



New World Records

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Roots of the Blues New World 80252-2

If the United States has a national song form, it may well be the blues. Wailed by solo singers, the thousands of verses of the blues, borne on a single but endlessly varied haunting cadence, fill a regular Mississippi River of song that long since overflowed its banks into jazz, hillbilly, gospel, opera, pop, and rock. The simplicity of the blues form is as remarkable as its vitality. In this the blues is like other national song forms—the austere *copla* in which Spanish singers have rhymed the whole Iberian experience, the bittersweet *stornello* that since the early Renaissance has registered the Italian view of the beauties of women and the ironies of love. But the blues is not only the national song of the United States; it is creeping into the ear of the whole world and may become the first international song style. In origin the blues is bicultural, Afro-American or Afro-European: European in that, like the *stornello* and the *copla*, it is essentially a rhymed couplet set to a compact strophic melody; African in a score of ways descending cadences, flatted sevenths and thirds (which register the inherited influence of African scales), a polymetered relation between voice and accompaniment, and a playful singing style changing role from phrase to phrase. Thus the blues merges two musical languages into an international patois.

The appeal of this new language is that it speaks of the modern, urban, alienated experience. The blues came into being in the period between 1890 and 1930, as America was changing from a rural agricultural to an urban industrial nation. In this period the majority of blacks were surplus, often migratory, labor—badly paid, ill-educated, ghetto-confined, without civil rights, and subjected to every sort of exploitation and violence. Long before the rest of Western man,

the black migratory laborers—who built the levees and the railroads, raised the crops, and worked in the mills—knew what it was to be so economically and culturally underprivileged as to be without family, friends, or community. They sang:

I'm a poor old boy, jes ain't treated right,
Freezin' ground was my folding bed last night.

They knew total rejection:

I asked my captain what time of day,
He looked at me and walked away.

Now, after depression, war, the breakdown of the family and the neighborhood, in gradual disillusionment, and helpless in the face of the giant institutions that control our destinies, whites also have the blues, and are trying to sing them. As Big Bill Broonzy said:

It takes a man that has the blues to sing the blues. The blues is a kind of revenge. That boss actin' so mean and dirty and you want to say somethin', but you can't, so you go out behind the wagon, pretend a horse stepped on your foot and say, "Get offa me, god damn it., That's like a man, singing the blues, expressin' what he can't say in a song.

Big Bill, who in his lifetime turned the ironic light of the blues on a hundred subjects, was continuing a tradition of his cultural ancestors, the *griots* of western Sudan. These oral poets, chroniclers of daily events, family traditions, and the deeds of the kings of Mali and Senegal, often put into their verse things that their audiences dared not say; indeed, the greatest kings stood in fear of the *griots*, for their songs could bring the most powerful into ridicule and shame that might follow them through life. There are recorded *griot*

performances that precisely match certain Mississippi country-blues records in tempo, relation of voice to accompaniment, phrasing, and vocal style; I am not the first musicologist to conclude that the Sudanese *griot* style is the progenitor of the blues, although the precise mode of succession remains undiscovered.

The roots of the blues may be traced even further back. There is a distinctively African approach to the solo-string-accompanied type, heard in these recordings and common elsewhere only in Africa. A rather open voice with playful vocal quality, often employing rasp, falsetto, and glissando, performs a simple repetitive melody (often one phrase with variation, in descending cadence) in rich antiphonal and cross-rhythmed interplay with the instrument, which sustains a driving rhythm in a simple ostinato pattern under the voice and then breaks out between vocal phrases. This style is found largely in Sudan and East Africa, where the Oriental influence is apparent. It seems to be a sub-style of a very large musical region, embracing the Mediterranean and the whole Orient, where virtuosic solo singing with string accompaniment is the outstanding, often the dominant, mode. I have termed this the “bardic” manner, for it is in this way that the ancient bards performed the epics; it was in this manner that, from time immemorial, court bards have sung for their masters, as did David for Saul. Universes of varied musics live within this vast region of solo-accompanied song, but the drama common to all is of the individual, standing alone, crying out his troubles or addressing a plea to some powerful figure—the landlord, the emperor, the gods, or his unattainable ladylove. It is this last figure to whom, as we shall see, so many blues are sung. Thus one root of the blues runs back to the Sudanese kingdoms and through them to a refined, often melancholy or angry, and occasionally subservient Oriental tradition. The world-weary note that sounds in the blues is ages old, but it is counterbalanced by the driving, danceable rhythms that are an African contribution.

This ancient bardic strain tends strongly toward melodies that are free in form and rhythm and highly ornamented. One of the song types distinctive of the Orient is such melodies—they can be called “complaints,” because of their wailing melancholy notes—which are common in cantellations to Yahweh and Allah and in the field where farmers and herdsmen work at lonely tasks. These field songs too are often religious in character, for the hard-pressed peasant, weighed down with taxes and a large family, calls on God and the saints to aid

him. The muezzin summons the faithful and the priest intones the service in this rubato parlando style; it is indeed the *canto hondo* (the deep song) of the Old World, for gypsy, peasant, and priest all send their troubles aloft in this way. Such songs are heard less often on African recordings, presumably because most African work and religious songs are performed in concert, with the positive affect of group song. The few African examples we have heard, however, are the direct ancestors of the American Negro holler, which is the main source of the blues (Track 1).

When my father John A. Lomax and I recorded the work songs of the South we discovered this rich genre of the holler—the individual field call, sometimes with words, sometimes without. These hollers proliferated in the postbellum South as the folk scattered out to individual farms, rambled off to take up temporary work on construction gangs, or, worst of all, were sent off to the chain gang or jail. Plowing, getting in the wood, running a mule-drawn scraper on the levee, swinging an ax or a hoe all day long under the eye of a guard—these are lonely, heartbreaking tasks. In the holler the isolated worker communicates with his friends or family at a distance or complains to the sun and the mules about his hard lot. In some groups we found that every man had his own holler—a personal song of one or many verses, by which he was known. “That's ol' Bob hollerin' down there in the lowground.”

I'm down in the bottom, [mule] skinning for Johnny Ryan,
Writin' my 'nitals on that mule's behind.

I'm down in the bottom, mud up to my knees,
Workin' for my woman, she so hard to please.

These are verses from a levee-camp holler that Leadbelly turned into a blues by setting it to a dance rhythm. It was this particular process and this free-rhythmed holler style that gave rise to the blues. Maybe

the blues came from Texas, lopin' like a mule.

If it did come from Texas, I believe it came from a Texas levee camp to one in Mississippi. About the turn of the century, levees were built all along southern rivers, creating millions of acres of rich bottom land for farms in eastern Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Mississippi. The ready money and the lawless, adventurous life drew thousands of blacks into the levee camps, where it was “all right to kill anybody, if you could work better than him.”

The heart and center of this new frontier was the

Yazoo Delta, a huge slice of rich black land lying back of the rising levees on both sides of the Mississippi between Memphis and Natchez. This was the country where most bluesmen were born and raised and where W. C. Handy first wrote down the blues, but it was first of all levee-camp, railroad-building, cotton-picking country par excellence. In the Yazoo the haunting cadences of the field holler crept into dance and entertainment music—for the blues is primarily dance music. In its folk setting, whether in the Deep South or in the ghetto, the bluesman made the music for working people to dance to, slow-dragging, face to face, belly to belly, in a style that was born with the blues. The composer-musician worked all week mule skinning (driving a mule team; usually on a construction job) or roustabouting (working as a deckhand on a riverboat, or as a general laborer) or tie tamping (connecting railway ties). Then, accompanying himself on a guitar or piano, he could keep a crowd happy on Saturday night with his one or two tunes, so long as he kept a tricky beat going for the dancers and rhymed up new verses about common problems. He had all night to learn how to imitate the phrases of his song on the strings, pushing the strings to one side or pulling them off to make them wail like his lonesome tune. The subtleties of the hollers came to be articulated on guitar, piano, mandolin, and harmonica in levee camps and at crossroads dances and small juke joints, for in this country there were few amusements besides all-night dances on Saturday and church on Sunday. Tracks 1-10 illustrate this aspect of blues, showing the umbilical tie between a field holler from Senegal and one from Mississippi; then how the syncopated rhythms carry over between work and dance music; then how the dance music developed, gradually acquiring blues touches, until it finally could support and add gaiety to the blues' radical melodies. Tracks 11-14, which have religious music from the same area, shows that a very similar free-rhythmed, embellished, wailing style dominated the church and gave rise to a guitar-accompanied spiritual, a true Mississippi sister of the blues.

The black migratory workers, day laborers, field hands, and sharecroppers who had the blues, composed the blues, sang the blues, and danced the blues were confined to a world of little education, manual labor, low wages, and enforced subservience. The black who did not step off the sidewalk out of the white man's way, who vigorously protested an overcharge or an affront, who didn't take off his hat and say "yassuh" when a white man addressed him, who showed his anger or his defi-

ance in his face, was subject to immediate intimidation, attack, arrest, and jailing. If he was lucky enough to have a white protector, he might get home a bit sooner from the chain gang or out of the pen. Otherwise, he might die in one of these concentration camps.

A mess-hall tale:

"Cap'n," says the levee-camp or prison-farm worker, "I found a worm in my greens.

Cap'n say, "What the hell you want for nothin'?"

Feller down the table say, "Gimme that piece of meat."

The stark rhymes of the levee-camp worker tell the story:

I ask my cap'n to gimme me time,

He say, "Go way, nigger, you time behind."

I ask my cap'n did my money come?

He say, "The river too foggy and the boat won't run."

What happened when that construction job closed down? There was no relief system; the day of Roosevelt and food for the hungry and the jobless was far in the future. The black man just off the chain gang or the levee camp, broke, hungry, far from home, had no one to appeal to but the women of whatever community he found himself in. The women hadn't gambled away their few dollars earned as cooks, washerwomen, or prostitutes. They had a coal stove and a bed—a home, even if the roof leaked in the rain. As he tramped the dusty alleys of "niggertown," the lonesome holler of the homeless black man floated in the evening air:

I'm a poor boy a great long ways from home.

Sitting on the commissary steps, picking a borrowed guitar, glancing at a woman who stopped to listen, he sang:

Just make me a pallet on your floor,

Make me a pallet on your floor,

Make me a pallet right down on your floor,

That way your good man will never know.

Most of the bluesmen I interviewed in Mississippi agreed that this was probably the first true blues. At any rate, it is the heart of the genre, for most old regular country blues are appeals to women by men, with an occasional rejoinder from the women. There are pleas and demands for indulgence, shelter, care, and fidelity; there are boasts about sexual prowess; there are jokes and complaints and threats about how a working man feels when he has a "bad woman" or "finds another mule kickin' in his stall." They chronicle the endless sor-

row of "Careless Love," one of the oldest blues:

Love, O love, O careless love,
Love, O love, O careless love,
Love, O love, O careless love,
You see what careless love has done.

This being the real condition in which love was to be had and life lived, these men and women accepted it, joked about it, enjoyed it and each other. When there was time to drink and dance at the end of the day, they held each other close and laughed over the salty ironies that the bluesman rhymed together as he strummed the dance beat:

If the blues was whiskey, I'd stay drunk all the time,

What makes the rooster crow just an hour 'fo' day?
Just to let the bad man know that the husband's on his way.

WORK SONG
AND DANCE ORIGINS
Track 1

Louisiana/Field Song from Senegal

Henry Ratcliff, vocal/Bakari-Badji, vocal

This pair of work hollers—one that I recorded in the Mississippi penitentiary in the sixties and the other that David Sapir recorded in a rice field in Senegal about the same time—sounds like a conversation between second cousins over a backyard fence and provides positive aural evidence that, in spite of time and change of language and setting, the whole spirit of West Africa still flourishes in the United States and that the roots of the blues are African. The Mississippi statement is wistfully melancholy, the Senegal song more energetic and sanguine, but the style is shared. More such irrefutable documents will emerge as field coverage improves. The Senegal song is a

solo rendition of an antiphonal work song for peanut cultivation. It is kin to the praise songs of the nearby Malinke (but, according to Dr. Sapir, its origin is probably a local dance of this Diola group).

The Mississippi prisoner introduces us to the vein of protest and anger that underlies the blues. He addresses his distant woman, hinting (for he is singing where the guards can hear) that if he survives he will run away. He complains about the eternal speedup in the prison field gangs, and says that he would not be so docile if he had his pistol. He fantasizes about running away to Louisiana and about his woman joining him there, but even there he would be on the run. In the final stanza he asks her to tell his friends that he's going to escape; he may be seeing her before the summer's end, but on the run.

Oh, if I ever make it, baby, I'll be long gone.

(Senegalese verse)

Thus, in conditions very similar to those in the empires of the Old World, where every soul existed at the whim of the overlords, so in the Deep South, where black men lived under similar duress, with similarly distorted human relationships and in loneliness and anger, this ancient style reemerged, albeit in a new form.

Oh, the captain said, "Hurry, hurry,"
Lord,
Oh, and the sergeant said, "Run."
Oh, if I had my 38/40 I wouldn't do either one.

(Senegalese verse)

Woo, I'm going down in Louisiana, oh,
don't you want to go,
Woo, I'm goin' down in Louisiana,
don't you want to go.

Wo, you look for me in Louisiana, oh,
I'll be long gone. (Twice)

(Senegalese verse)

Oh, you can tell everybody that I'll be gone,
Oh, I'll be by to see you 'fore the summer gone.
Oh, I might be in a hurry, I can't stay very long.

Track 2

Po' Boy Blues
John Dudley, vocal

In his young days John Dudley, now fifty and a prisoner, played for country dances all over Tunica County, Mississippi, in the northern sector of the Yazoo Delta, the

county that produced the great Son House (a Delta bluesman) and the dazzling Robert Johnson. Dudley is a nonprofessional, with all the enthusiasm and strong feeling of the amateur. His song begins with the oldest theme of the blues, repeated without a rhyme, in the fashion of the early blues. The next stanza is improvised and also unrhymed. In the third stanza he flirts with a new acquaintance. The fourth hints of a danger the itinerant bluesman faced—the jealousy of the reigning male. The chording in the left hand is done with a bottle neck over the index finger or the back of a knife held between the thumb and index finger. This, a black invention popularized by Blind Lemon Jefferson, the great Texas blues composer, allows the left hand to play chords and melody and contribute to the rhythm while the free fingers of the right hand continue that hand's normal role of playing bass ostinato and picking melodic patterns on the treble strings. The expert at this style can make the guitar a one-man orchestra with three or four simultaneous parts.

I'm a poor boy and I'm a great long
ways from home.
(*Three times*)

Well, I telephoned to my baby, please
send my fare,
Well, I phoned to my baby, please send
me my ring,
I'm a poor boy and I got nowhere to
stay.

Run here, baby, sit down on my knee,
(*Twice*)
Have any troubles speak it all to me.

I'm gonna sing this verse, and I ain't
gonna sing no mo',
(*Twice*)
Keep down trouble, boys, now I bet-
ter go.

Track 3

Katie Left Memphis Tangle Eye, vocal

The black man working alone with his ax in the woods sings to lighten his tasks. The ax is swung up in a relaxed way and picks up a beat in the second part of the phrase (“fo’ the”), at the end of which it bites into the tree and an exhalation of effort is heard. The cycle begins again. The beat patterns of the song and the ax blows are different, and their juxtaposition makes a syncopation every half line when the ax strikes, so that the work is transformed into a stationary polyrhythmic dance with erotic implications. This is an age-old black practice, which made the heavy tasks of field work and river transport in the tropical heat of Africa and the Caribbean not only bearable but even pleasurable. As one man told me, “We starts to sing soon in the mornin’, and when I look roun’ it’s dinner time.” In Africa and the West Indies drums are often played in the field, but in Protestant America, where drums were forbidden, their rhythms are implied in the syncopated interplay between the work blows and the voices. Thus the raw material for the blues rhythm was rehearsed all day long at work, with the song leaders polishing exquisite runs of vocables (you’ll get the flavor if you sing along, even silently) about matters familiar to the men on the job. The text is pure Yazoo, with lines about one of the heroines of the river, the steamboat *Katie Adams*, stuck and spinning round on a sandbar and then skimming along a deep channel, and a warning right out of

Faulkner for the countryboy, venturing into the fleshpots of Memphis, to put some of his money into a return ticket on the *Yellow Dog*, the train Handy celebrated in his blues.

Little George said ‘fo’ the well the
Katie was made
(*Twice*)
Arkansas City gonna a-be her trade.
(*Twice*)
Chorus
Oh, Rosie, oh gal,
Oh, Rosie, and a-Oh Lord, gal.

The boats in the bayou turnin’ well
around an’ round,
(*Twice*)
The drive wheel knockin’ Ala-well-a-
bama bound.
(*Twice*)

You go to Memphis, don’t you well
you act no hog.
(*Twice*)
Buy you a ticket and catch the well
the *Yellow Dog*.
(*Twice*)
(*Chorus*)

Track 4

Berta, Berta Leroy Miller and a group of prisoners, vocals

The big penitentiary farms of the Deep South are an extension of the southern plantation system. A black worker who tried to flee his burden of debt or to revenge himself on the system by an act of violence was simply transferred across the barbed wire to help make a crop on another plantation—that of the prison. In the penitentiary system of exploitation was even more explicit. The prisoner was paid nothing to work six days a week in all weathers from daylight till dark, running each way to the field, pushed to his limit by guards who were experts at “nigger driving” and who were paid a bonus if they killed a man who

was trying to escape. If a man complained of sickness he might be told, “Die, dammit, and prove it.” If he made it in the “burning hell” of the field work and through the murderous black midnights of the prison dormitories, he was regarded with some respect by both his guards and his comrades as a “man in full.” He might break trusty; be allowed to make love to his women friends, visiting on weekends, in one of the farm outbuildings; earn a few pennies for tobacco from extra work. Leadbelly and other cool-headed men managed this. But most men stayed in the line, plowing, planting, hoeing, chopping wood in the yearly work cycle, sustained in good measure, I believe, by the healthy power of African work songs. Here, right under the shotguns of the guards, the black collective coalesced and defiantly expressed its unity and belief in life, often in ironically humorous terms. There are simply no more engaging or more singable songs in the English language than these black prison work songs, which so often addressed themselves to a longed-for woman—in this case Berta, living in the ease of the free world while her lover, who had robbed to please her, pays the penalty on the Parchman prison farm, where the only alternatives are work or attempted escape.

Chorus

O Lord, Berta, Berta, O Lord, gal oh-ah,
O Lord, Berta, Berta, O Lord, gal well.

Go 'head marry, don't you wait on me
oh-ah,

Go 'head marry, don't you wait on me
well.

Might not want you when I go free
oh-ah,

Might not want you when I go free well.

Raise 'em up higher, let 'em drop on
down oh-ah,

Raise 'em up higher, let 'em drop on
down well.

Don't know the difference when the
sun goes down oh-ah,

Don't know the difference when the
sun goes down well.

Berta in Meridian an' she livin' at ease
oh-ah,

Berta in Meridian an' she livin' at ease
well.

I'm on old Parchman, got to work or
leave oh-ah,

I'm on old Parchman, got to work or
leave well.

(Chorus)

When you marry, don't marry farmin'
man oh-ah,

When you marry, don't marry farmin'
man well now.

Everyday Monday, hoe handle in yo'
hand well,

Everyday Monday, hoe handle in yo'
hand well now.

When you marry, marry railroad man
oh-ah,

When you marry, marry railroad man
well now.

Everyday Sunday, a dollar in your hand
oh-ah,

Everyday Sunday, a dollar in your hand
well now.

(Chorus)

Track 5

Old Original Blues

Fred McDowell, vocal and guitar;
Miles Pratcher, rhythm guitar

Pratcher lays down the characteristic driving ostinato bass figure, which is supplemented by McDowell's knife-produced chords. Then McDowell plays the melody by sliding the knife along the strings with his left hand, his right-hand fingers making comments on the treble strings. Then comes the first phrase of the song. Both tune and text (some of it unclear) are remarkably close to the holler on Track 1, but in a contrasting tempo slower than the accom-

paniment. The voice prolongs the last note of the half phrase, so that the syncopations and delays in the two guitars can be heard at the same point the syncopation appeared in the work songs. The brooding descending melody is sung again, then again with small variations, to make a three-phrase litany, a form distinctive of the blues; then the lead guitar takes over the melody role. Sometimes the third phrase of the tune brings in the punch line of the conventional blues form with a new text and a rhyme for the first two lines, but often the text is simply repeated, as it might be in a field holler (in some country blues one phrase may be repeated indefinitely). In fact, these country blues are like field hollers set to an insistent driving dance rhythm. McDowell's title is therefore apt. He said, “Let's jes' call this one the 'Old Original Blues,' “and that it is—a blues in its first stage away from a work song—but more: it is also an American reconstitution of the African bardic style described earlier.

Lord, I'm goin' down south, baby, I
believe I will carry my girl.

(Twice)

Lord, they tell me the river's risin',
baby, days I been here.

Lord, I'm goin' down in Louisiana, I'm
goin' to buy me a mojo hand.

(Twice)

I'm goin' to fix my baby, so she won't
have no other man.

Lord, sometimes I wonder what's goin'
to come of me.

(Three times)

If the river was whiskey, baby, Lordy,
honey, I was a diving duck.

(Twice)

Lord, I would dive on the bottom, dive
on the bottom, baby, honey, I
would never come up.

Track 6

Jim and John

Ed Young, home-made fife;
Lonnie Young, vocal and bass
drum

Here again is the same African style: a one-phrase melody, varied playfully in its melodic and rhythmic aspects, creating cross rhythms with a powerful repeated rhythmic accompanying figure—an ancestor of the blues—dance form, but far older. In fact, the piece might have been recorded in Africa, although the players were friends and contemporaries of Fred McDowell's, living in the same neighborhood of northwestern Mississippi on the hilly edge of the Yazoo Delta. Here bands of country musicians, playing home-made fifes and pipes and fiddles and accompanied on drums and with clapping, just as they would be in Africa, still make dance music for all-day country picnics on summer holidays. I was fortunate to be the first to discover this extraordinary musical pocket in 1941 and then to further explore it eighteen years later. Since then others have recorded and filmed in the area, but, so far as I know, no one has found out exactly how and why this extraordinarily African music survived here and in this form. We know that Thomas Jefferson's personal servant organized a fife-and-drum band as his contribution to the cause when the Revolutionary War began. One presumes, then, that because fife-and-drum corps have generally been viewed as patriotic the blacks were permitted within this genre to continue to play drums (generally banned elsewhere in the Protestant South) and to blow wild African tunes on home-

made aerophones. Perhaps such patriotic Afro-American fife-and-drum orcheras were once widespread but not noticed because the players were performing as blacks might be expected to. Moreover, the country where I found this musical pocket is off the beaten track in an area where blacks own most of the land and thus can maintain their own ways. There I found the Young brothers, both great musicians and in their prime, in 1959. Before they died they had played to great applause for festivals all over the country. On my 1941 trip I had found the panpipe piece (Track 7), which is of an even older level. David Evans has recorded similar music in the countryside near Columbus, Georgia. For more information, see Mitchell (1971) and *Traveling Through the Jungle* (Testament T-2223).

Track 7

Emmaline, Take Your Time

Alec Askew, panpipes

Panpipes are one of the oldest and most widespread instruments. Joel Chandler Harris and other nineteenth-century writers noted that they were very popular among the rural blacks of Georgia, who called them "quills," perhaps because they were made out of measured sections of cane bound together. Since panpipes are fairly common in parts of Europe (notably Galicia, Lombardy, Rumania), in aboriginal Central and South America, and somewhat less so in Africa, and since they have long been a common children's toy instrument, one cannot be sure of the origin of the quills. The pentatonic scale, the altogether rhythmic attack, the consistent

use of variation, and the hooting of notes (which I have heard in other southern black and in pygmy playing but nowhere else) give this music a strongly African cast. Indeed, if I were to pick one sound, recorded in America, to lead off a series of African musical survivals, I think I would begin with this piece. Its considerably varied two-phrase litany tune is close to the preceding fife tune, and the rhythmic phrasing is simply part of the idiom of Mississippi Valley dance music, including the blues.

Track 8

Buttermilk

Miles Pratcher, guitar and fiddle;
Bob Pratcher, vocal, guitar,
and fiddle

The Pratcher brothers are another band from the same neighborhood, and their dance tune is close kin to the preceding piece. This is a black string band playing more old-time black square-dance music of the type once common to the whole frontier, white and black, yet with many traits linking it to the blues—a driving ostinato figure; the instrumental part in complementary and overlapped antiphony with the voice; the voice changeful and playful; polyrhythms among vocal part, handclapping, and orchestra; and finally a plethora of blued notes in both vocal and instrumental parts.

Long time, so glad.
(*Four times*)

Take me back, take me back,
Now that's all right.
Gal, I had you, you wouldn' do,
Got me another 'un, don't want you.
Well then, take me—
So bad, long time,
etc., ad lib.

Take me back, take me back.
Now that's all right.
Gal, I had you, you wouldn' do.
Got me another 'un, don't want you.

Then ta—me—
Run today.

So bad, long time,
O Lord,
etc., ad lib.

Track 9

Mama Lucy Leroy Gary, vocal

A variation on the commonest levee-camp tune, one that my father and I found virtually Southwide. Notice the free rhythm, held notes, melismata, glissandos, blue notes, and occasional occurrence of three-phrase form, composed of three variations of the same phrase—all prelude to the blues.

Save old Mama Lucy, doctor, don't let
her die,
Oh, she can furnish me more money
yondo than I can buy.

Oh, you can go down yonder an' tell
old Mattie Groan,
Oh, I give her four, five dollar that
she's sittin' on,
Oh, that she's sittin' out on.

Oh, I don't know, buddy, but I believe
I will
Take my baby to Jacksonville,
Oh, my baby to Jacksonville.

Oh, a-save her, doctor, save her, doctor,
don't let her die,
Oh, she can furnish me more money
yondo than I can buy.

Oh, I go down yondo, tell old Mattie
Groan, old Mattie Groan,
I give her four, five dollar for that she's
sittin' on.

Track 10

I'm Gonna Live Anyhow till I Die
Miles Pratcher, guitar and fiddle;
Bob Pratcher, vocal, guitar,
and fiddle

One of a family of tunes lying between black square-dance music, like “Buttermilk,” and the first true instrumental blues. I always have thought of this genre as a sort of bluesy ballad in ragtime. It includes such songs as “Brady,” “Frankie,” “John Henry,” and “Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy.” The strophic form, standard in frontier balladry, appears in a new and sophisticated guise, graced with blue notes and backed up by a catchy dance beat. In this text the dancing, drinking crowd defies the hellfire—intimidated churchly folk, who disapprove of their sinful ways, saying, “What you say about me don't worry me none; I'm gonna live how I please, and when I die I'll just be dead, that's all.”

I'm gonna shake it well for my Lord,
I'm gonna shake it well for you, my
gal,
Well, sticks and stones gonna break
my bones,
Talk about me when I'm dead and
gone,
I'm gonna live anyhow till I die.

I'm gonna live anyhow till I die,
Well, sticks and stones gonna break
my bones,
Talk about me when I'm dead and
gone,
I'm gonna live anyhow.

Good-bye, Lord . . . (*Twice*)
Sticks and stones, *etc.*

Good-bye, Lord, honey, what you do,
(*Twice*)
Sticks and stones, *etc.*

Well, I'm gonna live anyhow till I die,
(*Twice*)
Sticks and stones, *etc.*

I'm gonna shake it well for my Lord,
(*Twice*)
Sticks and stones, *etc.*

I'm gonna live well for my Lord,
(*Twice*)
Sticks and stones, *etc.*

RELIGIOUS PARALLELS

Track 11

No More, My Lord
Tangle Eye and a group of
prisoners, vocals

This was recorded while the prisoners were chopping wood in the Parchman penitentiary. Although a deep social division separated the “saints” from the “sinners” in the black community, they shared a common song style. In this example of a work song with a religious text we hear the same kind of vocalizing that characterizes the secular pieces on tracks 1-10—an open, changeful, often liquid vocal quality and a flowing melodic style with holds, glissandos, melismata, and many wide intervals and blued notes. The orchestration of voices, improvised for this particular recording by a group unaccustomed to singing together, is remarkable and touching.

Chorus
No more, my Lord, (*Twice*)
Lord, I'll never turn back no more.

I heard the voice of Jesus say
Come unto me and rest.
I found in Him a resting place
And He made me glad.
(*Chorus*)

Jesus, the Man I'm looking for,
Can you tell me where He's gone?
Go down, go down among the flower
yard,
And perhaps you may find Him there.
(*Chorus*)

Track 12

Lining Hymn and Prayer
Rev. Crenshaw and the con-
gregation of New Brown's
Chapel, Memphis

Here, at the conclusion of his sermon, when he is about to call for sinners to come to the

mourners' bench, the pastor has brought into play one of the old lining hymns. The tune (sometimes known as the church-house moan) is one of the most appealing to the hearts of black folk religionists. The deep-voiced deacon and the congregation embroider this magnificent old psalm with unexpected harmonies, supporting a text that speaks of the inevitability of death and the hope of seeing loved ones in heaven. The minister meanwhile continues his rhythmic exhortation in the background. The text is so prolonged and dwelt on that it is almost a minute before the minister raises the next line, in a despairing voice that tears at the heart. The congregation trails in, elongating each word into a phrase. The phrases are descending cadences that strongly resemble the oldest hollers and blues (here may be another source of blues melodies, or at least a clear parallel to the blues style). Then, on the pinnacle of feeling this beloved hymn has created, the preacher moves toward the climax of his sermon, using every device in his orator's repertory—singing, calling out, screaming, raging—as the faithful who are near the rostrum try with their responses to help him bring the sinners to their senses. What he does lies between song and oratory—a realm created by generations of great black ministers who extended the range of the English language and added their own epic vision to the poetry of the Bible. The result is a new religious art form that merits universal respect and study. (The transcription below is only approximate.)

(Sung)
Preacher: I wonder will we meet again
Congregation: I wonder will we meet again
(Spoken)
P: If you know, He'll bless you,
 If you believe it,
 Do he worth a dollar to you?
 Have you came here,
 Have you, to feed your children?
 Have you, to clothe yourself?
 What's He worth to you?
(Sung)
P: Before the roll is called.
C: Before the roll is called.
(Spoken)
P: Everybody!
 If you need Him, come to the altar,
 If you ashamed to give Him,
 If you ashamed to own Him,
 Then I'll be ashamed to own you.
(Sung)
 Did y'all hear me?
 If you are with me,
 God almighty...
 If you do my will,
 I'll feed you when you're hungry.
 If you do my will,
 I'll clothe you when you're naked.
 If you do my will,
 I'll take you in when you're outdoors...
 I believe somebody ought to believe* here today,
 Somebody been wounded, somebody around you have had a hard time,
 Somebody going to need His name on the way
 (Y'all don't hear me), †
 Somebody don't know how they're gonna meet their obligations.
 Ca' that name
 (Y'all don't hear me),
 Ca' that name
 (His arms all around me),
 Ca' that name
 (God sure wouldn't let me fall).
 You ought to be willin' today,
 You ought to be real today,
 You ought to be real in your soul,
 You ought to let Him use you today,
 O, God almighty.
 Oh, He shook your bed this mornin'
 And woke you up,
 Let you went to your table,
 Eat His good food,
 Drink His cool water,
 Lookin' after your own feelings.
 I wonder will we meet again.
 And then get ready to come to the house of God.
 How many of you been broken and disenchanted?
 How many of you here last Sunday

That's around the altar right now?
 How many of y'all said-

The Lord giveth,
 The Lord take it away.
 I wouldn't let the Lord take it from me,
 I'd walk up and look Him in the face-
 "Lord, here it is,
 Oh spare me
 To see another year."
 I'd tell the Lord, the Man
 Died one time....

Track 13

Death Come A-Creepin in My Room

Fred McDowell, vocal and guitar

Out of the caldron of sorrowful feelings that gave rise to the ritual music of the last piece came a new genre of spiritual melody, like "Man Goin' Round Takin' Names," "Toll the Bell Easy," and the present song. These death songs were money-makers for the blind street singers of the South—Blind Willie Johnson, Blind Willy McTell, Blind Gary Davis—who growled them out as they shuffled along through the endless darkness, picking out the minor airs on the top strings, keeping the beat steady in the bass, tin cups rattling a counter-rhythm. As in the blues, the stanzas were composed of three or four variations on the same downward-tending phrase. Between stanzas the tenor strings would repeat the melody. These blind musicians became so expert that under their fingers the guitar could take over the song at any point and sing a word or end a phrase with such refined intonation that the listener would hardly be aware of the shift. So the godly, who would

*"Believe" meaning to seek religion, to be converted.

†Here the minister asks for responses.

not play the blues or permit these sinful songs in their homes, could play and listen to these blueslike spirituals that developed in the Deep South and assumed their present form at the time the blues were born. In both styles the singers were experimenting with the guitar, teaching it to sing in black style.

It was soon one morning, death come
a-creepin' in my (room),
Soon one (morning), death comes a-
creepin' in my room, Godamighty
knows,
(Soon one morning) death come a-
creepin' in my (room).
O my Lord, O my Lord, what shall I do
to be (saved)?

Well, hush, children (hush), heard my
Lord call (my name),
Hush (children, hush), heard my Lord
call (my name), Godamighty
knows,
Hush, children, hush, heard my Lord
call (my name).
O my Lord, O my Lord, what shall I do
to be (saved)?

I'm gonna stand right here, I'm gonna
wait (till Jesus come),
I'm gonna stand right (here), gonna
wait until Jesus come, Godamighty,
(I'm gonna stand right here,) gonna
wait till Jesus (come).
O my Lord, O my Lord, (what) shall I
do to be (saved)?

Well, soon one morning, death come a-
creepin' in my (room),
Soon one morning, death come a-
creepin' in my room, Godamighty,
(Soon one morning, death come a-
creepin' in my room).
O my Lord, O my Lord, what shall I do
to be saved?)

*(Words in parentheses are not sung
but played on the guitar.)*

Track 14

Church-House Moan
Congregation of New Brown's
Chapel, Memphis

For me and, I believe, for
most southerners, the most

magical of all musical sounds is the many-voiced humming of a lining hymn that arises during quiet moments in the black folk service. After a song has been sung and shouted clean through and the church is resting; after a peak in the sermon, when a sinner has come through for the Lord; after the deacon has prayed and led the first hymn and everyone is thinking about what will come—then this silvery humming begins among the women, like the wind faintly stirring the water. Some older sister in the back sets the sharp metronome of her toe rapping out a quick staccato beat that will set the tempo for everything that will follow. Against it the strong, sorrowing current of the church-house moan moves like the tide of life itself, and the southerner feels the presence of his ancestors from Senegal, from Skye, from Guinea, from Galway. This is the old, women's wordless blues, the sound of a woman alone in the kitchen rocking a hurt child.

Track 15

Beggin' the Blues
Bessie Jones, vocal

Mrs. Jones, of St. Simons Island, Georgia, is a leader of religious songs. The blues she sings here she made up when she was young and still “out in the world” (that is, not a church member and thus free to sing secular songs). Her personal blues returns to the theme of the lonely woman, waking alone with the feeling that a stranger is in her room. It turns out to be Old Mister Misery—the blues she can't shake, the Blues that can out-

run a rabbit and break its heart, the blues that won't give you a single day of the week that is free of heartache.

I woke up this mornin', I looked
around in my room,
Well, I woke up this mornin' an' I
looked around in my room,
I said, “Hello, blues, what you doin' in
here so soon.

I knowed it was the blues, 'cause I
heard him walkin' in my room,
(Twice)
Lord, I wonder what's the metter,
'cause the blues won't leave me
alone.

Lord, I walked and I wondered, I cried,
honey, all night long, *(Twice)*
I don't care where I go, the blues jus'
won' leave me alone.

O the blues jumped a rabbit, run him a
solid mile, *(Twice)*
And the rabbit turned over and cried
like a nachul chile.

He cried, “Blues, blues, you follow me
everywhere, *(Twice)*
I won't know what's the matter, the
blues jus' won't let me be.”

Track 16

Rolled and Tumbled
Rose Hemphill, vocal; Fred
McDowell, guitar

Rose Hemphill, daughter of the great Sid Hemphill sings with scalding intensity, mounting each thought, each scrap of verse, each bitter memory on an unvarying phrase that burns into the heart. Most blues are performed for amusement, with a smile. Rose, on the contrary, addresses us directly with her anguish.

Rolled an' I tumbled, cried the whole
night long. *(Twice)*
Got up this morning, didn't know
right from wrong.

What you gonna do when your trou-
bles be like mine?
Gonna stand an' wring, goin' ta wring
my hands and cry.

Want with a woman, she won't do
noth' she says,
What you want with a woman, she
won't do nothin' she says.

Rolled an' I tumbled, cried the whole
night long.

...do with a woman, won't do nothin'
she says,
Want with a woman, she won't do
nothin' she says.

Track 17

Goin' Down to the Races

Fred McDowell, vocal and guitar;
Miles Pratcher, guitar;
Fannie Davis, comb and paper

Here is the blues in its full dress as joyful, sad, erotic, unbeatable dance music, running all night long, all weekend long, at the little country suppers and the sukey jumps where the folks dance right on the ground or pack into a little one-room shack and move so that the whole fragile building reverberates to the beat and you can hear the pulse a mile or so in the Mississippi dark. Additional accompaniment may come from somebody puffing into an empty jug, dragging a broom across the rough floor, performing miracles on all the surfaces of a washboard, or, as in this case, singing along through a comb, as Fannie Davis did, her man's felt hat falling over one eye, her plaits sticking out every which way, her legs wide apart, leaning her big body in toward Fred and mixing her notes with his.

Pratcher keeps the rocking dance pattern going on his guitar. McDowell plays counter-rhythms to this beat in both hands and swings his voice out on this turbulent polyrhythmic stream like a mule skinner handling a perfect plow team. The pull of his voice takes you off

again into the adventures of the blues, finding the new woman, being rejected by her respectable folk, sleeping alone in an empty cabin, starting out for nowhere again. The mood is not sad but charged with sex. The three-line blues formula begins to be sung into African pieces again and acquires a chorus as the singer finds each phrase too sweet to let go without repetitions.

I first recorded Fred McDowell in 1959, along with the Youngs, the Pratchers, and others. Those records brought him to the notice of young British rock musicians, who flew him to England, where he tried unsuccessfully to teach *them* to sing the blues and where they dressed *him* in a silver suit and made much of him. They commercialized fragments of his songs and paid him some of the money, so that this perfect and modest country plowhand and bluesman had money when he died in 1972.

I'm goin' down the Brazos, well, I take
the right-hand road,
(*Twice*)
Lord, I ain't gonna stop walking till I
get in sweet mama's door.

Well, the girl I'm lovin', she got that
great long curly hair,
Lord, the girl I'm lovin' got the great
long curly hair.
Lord, her mama and her papa, Lord,
sure don't allow me there.

Lord, her mother, sure don't allow me,
Sure don't allow me, sure don't allow
me,
Sure don't allow me, allow me there.
Lord, Lord, sure don't allow, allow me
there.

Sun rose this mornin', baby, Lord, I was
layin' down on my floor,
Lord, the sun rose this mornin', I'm a-
layin' down on my floor.
Lord, no woman to love me, baby, even
no place to go.

Lord, nobody love me, baby,
Lord, no place, place to go,

Lord, even no place to go, Lordy,
Lordy, Lord, Lord.

Lord, I'm goin' away, baby, don't you
want to go?
I'm goin' away, baby, mama, don't you
want to go?
Lord, I'm goin' somewhere I ain't
never been before.

Lord, I, Lord, I gwine,
Gwine somewhere I ain't never
Been before.
Lord, Lord.

Track 18

You Gotta Cut That Out
Forrest City Joe, vocal and
harmonica; unidentified, guitar

If we date the previous blues about 1900-1910, then fifty years and many thousand stanzas later, this is what the Delta blues had become. It had gone up the river to Memphis, thence to Chicago, and been urbanized and commercialized. A whole branch of the recording industry, captained by men who largely looked down on the blues and its Negro composers, grew and prospered by teaching its mild-mannered country protagonists to cheapen themselves with gimmicks, insincere effects, poor arrangements, and silly subject matter. Since to the recording directors the blues were both cheap and meaningless, they encouraged the singers to compose blues by the yard, to cut ten to twenty sides a session, to pour out bits of rhymes about any and every subject to a blues-hungry public. In this forcing process the true, free spirit of the blues was trapped within the twelve- or sixteen-bar formula, rigid stanzas that consisted of two lines and a punch line, and a stiff style of arrange-

ment. That in spite of all this so much original and superb music was put on record is a testament to the force of the bluesmen who kept coming out of the Yazoo country with their many musical inventions. But what I have heard convinces me that the blues might have flowered so much more fully and richly if these men had not been forced to market themselves. The few fragments of the original country blues still remaining in 1959 and presented on this record are testaments to what there was originally and what might have been if the profit motive had not intervened. The performance of Forrest City Joe, a young country imitator of the latest juke-box records from Chicago, illustrates what this process can do even to a singer of charm and vitality. The beat is here, but the chords are stock and bookish and the boogie formula unvarying. The stock European four- or eight-phrase formula has replaced the always surprising three-phrase form. A few traces of the melodic style remain, but the demands of a heavy text focus the performer on enunciation, so that the lines are spoken rather

than sung, with most of the graceful and mysterious vocal embellishments eliminated. The result is amusing but not memorable music.

Now woman, you say when a man get
drunk, man, say it makes you mad,
When you get drunk, woman, you look
just as bad,
You better cut that out, cut that out.
You better cut that out, baby, before
it's be's too late.

Now you goes draw my check, you say
you can write all over the world
[words indistinguishable].
Now somebody ask you to work, now
look, girl, you can't even sign your
name,
You better cut that out, ain't that a
cryin' shame, cut that out,
You better cut that out, baby, before it
be too late.

Ah, when you get high, you wants to
fly,
You gotta be so *[words indistinguishable]*, you got your mind in the
sky,
You better cut that out, yes cut that
out.
Cut that out, girl, before it be too late.

Now when you get high, you know
the people say you get worse,
You get real drunk you throw a rock
in a hearse,
You better cut that out, yes, cut that
out,
Now you better cut it out, baby, before
it be too late.

Spoken: Play it for the king, yes, boys,
let it go.

ALAN LOMAX, *co-founder of the Archives of American Folksongs, has been, for over a quarter of a century, among the most active field recordists of folk songs. The author of numerous books, Mr. Lomax, as research fellow of the Department of Anthropology, Columbia University, is currently completing a cross-cultural survey of expressive behavior.*

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1. *Louisiana/Field Song from Senegal*:2:45
Henry Ratcliff, vocal/Bakari-Badji, vocal
2. *Po' Boy Blues*:2:36
John Dudley, vocal
3. *Katie Left Memphis*:3:00
Tangle Eye, vocal
4. *Berta, Berta*:2:53
Leroy Miller and a group of prisoners, vocals

5. <i>Old Original Blues</i>	4:09
Fred McDowell, vocal and guitar; Miles Pratcher, rhythm guitar	
6. <i>Jim and John</i>	2:10
Ed Young, home-made fife; Lonnie Young, vocal and bass drum	
7. <i>Emmaline, Take Your Time</i>	1:03
Alec Askew, panpipes	
8. <i>Buttermilk</i>	3:17
Miles Pratcher, guitar and fiddle; Bob Pratcher, vocal, guitar, and fiddle	
9. <i>Mama Lucy</i>	1:33
Leroy Gary, vocal	
10. <i>I'm Gonna Live Anyhow till I Die</i>	2:32
Miles Pratcher, guitar and fiddle; Bob Pratcher, vocal, guitar, and fiddle	
11. <i>No More, My Lord</i>	2:45
Tangle Eye and a group of prisoners, vocals	
12. <i>Living Hymn and Prayer</i>	3:31
Rev. Crenshaw and the congregation of New Brown's Chapel, Memphis	
13. <i>Death Come A-Creepin in My Room</i>	3:12
Fred McDowell, vocal and guitar	
14. <i>Church-House Moan</i>	1:50
Congregation of New Brown's Chapel, Memphis	
15. <i>Beggin' the Blues</i>	2:05
Bessie Jones, vocal	
16. <i>Rolled and Tumbled</i>	2:52
Rose Hemphill, vocal; Fred McDowell, guitar	
17. <i>Goin' Down to the Races</i>	4:13
Fred McDowell, vocal and guitar; Miles Pratcher, guitar; Fannie Davis, comb and paper	
18. <i>You Gotta Cut That Out</i>	2:56
Forrest City Joe, vocal and harmonica; unidentified, guitar	

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