

# COUNTRY NEGRO JAM SESSION



1. **44 BLUES** – Butch Cage, vocal and fiddle; Willie B. Thomas, vocal and guitar.
2. **MISSISSIPPI HEAVY WATER BLUES** – Robert Pete Williams, vocal & guitar; Robert “Guitar” J. Welch, guitar. (Recorded at Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola.)
3. **SMOKESTACK LIGHTNING** – Clarence Edwards, vocal & guitar; Cornelius Edwards, guitar; Butch Cage, fiddle.
4. **WHO BROKE THE LOCK** – Butch Cage & Willie B. Thomas.
5. **YOU DON'T LOVE ME** – Clarence Edwards, vocal & guitar; Cornelius Edwards, guitar; Butch Cage, fiddle.
6. **IT'S THE SIGN OF THE JUDGEMENT** – Butch Cage & Willie B. Thomas.
7. **FOXHUNT** – Ben Douglas (pseudonym), vocal with Coke bottle, with crowd banging sticks on wooden cylinders. (Recorded during music therapy session at State Mental Hospital in Jackson, La.)
8. **YOUR DICE WON'T PASS** – Sally Dotson, vocal; Smoky Babe (Robert Brown), vocal & guitar; Hillary Blunt, guitar. (Recorded at home of Mable Lee Williams, Robert Pete Williams' sister, in Scotlandville, La.)

9. **JELLY ROLL** – Willie B. Thomas & Butch Cage.
10. **I'VE GOT RELIGION** – Rebecca Smith, Tom Miller, & Ruth Miller, vocals. (Recorded at Rebecca Smith's house near Napoleonville, La.)
11. **GOING DOWNTOWN BOOGIE** – Smoky Babe, vocal & guitar. (Recorded at Mable Lee Williams' house in Scotlandville, La.)
12. **STACK O'DOLLARS** – Clarence Edwards, vocal & guitar; Cornelius Edwards, guitar; Butch Cage, fiddle.
13. **BROWN SKIN WOMAN** – Willie B. Thomas, Butch Cage, & Martha Thomas, tom-tom.
14. **I WON'T BE YOUR LOW-DOWN DOG NO MORE** – Leon Strickland, vocal & guitar; Lucius Bridges, thimbles & washboard; Leslie Anders, banging on back of guitar. (Recorded at Leon Strickland's house in Killona, La.)
15. **THE PIANO BLUES** – Butch Cage & Willie B. Thomas. (Note: This is a pop song from the 1920s entitled *Alcoholic Blues*.)
16. **COTTON FIELD BLUES** (On Mr Rollins' Farm) – Smoky Babe, vocal & guitar. (Using a

(Continued on page 2, inside front cover)

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# Country Negro JAM SESSION

Butch Cage, Willie B. Thomas and Others





(Continued from back cover)

Chevrolet bushing for a slide, Smoky Babe plays bottleneck guitar, recorded during a visit to his home area in Vance, Mississippi in 1962.)

**17. THE FARM BLUES** – Otis Webster, vocal & guitar. (Recorded at Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola.)

**18. THE BOSS MAN BLUES** – Otis Webster, vocal & guitar. (Recorded at Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola.)

**19. WHOA MULE!** – Butch Cage & Willie B. Thomas.

**20. BOLL WEEVIL BLUES** – Otis Webster, vocal & guitar. (Recorded at Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola.)

(Note: Coming from Mexico in 1862, the boll weevil crossed the Rio Grande at Brownsville, Texas. By 1903, leaving a grim trail of ruined cotton farmers in its wake, it had reached west Louisiana. Some time around the turn of the century, probably in Texas, the most durable boll weevil song made its appearance. *The Ballad of the Boll Weevil*, the entral plot of which has the weevil moving onto a farm, looking for a home; no matter what the poor farmer does to destroy the insect, the weevil cheerfully makes himself at home and ruins everything.)

**21. THOUSAND MILES FROM NOWHERE** – Clarence Edwards, vocal & guitar; with Cornelius Edwards, & Butch Cage.

(Note: This is a folk variant of Mercy Dee's powerful early 1950s composition, performance

and national juke box hit, *One Room Country Shack*.

**22. DEAD AND GONE** –

Butch Cage & Willie B. Thomas.

**23. CALLED FOR YOU YESTERDAY** –

Butch Cage & Willie B. Thomas.

**24. ME & MY CHAUFFEUR** –

Butch Cage & Willie B. Thomas.

**25. BABY PLEASE DON'T GO** –

Butch Cage & Willie B. Thomas.

Total Time: 76:55

When location of recording is not given, it was recorded at the home of Butch Cage in Zachary, La.

All recordings made by Dr. Harry Oster in Louisiana on portable equipment in 1959, 1960, and 1962 except #19, 22, 23, 24, & 25 which were made by Chris Strachwitz and Paul Oliver in 1960.

Cover photo of Butch Cage (with fiddle), his wife, Willie Thomas (with guitar), and wife Martha Thomas by Dr. Harry Oster.

Cover design by Wayne Pope

CD release produced by Chris Strachwitz

Selections #1-14 were originally issued on Folklyric LP 111, later re-issued on Arhoolie LP 2018. Selections #15 - 25 were previously unissued.

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## INTRODUCTION:

This collection of informal recordings of rural African-American folk music and songs was taped mostly in the homes of several of the singers and musicians from southwest Louisiana during the late 1950s and early 60s by the enthusiastic and dedicated folklorescholar, **Dr. Harry Oster**. The blues were by far the most popular form of rural black folk music at this time although church-related music was probably a close second. The commercial record companies had marketed the blues ever since the early 1920s and many of the songs heard on this collection are personal variants derived from widely circulated commercial records. Much of this material, however, is either of traditional origin or totally original and improvised with the majority of selections probably falling someplace in between. Featured on this disc is the remarkable country fiddler **Butch Cage**, representing a very old tradition which, with a few exceptions, was scarcely available on commercial records. This CD includes

all of the selections originally issued on the Folklyric/Arhoolie LP release, **Country Negro Jam Session** with some additional tunes by Butch Cage, plus a number of topical blues by virtually the same group of artists, which Dr. Harry Oster had at one time planned to release on a record tentatively called **Boss Men and Boll Weevils**.

Harry Oster has made significant contributions not only to the study of rural folk traditions, but also to our understanding of and ability to enjoy this music and the performers who were the transmitters of these traditions. He was aided by his unusually wide experience in various facets of the subject, such as performer, collector, editor, researcher, producer of and participant in folk festivals, founder of a record company, and university teacher of folklore. After his initial studies, graduating from Harvard in 1946 and obtaining his Ph.D from Cornell University in American Literature and Folklore in 1953, Harry Oster eventually gravitated to Louisi-



ana State University in Baton Rouge, La., fascinated by the richness and variety of folk music in the bayou area. "Tracking down leads with the persistence of a questing lepidopterist" (as **Time** magazine has written), he recorded thousands of songs and stories representative of five Louisiana traditions: Negro, Negro French, Old French, Cajun, and Anglo-Saxon. The two most fertile areas were the Cajun country in the southwestern part of the state and the huge prison farm at Angola where he met and recorded, among others, the remarkable **Robert Pete Williams**. He has also done fruitful field work in Mississippi, Tennessee, Georgia, Ohio, Iowa, French Canada, and Ireland.

A direct result of Harry Oster having discovered such an abundance of exciting performers and songs was the founding of Folklyric Records in the late 1950s. The masters of this catalog were eventually purchased by Arhoolie Records, which has used the Folklyric logo ever since to denote our re-issue series of historic regional tra-

ditions transferred from 78 rpm discs. Harry Oster has also prepared albums for major record companies specializing in folk music and his work has been discussed at length in **Saturday Review** and **Time**. He has received various awards and grants such as a Guggenheim Fellowship to write a book on blues (**Living Country Blues**), and others from the Newport Folk Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts and he has also served on the selection panel which produced a radio series dealing with Iowa folklife, broadcast on the Iowa Public Radio Network, and in part on N. P. R.; an hour long video documentary on folklife in southeast Iowa, **Selma Jim**, which has had international circulation. Dr. Oster has lectured at major universities and is presently teaching at the University of Iowa, his home since 1963.

(Chris Strachwitz - editor of CD release)

## COUNTRY NEGRO JAM SESSION

**James "Butch" Cage** was born on March 16, 1894 in Franklin County, near Meadville, Miss., where his parents were sharecroppers. They grew cotton, corn, sugar cane and rice among "hills and hollows red as paint, a poor place like Nazaree. When we cleared new ground," says Butch, "water'd wash out the top soil in three years. Don't know how we got along plenty of times. Yessuh."

When Butch was ten years old his father died; his widow had to take care of the thirteen children. Somehow she managed to keep the family together. They moved about every year or two to another unproductive farm. Their living quarters were crude board shacks without inside sealing and without a loft. Butch says, "We could look out through the holes in the roof at the stars." During these years Butch went to school a total of three weeks.

Though almost everything else was lacking, there was plenty of music. "All of my folks was some sort of

musician. I had sisters play accordion, an' another brother play the fife. My mother was a good songster, an' she was the best dancer in Franklin County." Butch remembers hearing two old Negro fiddlers Frank Felters and Ole Man Carol Williams; he sat at their feet listening and watching until he too could scrape away on their favorites: *Dixie*, *Arkansas Traveller*, *Hell Broke Loose in Georgia*, *Old Wagoner*, *Hen Cackle*, *Old Mule*, and many breakdowns, square dances and buck dances. He took part in the moaning and shouting at the local church. He danced the blues and he also heard popular hits like *Oh, You Beautiful Doll* and *If You Like Me Like I Like You*. He fell under the fascination of phonograph records when he heard a cylinder played in 1907. He also played the fife in "an old field band," which consisted of fifes, kettle, snare, and bass drums. The fifes were often handmade out of cane reed.

Although Butch was picking up



*Above: Butch Cage playing for his family. (Photo by Harry Oster)*

*Right: Martha and Willie Thomas and children with Dr. Harry Oster on bank of Mississippi River in Baton Rouge, La. (1963) during filming of German TV documentary for Wawzyn Films. (Photo by Chris Strachwitz)*





some money playing at both white and black dances on weekends, he felt he wasn't getting anywhere. In 1927, the year of the worst flood disaster on the Mississippi, he made only four bales of cotton. That year he left to join his brother who was farming a patch of land in Louisiana on shares. He later also worked on cane and strawberry farms, and from 1941 to 1945 did odd jobs for the railroad. In the '50s he got a steady job for the city of Baton Rouge; cleaning out ditches, picking up trash, and putting in pipes. Two years before these records were made he retired to live on Social Security and his city pension.

Up until 1954 Butch was playing at suppers and house parties for four or five dollars a night and also for the fun of it at all-night jam sessions. In the spring of 1959 a couple of blues singers in Scotlandville told me that the best fiddler they had ever heard lived in Zachary. As soon as I heard Butch dig into his cracked and scarred fiddle, I knew that he was a notable find — a great representative of the now virtu-

ally extinct 19th century black fiddle tradition. I gave him a decent fiddle and we began a series of all-day recording sessions at his house. Neighbors flocked in, including many songsters and pickers, some of them, like Willie B. Thomas and Clarence Edwards, exciting performers.

**Willie B. Thomas** was born on Bellemount Plantation in Lobdell, Louisiana, May 25, 1912. Since he began to sing before he was two years old, the family called him "hoodoo." The last of seven children of a family of sharecroppers, he started work when he was ten years old, "scrapping cane," that is, picking up the cane missed by the cane loader. When he was thirteen, his parents moved to a cotton farm in Zachary, La. Willie, riding in the van of the truck, was badly crushed by moving furniture. White folks around Zachary and later the welfare department took care of him, fed him, and gave him clothing until he was on his feet again, but it was a long time before he could walk. The permanent results of the accident were a twisted back

and stunted growth. Since then Willie has worked at various menial jobs, sharecropper, day laborer, caretaker of a house for seventy-five cents a week and room and board during the depression of the thirties, water boy for a construction crew, messenger, porter. At the time of these recordings, he was working as a janitor for the engineering firm of Stone & Webster.

Willie Thomas started playing the kazoo with Butch in 1928, the guitar with him in 1939. He also played at Saturday suppers, at first frailing a tenor banjo. His repertoire includes a wide variety of hillbilly numbers, blues, spirituals, and popular commercial music.

In 1947, in one of several such visitations, he heard a singing out of the sky while he was on his way to the Ethyl plant in north Baton Rouge. It was a supernatural voice calling him to preach the gospel; the voice sang:

*There is a fountain filled with blood,  
Drawing from Immanuel's vein,  
And sinners plunge beneath that flood,  
Lose all their guilt and stain.*

Willie had a vision of "dirty and filthy men splunging beneath the Cross of Jesus, coming out white and clean," and began to sing and shout in the streets. From that time on he became a preacher, though not affiliated with any one church. He is "his own free will spirit." Unlike many religious people, he sees no harm in singing "sinful songs," secular numbers like blues.

Unknown outside their own neighborhood in back-country Louisiana, Butch Cage and Willie Thomas received considerable attention during the summer of 1960 for their successful appearances at the Newport Folk Festival. During that same summer they also recorded for Chris Strachwitz and Paul Oliver (several tracks can be heard on this CD).

**Robert "Pete" Williams** (Pete is a nickname acquired as a teenager) was born March 14, 1914 in Zachary, La., just north of Baton Rouge. With almost no education he worked most of his life on farms, as a barrel maker, on highway crews, levee camps, and at



many other varied jobs. Impressed by several local blues singers, young Robert learned to play both bottle neck style and regular guitar. His favorite was Blind Lemon Jefferson, whose speed and flexibility impressed Robert greatly though he later developed a unique and personal guitar technique, unlike any other recorded blues musician.

Robert Pete was convicted of murder (he insists it was self-defense) and sent to Angola on April 6, 1956. He was in his second year of a life sentence when his ability to improvise blues changed his life. That was in 1958 and Robert Pete was in the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. "The warden knew I could play guitar — they furnished us with guitars — and he called me into his office. So Dr. Oster comes in and he asked me: 'Can you make up a prison blues, a talking blues?' I said, 'yes, I try' — and he handed me a twelve-string guitar." These records were initially released on the Folklyric label and resulted in a number of letters being

sent to Angola officials. One written by Dr. Oster himself was apparently the deciding factor which moved Governor Earl Long to parole Robert Pete in December of 1959 to a farmer in Denham Springs, La. After several years of semi-freedom during which time he was not allowed to travel, full pardon was finally granted to Robert Pete Williams in 1964, just in time for him to make an appearance at the Newport Folk Festival, to which he had been invited in previous years.

For transcripts of the texts to most of these songs as well as many other items recorded by Dr. Oster note **Living Country Blues** by Harry Oster — Folklore Associates — Detroit 1969.

*The common usage term for African-Americans has changed many times over the years and has included Negro, Colored, Black, Afro-American, and African-American. We have retained the term in usage at the time of these recordings.*

**OTHER CD RELEASES OF RECORDINGS MADE BY  
DR. HARRY OSTER:**

- CD/C 348 - **SNOOKS EAGLIN** —  
Country Boy in New Orleans
- CD 359 - **Folksongs Of The Louisiana  
Acadians**
- CD 394 - **ROBERT PETE WILLIAMS** - Vol. I
- CD 395 - **ROBERT PETE WILLIAMS** - Vol. II
- LP 2019 - **SMOKY BABE** — **Hot Blues**

**OTHER COUNTRY BLUES ON ARHOOOLIE:**

- CD/C 302 **LIGHTNING HOPKINS**  
"The Texas Bluesman"
- CD/C 304 **FRED McDOWELL**  
"Mississippi Delta Blues"
- CD/C 306 **MANCE LIPSCOMB**  
"Texas Songster"
- CD/C 310 **SONNY BOY WILLIAMSON**  
"King Biscuit Time"
- CD/C 315 **BIG JOE WILLIAMS**  
"Shake Your Boogie"
- CD/C 323 **BUKKA WHITE**  
"Sky Songs"
- CD/C 330 **LIGHTNING HOPKINS**  
The Gold Star Sessions Vol 1"
- CD/C 337 **LIGHTNING HOPKINS**  
"The Gold Star Sessions Vol 2"
- CD/C 340 **LIGHTNING, JOEL &  
JOHN HENRY HOPKINS**
- CD/C 349 **JOSEPH SPENCE**  
"Bahamian Guitarist"

- CD 352 **TEXAS BLUES**  
"1947 - 1951 Gold Star Recordings"
- CD/C 360 **JESSE FULLER**  
"Frisco Bound"
- CD/C 369 **MERCY DEE**  
"Troublesome Mind"
- CD/C 371 **Dr. ROSS**  
"Boogie Disease"
- CD 374 **BLACK ACE**  
"I'm the Boss Card in your Hand"
- CD 375 **"JUKE BOY" BONNER**  
"Life Gave Me a Dirty Deal"
- CD 377 **ROBERT SHAW**  
"The Ma Grinder"
- CD 378 **JOHN JACKSON**  
"Don't Let Your Deal Go Down"
- CD 385 **"Mississippi Delta Blues  
Jam In Memphis Vol. I"**
- CD 386 **"Mississippi Delta Blues  
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