

- 1. I HAVE TO PAINT MY FACE** – Sam Chatman (Sam Chatman)
- 2. JOHN HENRY** – John Jackson (arranged by John Jackson)
- 3. WALKED DOWN SO MANY TURN ROWS** – Mercy Dee (Mercy Dee Walton)
- 4. TOM MOORE'S FARM** – Mance Lipscomb (Mance Lipscomb)
- 5. TOM MOORE BLUES** – Lightning Hopkins (Sam Hopkins)
- 6. RIVER BLUES** – Parts I & 2 – Lowell Fulson (Lowell Fulson)
- 7. LEEVE CAMP BLUES** – Fred McDowell (Fred McDowell)
- 8. The 1919 INFLUENZA BLUES** – Essie Jenkins (Essie Jenkins)
- 9. WHY I LIKE ROOSEVELT** – Willie Eason (Willie Eason; Tradition Music Co. & Mango Tone Music)
- 10. LITTLE SOLDIER BOY** – Doctor Ross (Isaiah Ross)
- 11. PRISONER'S TALKING BLUES** – Robert Pete Williams (Robert Pete Williams)
- 12. I GOT TO CLIMB A HIGH MOUNTAIN** – Johnie Lewis (Johnie Lewis)
- 13. DEPRESSION BLUES** – Herman E. Johnson (Herman E. Johnson)
- 14. STOCKYARD BLUES** – Johnny Young & Big Walter Horton (Johnny Young)
- 15. WHAT WILL I TELL THE CHILDREN** – Juke Boy Bonner (Weldon Bonner)
- 16. IT'S ENOUGH** – Juke Boy Bonner (Weldon Bonner)
- 17. THINGS GONNA GET BETTER** – Bee Houston (Bee Houston)
- 18. BACK HOME BLUES** – Big Joe Williams (Joe Lee Williams)

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BLUES With A Message

I HAVE TO PAINT MY FACE • JOHN HENRY • TOM MOORE'S FARM BLUES • RIVER BLUES
• LEEVE CAMP BLUES • THE 1919 INFLUENZA BLUES • WHY I LIKE ROOSEVELT • LITTLE
SOLDIER BOY • PRISONER'S TALKING BLUES • DEPRESSION BLUES • STOCKYARD BLUES
• WHAT WILL I TELL THE CHILDREN • BACK HOME BLUES • & MORE!



Every one who is interested in blues and blues history is aware of the major changes that came with the late 1950s and early 60s. This is not the place to embark upon an account of the peak of Rhythm and Blues and the rise of Rock; nor do we need to be reminded of the power of the Chicago blues bands of Muddy Waters, Howling Wolf and their contemporaries, or even of the “rediscovery” of singers of the earlier blues generation, and the growth in world popularity promoted by international tours and Folk Blues Festivals.

All who witnessed this musical revolution were also aware of the decline of the “country” and acoustic blues, and the dominance of amplified and electric instruments. While many blues enthusiasts were to regret the loss of the former and others were exhilarated by the challenge of electrification, some of the implications of these changes were overlooked. Among these, and one of the most important, was the decline in “blues with a meaning.”

In 1960, my book *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues* (Cassell 1960; revised edition Cambridge

University Press, 1990) was published. It was concerned with the meaning and content of the blues as sung by singers over the previous forty years. Already it was retrospective, but the meaningful blues of many singers whose records were still in the catalogues were included. This would scarcely have been possible a mere decade later.

In what may be termed the “folk blues” tradition, the singers sang for themselves, or for their immediate audiences, requiring no amplification of voice or instrument. Working the streets or local jukebs, playing for dancing or parties, alone or with companions, they played and sang as the inspiration came or the occasion required. Blues singers sang from a personal position, and their blues were frequently based on their direct experiences and emotions. They also acted as a catalyst for others, projecting the feelings, the dilemmas, the fears and hopes of members of their communities. To some, this is a “romantic” view of the earlier blues, but it is not; it was the reality, as older generations who witnessed it, were fully aware.



Sam Chatman — Mississippi, 1960



John Jackson — Fairfax, Virginia, 1965

There was, however, a period of transition, though seldom considered as such, when blues of the personal, experiential and reflective kind, were still recorded. This collection of "Blues with a Meaning" presents some of them. The period of transition was also one of social disruption, witnessing the final years of segregation but also the great wave of migration from the South to the urban North that followed the mechanization of the cotton industry. By this time many of the rural folk songsters whose range of music was considerable, but who embraced the blues, had died. Among those still living and singing in the 1960s was Sam Chatman, a former member of the family string band, the Mississippi Sheiks. The band's repertoire was wide, for they played for both White and Black, and he affirmed that they sang different kinds of song according to the nature of their audience. It is likely that there was a vein of protest songs which was rarely if ever heard by Whites. One of these appears to have been "I Have to Paint My Face," a highly ironic song which dwells on the stereotypes of Blacks of the segregation period.

Say, God made us all, he made some at night,

That's why he didn't take time to make us all white,

I'm bound to change my name, I have to paint my face

So I won't be kin to that Ethiopian race.

Say, now let me tell you one thing that a Stump Town nigger will do -

He'll pull up on young cotton, and he'll kill baby chicken too .

I'm bound to change my name, etc.

This might have been in the repertoire of a number of "songsters," the folk singers of the travelling shows who sang ballads and minstrel songs, and embraced blues when they became current. One of the last of these was John Jackson, banjo and guitar-player from Virginia, who included the ballad of "John Henry" among his many songs. It may seem an anachronism, for the story told of the legendary "steel-driver" who competed with the mechanization of tunneling in the late 19th century. He died in doing so,



Mance Lipscomb & family — Novasota, Texas, 1960

but remained a folk hero.

*John Henry hammered on the right,
The steam-drill was on the left,
"Before I let that steam drill beat
me down,
Hammer my poor self to death"*

Every blues singer knew the ballad of "John Henry." His determination that he would die rather than submit, acted as a model of resistance to segregation.

Like many other songsters and blues singers John Jackson had done many jobs, and frequently worked in farming. Farming and plantation work was on a large scale in the South, and the labour was exhausting and the farmers demanding. As the pianist Mercy Dee (Walton) recalled:

*I walked down so many turn-rows,
I can see them all in my sleep (twice)
Sharecroppin' down here in this dark
muddy bottom,
With nothin' but hard tack and
sorghum to eat."
Four-thirty I'm out in the barnyard,
tryin' to hook up my poor raggedy team,*

*All my stock is dyin' of starvation,
and my boss is so dog-gone mean."*

Many blues singers had been sharecropping, in the debt-lien system of peonage which obtained in the South following Reconstruction. This meant that they had "shares" in the profits of their labours, but as they had to depend on the plantation owners for their dwellings and supplies, most were in the owners' debt. Tom Moore was notorious as a farmer in south Texas and became something of a symbol of the repressive conditions of dependency as songster and former Texas sharecropper Mance Lipscomb indicated.

*"Tom Moore will tell you,
without a smile or grin:
'Stay away from the cemetery boy,
I'll keep you from the pen.'*

The pen was the penitentiary, and Mance Lipscomb added the wry verse:

*Tom Moore got ways
most any man a' like;*

*Your woman quit you –
he'll have her brought right back.*

One of the finest of the Texas blues singers, Sam Lightnin' Hopkins, confirmed Lipscomb's comments with regret:

*You know there ain't but one thing
you know, this black man he did was
wrong,
You know that's when I moved my wife
and my family,*

*I moved them down on Mr. Tom
Moore's farm*

Many blues were about working conditions and the exploitation of both humans and animals. Though large numbers of southern Blacks were employed in agriculture, many found work on the river levees, constructing the immense embankments that were intended to keep the rising waters from flooding the lowlands. Lowell Fulson, a blues singer from Oklahoma, sang a two-



Lightning Hopkins & "Frenchy" Joseph - drums — neighborhood beer joint, Houston, Texas, 1959



Lowell Fulson — Club Blue Mirror,
San Francisco, California, 1963

part “River Blues” which had been a work song among the men in the levee camps for nearly a century.

*You oughta to been on the River,
oooh, in Nineteen and Ten, (twice)
When Bud Russell drove pretty women
like he did ugly men.*

He was referring to one of the most infamous of the team “drivers” who forced the pace of work, which was sometimes done by prisoners from the penitentiaries who laboured under the convict-lease system.

*He used to shoot you with a pistol,
now he whip you with a single-tree, (twice)
You can hear all the people hollerin’
and cryin,’
“Oh Lord, have mercy on me.”*

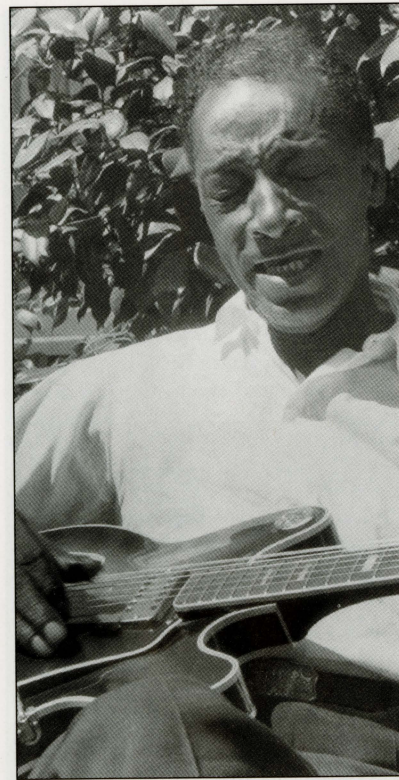
Lowell Fulson had also observed:

*You know I ride around
this whole corral (twice)
You know I can’t find a mule,
ooh, with his shoulder well.*

He was referring to the many mule teams that were used to haul the carts or often, the sledges, by which the heavy material for the levee building was moved. Many animals were injured by the strain of the harness at their collars. They were in the charge of the black “mule-skinners” who were basically accommodated in the “levee camps,” the subject of Fred McDowell’s “Levee Camp Blues.” Being a “long-line skinner” he would have several mules, but he was assigned the single, short-line mule. He too, had found sick mules, and was unfortunate with this one.

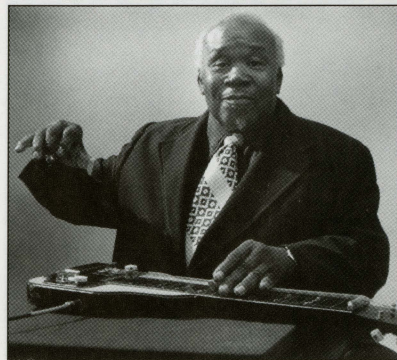
*Lord, I’m a long-line skinner,
you know I got the shorten’ line,
You know he won’t drink no water,
Lord he won’ even eat no corn.
You know that mule won’t drink water,
Lord, he won’t even eat no corn,
Lord, I cannot drive ’im Captain,
Lord, he can’t even go home.*

With a long tradition of religious observance dating far back into the slavery period, blues singers habitually appealed to the “Lord” to give them mercy, to



Mississippi Fred McDowell

relieve their pain, and to hear their pleas. To African Americans it often seemed that suffering was their fate, and that Whites were especially protected. But this image was largely dispelled in the terrible influenza epidemic that raged in two continents in 1919, after World War 1. More people died from the so-called "Spanish 'flu" than had died from the ravages of the War. The little-known woman pianist and singer Essie Jenkins, who came from Arkansas and worked with K.C. Douglas in California, sang her "Influenza Blues" about the epidemic in



Willie Eason

photo: Bob Stone

which "people died everywhere," the flu raging "through the air":

*But it was God's almighty plan,
To pass this judgement on this old land,
North and South, East and West can
be seen,
He killed the rich and the poor,
And he's goin' to kill some more
If you don't turn away from
your shame.*

In Essie Jenkins' view, and in that of many of her contemporaries, the epidemic was God's retribution for the sins of the world. Others believed that World War II was the same, but Brother Willie Eason (who in recent years has been recorded and filmed for the Arhoolie Foundation in his role as a steel guitar pioneer in the House of God Church) was grateful for the "poor man's friend," the president of the war years, "Franklin D. Roosevelt." His song-narrative which he had recorded already in the early 1950s with the Soul Stirrers, was derived directly from Otis Jackson's "Tell Me Why You Like Roosevelt," fully transcribed in Guido van Rijn's book on

blues and gospel songs about the popular president, *Roosevelt's Blues* (University Press of Mississippi, 1997). It told of Elizabeth Shoumatoff who "grabbed a brush, dipped it in the water and she began to paint" a portrait of Roosevelt, until "the good president lay down and died," in 1945. Using references unparalleled in the blues, the song recalled that "he advocated the Fair Practice, to let the poor Man have his way":

*He endorsed the inventions of George
Washington Carver,
That's why I say, he was an
earthly father.
He took my feet out of the miry clay,
And I haven't had to look back to
the W.P.A.
That's why I like Roosevelt...*

George Washington Carver was the brilliant African American agricultural scientist at the Tuskegee Institute, while the W.P.A. was the Works Project (later, Progress) Administration which assured a measure of work and income for poor people in the "New Deal" years.



Dr. Ross



Robert Pete Williams

With the Truman administration that followed the death of Roosevelt and the end of the war there was a period of uneasy peace during which civil war broke out in China. Following Mao Zedong's establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, the North Koreans invaded South Korea, and in 1950 the Chinese joined them. President Truman had gained United Nations support to send American troops to Korea, where nearly 60,000 had died in action by April 1951. Many blues were recorded of the fear of action in Korea, about which the Detroit-based harmonica player Doctor Ross pleaded:

*Now babe, please baby, pray for me,
Because I'm a li'l soldier boy,
I need your prayer to set me free.*

And he underlined the message with a spoken request: "Pray for me li'l girl: I'm sittin' up here in Korea; say a good prayer for me."

Back in the USA life was little better for literally millions of Blacks, and the blues of the tense period of the late Segregation era reflected this. It was hardest for those

in prison, for whom there seemed little hope or prospects of a future. Robert Pete Williams was one such prisoner, recorded in Angola State Penitentiary by Harry Oster in 1959. Williams's blues were of a free-form character, frequently being improvised soliloquies. "Lord, I feel so bad sometime, seems like I'm weakenin' every day" he reflected in his "Prisoner's Talking Blues," in which he spoke of his deceased parents, the support of his sister and his fear that he would never see his "little kids anymore"

*Lord, my worry, sure is carryin' me
down, (twice)*

*Sometimes I feel like, baby, committin'
suicide.*

*I got the nerve if I just had anythin' to
do it with.*

Some who were in despair took inspiration from the example of others, like guitarist Johnie Lewis, slide guitarist from Alabama who felt "like talkin' a little bit about Martin Luther King." He imagined the preacher at home with his family, facing the prospect that he had to

"climb a high mountain." "Well, he was goin' up and looked over the mountain, looked overboard. Well he looked down and he saw a lake of water, Well, I imagine in his mind a voice was hailin', tellin' him that 'You don't have long..' I know he felt that he was gettin' weak...Then I could hear a song, talkin' about how he got to climb a high mountain."

*I got to climb a high mountain, tryin'
to get home (twice)*

*I got to climb a high mountain, got to
climb a high mountain,*

*Got to climb a high mountain, tryin' to
get home.*

It is apparent that Lewis was, himself, so affected that he had "to wade deep water, tryin' to get home," as he termed it. The phraseology echoed that of a number of spirituals, in which "getting home" was tantamount to going to Heaven.

Many blues singers sang of their disillusion in the period when Segregation still persisted, when job opportunities were fewer, and there was little hope for the future. The Louisiana songster



Johnie Lewis — Chicago, Illinois

Herman Johnson sang a “Depression Blues” which appeared to anticipate a recurrence of the Depression of the 1930s, and more personally, was about his own depressed spirits following being fired from his job with Esso in Baton Rouge.

*I'm lookin' for a Depression in
Nineteen and Sixty-One
And what grieves me so bad, I can't
have no more fun.*

He had kept on walking, but couldn't find a job:

*I don't take the daily papers,
ain't got time to bear the news,
I'm just rollin', rollin', rollin'
with these deep depression blues.*

In the face of these problems many African Americans left the South and made their way, as hundreds of thousands had done before them, to the urban North, and in particular to Chicago. Most migrants were obliged to live in the black ghetto of the South Side, close to the Stockyards, where animals from the

west were transported for slaughter and the meat cut up and rapidly prepared for marketing. The stench was overpowering and the conditions on the “killing floor” obnoxious, but many blues singers were among those for whom this meant employment, at least until there was a strike for more pay. Mandolin player Johnny Young sang a version of Floyd Jones's “Stockyard Blues” which told of the forcing up of meat prices caused by the picketing of the stockyards.

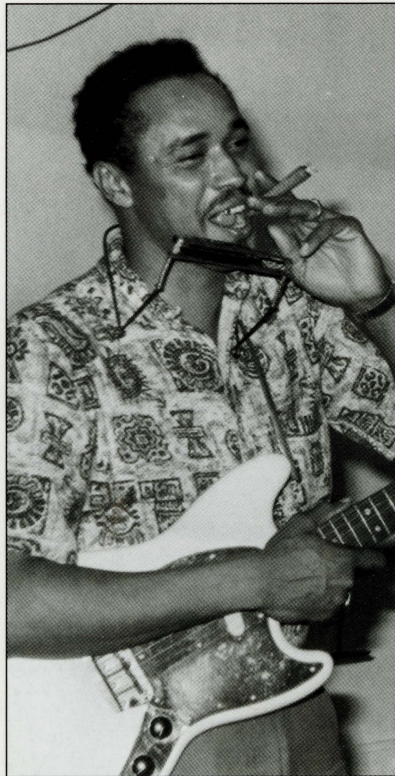
*I passed the stockyard this morning,
in the showcase I get a peek
'I got four cents raise, man,
on all of my meat'*

Johnny Young, accompanied by Big Walter Horton's expressive harmonica playing, conveyed something of the despair felt by many migrants.

*I caught the street-car this mornin',
bout half-past fo'
I gave the man eleven cents, he said
— I swear he too, said 'No.'
You know I need a hundred dollars*



Johnny Young & Big Walter — Chicago, Illinois



Juke Boy Bonner

*I need a hundred dollars,
'Cause the living's gone so high, darlin',
and I don't know what to do.*

Much of the anxiety expressed in the male blues relates to poverty, to rejection and failure to obtain work, and to responsibilities to wife and family. Such themes persisted as conditions did not improve, and were taken up some years later by Juke Boy Bonner. A younger blues singer from Houston, Texas, Juke Boy Bonner had a gift for poetry, the local press in Houston frequently publishing his poems. That his "troubles will be gone" is treated with some irony.

*Listen, looked around all day for a job,
and I looked almost every place
It's hard to come home and find hunger
on your children's face.
You know it's so hard
when you're tryin' to make it,
you livin' from day to day,
You go and apply for a job
and the people turn you away
What shall I tell the children,
Oh Lord when I get home? (twice)*

*Tell'em "maybe tomorrow,
all our troubles will be gone."*

Bonner's frustration and hopelessness was evident in other blues he sang. To a similar structure he sang despairingly that "It's Enough"

*Look like I'm walkin'
down a country road,
that don't have no end,
Every time I hits a dry spot
it starts to rain again –
It's enough to make you
wish you were never born
Sometimes I wonder where I get
the power,
and the strength to carry on.*

Yet there were optimists around, who saw brighter prospects ahead. One of these was Irving Bee Houston, sometime accompanist to Big Mama Thornton who believed that "Things Gonna get Better" from his base in California.

*Well, I look all around me, and what
do I see?*

*Nothin' but trouble and misery.
Things got to get better, just you wait
and see
Just keep by my side, baby, just you
and just me.*

Perhaps the only blues recording which captured a kiss. For many African Americans, Bee Houston's optimism was justified to a considerable extent, with the end of legal racial discrimination and increased employment opportunities. But it was not the same for all, as the blues of Big Joe Williams are evidence. Emotional entanglements and loss of income appear to be the reason for him to quit his rambling and to return to his large family at his birthplace in Mississippi.

*Well, I'm back home, I've decided to
settle down,
I've made it back home, I've decided to
settle down,
I'm livin' round Crawford, Mississippi,
ooh yes,
'til my moustache hit the ground.*

He had no intentions of leaving



Big Joe Williams — Los Gatos, California, 1960

Crawford afterwards, declaring “When you see me again back in Chicago, Big Joe’s head needs rightnin’ sho” – or words to that effect, for the blues of the near-septuagenarian singer were not always easily deciphered. But that is largely the point: the singers who sang blues with a meaning were not directing their music to a large, if unknown, audience. These blues with a meaning dispel the belief that the blues are never about family, children and love for parents and other relatives. Underlying many of them is concern, not simply for improving their own economic position, but for the welfare and future of those dear to them. These singers were expressing themselves for their own relief, but also to communicate with their friends, relatives and companions. We are privileged to be able to hear these personal accounts, and intimate reflections on incidents and events in their lives, of these last singers of the acoustic generations.

Paul Oliver – 2005

1. I Have To Paint My Face – Sam Chatman: from **CD 432**
“I Have To Paint My Face” various artists.
2. John Henry – John Jackson: from **CD 378 “Don’t Let Your Deal Go Down”**
 John Jackson.
3. Walked Down So Many Turn Rows – Mercy Dee: from **CD 369**
“Troublesome Mind” Mercy Dee Walton.
4. Tom Moore’s Farm – Mance Lipscomb: from **CD 398 “You Gotta Reap What You Sow”** Mance Lipscomb.
5. Tom Moore Blues – Lightning Hopkins: from **CD 302 “Texas Blues”**
 Lightning Hopkins.
6. River Blues Parts I & 2 – Lowell Fulson: from **CD 443 “My First Recordings”**
 Lowell Fulson.
7. Levee Camp Blues – Fred McDowell: from **CD 441 “This Ain’t No Rock N’ Roll”**
 Mississippi Fred McDowell.
8. The 1919 Influenza Blues – Essie Jenkins: from **LP 1018 “Bad Luck N’ Trouble”**
 various artists.
9. Why I Like Roosevelt – Willie Eason: from **CD 450 “Sacred Steel”** various artists.

10. Little Soldier Boy – Doctor Ross: from **CD 371 “Boogie Disease”** Dr. Ross.

11. Prisoner’s Talking Blues – Robert Pete Williams: from **CD 419**
“Angola Prisoners’ Blues” various artists.

12. I Got To Climb A High Mountain – Johnnie Lewis: from **CD 9007**
“Alabama Slide Guitar” Johnnie Lewis.

13. Depression Blues – Herman E. Johnson: from **CD 440 “Louisiana Country Blues”**
 Smoky Babe / Herman E. Johnson.

14. Stockyard Blues – Johnny Young & Big Walter Horton: from **CD 325 “Chicago Blues”** Johnny Young.

15. What Will I Tell The Children – Juke Boy Bonner: from **CD 9040 “Ghetto Poet”**
 Juke Boy Bonner.

16. It’s Enough – Juke Boy Bonner: from **CD 9040 “Ghetto Poet”** Juke Boy Bonner.

17. Things Gonna Get Better – Bee Houston: from **CD 9008 “The Hustler”**
 Bee Houston.

18. Back Home Blues – Big Joe Williams: from **CD 9015 “Going Back To Crawford”**
 Big Joe Williams and friends.

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"THE BLUES, CONTRARY TO POPULAR CONCEPTION, ARE NOT ALWAYS CONCERNED WITH LOVE, RAZORS, DICE, & DEATH." RICHARD WRIGHT

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FILE UNDER: BLUES



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