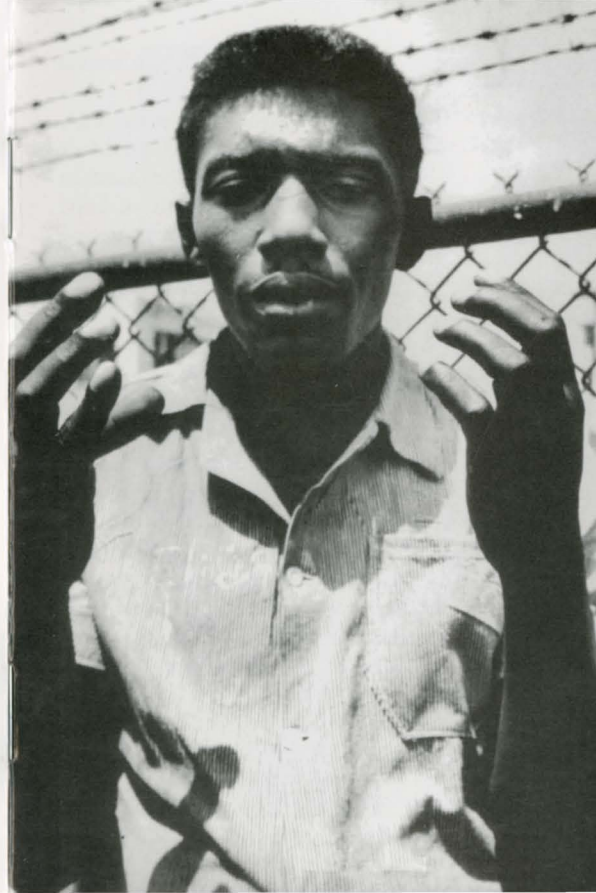


1. **I'M ON MY WAY**
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21. **EACH DAY (LIFE'S EVENING SUN)**
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22. **STEAL AWAY TO JESUS**
Angola Choir (Murray Ted Macon - director)

All recordings made by Prof. Harry Oster at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, Louisiana in the late 1950s (#20 - #22 were recorded January 5, 1959)
6 - is also available on Arhoolie CD 395:
Robert Pete Williams - Vol.2
8 - is also available on Arhoolie CD 394:
Robert Pete Williams - Vol.1
1 - #13 were originally issued on Folklyric LP LFS A-6, the content of which is presented here in its entirety
14 - # 22 were previously unreleased

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10341 San Pablo Ave, El Cerrito CA 94530, USA



ANGOLA PRISON

spirituals

recorded by
Dr. Harry Oster

Arhoolie
9036

ANGOLA PRISON SPIRITUALS

Contrary to the impression many whites have of black Americans in the South, very few of them, if any, have the old folk spirituals like "Go Down Moses" and "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord" still on their lips, or in fact know such songs at all. It has been my experience that even elderly blacks have to dig into their memories to bring to the surface these beautiful old songs, for spirituals (with some exceptions) are no longer functional, that is no longer a natural spontaneous part of the repertoire of most black Southerners. Being highly responsive to the mass media, blacks now turn for their religious music to the commercially composed gospel songs they hear on radio, records, and TV.

Although there are still a good many revivalistic churches, the trend is toward formalism - a program for each service, an educated minister, a trained choir with a director, singing from books of hymns or gospel songs; the use of an organ - in short, a movement toward

the dignity of a typical non-revival Protestant white service.

The recordings you hear on this CD, made almost entirely among the black prisoners at Angola, are significant in that they give a vivid picture of basic styles in which African-Americans sing spirituals, gospel songs and preach - styles, many of which will soon be extinct. Among the old styles are Robert Pete Williams' improvising and disregard for regular meter and rhyme, Tom Dutson's subtle syncopation in his "Little School Song," "Guitar" Welch's bottleneck accompaniment, Roosevelt Charles' sensitive varying of the melody from verse to verse in his unaccompanied singing, the rhythmic half-sung, half-spoken sermonizing of Reverend Benjamin E. Osborne, and the powerful and enthusiastic singing of the Angola Choir of old spirituals. The two quartets and the singing of Andy Mosely, on the other hand, show the impact of recently popular commercial fashions in singing.

(Harry Oster, 1959 - with some editing by Chris Strachwitz, 2003)



Robert Pete Williams

1) **"I'm On My Way,"** sung by Andy Mosely, guitar accompaniment by Robert Pete Williams. Because of its relevance to the longing for freedom, this is one of the best known spirituals among the black prisoners at Angola. Andy Mosely sings in a style which reflects the approach of popular singers like Johnny Mathis, whom the prisoners hear on the radio. "Little Joe" in the third verse is apparently Job; when God afflicted him from head to foot with boils, his wife said, "Dost thou still retain thine integrity? Curse God, and die."

2) **"Church on Fire with the Word of God"** is sung by Robert Pete Williams, who is sufficiently at home in the folk spiritual tradition to improvise freely. Most of the phrases in this song are standard religious statements, but Williams combines them in his own personal fashion; he goes through a song by free association, drawing on a reservoir of folk phrases and occasional original thoughts of his own.

The third verse refers to Zacchaeus in the Gospel of St. Luke, Chapter 19:

1. And Jesus entered and passed through Jericho.

2. And, behold there was a man named Zacchaeus, which was the chief among the publicans, and he was rich.
3. And he sought to see Jesus who he was; and could not for the press, because he was little of stature.
4. And he ran before, and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him; for he was to pass that way.
5. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up, and saw him, and said unto him, Zacchaeus make haste, and come down; for today I must abide at thy house.

Since Robert Pete Williams is illiterate, his knowledge of the Bible comes purely from oral tradition; as a result, his references to events in the Bible are usually colorful, but fragmentary or inaccurate.

- 3) **"What Shall I Do,"** sung by Robert "Guitar" Welch, accompanying himself on the guitar. Welch here plays in the now almost legendary style known as "bottleneck;" the guitar is tuned to an open G chord as in the Hawaiian system

of playing, but instead of using a sliding bar to form all the chords, on his little finger the performer wears the neck of a bottle which he slides along on one to three of the treble strings; sometimes he alternates the sliding with fretting the strings with his left hand, sometimes too he can combine both. "Guitar," who uses the neck of a small green bottle, says he observed this technique for the first time in 1924.

- 4) **"Brother Norah,"** Willy Rafus, lead; Edward James, Ollie Brown, and Burnel Jones. This style of religious quartet singing, the syncopated singing lead over a highly repetitive background, is still quite popular among Blacks in the South. There are many professional quartets whose recordings are played frequently on the radio, like the Trumpeteers and the Soul-Stirrers. "Brother Norah" has a much more elaborate text than most of the songs performed by quartets.

- 5) **"Little School Song,"** sung by Tom Dutson, accompanied by Robert Pete Williams on the guitar. Taught this song

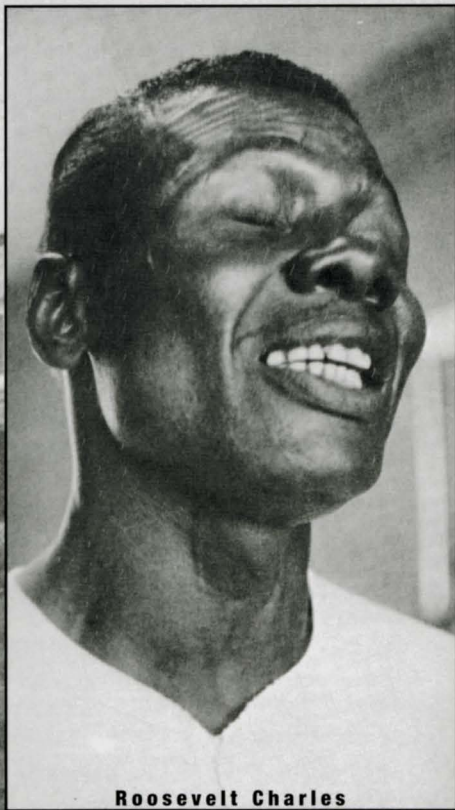
as a young child in school, Tom sang it so well that the teacher often insisted that he entertain the rest of the class.

My God a-mighty says that
If you go an' I go with you,
Open yo' mouth, yo' mouth,
An' I speak for you,
Lord, an' if I go now, Lordy,
They won't believe in me,
In pore old me, in pore old me.

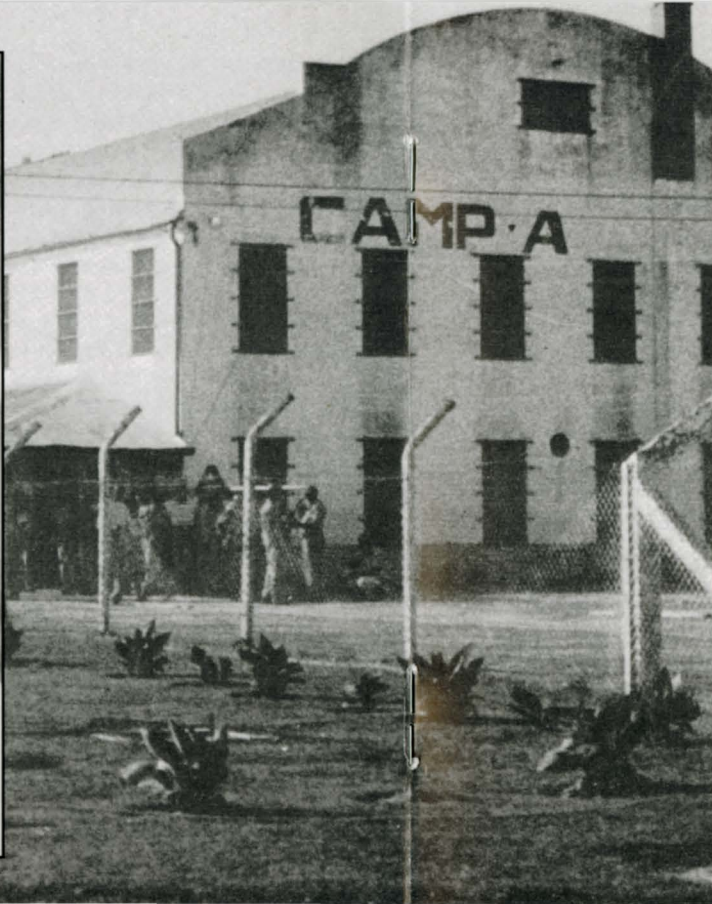
- 6) **"Dyin' Soul,"** sung by Robert Pete Williams, accompanying himself on the guitar, is an improvised spiritual. As he generally does, Robert Pete follows no regular stanza form or rhyme.

Oh, Jesus, have mercy on my dyin' soul,
Oh, Lord, have mercy on my dyin' soul,
Oh, Lord, save me, Jesus, on my way,
Oh, Lord, Oh Jesus.

- 7) **"Let My People Go,"** as sung by Roosevelt Charles, is an excellent example of one of the basic old styles of singing spirituals; each verse shows variations in phrasing and tempo and the singer often freely ornaments the basic melody.



Roosevelt Charles



Hogman Maxey & friend

All photos © by Harry Oster

8) Although the framework of "**So Much Is Happenin' in the News**" is traditional, Robert Pete Williams uses the formula creatively; in his variant he incorporates the crash of a Capitol jet airliner which occurred in the spring of 1959, carrying thirty-one passengers to their death. The tragedy makes him wonder whether those who were killed were devout Christians, ready to face their Maker.

I was readin' in the news the other day,
I see where one of them great mighty jets
had big trouble in the air,
Thirty-one passengers got killed,
Oh Lord, oh Lord, I wonder,
I wonder who was in 'em,
Was it child's of God?
Lord, I hope to sail in God's kingdom,
Have mercy on me,
Man, I could see when they was fallin'
through the air,
Lord, have mercy on the poor people's soul.

9) "**Dig My Grave with a Silver Spade**," Tom Dutson, accompanied by Robert Pete Williams on the guitar. Originally a white spiritual, this song is known among both whites and blacks. It was first widely

popularized via one of Blind Lemon Jefferson's recordings.

10) "**Brother Mosely Crossed the Water**," sung by Andy Mosely, accompanying himself on the washboard; Hogman Maxey, guitar. Mosely sings this lilting spiritual about Moses crossing the Red Sea in a polished modern style in striking contrast to the primitive and more exciting approach of Robert Pete Williams.

Apart from the change from "Moses" to "Brother Mosely," the spiritual closely resembles "When Moses Smote the Water," which was sung by the Jubilee Singers in their concert tour in 1871 to raise money for Fisk University.

11) "**I'm Stranded on the Banks of Ole Jordan**," Willy Joe, lead; Roosevelt Charles, Edward James, and Willy McGee. This performance is an excellent example of the basic quartet style of singing. The almost startling opulence of the voices is characteristic of many of the quartets.

Probably the first stanza of this song was originally part of a white spiritual and

the middle section was added by a popular black quartet; the final section could have originated in either a black or white camp meeting.

12) "**I'm Goin' Back With Him When He Comes**," Robert Pete Williams, accompanying himself on the guitar. Although he is highly repetitive in his text, the singer's driving style and intensity of feeling make the song exciting and moving.

The device of leaving out key words and having the guitar speak instead is not unique with Robert Pete Williams; it was characteristic of many of the performances of Blind Willy Johnson, himself the best known exponent of a basic folk style of religious singing.

13) "**The Old Ship of Zion**," Reverend Benjamin E. Osborne and congregation. In this black folk style of preaching, the minister half chants, half sings his sermon; there is an underlying musical beat which gradually quickens in tempo. The congregation's responses and shouts of encouragement punctuate each line with rhythmic bursts of sound. The

preacher shouts, jumps in the air, twirls, uses every fiber of his being to stir his congregation. Picturesquely and vividly weaving his message around extended metaphors based on such stories as Jonah and the Whale, the Hebrew children in the fiery furnace, or Joshua bringing down the walls of Jericho, he skilfully works his sermon toward a climactic explosion into song.

This sermon is not typical of the kind of service the black prisoners participate in officially at the prison; the official service is dignified and restrained, conducted by an educated chaplain. The singing is led by a chorus which has been taught participating by a choir director.

Like many black spirituals, the song "The Old Ship of Zion" originated in a white spiritual which the slaves heard in church or in a camp meeting. Whereas usually in the course of the folk process blacks greatly changed the songs they acquired in this way, in this case "The Old Ship of Zion" closely resembles its white prototype.

(Harry Oster - 1959)

Editor's Note:

From the many tapes which Dr. Harry Oster (April 12, 1923 - January 19, 2001) left behind and which have been kindly provided to us by his widow, Caroline, and his son Aaron, I have added several selections to this collection. Dr. Harry Oster spent many years collecting folk songs in southwest Louisiana, beginning in 1955 when he was hired by the English Department at LSU in Baton Rouge, La. He issued his first LP album, "A Sampler of Louisiana Folksongs" in 1957 on the Louisiana Folksong Society label. The album which constitutes the major part of this CD was originally issued as "Angola Prison Spirituals" in 1958 followed the next year by "Folksongs of the Louisiana Acadians" (now available on Arhoolie CD 359). 1959 was also the year Harry borrowed money to turn the recording venture into a commercial one and he changed the name of the label to Folklyric. That same year the album "Angola Prisoner's Blues" appeared and Robert Pete Williams was released on parole. Many of the subsequent releases on Folklyric are now available on Arhoolie Records - check out our web site at: www.arhoolie.com.

14) **"When I Lay My Burden Down"** by Robert Pete Williams - previously unissued.

15) **"See How They Done My Lord"** is sung by what is marked on the tape as the Angola Quartet (actually six) from Camp A - previously unissued.

16) **"Be With Me Jesus"** - same as last.

17) **"Rise And Fly"** - by an unidentified Angola vocal group - not really a spiritual or gospel song but a kind of "rap" about how inmates felt about life in prison. Performed in a work song style and a precursor of what was to come in black music in the 1980s!

18) **"I Know I Got Religion"** by Andy Mosely - vocals and washboard with "Hogman" Maxey on guitar - previously unissued

19) **"Jesus"** - same as last

20) **"I Take Jesus"** (aka: Do Lord, Remember Me) - sung by the Angola Choir, Murray Ted Macon - director;

Recorded at Angola on January 6, 1959 - previously unissued.

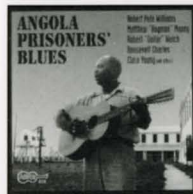
21) **"Each Day"** (aka: Life's Evening Sun") - same as last

22) **"Steal Away To Jesus"** - same as last. I was especially impressed with the last three selections which are sung and performed with incredible beauty, vitality and power

especially when you consider the very old style they represent. Aaron Oster just sent me the tape with these cuts about a week ago! I have a feeling that director Murray Ted Macon and the men may have had hopes to make appearances of this choir outside of the Angola penitentiary. Does anyone have any information about the director? I welcome all comments.

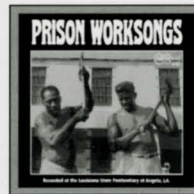
(Chris Strachwitz - April 15, 2003)

Also available on Arhoolie Records, recorded by Harry Oster:



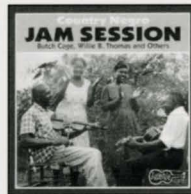
"Angola Prisoners' Blues"

Various Artists
Arhoolie CD 419



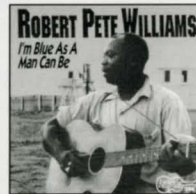
"Prison Worksongs"

Various Artists
Arhoolie CD 448



"Country Negro Jam Session"

Various Artists
Arhoolie CD 372



Robert Pete Williams Volume 1 - "I'm Blue As A Man Can Be"

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recorded by Dr. Harry Oster

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Recorded at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at
Angola, Louisiana in the late 1950s