

# Mississippi Delta Blues Jam in Memphis, Vol. I



## NAPOLEON STRICKLAND (fife)

with the Como Drum Band (unidentified girl on bass drum):

1. Back Water Rising (1:50)

## FRED McDOWELL (vocal & guitar) & JOHNNY WOODS (harmonica):

2. Shake 'em On Down (3:00)
3. Fred's Blues (4:40)
4. Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning (3:35)

## OTHA TURNER (fife)

with the Como Drum Band  
(Otha Turner on bass drum):

5. Otha's Piece (2:35)

## NAPOLEON STRICKLAND

with the Como Drum Band:

6. Shimmy She Wobble (2:25)

## FRED McDOWELL:

7. Write Me A Few Of Your Lines (4:31) (\*)
8. A Dark Cloud Rising (5:00) (\*)

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## FURRY LEWIS:

9. Furry Lewis' Blues (8:55) (\*)
10. Walking Blues (5:45)
11. Judge Bushay Blues (5:44)

## R.L. WATSON & JOSIAH JONES (guitar duets):

12. Memphis Rag (2:00)
13. St Louis Blues (3:00)
14. Praying on the Old Camp-ground & Lonesome Blues (3:30)

## MEMPHIS PIANO RED:

15. Mobile Blues (3:15)
16. Abel Street Stomp (3:10)

Total time: 65:25

(\*) = previously unissued. All other selections  
previously released on ARH LP 1084 & 1085.

Recorded and produced by Chris Strachwitz in  
Memphis, Tenn. during the week of the short-  
lived Memphis Blues Festival in June, 1969.

Cover photo of Fred McDowell & Johnny  
Woods by Jim Marshall.

Cover by Wayne Pope.

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# Mississippi DELTA BLUES JAM IN MEMPHIS VOLUME 1

With:  
Fred McDowell  
Napoleon Strickland  
Otha Turner  
Furry Lewis  
Johnny Woods  
Memphis Piano Red





## Mississippi Delta Blues Jam in Memphis, Vol. I

### Napoleon Strickland, Otha Turner, and the Como Drum Band

Some of the most striking, unusual music to have been recorded in the southern countryside in recent years has been that of singer-fife player Napoleon Strickland and the Como Drum Band, consisting of snare & bass drummer Otha Turner, who also plays fife, and an unidentified girl who usually played the bass drum. The eerie, fascinating music produced by Strickland's five-tone fife and the polyrhythmic drumming may well represent, as some researchers have asserted, the most "African" of all surviving southern music. Certainly theirs is among the most primitive sounds to have been captured on tape in the U.S. in a good long while. Strickland hails from the countryside near Como and learned both how to make and to play the five-hole fife from the older Turner, who hails from adjacent Senatobia. Otha Turner had learned the music in his youth from a considerably older man from the area, thus providing a link with pre-Civil War black musical practice and making these per-

formances some of the oldest-styled black American music currently available on CD. Whether its ties with West African musical practices are as strong and clearly defined as has been claimed has yet to be validated, but it is interesting to note that the only other similar fife and drum music to have been documented recently, that of Ed and Lonnie Young, was from this same region of northwestern Mississippi.

### Fred McDowell

It can be stated unqualifiedly that Fred McDowell was one of the most significant blues discoveries of the folk music revival of the 1960s, a singer and guitarist of such commanding, gripping power and originality that he must be numbered among the leading exponents of the pure country blues, now or anytime. Fred was born in Rossville, Tenn., near Memphis, in 1904 or 5 and from his early teens was engaged in farm work. He took up guitar about 1920, taking his impetus from the playing of a number of local musicians, among them Raymond Payne and Vandy McKenna.

He sharpened his growing skills by playing at country dances, suppers and picnics, but felt that he didn't really begin to develop significantly as a musician until much later (he didn't get a guitar of his own, for example, until 1940, twenty years after he first had taken up the instrument). At that time he moved to Mississippi, where he lived in Como, south of Memphis on Highway 61. [Fred McDowell died on July 3, 1972.] He was a master of the bottleneck or slide guitar technique, which he learned from the playing of an uncle, and over the years he elaborated a stunning command of the idiom, one that is rhythmically rich and complex, very powerful, and subtly colored and detailed. He was discovered and recorded in Como in 1959 by folklorist Alan Lomax, who was on a southern field recording trip. Fred became one of the most popular and highly regarded of traditional artists here and abroad (he made several European tours). On three of the five performances here he is seconded by Johnny Woods, from nearby Senatobia, a magnificent, sensitive harmonica accompanist who follows and anticipates Fred's instrumental lines perfectly, adding a rich

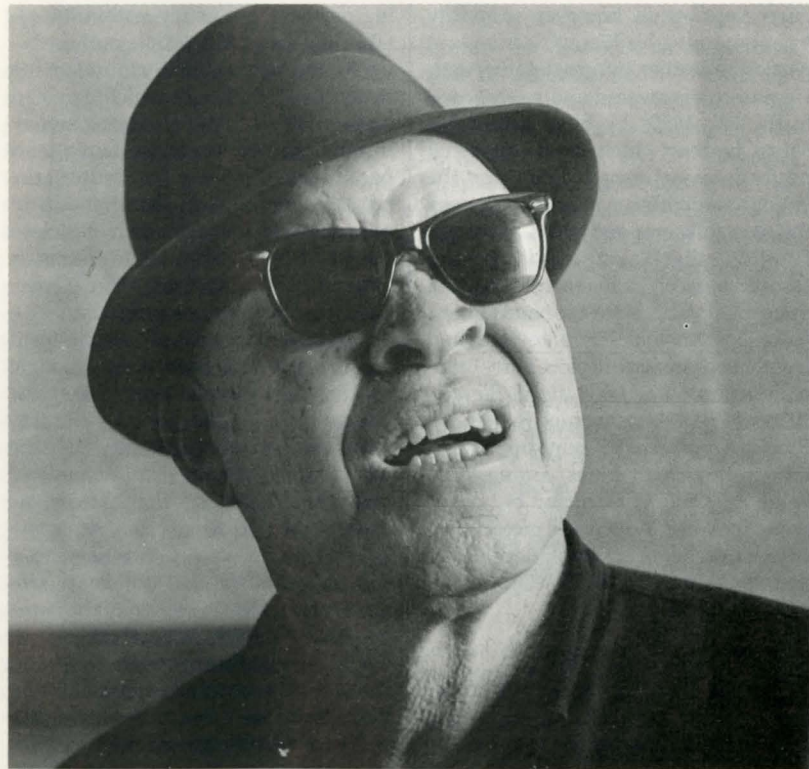
dimension to the music.

### Furry Lewis

Though a longtime resident of Memphis, Walter "Furry" Lewis, one of the most inventive singer-guitarists to record during the heyday of the country blues, was born in Greenwood, Miss., in 1900. This rural background, his years of performing experience in the traveling medicine shows that plied the South, as well as his living in Memphis and having had contact with the large number of bluesmen there explain his mastery of a wide range of the stylistic disciplines of southern black music. This mastery he continued to deepen throughout his long stay in Memphis, to which he had moved in the late 1920s. He quickly became one of the most popular entertainers of the city and participated in a good number of recordings, primarily as a soloist, beginning in 1927. Like many other country bluesmen of the period, his recording activity ceased with the onset of the Depression, which put an end to extensive recording in the South and saw a decline in popularity for the genre among African-Americans. Over the years



Left to right: Napoleon Strickland-fife; unidentified girl-bass drum; Otha Turner-snare drum.  
(Photo by Chris Strachwitz)



Memphis Piano Red (Photo by Jim Marshall)



Furry kept active, however, primarily by entertaining his Memphis friends at parties and other informal gatherings. He was re-discovered and re-recorded in the late 1950s by blues researcher Sam Charters which led to renewed performing activity playing for the young attentive listeners who comprised the new folksong and blues audience. His slide guitar playing was as keen and assured as ever, as his three delightful performances here attest so handsomely. *Judge Boushay Blues* is a revised and lengthened version of a piece Furry originally recorded as *Judge Harsh Blues* in 1928, while *Walking Blues* and *Furry Lewis Blues* are typical of his semi-improvisatory approach to blues composition, being a loosely constructed but nonetheless powerfully focussed piece drawn from a number of commonplace verses and motifs, and unified by Furry's musical personality.

#### R. L. Watson – Josiah Jones

While their names are new to collectors of authentic black American folk music, the lineaments of the delightful instrumental music of guitarists R.L. Watson and Josiah Jones, longtime play-

ing partners, are firmly within the established musical practices of those revered traditions. Literally found on the streets of Memphis, to which they had repaired in the hopes of earning money through their sidewalk entertaining and pantomime (both are deaf mutes), the pair was brought to the attention of producer Chris Strachwitz by his close friend, the distinguished German ethnomusicologist Prof. Franz-Georg Goldwasser, who was producing a radio documentary on the Memphis festival for his popular show "Blues, Boogie und Schwarze Musik" broadcast on the German state radio network. Strachwitz was immediately taken with the wistful, energetic music of the elderly pair of guitarists and arranged that their insinuating performances of three traditional pieces—a rag, a blues and a spiritual—be included in this set. Unfortunately, little is known of the backgrounds of the two performers, as Strachwitz was unable to conduct an interview with them and all attempts at communication were forestalled in the face of the pair's undisguised mistrust of, if not outright hostility towards, blond, blue-eyed Silesians.

#### Memphis Piano Red

The pungent, lusty older barrelhouse and blues piano traditions are rousing laid out here by singer-pianist Johnny Williams, better known to his friends and neighbors as "Piano Red" (though he's not to be confused with the popular Atlanta rhythm-and-blues recording artist of the same name who can be heard on ARH CD 379). Memphis-reared Williams has been a fixture of the local blues scene there for a long time. "I been knowing him for almost a hundred years" Bukka White noted, though since this is his first recording, his contributions have gone unacknowledged. On the basis of his two selections here—*Mobile Blues* and *Abel Street Stomp*—Williams can be seen as a solid, persuasive worker in the older keyboard traditions associated with the rural and urban South of three to four decades ago. *Mobile Blues* moreover, displays Red's easy singing style, his grainy, unforced vocal riding insinuatingly over the rock-ribbed rhythms and splashing inventions of his relaxed piano. The instrumental *Abel Street Stomp* is Red's localized version of a set-piece recorded by a number of blues pianists

who have used the same effective bass figure as the basis of their extemporizations. As demonstrated by these happy and vigorous performances Red's command of these idioms is assured placing him among the finer contemporary exponents of the unfortunately fast disappearing art of barrelhouse blues piano. This set is both richer and more valuable for his solid contributions. Play on, Red!

Pete Welding – 1969

#### Also available:

**CD 386 Mississippi Delta Blues**

**Jam In Memphis Vol 2.**

*With: Bukka White, Sleepy John Estes, & Nathan Beauregard*

**CD/C 304 Fred McDowell:**

**Mississippi Delta Blues**

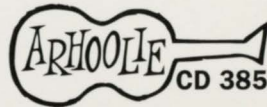
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**Over 60 Minutes of Classic BLUES**

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