LOWELL FULSON "My First Recordings"



- 1. WESTERN UNION BLUES (L.Fulson) ST 201
- 2. LAZY WOMAN BLUES (L.Fulson) ST 201
- 3. RIVER BLUES, Pt. 1 (L.Fulson) ST 202
- 4. RIVER BLUES, Pt. 2 (L.Fulson) ST 202
- 5. I WALKED ALL NIGHT (L.Fulson) DB 219
- 6. BET WEEN MIDNIGHT AND DAY (L.Fulson) DB 219
- 7. THE BLUES IS KILLING ME (L.Fulson) SB 220
- 8. DID YOU EVER FEEL LUCKY (L.Fulson) SB 220
- 9. I'M WILD ABOUT YOU (L.Fulson- ATV Music) DT 2002
- 10. THREE O'CLOCK BLUES (L. Fulson ATV Music) DT 2002
- 11. CRYING BLUES (Street Walking Woman) (L. Fulson - Acuff/Rose) BT 1068
- 12. YOU'RE GONNA MISS ME (L.Fulson - ARC Music Corp.) BT 1068
- 13. MISS KATY LEE BLUES (L. Fulson) BT 1071
- 14. RAMBLING BLUES (L.Fulson) BT 1071
- 15. FULSON BLUES (L.Fulson Ft.Knox/Trio) BT 1072
- 16. SAN FRANCISCO BLUES (R. L. Geddins B-Flat Pub.) BT 1072
- 17. I WANT TO SEE MY BABY (R.L. Geddins B-Flat Pub.) BT 1074
- 18. TROUBLE BLUES (L. Fulson Ft. Knox/Trio) BT 1074
- 19. DON'T BE SO EVIL (R.L. Geddins B-Flat Pub.) BT 1077
- 20. BLACK WIDOW SPIDER BLUES (L.Fulson - Ft.Knox/Trio) BT 1077
- 21. I'M PRISON BOUND (R.L. Geddins B-Flat Pub.) DT 2021

- 22. MY BABY LEFT ME (R.L. Geddins- B-Flat Pub.) DT 2021
- 23. BLUES WITH A FEELING (L.Fulson) ST 272
- 24. WHY CAN'T YOU CRY FOR ME (L.Fulson) ST 272
- 25. THERE IS A TIME FOR EVERYTHING (L.Fulson) ST unissued
- 26. LOWELL JUMPS ONE (Cash Box Boogie)
- (L.Fulson) ST 335

Total time: 74:00

Lowell Fulson - vocals and guitar; with:

Martin Fulson - rbythm guitar on # 1 - #10; small combo on all other selections.

All recordings made between 1946 and 1951. Cover design by Wayne Pope. Cover photo © by Chris Strachwitz. Notes by Mark Humphrey.

Masters of #1 - 8 & #23 - 26 purchased by Arhoolie from Swing Time/Down Beat Records & Jack Lauderdale. Several of the Big Town titles were re-recorded later for Swing Time - they are different performances.

Discographical abbreviations: ST=Swing Time; DB=Down Beat; SB=Swing Beat: BT=Big Town; DT= Down Town.

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LOWELL FULSON "My First Recordings"

Anyone surveying the development of the blues idiom over the past half century finds Lowell Fulson's name recurring with unusual persistence in a variety of contexts. It appears first among the handful of Southwestern country blues singer-guitarists (Lightnin' Hopkins, Smokey Hogg, Lil Son Jackson) recorded on the West Coast in the wake of World War II. Lowell was at the head of this class: he distinctly recalls making his first recordings in June 1946, five months prior to his nearest classmate, Lightnin' Hopkins, whose first Aladdin sides were waxed in November. (Hogg and Jackson debuted still later.) The success of West Coast independent labels with such downhome bluesmen served as a catalyst for related enterprises in Memphis and Chicago. Fulson recorded extensively during this shortlived country blues renaissance but soon developed a more sophisticated sound in the company of the superb pianist Lloyd Glenn and alto saxophonist Earl Brown. He moved to a high middle ground between country roots and West Coast urbanity, his blues a deft balance between the resolute rusticism of a Smokey Hogg and the high-gloss club blues of a Charles Brown. This blend delivered Fulson four Billboard Top 10 R&B hits (and a # 1 in "Blue Shadows") in 1950-51.

By the early 1950s, the R&B world was rapidly changing, but Fulson's talents as singer/songwriter, guitarist/bandleader kept him afloat in swift currents. His 1954 Chess recording, "Reconsider Baby," first became a hit (it went to # 3) and, in time, a blues standard covered by Elvis and inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame in 1993. In 1966, with blues losing its core audience to Soul, Fulson delivered the delightfully funky "Tramp," which went to # 5 on the Billboard R&B chart for him in 1966

and to # 2 the following year for Otis Redding and Carla Thomas. Fulson, then 45, proved to be a rare sort of survivor among bluesmen, one who adroitly adapted to change while seldom sounding out of his element (his cover of the Beatles' "Why Don't We Do It in the Road" notwithstanding).

Recent years have brought Lowell the accolades which rightfully accrue to survivors: he was inducted into the Rhythm and Blues Hall of Fame in 1993, the same year in which the Blues Hall of Fame gave him five W.C. Handy Awards. Though he turned 76 on 3/31/ 96, he has continued in recent years to write, perform and record his own brand of blues. Surviving in the blues world for some six decades is an art in itself, but Fulson is one survivor who can look back on a career marked by both consistency and unusual diversity, the latter a rare quality in a field where decades of stylistic sameness are often hailed as a mark of artistic integrity. In Lowell's work we hear an artist's ongoing creative responses to the evolving blues context. The roots of that evolution in the field hollers, church hymns and country blues he heard in rural Oklahoma are clearly evident in Fulson's debut recordings,

presented here.

Fulson's first recordings may have been made ten months after V-J Day, but they echo a harsh world of sharecroppers seemingly of an earlier, less hopeful era. It was the world of Alger 'Texas' Alexander, Fulson's mentor. "I learned most of them things from Texas," Fulson says of his earliest recordings. "He taught me quite a bit about singing blues. I was gone a couple of months with Tex [in 1939]. I came back with \$35, \$40 and everybody was happy. That's when I picked up most all the blues...and made up the rest of 'em."

Fulson was still in his teens when he played guitar for Texas Alexander, an itinerant blues singer who had recorded 64 sides between 1927 and 1934 but who seemed not to play any instrument. Accompanying Alexander was a significant apprenticeship for a young man who grew up in a musical family but not necessarily a blues-oriented one. His mother, whose maiden name was Mamie Wilson, played guitar but only at home in Southeastern Oklahoma. "My mother said I was born up on Choctaw Indian strip," says Lowell, who was born March 31, 1921. His father, Martin Fulson, was killed in a cotton gin accident

when Lowell was five, leaving his mother to raise two sons in a rural environment widely populated with kinfolk: "That community was half built upon just relatives," Lowell recalls. "From Tulsa back to Atoka and all between was Wilsons and Fulsoms " One memorable relative was his paternal grandfather, Henry Folsom, who regaled his grandson with tales of fighting alongside Indians in the Civil War and claimed to have been born in Africa. "He was an Indian herb doctor," says Lowell, who sometimes went to the woods collecting roots with his grandfather, a Choctaw Freedman. Like the other so-called Civilized Tribes, the Choctaws brought African-American slaves with them to Indian Territory, where they were eventually freed and granted some tribal rights. "Grandpa had married a Cherokee Indian woman," says Lowell, though tribal records from the Oklahoma Historical Society place Nancy Fulsom, Henry's wife, on the Chickasaw Nation's Freedmen Roll. Henry was a slave of Dave Folsom, prominent in one of the leading Choctaw families. By 1903, the consonant stage of the name change is evident in documents referring to Henry and Nancy Fulsom. Lowell says his mother effected the final name change to Fulson.

Along with his grandfather, who played fiddle, Lowell was often around his maternal uncles, who "all hammered around on something," he recalls. Some played guitar in Holiness churches or performed on mandolin and guitar at country picnics. Lowell's first public performance at about age 13 was at one such 'country frolic.' During one of his musical uncles' breaks, he recalls, "I got up there and played an old song called 'South Texas Blues." By age 15, Lowell was a regular performer at local dances, of which he says, "it wasn't no race barrier [between] Indian, white, black."

By the time Lowell was 18, he had married and moved to Ada, Oklahoma, where he performed with banjoist Dan Wright's string band, a popular Texas-based regional group which never recorded. "We played from one o'clock to about five o'clock in the evening in the Summer," Lowell recalls. "I done a little singing and playing guitar, so they moved me up to the second chair. You got 50 cents more." Wright's African-American string band entertained largely white audiences with pop standards ("Beer Barrel Polka," "Silvery Moon") and what Lowell calls "country and western...a lot of

Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys records."

But blues could be heard in a part of Ada called Foggy Bottom. That's where Lowell met Texas Alexander in the Fall of 1939. "I went down by Joe Pete's," Lowell remembers, "she kept all the drinks for everybody down there; she made it herself. I played my mother-in-law's guitar, but she didn't want nobody to play nothing but church music on it. People had funny ideas back in them days. I guess she thought the sin would rub off. Anyway, I still had my church guitar. I was playing a couple of pieces, and Tex [Alexander] kept on watching me. 1 said, 'Man, I got to get this guitar back to my mother-in-law.' But I came back to drink me a little beer. I asked this ol' boy if I could use his guitar he was playing. So I played around with a song out then, I can't think who played it: 'What you done to me, sugar, will never get out of me.' He said, 'Man, we could make some money. You go on this trip with me, I'll furnish the expenses and everything and give you \$5 a week in tips.' I didn't get a fair count, but it didn't make no difference; I wound up with \$10, \$12 a week. So I followed him, and that's when I picked up 'River Blues' from him singing it. I never had the voice to sing it like he sang it, though. He had one of them great big voices. He'd walk in the house if they had the Victrola on, the Nickelodeons they called 'em then, singing the blues. (sings) 'Well, you oughta been on the river, whoa, boy, 19 and 10...' I liked the sound of it 'cause it sound churchy, see. I went and I played with him; we left. Tex bought me a Gibson. I've been playing those Gibsons ever since I was big enough to play a guitar."

The duration of Lowell's stay with Alexander is in some dispute ("I was gone a year," he said in a 1971 Living Blues interview, while "Just a summer" was the extent of it in a 1994 Living Blues interview), but it was sufficient to make a lifelong impact. It was an initiation into a classic itinerant rural blues singer's life, following the cotton pickers by car and by Greyhound bus across Oklahoma and into Texas, where Lowell recalls coming too close for comfort with a character immortalized in regional blues song.

"Bud Russell [mentioned here in 'Red River Blues'] was the boss man on the plantation down there," he says. "Texas Alexander hung around his place down there. He'd just go in there and sing; I never did see him [Alexander]

5

pick no cotton. 'I ain't gonna pick no cotton or chop no corn; if I see a mule run away with world, I'll tell him go ahead on.' That was one of them early ones. That was a line of Tex's. He sang about a couple of them ol' bad white men. He [Russell] looked at me pretty hard, said, 'What are you doing down here?' I said. 'I'm with him.' I'd never been down there [Texas] before. So he looked at me hard and I said, 'Tex, you better get me out of here! That ol' boy wants to put me in the fields, and I ain't going in nobody's fields.' I wasn't there the next day."

Lowell returned to Oklahoma to collect his first wife, Adena, before moving to Gainesville, Texas, where he became a restaurant 'breakfast man.' After the draft caught him in 1943, his culinary skills continued to serve Lowell well in the Navy, as did his musical background. He played with an integrated band on Guam, and his performances of songs like Louis Jordan's "Caldonia" were well-received. "That was the first time it really hit me that I was good enough to cut a record," he recalls.

But the idea had been planted before Fulson shipped out. While stationed at Alameda Naval Air base in Oakland, he sometimes played on the streets and at house parties. "That's how I met Bob Geddins," Lowell told Arnold Shaw in Honkers and Shouters. "One evening Bob asked me what I was going to do after I got out of the service. I said that all I was trying to do was keep from going overseas. He said that he thought we could get a recording session. I didn't think I was that good, but I went out and got me an electric guitar and amplifier." He took his Gibson L-5 with him to Guam, but the instrument failed to make the return voyage. Fortunately, that loss was the only one Lowell suffered during World War II

Stateside, he worked as a fry cook at the Wade Hotel in Duncan, Oklahoma, just long enough for his foot locker to follow him home (it contained some \$600 worth of Wartime poker winnings). "I told my wife, said, 'I'm going to California,'" Lowell recalls. "'I'll let you know when I get there.' She said, 'You always talking about going to California; nobody knows you in California.' I said, 'They will when I get there.'"

Lowell arrived in Oakland in May 1946. It wasn't long before he had his second encounter with African-American entrepreneur Bob

Geddins, "He promised me a recording session when I got out of the service." Lowell recalls, "but you don't never count on that. I met him by accident. I was staying in Vallejo, and went on over to Oakland. I was walking down 7th St., and, boy, they'd be having music and everything else going on down there. I heard music from a beat-up looking place, like a retired garage. I didn't see but one man in there. (Geddins) I went in there, and first thing I seen an old guitar settin' in the corner. Seems like in them days I couldn't pass one up. I said, 'Is that your guitar?' He said, 'Can you play that thing?' I said, 'Man, there ain't no liquor store around here nowhere?' He went and got me a bottle of wine; I didn't care for whiskey, it's too hot, you know. Burned. He got me a jug of wine, and said, 'Yeah, you can play that thing,' after I went to playing it awhile. I sung a couple of old songs I messed around with. He said, 'Who you record for?' Show you how dumb I was, I didn't know what he was talking about when he said, 'Who do I record for?' I'd been from the kitchens to the country balls, and then I was a fry cook. He said, 'You want to cut that record right there?' I said, 'Yeah.' He said, 'Well, if you cut me a couple of records,

I'll give you a hundred dollars.' And I didn't want to act too overjoyed about that (laughs). I think I had about two dollars! He was pressing records, by the way, in this place I was talking about. It was a one-man pressing shop. I said, 'Yeah, I don't care.'

"We get up and go on over to San Francisco-that's where he always recorded, in Frisco-it didn't look much better than the place we just left out of. He had an engineer. He had a heck of a good ear. Him and the engineer, they discussed the sound. Old Bob Geddins say, 'The sound is the main thing, man! Get me a sound!' He'd say, 'That sound like a bunch a kids washin' dishes!' He was a character, Bob was. Good guy. I said to myself, 'If I could get my brother out here, this would sound much better, 'cause we used to play together.' He could make those pretty chords. He couldn't solo, but he'd carry a pretty good rhythm, you know. Keep me in line, 'cause I'd jump time. So we went on and I cut two records; I got my hundred dollars. He said, 'I want you to stay in touch with me, man. You ain't under no contract with nobody?' 'Contract for what? I go to the shipyard every morning.' We laughed about it. I think the first

record I ever put out was 'Western Union Blues.' He went on and sent for Martin, and Martin was there the next week."

Then 25. Fulson recorded several blues which reflected a harsh Southwestern rural life. he and other Texas-Oklahoma migrants to the West Coast gladly left behind them. "First time I heard myself on a record player was down on 7th." says Lowell, singing the opening line of his debut: "Western Union man, please pass by my house today...' That was one of the first ones right there." Separated from his wife in Oklahoma (who later joined him unexpectedly), this song has a tinge of autobiography. "Lazy Woman Blues," however, is much indebted to Texas Alexander, and the two-part "River Blues" revamps Alexander's 1928 OKeh recording, "Penitentiary Moan Blues." The second part of "River Blues" opens with guitar lines inspired by one of Alexander's accompanists on record, Lonnie Johnson. "I favored him," Lowell says succinctly of the influential single-string stylist.

The dozen tracks here which are Lowell backed by his younger brother, Martin, are searingly stark country blues of the sort generally associated with Lightnin' Hopkins. Lowell recalls using a Holiness preacher's Epiphone guitar for many of his early recordings; most are on an electric instrument but some ("River Blues") apparently are not. "If I could get an electric," Lowell recalls, "they'd fix it so it would sound like an acoustic anyway but just louder. It was just the way they recorded it." Even as Lowell moved out of his 'country' sound into nattier musical threads, we hear him apparently playing an acoustic guitar on songs likes "Fulson's Blues."

"We'd cut two or three times a week," Lowell recalls. "He [Geddins] was releasing them no sooner than they would cool off and he could handle 'em! He wasn't going nowhere without a car full of boxes of 78s. That evening, he'd press off more records to take out the next day. He pressed his own records and everything. He wouldn't let nobody press them, thinking they were going to steal some. They went where he put 'em, and he didn't get out of Oakland, I don't think! They'd finally worked down to Bakersfield, and they must have worked down to Los Angeles, because Jack [Lauderdale] had 'em."

Despite the fast pace of recording for Geddins, the limited distribution of his Big

Town label didn't make a star of Lowell "I didn't get to do too much playing because I had a wife and a kid," he recalls, "so I had to bring in some kind of paycheck. But we'd cut records all the time 'cause you could do that at night and go to work during the day." In 1947, Lowell was working for the U.S. Maritime Commission: "Man, it would be cold down in that water decommissioning ships," Lowell recalls. On weekends, he played music in the Bay Area, and was beginning to face the limitations of his downhome approach. Lowell recalls an encounter with Pee Wee Crayton at Slim Jenkins' popular Oakland nightclub. "I'm playing like Lightnin' Hopkins," Lowell explains. "I went struttin' in there one time. was going to sit in on a jam session. So we got up there and Pee Wee [Crayton] says, 'Lowell, if you are going to sit in with these guys I think if it was me, now, I'd go back to school and learn a little more, 'cause these cats is pretty heavy.' I thanked him for the advice... I sat around and listened all evening. 'Come on, we play with you.' I said, 'No.' My 'Three O'Clock in the Morning' and 'Miss Katy Lee' and my 'Black Widow Spider Blues' ain't going to fit this thing."

In 1947, Lowell began working in clubs with pianist Ellis 'King' Solomon, drummer Asal 'Count' Carson, and teenaged alto saxophonist Earl Brown, later to become an important feature of his Swing Time-era recordings. "It sounded like we were doing a little something," Lowell recalls, but Geddins was reluctant to 'break the image,' in Lowell's words, and continued to release downhome blues. "Black Widow Spider Blues' really jumped off in the later part of '47," says Lowell. "Black Widow Spider' kind of woke things up for blues...It caught the jukebox and went all the way to Louisiana." Lowell's first hit came from perhaps his first session (discographical accuracy isn't pinpoint in the case of his early sides) with pianist Rufus J. Russell, remembered by Lowell as a church deacon who 'turned up his nose' at blues but took the \$5 anyway to play a session. The extended guitar solo that opens "Black Widow Spider Blues" suggests Lowell had indeed 'gone back to school' and was now incorporating the vocabulary developed by T-Bone Walker into his native style.

"Martin quit when I added a full combo," Lowell recalls. Though not a major hit for Lowell, perhaps the most influential of his duets with his brother is "Three O'Clock Blues," which became B.B. King's first # 1 hit in February 1952. In his capacity as popular DJ at WDIA, King had promoted a 1951 Memphis appearance by Lowell that was a sellout, and asked permission to record the song in return for the favor. "I didn't know he could sing that good," Lowell muses.

1948 was a transitional year for Lowell, evident in a song like "San Francisco Blues," which frames contemporary West Coast references in the structure of a decade-old hit for Bukka White, "Shake 'Em On Down." The country blues was gradually becoming more framework than foreground, and Lowell was adapting his tradition to changing times ("My mind got to rambling like an airplane in the West," he sings in "Rambling Blues"). "I'd done got pretty hip," Lowell recalls. With his first hit bolstering his confidence and his draw at Bay Area clubs, Lowell finally clocked out of the shipyard one lunch hour and never looked back

None too pleased (and jealous of the admiring women in the clubs), his first wife put her foot down and through the top of Lowell's

Gibson L-5. But her ultimatums couldn't curb Lowell's career. "Jack Lauderdale came up in '48," Lowell recalls, "and we made a deal sometime in the middle of the year." Lauderdale had been leasing many of Geddins' recordings, and was eager to have exclusive claim on Lowell's recordings. "I told Bob Geddins, 'You helped me get started, and I put some money in your pockets for all these babies you got around here."" (Geddins had 13 children.)

The final four tracks on this collection come from Lowell's Los Angeles recordings for Lauderdale's Swing Time label. The 1951 instrumental, "Blues with a Feelin'," finds Lowell playing downhome blues lines complemented by the typically superb piano of Lloyd Glenn. whose subtle blues sensibility is among the great pleasures of Lowell's Swing Time recordings. "They don't make piano players like that no more," Lowell says of Glenn, with whom he shares composer credits for "Why Can't You Cry for Me," an example of Lowell's 'classic' Swing Time sound at its zenith. "There Is a Time for Everything" finds Lowell again adapting to changing R&B trends with two saxophones and Glenn playing organ. Finally, 1952's "Cash Box Boogie (Lowell Jumps One)"

is a storming instrumental from the honking sax era (that's Dexter Gordon on tenor) that features aggressive drumming, a hint of developments brewing in R&B's future.

The generous collection at hand is far from all the recordings Lowell Fulson made between 1946 and 1952, and, as Lowell is quick to point out, "I've covered a whole lot of territory since then." Yet this is where we hear the blues of Texas Alexander, little removed from field hollers, meet the streets of Oakland. It was the era when Lowell "went

to school" and joined the first wave of T-Bone Walker's disciples and penned some blues classics ("Three O'Clock Blues") and reworked others ("Everyday I Have the Blues"). His early '50s road band nurtured the talents of Ray Charles and Stanley Turrentine, and Lowell's recordings from that era remain paragons of innovation within tradition. With typical plainspoken understatement, Lowell says of these sides, "You start out from somewhere. I was trying to get my own blues..."

(Mark A. Humpbrey - 1997)

Thanks to Lowell Fulson for his generous recollections; to Tina Mayfield for her gracious hospitality; to Mary Katherine Aldin for her extensive help with introductions, background material, and permission to quote from her interviews with Lowell Fulson (see Living Blues No. 115, June 1994)

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- 1. WESTERN UNION BLUES (2:48)
- 2. LAZY WOMAN BLUES (3:19)
- 3. RIVER BLUES, Pt. 1 (2:40)
- 4. RIVER BLUES, Pt. 2 (2:34)
- 5. I WALKED ALL NIGHT (2:50)
- 6. BETWEEN MIDNIGHT AND DAY (2:28)
- 7. THE BLUES IS KILLING ME (2:30)
- 8. DID YOU EVER FEEL LUCKY (2:33)
- 9. I'M WILD ABOUT YOU (3:25)
- 10. THREE O'CLOCK BLUES (3:07)
- 11. CRYING BLUES (Street Walking Woman)
- 12. YOU'RE GONNA MISS ME (2:14)
- 13. MISS KATY LEE BLUES (2:45)
- 14. RAMBLING BLUES (2:48)
- 15. FULSON BLUES (2:50)
- 16. SAN FRANCISCO BLUES (2:43)
- 17. I WANT TO SEE MY BABY (2:37)
- 18. TROUBLE BLUES (2:57)
- 19. DON'T BE SO EVIL (3:09)
- 20. BLACK WIDOW SPIDER BLUES (3:21)
- 21. I'M PRISON BOUND (3:11)
- 22. MY BABY LEFT ME (2:42)

- 23. BLUES WITH A FEELING (2:28)
- 24. WHY CAN'T YOU CRY FOR ME (2:37)
- 25. THERE IS A TIME FOR EVERYTHING (3:20)
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