

Henry "Mule" Townsend - obituary
by Michael "Hawkeye" Herman
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Henry James "Mule" Townsend, b. 10/27/09, Shelby, MS - d. 9/24/06,
Mequon/Grafton, WI

It is with a heavy heart that I report to you that 96 year old blues legend Henry Townsend passed away this evening at St. Mary's Ozaukee Hosptal, Mequon, WI at approximately 9:25PM (CDT) just hours after having been the first person presented with a 'key' in Grafton's Paramount Plaza Walk of Fame. Mr. Townsend was the last surviving blues artist to have recorded for Paramount Records. He died with his son Alonzo and his long time friends Scott Shuman and John May at his side.

The Paramount Plaza Walk of Fame, currently under construction, will be a stylized piano keyboard. Forty-four keys will each have the name of a famous Paramount recording star.

It was in Grafton, Wisconsin that Henry Townsend recorded two songs for Paramount Records in 1930; "Doctor, Oh Doctor," and "Jack of Diamonds Georgia Rub."

Mr. Townsend made the trip to Grafton to be honored by the Village of Grafton as the first inductee on the Walk of Fame along with his son, Alonzo, his son's fiance, Kendra, and members of his band and longtime friends Scott Shuman and John May.

Mr. Townsend arrived in Grafton on Thursday, Sept. 21st in good spirits, but confined to a wheelchair. He was to perform at the first annual Paramount Blues Festival as the honored guest. He was to be honored again on Sunday, Sept. 24th, at a noontime Paramount Plaza Walk of Fame ceremony.

Myself, members of the Grafton Blues Association, Alonzo, Kendra, Scott Shuman, and John May all went out to dinner together on Thursday night. Henry was talkative, happy to be in Grafton, and excited about the weekend events that lay ahead.

However, the following day, Friday, 9/22, he was not feeling well and it was necessary for him to be hospitalized. The hospital staff took immediate and great care of him. He wanted to get out of there and perform on Sat. at the festival. But it was not to be. His condition did not improve and the doctors refused to release him on Sat. so that he could perform. He was extremely disappointed. He told band member Scott Shuman, "They didn't say I couldn't perform today." Shuman had to go and get the doctor and have him come back to Mr. Townsend's hospital room and explain to him that this meant that he could not leave the hospital to perform.

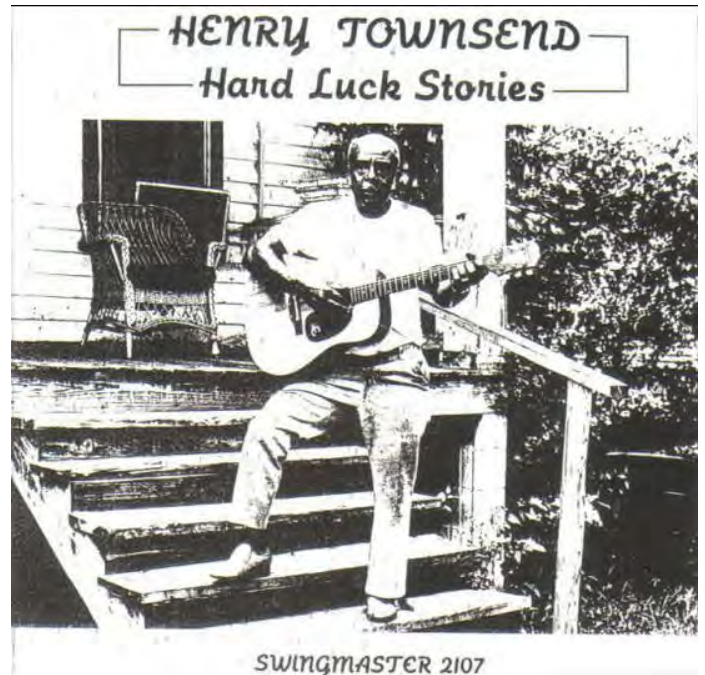
An announcement was made at the festival that he would not be present to perform. Alonzo Townsend spoke on behalf of his father, and apologized to the crowd for his father not being present, and that it was wonderful that Grafton had chosen to honor him, and that he hoped that he would be able to make it to the Walk of Fame ceremony on Sunday. It was not to be. Alonzo Townsend attended the noon ceremony on Sunday and accepted the honor for his father. (see photo below) Alonzo returned to the hospital later in the day and presented the honor to his father, who was awake and, talkative, and most appreciative of the honor. Townsend passed on hours later.

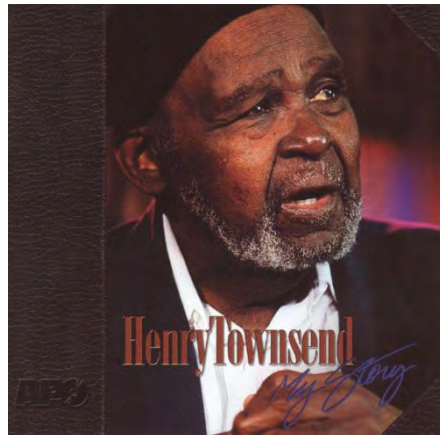
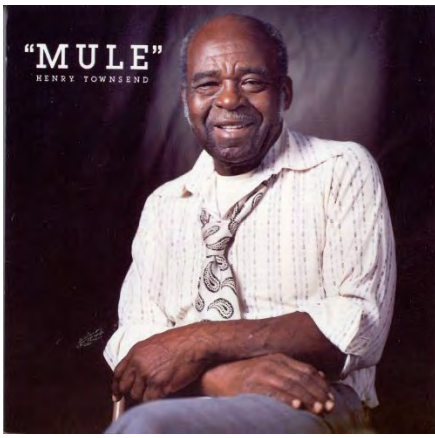
Henry Townsend is one of the few musicians who has recorded in every decade for the past 80 years. He was the last surviving Paramount blues artist. Born in Shelby, MS in 1909. As a youngster, he ran away from home to St. Louis where, as a teenager he heard Lonnie Johnson and other legends develop the blues sound. Henry was influenced by local barber Henry Spaulding's recording of "Cairo Blues," and his boyhood friend, David Perchfield. In 1929, an audition was arranged by Sam Woolf, owner of a music store in St. Louis. Townsend recorded for Columbia in 1929, and for Paramount in 1930. It was piano great Roosevelt Sykes who brought Townsend to the attention of Paramount records.

Henry Townsend became the "Patriarch of St. Louis blues." Performing on piano and guitar his entire life, and nurturing the younger generations in the world of the blues. His last release was "The 88 Blues." He was a recipient of the National Endowment for the Arts Heritage Fellowship Award, the highest honor our country bestows on an artist of the Traditional Arts. The wisdom he shared with anyone who came to know

him was powerful and thought provoking. He made you believe that anything is possible. Although there will be hills to climb, with determination, one can accomplish anything. At one of his performances, he shared this deep conviction, especially for the younger generations: "I likes to talk to younger people about their future, It don't mean that they have to take a certain avenue, take an avenue yes, but be the best, or among the best at whatever they do, and I'd like to leave that with the coming generations."

Sadly submitted by Michael "Hawkeye" Herman
9/24/06 in Grafton, WI
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Mississippi Blues Trail Marker Honoring Henry “Mule” Townsend:



Paramount Records Blues Walk of Fame honoring Henry “Mule” Townsend in Grafton, WI:

