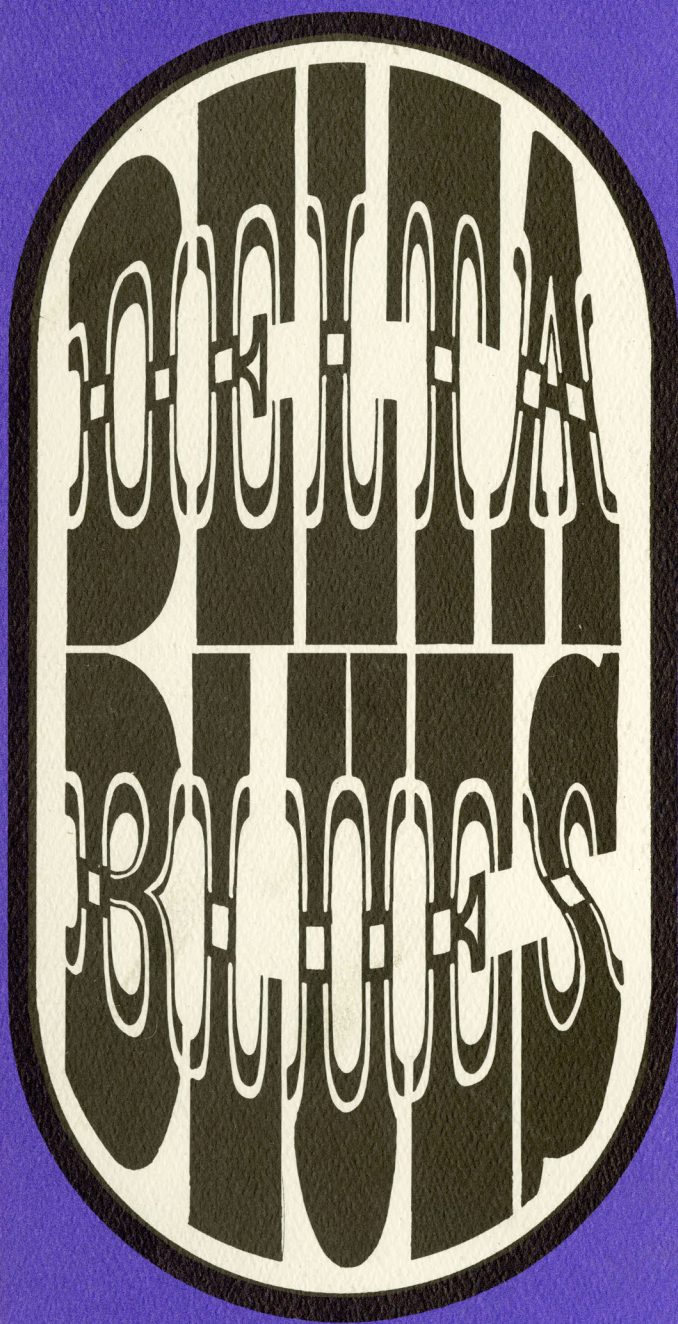


MISSISSIPPI



FRED MCDOWELL

MISSISSIPPI

The Delta was and still is cotton country—it's flat—there isn't a hill anywhere—the sky meets the cotton fields all around you—here and there you can see a shack—some deserted, others still occupied—now and then a bigger farm house. In the winter it is cold—the land is grey and brown and the sky is gloomy. In the summer the cotton is green—monotonous—row after row—the air is hot and sticky and the sun beats down unmercifully—the occasional rains don't cool off the humid air—it's desolate country—lonesome—it is the home of the Mississippi Blues.

Today the blues have almost disappeared—except those heard on the radio or blaring from juke boxes—the modern blues—Bobby Blue Bland, B. B. King and James Brown. Most of the older blues men have passed on or moved north or perhaps have just laid down their guitars. On week-ends the quartets sing over the radio and at many churches—but the old music is almost gone—and with the increased use of mechanization the old music has gone with the old way of life.

Fortunately there are still a few men who have kept their guitars and still play from time to time for their own or their friend's and neighbor's enjoyment. But most strangers traveling through will never hear this music and it is only due to the concentrated efforts of the famous folklorist Alan Lomax that the world got a chance to hear the magnificent artistry of Fred McDowell. Alan met Fred McDowell a few years ago on one of his tours through the South and since the release of a few selections on the Atlantic and Prestige labels Fred McDowell's reputation as one of the finest bottle neck guitar players has grown and grown among folk music enthusiasts the world over and in 1963 Fred appeared at the University of Chicago Folk Festival. Since then he has returned to Chicago and will probably make a trip to the West Coast in the spring of 1965. But Fred McDowell never made a living with his music—he never really thought much about it and today his life has not changed and he still drives a tractor on a farm in Northern Mississippi.

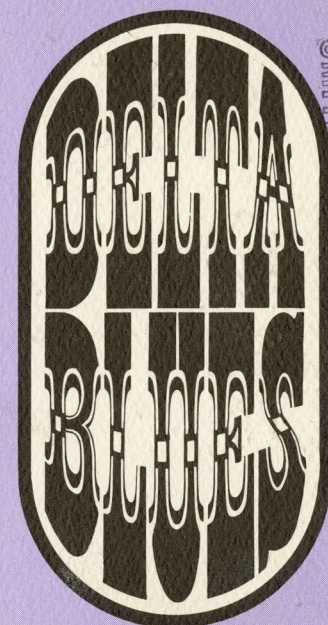
The old Mississippi blues have a very special and distinct sound—and ever since the first recordings of Mississippi blues were made in the late 1920's and early 30's by Charlie Patton, Son House and Robert Johnson they have changed very little as evidenced by the recordings of Big Boy Crudup, Muddy Waters and Elmore James recorded during the late 40's and early 50's. Only the guitars have been amplified but the music is the same. Fred McDowell has learned a little from all of them and from many who

never made recordings. His style is perhaps one of the oldest. On the third finger of his chording hand he wears part of a bottle neck—less than an inch wide—which makes it possible for him to play melody and rhythm with both hands. Fred McDowell is a magnificent person and one of the most sensitive artists I have ever heard. The songs of course are a mixture of traditional material and personal improvisations. Many are no doubt based on what the singer heard on a record or over the radio but many came to him from other singers he encountered in his travels throughout the Delta.

Fred McDowell was born in the country not too far from Memphis on January 12 and the year was probably 1904. But no one is quite sure since the records were burned and his age was established only recently by some old timers who knew him as a youngster. At an early age Fred moved to Memphis where he started to work in the Buck-Eye feed mill where they processed cotton into oil and other products. He recalls hearing records in those days by Blind Lemon Jefferson and Charlie Patton and no doubt that type of music was all around him in those days. Later in 1928 he moved south into Mississippi to pick cotton. He was working near a work camp in Cleveland, Miss., when one Saturday night he went to the local jook joint where the camp owner would make sure his hands were satisfied by having women and crap tables and lots of booze available to all who desired a little diversity and fun. Here he heard the well known Charlie Patton who impressed him very much but there were other singers who left their impression on Fred McDowell: Sid Hemphill and Eli Green in particular—they played at the same jook and Fred learned many songs from them. He particularly recalls learning "Write me a few lines" from Eli Green and this is no doubt one of the most haunting and exciting numbers on this record.

From there Fred McDowell moved around—from town to town—from job to job—Hollis Springs for a while—then on to Red Bank, Miss.—on weekends he would play for house parties but during the week it was hard work from sun up to sun down. Listen to his songs and you will never forget the Mississippi Blues. CHRIS STRACHWITZ

(Recording notice—Side 1: tracks 1, 2, 3 and 4 and side 2, track 4 are performed with Fred McDowell's own guitar unamplified; side 1, track 5 and side 2, tracks 5, 6 and 7 are amplified guitar, while side 1, track 6 and side 2, tracks 1, 2 and 3 are played on my bass-heavy Gibson. The spiritual "When I Lay My Burden Down," is sung by Mrs. McDowell.



SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

FOLK-LIFE PROGRAM

PROPERTY OF

WRITE ME A FEW LINES

LOUISE

I HEARD SOMEBODY CALL

61 HIGHWAY

MAMA DON'T ALLOW ME

KOKOMO BLUES

FRED'S WORRIED LIFE BLUES

YOU GONNA BE SORRY

SHAKE 'EM ON DOWN

MY TROUBLE BLUES

BLACK MINNIE

THAT'S ALRIGHT

WHEN I LAY MY BURDEN DOWN

Cover Photo:
CHRIS STRACHWITZ

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WAYNE POPE

Recorded by:
CHRIS STRACHWITZ

In Como, Miss., on February 13, 1964
with One Capps Condenser Microphone

Produced by:
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BOX 5073
BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA

FRED McDOWELL

ARHOLIE F 1021