

When my buddy Lij and I first visited Roscoe Gordon in 1997, he was all but forgotten in the music industry. Even among his neighbors in the Rego Park section of Queens, N.Y., Roscoe was just a nice old guy who played a little poker, bet the numbers, and kept to himself.

There was much more to Roscoe Gordon than met the eye. Unlike his neighbors, and unbeknownst to them, his little mailbox in their high-rise apartment complex attracted songwriting royalty checks. They represented only a fraction of what he had earned, because so many of his rights had been stolen when he was young. But Roscoe still made a nickel or two when Elvis Presley, Jimi Hendrix and Jerry Lee Lewis (to name just a few men of fame who have covered his tunes) sold certain records or had them played on the radio.

Early R&B buffs could recite parts of Roscoe's complicated discography, which jumps back and forth between the seminal labels of the era: Chess, Sun Records, RPM. They could tell you that Roscoe, a Memphis native, had a hit with Sam Phillips when "Elvis" was still just an unusual, old-fashioned name. They could screen you the 1957 novelty flick, *Rock Baby, Rock It*, in which Roscoe performed his stage act with his pet chicken, Butch. In a more lax time for animal rights, Roscoe used to deprive his sidekick of water before a gig, and then set out whiskey so the animal would drink up, and lose some of its chicken inhibitions.

When we met Roscoe, he was still trekking into Manhattan a few times a year to appear on the "Midnight Ravers" show on WBAI, a Pacifica Radio affiliate. The show's hosts knew that the jerky back-beat of Roscoe's early hits — especially "No More Doggin'" from 1952 — pioneered ska and reggae when his records became available in Jamaica. As Terry Wilson of WBAI says, "Roscoe is the seed of reggae. Not the root, the seed."

So, to the industry, Roscoe Gordon was an historical footnote, a museum piece. To his neighbors, he was a man nearing 70 with a nice smile. But inside, Roscoe was on fire.

That was why our friend, the roots music critic Kevin Roe, suggested that we visit him. Kevin had interviewed Roscoe at his home, and been struck by the passion of his impromptu performances on his "raggedy" electric guitar and tuneless piano. When Kevin heard that Lij and I had disbanded our rock group and taken up field recording, he sent us to Roscoe.

We appeared in Queens with an assortment of recording gear stuffed into my 1987 Cavalier. Lij, the lead producer and sole engineer, turned Roscoe's apartment into a studio. Roscoe literally sang himself sick for us, clawing his guitar and banging his decrepit piano like a man possessed, then ending up in the hospital after we left. Eventually, Roscoe would fess up to his ulcers, diabetes and at times crippling back pain, but only bit by bit. He remained secretive about his health until the end, which made that end a terrible surprise.

During our early sessions, Roscoe was anything but secretive about the illness of his dog, Tiger. Roscoe said Tiger was mysteriously wasting away, and suspected hoodoo inflicted by neighbors. "I'm going to have to have him destroyed," Roscoe said. So we piled man and dog into my crumbling car, and drove them to the vet. During the drive, Roscoe paused from telling bawdy tales about the old R&B days to bid goodbye. "Tiger," he said, "I hope one day to see you in doggy heaven." This man, the author of a goofy song called "No More Doggin'," was nearly weeping. We waited in the car as Roscoe went to have the deed done. But he soon emerged, smiling, carrying his dog, and said, "I couldn't bring my heart to do it."

In Nashville, where Lij lives, he began to build a band around Roscoe's solo tracks. The piano numbers we recorded the night Roscoe sang himself sick were unusable, because Roscoe's piano was permanently warped after years of neglect. (You can hear this sick piano on "You Look Bad When You're Nekked.") So we returned to New York, vagabonds that we were, and recorded Roscoe, again solo, playing on a piano owned by Lij's brother, the jazz pianist Nate Shaw, then added those tracks to our bulging archives.

Lij's contacts in the Nashville rock scene jumped at the opportunity to play, even via overdub, with this forgotten legend. At first, we continued our field recording approach, erecting a studio in Ken Coomer's basement. Ken, best known for having played in Wilco but a producer in his own right, vowed "to get one with Roscoe." He and Lij worked for days to overdub drums to that jerky Roscoe rhythm. Lij also borrowed time at Alex the Great, a local pop studio, and eventually built his own permanent studio, the Toy Box, where he would finish this record alone, years later, after Roscoe was gone. This record began as two buddies on a road trip, but it owes its existence to Lij spending endless hours coaching sidemen through overdubs, and then orchestrating dozens of different sessions into one coherent sound.

Roscoe liked our method, driving around like tramps and recording him in the comfort of homes. A fondness grew between us. I moved to New York, for love, and Roscoe became my best friend in town despite the forty years that separated us in age. When I got married, he stood up with me as best man. We watched Mets games, drank dwarf Budweisers. As Roscoe began to confide his fear that he was drying up as a songwriter, I would scratch out lyrics and cheerlead every time a new idea did creep through him, sometimes aided by the most unlikely source, such as a chord change on country music television.

Meanwhile, Lij signed a contract to produce a hairy young rock band for a major record label. He disappeared for months at a time. Roscoe was anxious to make a move. So he struck a deal with Stony Plain Records, and rerecorded many of the songs he did with us for "Memphis, Tennessee," released in November, 2000. The record did him good as an artist—Roscoe was nominated for a Handy Award as "Comeback Artist of the Year"—but, as a man, he struggled. Tiger died. Then Lorraine Dobson, his girlfriend and housemate of many years, passed away. (You can hear her encouraging Roscoe to play the proper notes at the end of "Night in Rio," recorded the day we first met them.) A new, younger lover proved to be more torment than release. Past the age of 70, Roscoe found himself miserably unhappy, trapped in a sordid scene. He would meet new friends by saying — the first words out of his mouth! — "She broke my heart!" And then the World Trade towers fell. Roscoe struggled to write a song that would give him a grip on his misery. It was all terribly real to Roscoe, his pain, the suffering of our city (and country), and the elusive power of music to offer emotional rescue. Roscoe wrote from the gut, and it truly chewed on this man when his writing wouldn't come. That's why the title song to this record, the last song Roscoe Gordon ever completed, was such a victory. He played it for everyone who would listen, usually over the phone, and you could hear his jubilation. He had found a song for people to enjoy, starting with himself, which might lift them from crushing sorrow.

Roscoe recorded "No Dark in America" and several other songs with Lij in Nashville in the summer of 2002, backed live by the young musicians who had been so fired up overdubbing to him. The joy of their connection gives life to this record. It made Roscoe happy and proud. He told the band they made him "feel like a true artist." Affection between new friends and the triumph of art were not enough to comfort a sad and shaken man, however. Those sessions — none of us would have believed they would be the last Roscoe Gordon sessions — were interrupted by outbursts of grief. Lij even took Roscoe to a cemetery, prospecting for grave dirt with the thought of constructing a mojo to help him overcome the evil that was destroying his heart.

A month later, Roscoe was found dead in his apartment. The cause of death was listed as heart failure, which seemed all too accurate to those of us who knew Roscoe near the end. He had a booking at a music festival in Wisconsin when his heart seized up. It's fitting that this man who said music was his baby died with his bags packed for a gig.

Roscoe's voice will always be with us, and not just in his songs. He said so many memorable things. But, as we mourn him, I think of something someone else said about Roscoe. Lloyd Dewar is young, bold ska DJ and historian from Melbourne, Australia. We fulfilled a life ambition of his by putting him in touch with Roscoe through our website, Hoobellatoo. They spent time together in New York, and when Lloyd returned to Australia, he would often call Roscoe. They kept in amazingly close touch for two people who were separated by half of the earth. I hated to tell Lloyd that Roscoe was gone, and he took it hard. "When I met Roscoe," Lloyd said, "it was like going back in time to meet Captain Kidd, some mythical figure. Now I feel like I have finally lost touch with the lost world."

---Chris King

