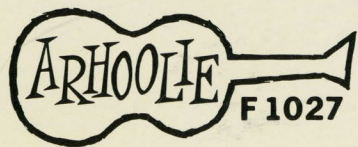


FRED MCDOWELL



VOL. 2



"No one will ever trace the blues back to their original tap root," wrote folklorist Alan Lomax of his discovery of bluesman Fred McDowell in 1959, "but there can be no doubt that the Mississippi Delta has continuously made the greatest regional contribution to our most important and original national song form. With every year that recording teams have visited the South since the '20s, great new singers have been discovered there. Some of these men, like Big Bill Broonzy, have become internationally famous. Others, like Fred McDowell, have stayed on the land, playing and singing for their family and friends."

"Fred was surprised," Lomax continued, "when I admired his music sufficiently to visit him for several evenings and record everything he knew. In true country fashion he kept telling me that he couldn't play nearly so well as other men he knew. In my estimation he is simply a modest man, for in him the great tradition of the blues runs pure and deep and no note in one of his performances lacks a touch of great and genuine melancholy."

In the seven years since his discovery in Como, Mississippi, Fred's compelling, original music has extended far beyond the small circle of family, friends and neighbors for whom he played then. His blues have been recorded for a number of labels, he has traveled widely both in the United States and in Europe, meeting with spectacular acclaim wherever his gripping, magnificent singing and playing have been heard. The reason is simple: his is among the most exciting, emotionally intense music the current blues scene can offer the listener. Initially a performer of consummate individuality and persuasive force, Fred has deepened and extended his art in the last few years. As this recording attests, his is an art of almost hypnotic intensity, his involvement with his material total. The fabric woven by his voice and guitar in performance is of astonishing complexity, subtlety and sensitivity. "When I play — if you pay attention — what I sing, the guitar sings too, and what the guitar say, I say," Fred explained to British critic Valerie Wilmer.

He also offered a capsule biography: "I was born and raised in Rossville, Tenn., but my mother and father died when I was real small. I had one sister who married down in Mississippi, so I moved down there and I call it my home. I haven't been long started playin' for white people, but I played lots of parties 'round the country on Saturday nights for the colored people. I was workin' in the cotton fields and I never got no money from it till I started broadcasting and makin' these records."

"The first music I ever heard was the guitar. In the olden days there used to be three of 'em. One was a harmonica blower, his name was Cal Payne, and my uncle Gene Shields, he was the leader. I used to sit and listen to them and say that if ever I get big enough I'm gonna do that. And a boy next door named Booster Green, his daddy bought him a guitar. The first blues I remember they used to play was Big Fat Mama with the Meat Shakin' on Your Bones. All the boys had done learned how to play that, so one day I got the guitar and sang while they was restin' after they got through the day. Man, I worried that one string I don't know how long till I kinda hit it!

"I got so that I got a chance to go up to these parties on a Saturday night — you know, what they call fish fries. I could sing good then and Vandy McKenna and Booker T. Jones, they all be playin' and they'd get me to sing and I'd get down there in front on my knees and sing to the guitar. And then they would get tired and quit and I'd grab one of them guitars and just start out fraillin'. Finally one night after I said, 'Lawd, if I just learn this one piece I'll be doin' pretty good,' I got so

I could do that. And everybody wanted to hear me because I sang good and I always learned to sing with the guitar. And that's the way I do now."

"When I first started I tried it (playing slide) with a pocket knife but I couldn't make much out of it. So my uncle, who was a guitar player, he took a little bone out of a steak and he taken his knife and trimmed it, smoothed it off and played with it on his little finger. And I thought that was about the prettiest tune I ever heard in my life. I was a small boy then ... but I said if ever I play I'm sure gonna get me one. So I started from a bottleneck 'cause that got a louder tone to it than that bone."

Playing at back-country parties and dances, McDowell refined and strengthened his singing and playing into the powerful, complete entity it is now, and which is stunningly displayed in this album. His guitar work invites immediate attention for its tensile rhythmic strength, its richness of invention and subtlety of decoration. It supports and interacts with his aching voice with a sensitivity all too rare in the present-day blues.

"The guitar style Fred uses is exciting, unique to him, and yet obviously from the Delta," wrote Ed Denison in a perceptive article on McDowell in *Rag Baby*. "Tuning the guitar to an open chord (he used E, E minor and G, I believe), he picks, using a short piece of pipe, which he wears on the third finger of his left hand, to get a bottleneck sound, which he augments by fretting with his fourth and fifth fingers. This technique is related to hillbilly Hawaiian guitar and is used by other Delta artists, like Bukka White, though seldom as well. Using semi-melodic runs while he sung and rhythmic figures in the breaks between lines and verses, Fred has a style which sounds quite modern, although it was unmistakably developed in the '20s and '30s. It is much more like the electric 'down home' sound of Muddy Waters or Elmore James than the older, more melodic, style associated with Charlie Patton or other first-generation bluesmen. Fred did not sound archaic on the same stage with Chuck Berry, when they played in Berkeley."

"His spiritual style is much more restrained. The guitar becomes another voice and its clean steely melodic figures blend well with Fred's singing. These spirituals can have a beauty which is usually associated with classical music, although they are more alive. When Fred is joined by his wife, Anne, they sound as good as Blind Willie Johnson, and you know you are hearing masters perform one of the greatest achievements of American folk music."

In this, his second Arhoolie album, Fred performs a number of songs he has only recently reworked and added to his repertoire. His performances require no explanation or apology, as they are their own most eloquent advocates. Of special interest, however, are the two spiritual performances, Fred's beautiful solo version of *You Got to Move*, and the excitingly antiphonal *I Wish I Was in Heaven Sittin' Down*, performed by the Hunter's Chapel Spiritual Singers with which Fred regularly performs on Sunday mornings in Como. Then, too, there is an added bonus in the powerful blues performances by Fred's neighbor and sometime mentor, Eli Green. Recorded informally in Green's cabin outside Como, these two numbers possess an immediacy and candid unpretentiousness that make them among the most interesting recordings to come out of the Delta in recent years. Green's simple, direct guitar work has a brusque force that brings Son House to mind, and he and McDowell between them generate quite a bit of rhythmic tension, particularly on *Bull Dog Blues*. The Mississippi Delta blues have rarely been more fervently alive.

(Pete Welding - 1966)

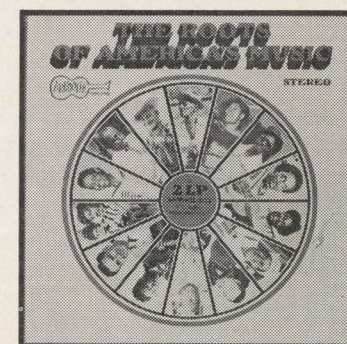
FRED McDOWELL - Vol. 2

I AIN'T GONNA BE BAD NO MORE
WHERE WERE YOU
I LOOKED AT THE SUN
DO MY BABY EVER THINK OF ME
BROOKS RUN INTO THE OCEAN
BULL DOG BLUES
I WALKED ALL THE WAY FROM EAST ST. LOUIS
RED CROSS STORE BLUES
GRAVEL ROAD BLUES
FRISCO LINES
YOU GOT TO MOVE
I WISH I WAS IN HEAVEN SITTIN DOWN

Recorded by Chris Strachwitz in Como, Miss., and Berkeley, Calif.

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