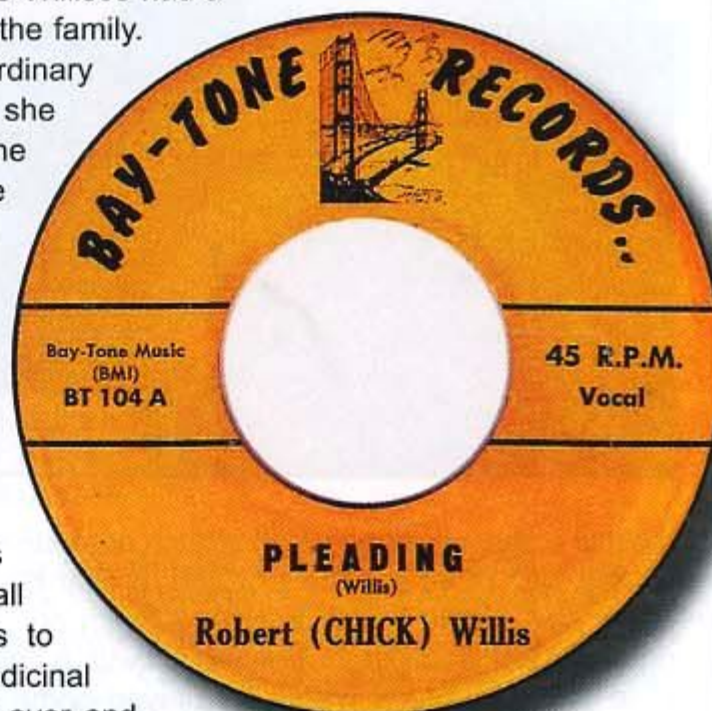
The Willis clan lived and worked on a farm, raising cane, corn, beans, watermelon, beans and cantaloupes. They took care of 37 cows that they had to religiously milk twice a day, every day, six in the morning and six at night. The usual workday schedule started with a wake-up call at four o'clock, followed by morning milking. Then it was time to hitch up the mules and plow the fields. Twelve-noon was lunch break, followed by an afternoon back in the furrows. Second milking preceded supper and chopping of wood.

COTTON AND MILK

On summer evenings the family sat out on the front porch. Fannie set up the pump organ, Ted brought out his harmonica, and with sweet potatoes over the fire in the fireplace and Hattie's hominy grits cooking to a boil, the family sang old spirituals like the old folks used to do. It did not hurt any that the Willises had a couple of preachers in the family.

Fannie was an extraordinary woman. Not only did she make berry wine for the church, she served the local community as both expert herbalist and competent midwife. The farming folk thereabouts were poor and could not afford a regular doctor or certified nurse.

Chick remembers when Fannie took all the kids to the woods to gather just the right medicinal plants. They were told over and over just which ones to pick at each



Courtesy Victor Pearlin.

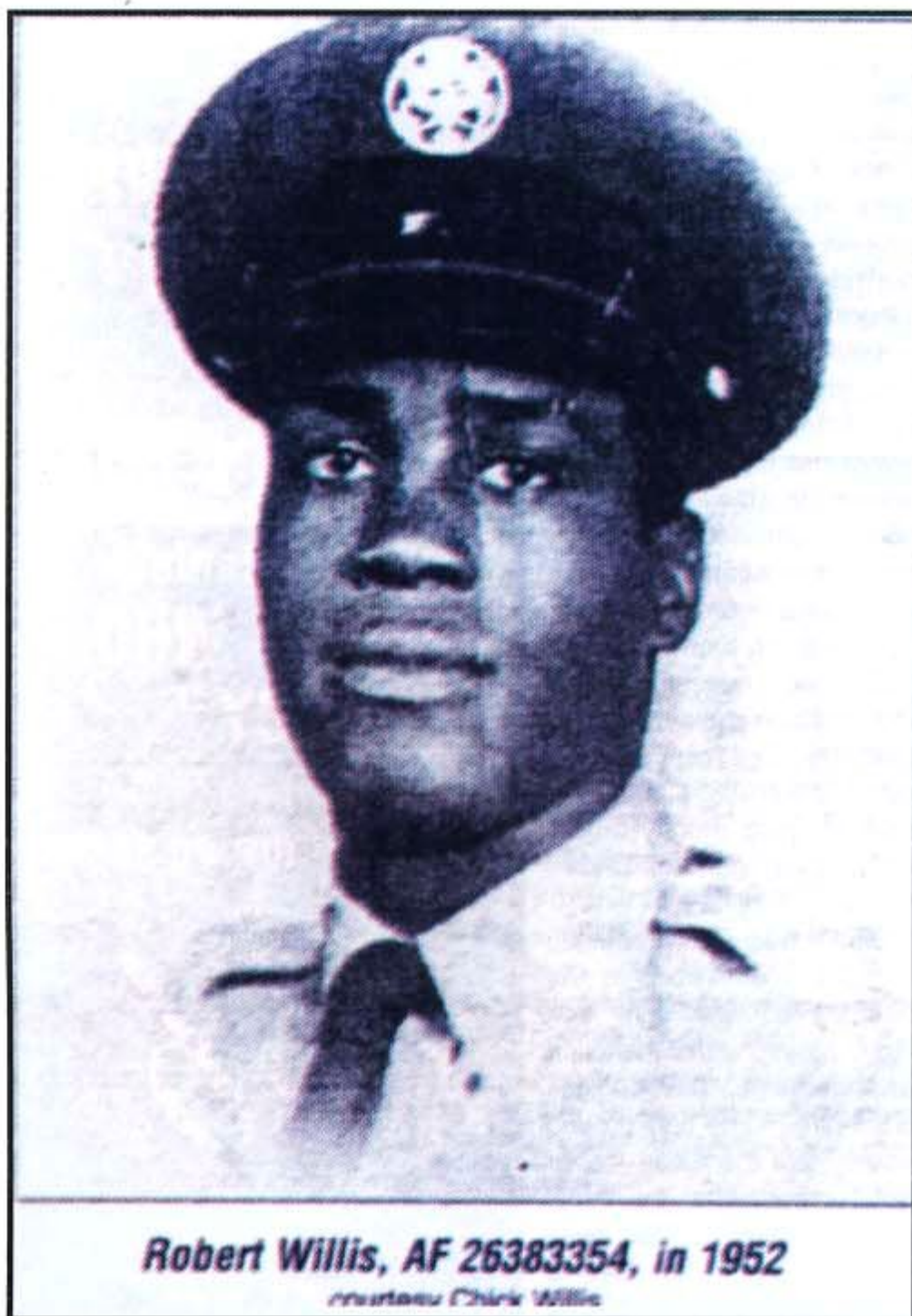
time. Cotton and milk were the principal commodities. Milk trucks came regularly early every Monday morning for pick-up. Large bricks of ice were delivered. These were wrapped in newspaper, carried into the house and placed in the cooler where the milk waited for collection.

The family moved to Atlanta in 1940. By now a quartet had been formed to accompany Hattie on her church gigs. Chick and Emmett, along with cousins Fred and LeRoy Shannon, plus Robert Johnson (in no way related to the country blues singer) formed the Southern Gospel Singers. They named themselves after their famous cousins, the Southernaires, who recorded for Decca in New York during the 1940s. The Southernaires' repertoire was the group's strongest influence. The Willis family were also related by marriage to the great Archie Brownlee, of the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi.

When the boys were a little older, they went out on their own. When their church members were invited to sing as guests at another church, the Southern Gospel Singers went with the choir. The quintet did quite well, filling churches in both Atlanta and around Southern Georgia. A special feature event took place in Juliette, a little town north of Macon near the Ocmulgee River, every third Sunday in October. A camp meeting would be set up with vendors selling chitlins, hot dogs and tripe sandwiches. Folk would come down from the woods with illicit liquor and moonshine for 75 cents a bottle. The boys bought homebrew and whooped it up. Sometimes the boys went down in the woods to sample roasted possums. Best of all, says Chick, were the 'soppings', leftover bacon fat mixed with corn syrup, sopped up with biscuits or corn bread.

In 1949 Chick left home and went to live with his Aunt Lois (Willis-Keith) in Chicago. With nothing more than a seventh grade education (he was needed most on the farm and kept out of school) he managed to get a job at the downtown Harrison Hotel. In less than a year he worked himself up from busboy to desk clerk. He began to realise the need for more education and when he got a chance later in life, he made up for the classes he had missed. By now, aside from singing, all he could muster in terms of accompaniment were just a few harmonica licks he had picked up from Ted.

With little promise for immediate advancement in something more remunerative, Chick joined the National Guard's 178th Army Regimental Combat Team and in 1951 Chick was given the choice as to which branch of the Armed Services he would like to serve in. He chose the Air Force. He was sent for basic training at The Lockland A.F.B. in Texas and in 1953 was shipped out to Korea to fight in the war as tail gunner



Robert Willis, AF 26383354, in 1952

courtesy Chick Willis

Chick Willis in the military circa early 1950s. Courtesy Opal Louis Nations

on the B29s. The B29 was an old World War II warhorse that took eleven men to fly. The B29 was gradually being replaced by the newer B47, which took only three men to operate. This excluded the need for a tail gunner. The war ended before Chick was able to retrain and he was demobbed at an A.F.B. in Shreveport.

Shreveport was a long way from the family home in Atlanta. With next to no money in his pocket, Chick had to hitchhike home. It took two rides to reach Milledgeville, Georgia

where his driver was pulled over by the Highway Patrol. It turned out the vehicle had been stolen by Chick's driver who had escaped from a mental institution and was fleeing by road. Chick was questioned by a white officer with a penchant for old Southern hospitality. The officer took offense to Chick's attitude, it seems that Chick did not hold to the officer's concept of Southern manners and neglected to call him 'sir' when answering questions. Before returning to his car, the officer struck Chick to the ground. Chick headed straight for the courthouse and summoned the judge.

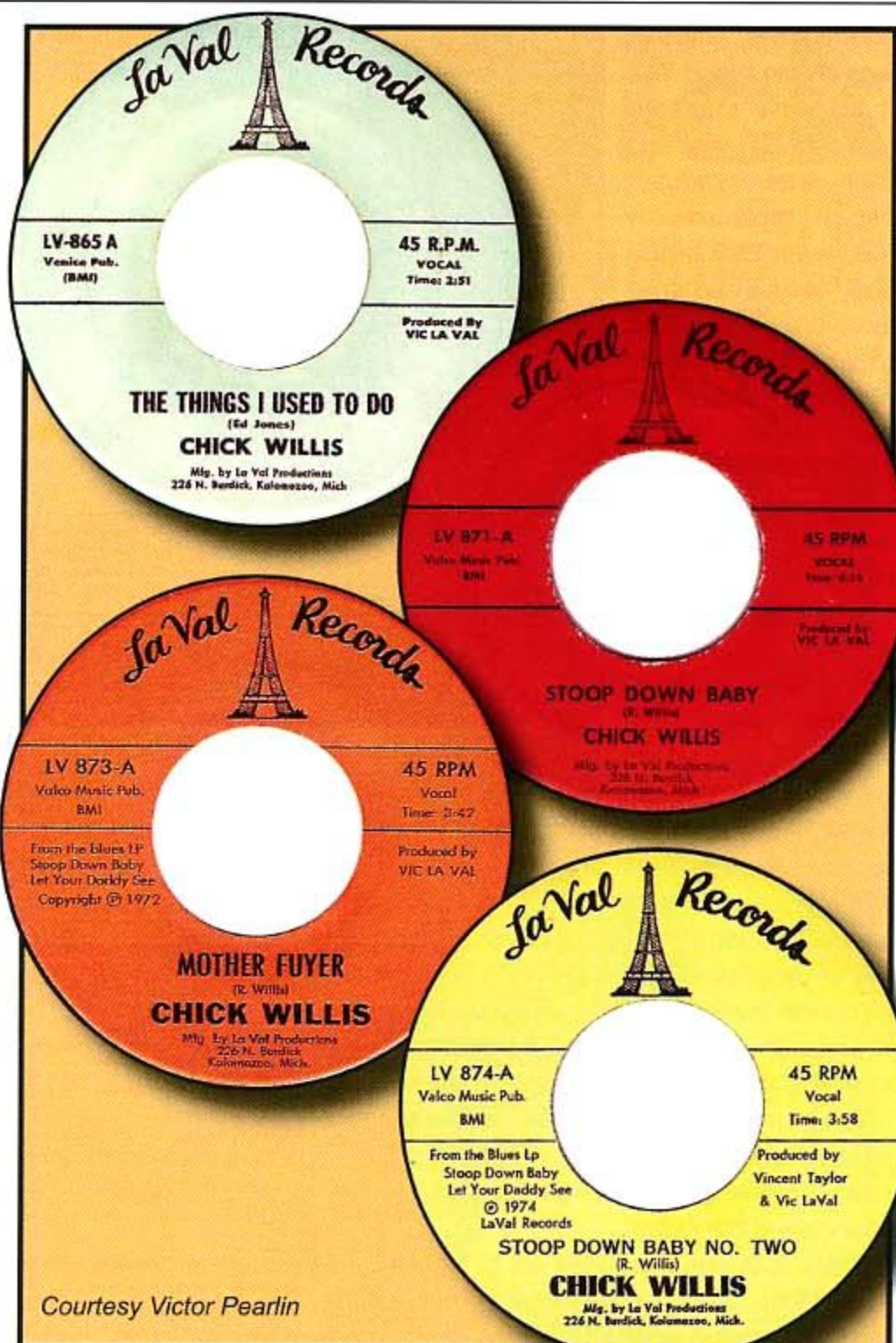
Chick informed the judge as to how the officer had mistreated him. The officer was reprimanded and ordered to pay Chick's entire trip home from Shreveport to Atlanta. Chick thought a moment, and changing his mind, took the train to Chicago. He then began regular trips to and from his folks in Atlanta. Chick, encouraged by his buddies at the Shreveport A.F.B., played a few local gigs. These were singing engagements. Having by now reached Chicago, he discovered that to find decent paying gigs he would have to learn how to accompany himself. Chick insists that he started playing guitar before joining his first cousin (Chuck Willis)'s touring band in late 1954. With all known facts fully considered, it is quite likely that Chick did not really get to know his way around the instrument until the close of 1954, when the great Roy Gaines, Chuck's regular guitarist, started giving Chick a few pointers. It was probably true that Lowell Fulson, Guitar Slim and Chuck Berry showed Chick a few things along the way. After all, they all guested on Chuck's road show.

Later on, Wesley Jackson of the Roy Mays Band taught Chick a few useful moves. When Chick hooked up with Chuck Willis, Chuck had just recorded 'Lawdy Miss Mary' (which became extremely popular in the Southland). 'Lawdy Miss Mary' was backgrounded by the Sandmen, a vocal group in which Brook Benton sang the baritone part. Chick was taken on as chauffeur, valet and general servant. This meant he had to tend to Chuck Willis's regular medical prescriptions, which included the ongoing use of Phenobarbital. Chuck was then living on Moore Street in Atlanta's Red Light district and often wore a turban, not for any Muslim persuasion, but simply because he was bald. Baldness ran rampant in the Willis clan. According to Chick, most of the males in the family wore hats.

Chick says his first major solo gig came about in Hattiesburg, Mississippi at the High Hat Club in 1953. This does not jive with the fact that Chick was serving in the Air Force in Korea in 1953. The High Hat gig must have taken place in 1955, after he had joined his first cousin's touring band. When Chick had mastered a few chords, Chuck got him to open his show. Gaining more confidence, Chick got a job as band vocalist with the Roy Mays band. Mays played trumpet, Julius Hemby was keyboardist, Ike Anderson slapped bass, Wesley Jackson picked guitar and John Pete often played second trumpet alongside Carlos Mamouis, who sat in on tenor. Roy Mays' sister Zilla sang songs written from the distaff point of view, and Chick handled the rest. Zilla, who had recorded for Mercury, Coral and Groove, was one of Atlanta's first female deejays. Billed as the 'Dream Girl', she hosted radio WAOK's late show. This was an added advantage for Roy, as he could rehearse his band at WAOK.



Chuck Willis publicity shot, circa early 1950s. B&R Archives



Courtesy Victor Pearlin

In April 1957 Lee Rupe, ex-wife of Specialty boss Art Rupe, founded Ebb Records to taunt her ex-husband with a bit of healthy competition. Lee Rupe hired arranger J.J. Jackson to find and develop talent for the label. Jackson played piano and alto sax with great skill.

In June 1957, having just recorded Tony Harris's LA bestseller 'Chicken Baby Chicken', J.J. called Chuck Willis in Atlanta to ask if he knew any promising local artists without contracts. J.J. was sponsoring a talent show, and WGST deejay Zenas 'Daddy' Sears was serving as m.c. at Atlanta's Magnolia Ballroom and needed acts to fill the bill. The Magnolia was notable for its great rhythm and blues shows, especially those featuring 'quartet battles' promoted by B.B. Beamon.

Chick recalls that 87 contestants competed. In one account, Chick says he sung and played a Jimmy Reed song while turning back flips and other gymnastic feats. In Alan Empson and Dave Williams' feature for their 1999 Juke Blues article (Juke Blues number 45), Chick said, "I came in first place, and Roy Lee Johnson and the Brassettes Band came in second. I did 'Ain't Nobody Gonna Tell My Baby To Break My Rule', one of Chuck Willis's old songs. At that time I was playing guitar behind my head, with tongue and lips, and all this kind of stuff." (Incidentally, Billboard reported in a July 1957 issue that the Brassettes won first place and that Chick Willis came in second)

Chick's antics certainly paid off. From then on, with the addition of 'lap-sitting', Chick would become known as the guy who took the routines of T-Bone Walker and added his own patent lasciviousness. Both Chick Willis and the Brassettes were signed to an Ebb recording contract. In July The Brassettes recorded 'Brassette Rock Parts 1 & 2'. Six months later Lee Rupe issued 'Never Let Me Go' coupled with 'You're Mine', as by Robert Willis to avoid confusion with Chick's first cousin. Chick told me that the original Ebb session was held in Atlanta at WABC. A single-track tape was used and each song took two hours to complete. Chick told Juke Blues that the session was conducted at radio WGST in Atlanta. It is more than likely that the session was conducted at WGST as Zenas Sears served as an R&B deejay on the station and was a supportive friend.

It is also likely that WGST co-sponsored the talent show. Chick insists that some members of Roy Mays' band were used on the session, but on the final cut J.J. Johnson himself could have played the sax and piano parts. Chick told Juke Blues that the Brassettes band were not good enough on the horn parts, hence J.J. was asked to substitute.

Ebb Records went belly-up six months after Chick's release. WADK (the station at which Zilla Mays conducted her show) was run by Stan Raymond and Zenas 'Daddy' Sears. Their purpose was to broadcast a roster of all-black programming. This suited Roy Mays and Chick Willis perfectly. Sears helped find work for Chick and the band at The Poinciana, American Legion and Auburn Avenue Casino. Chuck's most important appearances at this time were solo engagements at The Royal Peacock and here he shared billing with Guitar Foots and opened for Big Joe Turner, Ray Charles and Ruth Brown on an Atlantic Records package show. Chick still did the odd chore for cousin Chuck.

Chick put Chuck's ulcers down to not eating right, at least in the beginning. Chuck was raised by Aunt Alberta, a stepmother, who preferred to drink and party rather than sit and eat three squares a day. The house was often without food. Chuck caught his drinking habit from his aunt. After a while he developed a stomach ulcer, which he aggravated with more booze. The pain got so bad he had to take prescription drugs to alleviate the agony. One morning Chick found Chuck laying on the floor foaming at the mouth. They were staying in Dayton, Ohio at the time. Paramedics were called, and Chuck was admitted to Farmdale Hospital.

Chuck, through working with booking manager Danny Kessler, had a string of dates lined up and no one to fill them. It was decided that Chick, supported by Roy Gaines on guitar, would go out and honour the bookings.

Wearing Chuck's turban and silk suits, Chick masqueraded as Chuck and no one suspected the switch at first. When the entourage reached Buffalo, New York, they were booked to play a show for 'Hound Dog' (George Lorenz). Lorenz hosted The Hound Dog Hit Parade at WKBS. Chuck was supposed to headline the show with Etta James appearing as second act. Etta knew Chuck and Chick and threatened to spill the beans unless the billing was switched. The switch was made amicably and the show went on.

Chick was at Chuck's bedside right at the end. Chuck had swallowed half a bottle of 7-Up that Chick had given him. Chuck was complaining about how he wanted to throw up. He was driven to the emergency room of The Hugh Spalding Hospital in Atlanta and given an x-ray and then rushed to the operating room. His ulcer had turned cancerous, and the doctors could not save him. He died of peritonitis 10th April, 1958. Chuck was making good money before he passed, earning \$1,250 per gig.

Chuck was also producing an album on Chick at the time. Fred Jackson and Roy Mays were handling arrangements. The Cookies were hired to do background vocals, but the album never got finished. After the burial Chick wanted to get away from everything and fled to Chicago where he played second guitar and bass

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for Elmore James. Chick met all the blues greats and played all the nightclubs and took the time to build up a friendly relationship with the club owners. The reason for this was that he had planned beforehand to build his own band and work the same circuit.

He then got together with a drummer named Jessie James and band vocalist 'Barking' Bill. The group played Pepper's Lounge and most of the South Side, sometimes working with Muddy Waters, Mighty Joe Young, Maxine Brown, Ruby Andrews and the Scott Brothers. In Chicago Chick met Jimmy Lynch, a vaudevillian with a unique ribald routine. Dressed in a tattered suit with a stick and 'kerchief tied to one end, Lynch played the Funky Tramp, a guy who made out with a gorilla, in small black clubs. Both Lynch and the better-known Rudy Ray Moore (who wore a turban) played in supper clubs with shake dance revues. Chick borrowed from Lynch and Moore, both of whom were pals, for his own evolving stage act.

Lynch had a recording contract with Vic La Val (Taylor's) La Val label in Kalamazoo, Michigan. La Val had put out Lynch's 'funky tramp' routine on album. Sales from the album enabled La Val to dabble in blues a little later on. Lynch put Chick in touch with La Val. Chick had plans to move out to the West Coast where, he thought, he stood a better chance at finding work. La Val told Chick that he and his brother Brad Taylor co-owned a record company they had set up in San Francisco called Bay Tone Records on Fillmore Street. Bradford James Taylor, who founded Bay Tone in 1958, had played tenor sax in Jay McShann's Orchestra in 1943. He also set up the Bradley Booking Agency on Fillmore during the mid-Fifties.

By the time Chick hit California, Brad had already recorded Bobby Freeman and the Romancers and James Brown's second set of Famous Flames, now recording under the name Fabulous Flames. This bunch of Flames – J.W. Archer, 'June Baby' Bill Holland, Louis Madison and Willie 'Snake' Johnson – were formed in the mid-fifties in Sanderville, Georgia by Henry Nash, who christened them the Dominions. Nash put the Dominions with promoter Clint Brantley, who managed Little Richard's Upsetters Band. The Dominions and Little Richard toured together making it easy for Richard to re-create some of his backgrounded Peacock sides in performance.

When Richard found religion Nash put the Dominions with James Brown's touring revue. Bobby Byrd and the original Flames had just quit, and Brown needed an immediate replacement, hence the Dominions changed names to the Flames with Louis Madison as keyboardist, lead

vocalist and vocal group arranger. The ex-Dominions' full set of Flames played only on one Federal studio session for James Brown. This was the October 1957 date which produced 'That Dood It Good'/'Begging Begging' etc. Bill Hollings, Johnny Terry and 'Baby' Lloyd Stallworth replaced them in the studio by the time the 'Try Me' session came around.

When Chick reached the San Francisco Bay Area on a Greyhound bus, Brad put him up in a large apartment space over a pool hall on Seventh Avenue in Oakland. Chick shared the apartment with the Fabulous Flames who were about to become Chick's background group. The story of the Flames' split with Brown runs as follows. Brown and the Flames were playing the Fillmore Auditorium in San Francisco on a stormy night. Behind the theatre a tussle broke out after the show when Archer accused Brown of not paying the group a sufficient percentage of the gross. The angered Archer proceeded to push Brown into the rain-filled gutter. Enraged, Brown fired the group on the spot, which, I suspect would have happened anyway as childhood pal Bobby Byrd wanted to return to the group with Terry and Bobby Bennett in tow.

Capitalising on all this, Chick (wearing a turban) went out with the Flames doing all of Brown's so far charted hits, which, of course, he knew by heart. By late 1959 Brad Taylor was still leasing Bob Geddins' West Oakland studio to cut his artists. The Fabulous Flames had already waxed the beautiful 'Do You Remember' and 'I Need You Dear' and were enjoying some measure of success in the Bay Area. Back for a second time fronted by Chick on lead vocals, the ensemble recorded the gospel-inflected 'Pleading', which sounds to me like a slowed up, churchified reading of Ray Charles' 'I've Got A Woman' and 'Yes I Do', a Fats Domino-sounding mid-tempo declaration of love. The session was a long one as it included 'Lover' and 'I'm So All Alone', the Flames' third release, and two songs which were held back and issued by Vic la Val to kick off his own La Val singles label in 1968.

These were Chick's anguished reading of Guitar Slim's 1954 opus, 'Things I Used To Do', and the jumping 'This Is My Life', Chick excels on 'Things'. Both his vocals and guitar playing make this his finest ever blues recording.

It was a mistake for Brad to issue 'Pleading' instead of 'Things' early 1960, but then again 'Pleading' had more current commercial potential. Like all small label proprietors in the Bay Area during the 1950s, Brad hawked his product personally, taking them around to all his distributors and retail outlets. The consequence of this was that his recordings were seldom heard outside of California. Bay Tone Records was more a favourite hobby to Brad than an enterprising business, which did not help Chick much.

Work dried up after only a short while. Chick moved to Sacramento, and the Fabulous Flames signed with Rex Records where they recorded the extremely rare and expensive collectors' item 'My Joan'. The Fabulous Flames split up shortly after this when Archer was murdered on the street in Los Angeles.

In Sacramento, Chick put together a band and played around the local scene for a while. He moved home to Atlanta for a spell and then tried Cleveland, where he took up with a wealthy woman who controlled the numbers racket and had links to drug traffic and prostitution. Cleveland turned out to be a bad deal. Chick ended up penniless, eating hoagie sandwiches spread with toothpaste. Eventually, in 1962, Chick wound up in New York playing at Asbury Park and over in New Jersey. He fell in with Tommy Robertson, who had the year before started the Alto label on Broadway. Robertson was a veteran in the small indie record business, having owned the Angle tone and Atlas labels during the 1950s.

Robertson's major concern at the time was the career advancement of Chyverne Scott, who was making a name for her self on the club scene. 'The Twist' was the rage when Robertson took Chick and Chyverne into the studio to record 'Twistin' In The Hospital Ward'. Robertson sent the pair out to promote the novelty but little came of it. Chyverne moved on to supper club gigs and Chick took up with Julia De Witt and Ron Wolfe. Chick insists that the necessary ingredients for 'Stoop Down' came about during the time he recorded 'Edgewood Alley' with Esther Warnock for her husband Cleve's Mark IV label in Atlanta. A demo of 'Stoop Down' was made, says Chick, at the Alto studio, which he hawked around to every diskery on Broadway. Nobody wanted to take it; it was thought that the lyrics would prevent airplay.

On a string of gigs that took Chick, Julia and Ron through Michigan, Chick met up with Jimmy Lynch once more. Lynch suggested taking 'Stoop Down' to Vic La Val. La Val had Chick record the song with Ron and Julia, plus a bass player, in 1972.

Travelling in a Dodge van, La Val took copies of the record around to juke box distributors in the Mid-South. The distributors got the single into their clients' machines, the record snowballed and the rest is history.

Since the success of 'Stoop Down Baby', Chick has continued to record including a number of fine albums, regularly tours the US and has been a regular visitor to Europe.