FSA-12

"Talkin' About My Time"

and other blues sung by

EUGENE RHODES

of Michigan City, Indiana

Recorded by Bruce Jackson

FOLK-LEGACY RECORDS, INC. HUNTINGTON, VERMONT

FOLK-LEGACY RECORDS, INC. FSA-12

"Talkin' About My Time"
and other blues sung by
EUGENE RHODES of Michigan City, Indiana

Recorded and with notes by Bruce Jackson
Edited by Sandy Paton

Bruce Jackson first met Eugene Rhodes in a practice room in the Band Building of the Indiana State Prison at Michigan City. Rhodes, who is part-way into a ten- to twenty-five year sentence and in no position to know about the surge of urban interest in folk music, was nervous at first about recording what he called "them old alley blues." Twenty or thirty years ago, he told Jackson, he used to play them all the time, but nowadays all anyone wanted to hear was jazz. The nervousness was finally dispelled, however, and when Rhodes began to play, Jackson knew that he had found a truly fine blues artist.

As a boy, Eugene Rhodes traveled through the south as a one-man band. He had a harmonica rack with a side mount for his horn, a foot drum, and his guitar. "That was four," he said, "and don't forget voice. That's five instruments." He drifted down through Dallas and met Blind Lemon Jefferson. Rhodes liked Jefferson's guitar work, but he really didn't think too much of his voice. ("I like a *smooth* blues.") He met Blind Boy Fuller in one of the Carolinas, then Buddy Moss in Georgia. ("I have heard most every old country or alley blues player, but none can play anything like those two! There's no doubt about it, Moss and Blind Boy Fuller were the best ever to record blues in the USA.")

Eugene Rhodes has "fooled around with music" all of his life. His approach to his material is relaxed and comfortable. He sings very softly and never, except when he is trying to imitate someone else for the listener, lets his guitar intrude upon his singing. He says that the content of alley blues is in the words and that the words, therefore, should not be shouted into senselessness.

"Since everyone knows about the things blues talk about, a singer should let a good blues do its own talking."

Side 1:

If You See My Savior
Blues Leaping from Texas
Don't Talk Me to Death
Talkin' About My Time
Working on the Levee
Step It Up and Go
Talk (about the blues)
I Keep Wondering (Rhodes)

Side 2:

Jelly, Jelly
Dough Rolling Papa
Who Went Out the Back?
See That My Grave Is Kept Clean
I'm Gonna Find My Woman
If She's Your Woman
Fast Life
Whosoever Will, Let Him Come

"Talkin' About My Time"

EUGENE RHODES

Recorded and with notes by
Bruce Jackson

Edited by Sandy Paton

FSA-12

FOLK-LEGACY RECORDS, INC.
SHARON, CONNECTICUT 06069

EUGENE RHODES

My guide led me through the maze of cubicles in the Indiana State Prison Band Building, a former bakery that had been converted by inmate volunteers working thousands of hours with a minimum of equipment and supplies. He stopped in front of one windowed door. "That's Rhodes," he said, "the guy practicing trombone. Just go on in."

Rhodes noticed us standing there and opened the door. My guide took off down the corridor. I introduced myself and said that one of the other inmates had told me that he knew a lot of blues. I asked him if he would record for me.

"I play jazz blues," Rhodes said. "Is that what you mean?"

I explained that I meant country blues, and he shook his head. Twenty or thirty years ago, he told me, he used to play them all the time ("They called them 'alley blues'. They'd say 'Put me in the alley' and I'd play them old blues."), but no more. All anyone wanted nowadays, he said, was jazz.

An old Gibson f-hole guitar, with an electric pick-up, leaned against the corner. "Your guitar?" I asked.

"No. Belongs to another guy."

"You play?"

"A little."

"Why don't you strum it a little, then?"

"I just play jazz on it nowadays."

I remembered Ellen Stekert telling me that she had found folksinger after folksinger in the Southern Appalachians who "couldn't sing a note", but who would relax and sing a lot of notes after Ellen played a song or two on her guitar.

"Mind if I try it?" I asked Rhodes.

He put his trombone on a table in the corner and sat down opposite me. I picked through the melody of "Down and Out". He smiled. "I don't play very well," I apologized.

"That's a old Bessie Smith song."

"I know."

"You ever hear the time she did 'Saint James Infirmary?"

"Louis Armstrong backed her up? He takes off at the end....."

"Yeah, that's right. End of every line he takes off and goes somewhere else, then comes back in. Hey, you a blues man!"

We talked about blues and real bluesmen. Rhodes has a soft, gentle voice and he is as shy as he sounds. He was nervous about recording at first, embarrassed at the thought of what the other inmates would say about his singing the old blues that no one was interested in any more. Part way into a ten-to-twenty-five year sentence, Rhodes is in no position to know about the surge of urban interest in folk music. To help him relax, the Music Director of the prison, Palmer Myran, cleared his office and the room adjoining it. It was strange: we were behind forty-foot walls, yet we had to lock ourselves inside a double office for privacy.

Rhodes was reluctant to talk about himself at first. "You know how it is in a prison," he said, "everybody's out for himself. You learn to keep quiet, I guess." But, after a while, the story of his background began to emerge.

As a boy, Eugene Rhodes traveled through the South as a one-man band. His sister told me that he left their home in Lexington, Kentucky, when he was very young, would come back home for awhile every now and then, then go off again. He had a harmonica rack with a side mount for his horn, a foot drum, and his guitar. That was four, and, he said, "don't forget voice. That's five instruments." He drifted down through Dallas and met Blind Lemon Jefferson. Rhodes liked Jefferson's guitar work, but he really didn't think too much of his voice ("I like a smooth blues"). But Lemon had a sister who played piano, and Rhodes liked pretty much of everything about her. He stayed with Jefferson long enough to learn a few songs and that he was getting nowhere with Mabel, so he moved on. He went back to Bowling Green for awhile, then drifted on again, this time heading southeast. He met Blind Boy Fuller in one of the Carolinas, then Buddy Moss in Georgia. Rhodes wrote me, not long ago, that:

"I have heard most every old country or alley blues player, but none can play anything like those two (Moss and Fuller). I was thinking to myself a couple of nights ago about Blind Lemon. I will never forget, Lemon was going with this woman named Nell, and I was playing my little one man band outfit that I told you about and Nell came and listened to me play. You know, like all the other people did when a stranger was playing, and Blind Lemon got jealous. I was just a kid. Anyway, he wanted her to quit listening and take him home and she wouldn't leave. Well, you know how a blind man walks, kind of

feeling his way along with his cane? Man, when he started walking away by himself, I saw him start feeling his way along with this cane. I started crying and quit playing and took him home myself. Honest, I wasn't even thinking about Nell. I didn't even know how to talk or what to say to a girl. But, you see what I mean? He didn't know that I was just a little stupid kid from the country who was happy to meet him after all his records I had heard."

In another letter, he wrote:

"I had been waking up and setting on my bed in the wee hours of the morning while everyone was asleep. I would set and wish that I could hear some of Blind Lemon and Bessie Smith's old records once more in life. Knowing I was doing 10-25 years, I figured I would probably never get to hear them again. Oh yes, the book you left about the country blues (the liner notes to Country Blues, RBF-1), I have read that book every night. I fell asleep looking at Blind Lemon's picture. I sure wish you could hear Moss. There's no doubt about it, Moss and Blind Boy Fuller were the best ever to record blues in the USA. If you will listen to the tape that you have of me singing "I'm Going to Find My Woman", just listen to what the guitar is saying at the same time that I am saying these words: 'worried men can sleep'. Also in the second verse at the same time I am saying these words: 'Don't think she can't be found'. Well, Moss and Fuller could play a whole number through and sing and play that kind of background and never lose control of voice or instrument."

Rhodes told me that he has "fooled around with music and cooking all my life." On one tape, he plays the lead bass for a small jazz combo, running melody lines that would be difficult on a guitar. Before his conviction, he worked as a chef at the Italian Village in Indianapolis.

His approach to his material is relaxed and comfortable. He sings very softly and never, except when he is trying to imitate someone else for the listener, lets his guitar intrude on his singing. He plays with his thumb and forefinger, using picks, and never uses special tunings. Rhodes says that the content of "alley blues" is in the words and that the words, therefore, should never be shouted or howled into senselessness. "Since everyone knows about the things blues talk about," he says, "a singer should let a good blues do its own talking."

A NOTE ON BLUES STYLE

It is only in the past few years that many folklorists have looked at blues and seen a significant folk form. For a long time, most of the serious investigations of blues were

carried out by jazz fans who were interested in the roots of their genre. There is much in blues to put off the academic, Anglo-American ballad-oriented mind, for a superficial listening can give one the impression that blues are but a slight advance over some primitive chants, characterized by a paucity of final consonants and full rhymes and an excessive dependence on exaggerated rhythm, coupled with a lack of structurally interrelated stanzaic units built on regular syllabic units. All of these objections are quite valid, but only if one insists that Negro folksong follow patterns dominant in English and Scottish popular ballads, an insistence that is as absurd as it has been common. Understanding of the blues has been seriously hampered by academic skittishness. The jazzmen have written well on their subject, but academic or pseudo-academic excursions into the area have often been disastrous.

I haven't space here to rehearse the history of Negro folksong in America or the roots of the blues (some useful texts are listed in the bibliography), but I do wish to note some basic differences between white and Negro folk music. The white ballad in America, and often the white lyric, functions primarily on a narrative level, and if there is a significant emotional content in a song, the transmission of that content is highly, if not totally, dependent upon a coherent transmission of the literal plot. The emotions perceived or transmitted may be more or less significant than the text of the song would lead one to expect, depending on the performer, but the plot itself must first be coherently presented.

Negro folk music, on the other hand, is concerned with a much more direct kind of communication; there is a clear attempt to effect the emotional response without the singer's shackling himself with the causal interrelationships required in a plotted song. The goal of most Negro folksongs is not to report a story which may have an emotional impact, but to transmit the emotion itself. Even many so-called Negro ballads are really lyrics, rather than ballads. One rarely finds, for example, a Negro folksinger who will sing a ballad of John Henry; he will usually sing a set of verses concerned with John Henry, but with little or no temporal interrelation or interdependence. The same observation applies to John Hardy or Railroad Bill.

Since the goal of the Negro folksinger is the transmission of an emotion rather than a story, he can rely on the assistance of a number of devices at least partially proscribed to the white singer, who must maintain complete intelligibility of text. Some blues singers deliberately drop whole stanzas or phrases and let their guitar pick out melody lines; some feel free to shout, moan, or whisper.

Highly intellectualized laments are rare in Negro folk-

song, for such things are generally the luxury of a literate society. Negro folksong, however, displays imagery that is often brilliant, often shockingly effective. Consider the following:

> Oh, boss man, tell me, what have I done?
> How come you lock me away from the light of the sun?
> .....
> I live down in a holler, Lord, by a buzzing hornet nest,
> Where the lions, bears and tigers, they comin' to take
> their rest.
> .....
> If I'd a had my weight in lime,
> I'd a whupped my captain till he went stone blind.
> .....
> I walked down to the river, oh man, was I mad?
> I could look through muddy water and see dry land.
> .....
> Jellyroll killed my mother, ran my daddy stone blind.
> .....

Blues, by the way, make the same kind of use of commonplace stanzas and lines as do white songs and epic ballads. Since there is no dependence on a plotted structure, a blues singer can expand or contract his delivery of a particular song at will, depending on how he feels at the moment or how his audience is reacting.

I know that these are very broad generalizations and I know that they could easily be shattered by presenting conflicting examples; in a longer essay, there would have been space to consider and explain reasons for variation. But I think that, in general, the distinction on the basis of narrative holds true, and that its usefulness for understanding blues will bear this out.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Blues have finally begun to get the scholarly attention they deserve, but, for reasons I do not have space to examine here, most of the worthwhile investigations have been carried out by jazz enthusiasts rather than folklorists. The two best books on folk blues are Paul Oliver's Blues Fell This Morning (London, 1960), a fine attempt to explain the blues by relating blues themes to the social conditions that precipitated them, and Sam Charters' The Country Blues (New York, 1959) which approaches the same topic through biographical essays of representative bluesmen. Rudi Blesh, in Shining Trumpets: A History of Jazz (New York, 1946), gives an excellent musicological explanation of how the blues developed, with some fascinating running commentary on specific songs and performers. Harold Courlander's recent Negro Folk Song U.S.A. (Co-

lumbia University Press, New York, 1963) discusses the major aspects of Negro folk song in America and offers an excellent perspective on the place of the blues and other Negro folk forms in the general canon of folk material. Some other important books are:

Botkin, B. A., ed., Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery; Chicago, 1945.

Broonzy, William, and Yannick Bruynoghe, Big Bill Blues: William Broonzy's Story; London, 1955.

Hurston, Zora Neale, Mules and Men; New York, 1936.

Lomax, John A. and Alan Lomax, Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Leadbelly; New York, 1936.

Odum, Howard W. and Guy B. Johnson, Negro Workaday Songs; Chapel Hill, 1926.

_____, The Negro and His Songs; Chapel Hill, 1925.

Ramsey, Frederick, Been Here and Gone; New Brunswick, 1960.

Blues are, of course, a musical form, and there is a point at which even the best writing — like Charters' and Oliver's — leaves off and listening has to begin. There is a good introductory blues discography at the end of Country Blues. Prestige Records has issued LPs of a number of "rediscovered" country blues musicians. The best illustrations of the various musical techniques and styles used by blues performers is found on Charters' The Rural Blues (RF-202), which consists of forty-three short examples drawn from commercial discs in Charters' personal collection.

Side I; Band 1. IF YOU SEE MY SAVIOR

Much of the appeal of early Christianity lay in the promise of a good life after one had passed through this vale of tears. To the enslaved American Negro in the 18th and 19th centuries, and in many places even now, that appeal was and is still a strong one. If this life is nothing but pain and work and sorrow and frustration, then the next one must be ease and joy and satisfaction. In Negro spirituals, life's agonies are washed away in the river Jordan, along with one's petty sins, and the image of Heaven is not one of a strange new place, but of "home", the place where one really belongs.

Mahalia Jackson, Apollo 191
Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry, Just a Closer Walk With Thee, Fantasy FSY 3296

SPOKEN:

"This number here I heard a girl sing. It was way back in nineteen and... I think it's nineteen and twenty-eight or nineteen and twenty-nine. And you know, she died. I used to go with the girl and she got married to a fellow and then she died shortly after she was married. And, a somehow, it's a rung in my mind ever since. Seems I can't forget the song. It's titled to, "If You See My Savior"."

I was standing by the bedside of a neighbor
Who was just about to cross that swelling tide,
When I asked him if he'd do me a favor;
Kindly take this message to the other side.

If you see my Savior, tell him that you saw me;
When you saw me, Lord, I was on my way.
You may see some old friend there will ask you for me.
Tell them all I'm coming home some day.

Yes, you may chance to see my mother and father;
They have gone on up before.
Tell them I am coming, Lord, on this journey;
Tell them all that I am waiting at the door.

If you see my Savior, tell him you saw me;
When you saw me, yes, I's on my way.
You may chance to see some old friend who'll ask (for)
me there;
Tell them all I'm coming home some day.

Side I; Band 2. BLUES LEAPING FROM TEXAS

Rhodes learned this from Blind Lemon Jefferson. Like many country blues singers, Jefferson frequently juggled verses among several melodies, so it's hard to tell if this version is a pastiche from Rhodes' memory or Jefferson's performances. As Rhodes sings the song, it seems to be a combination of Jefferson's "Broke and Hungry" (Paramount 12442) and "Rabbit Foot Blues". Rhodes' opinion of the song's meter deserves some comment. His rendition of it is, of course, perfectly in time; what varies are word lengths in repeat lines. In the third stanza, for example, the vowel in "show" is long in the first line and short in the second, while the second vowel in "women" is short in the first line and long in the second. The net effect is a pair of lines having identical syntactical constructions and equal metrical lengths, but having different internal metrical structures. Rather than being simply "not in meter", the lines demonstrate a rather complex kind of metrical variation within a regular metrical framework. The transparently erotic metaphors of the fourth stanza are typical of the sort of thing Jefferson was recording in the last few years before his death.

SPOKEN:

"Ah, this is a number that a... I heard old Blind Lemon Jefferson play in the streets. That was when I first met him in person, been a long time ago. Now, incidentally, this number, you'll notice, it's not in meter — it's not in time at all. He's just playing the way he wants to play it. So, I'm gonna try to play it the way he did. If you'll notice the time on it — it doesn't carry any time at all. It's titled to a... 'Blues Leapin' From Texas'."

Well, the blues coming from Texas, loping like a mule,
Well, the blues coming from Texas, loping like a mule;
Well, now lookit here, woman, I ain't nobody's fool.

Well, I'm broke and hungry, ragged and dirty, too,
Well, I'm broke and hungry, ragged and dirty, too;
Mama, if I feel lucky, I'll go home with you.

Let me show you women what careless love have done,
Let me show you women what careless love have done;
Cause a man like me to steal away from home.

Now, I feel like jumping through the keyhole in your door,
Well, I feel like jumping through the keyhole in your door;
Well, if I jump this time, mama, I know I won't jump no more.

Now, the blues jumped a rabbit, run him one solid mile,
Well, the blues jumped a rabbit and he run him one solid mile;
Little rabbit laid down and cried like a natural child.

Side I; Band 3. DON'T TALK ME TO DEATH

Rhodes doesn't remember where or when he learned this song, and I haven't been able to track it down. The term "hip cat" was in fairly wide circulation in the Twenties and does not help in dating the text. Although the text may only be a rather hyperbolic comment about a loquacious female, there is a chance that it is really concerned with the voodoo notion (still not uncommon, by the way, in many southern communities) of the spoken hex.

Don't talk me to death, 'cause I'm not ready to die,
Don't talk me to death, 'cause I'm not ready to die;
If you talk so much, I know you going to lie.

If you talk so much, I'll tell you how I feel,
If you talk so much, I'll tell you how I feel;
You talk so much, you want to see me killed.

You've met a hip cat; he's tried to pull your coat;
You've met a hip cat; he's tried to pull your coat.
Watch out, pretty woman, my knife is on your throat.

Side I; Band 4. TALKIN' ABOUT MY TIME

Rhodes says he learned this from a recording of Buddy Moss and Pinewood Tom (Josh White) around 1938. He thinks it was originally a prison work song; the metrical breaks indicate that this may very well be true. There are some similar verses in "I Got a Letter, Captain", in Odum and Johnson, Negro Workaday Songs, p. 82.

"Cornbread, Meat and Molasses", Sonny Terry, accompanied by Woody Guthrie and Alex Stewart, Stinson SLP-7

I don't want no — cornbread, meat, and black molasses,
I don't want no — cornbread, meat, and black molasses,
At supper time, Lord, Lord, Lord, at supper time.

I got a letter — letter from my mother this morning,
I got a letter — letter from my mother this morning,
Said, "Son, come home, Lord, Lord, Lord, son, come home."

I didn't have no — have no ready made money,
I didn't have no — have no ready made money;
I couldn't go home, Lord, Lord, Lord, I couldn't go home.

If I can only — make May, June, July and August,
If I can only — make May, June, July and August,
I'm going back home, Lord, Lord, Lord, I'm going back home.

Side I; Band 5. WORKING ON THE LEVEE

Leadbelly recorded this in 1935 as "I'm All Out and Down" (Melotone 0314). It is quite possible that Rhodes forgot the original title and supplied "Working on the Levee" himself, but it is just as possible that Leadbelly was singing it under such a title when Rhodes heard him, since concern over titles for folk blues was something that became important only after the plethora of "race recordings" made some kind of identification system necessary. John and Alan Lomax published the song in Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Leadbelly, p. 131, and Alan reprinted it in his Folk Songs of North America, p. 583. There are quite a number of textual variations, the most important of which is Rhodes' omission of Leadbelly's spoken patter between verses, although it is possible that the patter was added by Leadbelly for the benefit of the academic white audiences the Lomaxes gathered for him and omitted them when he sang for Negro audiences who would not need background information on the characteristics of hard labor.

SPOKEN:
"Now, this is another one of those old numbers done by old Leadbelly. As you know, Leadbelly didn't play anything on time. This is rubato style and it's titled to 'Working

on the Levee'."

And hey, I'm all out and down,
And hey, I'm broke, babe, and I ain't got a dime;
But any poor man's gonna have hard luck sometime,
Won't he, baby? Won't he, baby?

And hey, well, the men on the levee run and hollerin',
"Don't you see?"
Well, the women on the levee they hollerin', "Don't
murder me,
Please, baby, please, baby."

And hey, I'm all out and down,
And hey, have no money and can't go to town.
Well, it's on the levee where I will be found,
Won't I, baby? Won't I, baby?

Side I; Band 6. STEP IT UP AND GO

Rhodes learned this from Blind Boy Fuller. Brownie McGhee, who was billed as "Blind Boy Fuller Number Two", is one of the many blues men who have recorded this song (Columbia 37460). It has been frequently recorded in recent years as "Bottle Up and Go".

Josh White, Elektra EKS-7211
Snooks Eaglin, Prestige BV-1046
Leadbelly, Folkways FP-2941

Well, mama told papa, just the night before last,
She believed he was running just a little too fast.
You gotta step it up and go, yes, you gotta go.
Sayin', "You can't stay here; you sure gotta step it up
and go."

Now, a nickel is a nickel and a dime a dime;
House full of women, but none are mine.
Step it up and go, yes, you gotta go.
Says, "You can't stay 'n here; you sure gotta step it up
and go."

Yes, I'm going home; I'm going to stay,
'Cause I see I'm in your way.
You gotta step it up and go, yes, you gotta go.
Says, "You can't stay here; you sure gotta step it up
and go."

I say I got a girl, she's running like a dog,
Doing that thing called "falling off a log.
Step it up and go, yes, you gotta go.
Says, "You can't stay here; you sure gotta step it up
and go."

Side I; Band 7. TALK (ABOUT THE BLUES)

Sometimes, when the noise of other inmates practicing became too loud for us to record music, we would leave the tape recorder running while we talked about the blues. This band is composed of a number of extracts from one of those conversations.

"I met this Blind Lemon Jefferson down in Dallas, Texas, and I met another guy by the name of Blind Boy Fuller. Both of those guys were blind, and he was a great guitarist. Oh, Fuller was better; he's way better than Blind Lemon Jefferson. And there was another guy by the name of Buddy Moss. I learned to play a lot of the old fashioned blues from those guys.

"Well, Jefferson, I remember before — this is before I left Kentucky — I was going with a girl that lived back out in the country and she had a whole stack of Blind Lemon Jefferson's records, you know. And she had his picture on one and it was one day that it was his birthday and he made this particular record and he had his picture on it (The birthday record was made in 1928 — Paramount 12650 — "Piney Woods Money Mama" and "Low Down Mojo Blues; see Charters, p. 65.). And I just admired the picture, looking at it, you know. He was such a big, healthy-looking guy. I always wanted to see him. I said, if I ever went south, I wanted to see him. So, I finally got to see him.....He was in Dallas, Texas..... On the street; he was playing on the street there. He would go from one place to the other. Most all of those guys, back in those days, played the street corners and, well, you know, little night clubs. The great thing was, back in those days, you take one man that could play good, why, he was a band by hisself, you know. But, nowadays, well, people — you feel, man — I don't know. I feel a little — I'm reluctant to play that style, I mean since I've been on modern, since I been on a jazz kick, you know. I'm a little ashamed to play those old-fashioned blues. I don't know why, but I am.....

"It's a funny thing. When I was a little child, back at home — I could never forget — we lived in the country and, with my older sister, I went to town one time, the first time I'd ever been to town. But, still, I'm crazy about music. My father had a bunch of those old winding type Victrolas and I was.....all the other kids would be outside playing and I would just lay around the door to listen to them — Bessie Smith and Bessie Fox, and those records. I'd just lay around the door, listening, the other children outside playing. I'm that crazy about music. So, I can't be exact how old I was, I think I was

about maybe seven years old; my older sister went to town and I went with her, and we heard a record down in a restaurant there. Piano — playing the blues on the piano. And I just stood there and just listened; I just admired it so. And when I went back home, my aunty that lives in the country, she had an old piano. And I got my mother to let me go over to my aunty's house and I went over to my aunty's house and within two days I was playing that record that I heard in town — playing it in the same key the man was playing it in and played every note exactly like he played it..... I was about seven years old.....

"Yeah, here is my opinion about blues; you was asking me about blues a while back. I go for good, smooth blues, like Bessie Smith sing and like a... I didn't go any too much for Lemon Jefferson's singing because, I'll tell you what I hate in blues: I hate a lot of screaming; I hate a lot of that loud hollering. And the same way with hillbilly music. I like good, smooth hillbilly music, but when they come up with all that old whining and pitiful, you know.... Ah, that's the same thing.... that's another trait or difference in colored and white playing. See, white people, they play hillbilly especially. They play .... everything's so pitiful and sad and, you know, they all sad and pitiful — and it's just so sad and pitiful till it's just nasty — it's no good. And we have a lot of colored guys, such as Little Richard and those kind of guys, they sing them old silly blues, you know. Hollering and screaming: doodadadadoodadahhjumbokinthealleybaby! All that screaming! I don't go for that; you go for that?"

Side I; Band 8. I KEEP WONDERING

Rhodes composed this rather existential lament last year. Many of the lines in the verses are blues commonplaces that Rhodes has simply appropriated or adapted. The chorus, with its terminal shift and junking of the whole theological question, is Rhodes' own creation.

People's all (paperboy?) hollering, "Extry! Have you heard the news?"
They got me on the levee and they work me like a mule.
But I keep wondering, is there a God above?
Yes, I keep wondering, who could a God so love?

Working on the levee, job so hard,
Can't sleep at night; I lay 'n' pray to the Lord.
And I keep wondering, is there a God above?
Yes, if it is a God in Heaven, I wonder who He love.

Now, I'm going to see my baby; this time I'm going to stay.
Rather be dead and buried than living thisaway.
Then I'll stop wondering about such a God to be,
For, if it is a God in Heaven, I know he don't care for me.

Side II; Band 1. JELLY, JELLY

A popular city blues of a few decades back. "Jelly", by the way, is a metaphor, not a euphemism.

Josh White, Elektra EKL 123

Hello, baby, I had to call you on the phone,
Hello, baby, I had to call you on the phone;
Yes, I'm so sad and lonely, need the baby home.

Downright rotten, lowdown dirty shame,
Downright rotten, lowdown dirty shame,
Way you treat me woman; know I'm not to blame.

Jelly, jelly, jelly, jelly stays on my mind,
Jelly, jelly, jelly stays on my mind;
Jellyroll killed my mother, ran my daddy stone blind.

Side II; Band 2. DOUGH ROLLING PAPA

Rhodes learned "Dough Rolling Papa" from Buddy Moss, whom he says wrote the song in 1929. Like most sexual blues, the metaphor is thin and obvious — and was probably meant to be. Itinerant street singers like Moss, whose income came in passed hats and was directly proportional to entertainment delivered, could not afford to be obscure, even when they were being ambiguous. The ambiguity was, usually, only nominal. No one — or hardly anyone — thought of pastry when he heard "dough rolling" or "jellyroll", of liquid refreshment when he heard "coffee grinding", or of zoology when he heard "black snake", "rootin' groundhog", or "milk cow".

SPOKEN:
"This one was recorded by old Buddy Moss in nineteen and twenty-nine, titled to 'Dough Rolling Papa'."

I went out last night and got locked up in jail;
My baby told me she's going my bail
'Cause I'm a dough rolling papa,
'Cause I'm a dough rolling papa,
Yes, I'm a dough rolling papa;
Mama's going crazy about my bread.

I rolled her last night, baby, and the night before;
She came to my job, want me to roll some more
'Cause I'm a dough rolling papa,
'Cause I'm a dough rolling papa;
Yes, I'm a dough rolling papa;
Mama's crazy 'bout my bread.

Now the old folks rolling and the young ones, too;
Ain't nobody can roll just like I do,
'Cause I'm a dough rolling papa,
'Cause I'm a dough rolling papa;
Yes, I'm a dough rolling papa;
Mama's crazy 'bout my bread.

Well, look on board, boys, you got to go;
I'm here to tell you she ain't coming no more.
I'm a dough rolling papa,
'Cause I'm a dough rolling papa;
Yes, I'm a dough rolling papa;
Mama's going crazy 'bout my bread.

Side II; Band 3. WHO WENT OUT THE BACK?

The husband in this song is much more an advocate of direct action than the oafish cuckold who is his white counterpart in the ballad of "Our Goodman" (Child 274) which has a similar theme. Rhodes recorded the song for me on three separate occasions, each time with major changes. He dropped and added whole stanzas, varied the rhyme scheme, changed the chorus. He later wrote me that he really couldn't remember Fuller's lyrics, but that he did remember the plot, so he had "made it up again" each night after he went back to his cell. The version presented here is the most complete, except for the nonsense syllables in the last line of the first stanza, which Rhodes inserted when he forgot the lyrics momentarily. The line should read: "About that time I heard the back door slam."

SPOKEN:
"Well, let's see, I'll attempt to do this one. I learned it from old Blind Boy Fuller. This is a.... he used to play it way back at old house parties. It's kind of a funny song, if I can get these lyrics together. It's complicated, but I'll attempt to do it, if I can. It's titled to: 'Who Went Out the Back?'"

I came home last night, somewhat early, you know;
I knocked before I noticed my window shades closed.
She said, "Is that you, daddy?" I said, "Yes, here I am."
About that time, man, it was all le bamb.

Oh, man, was I mad! My window shades closed?
It's not even dark. Who went out the back?

Now, sweat broke out on my arms and legs
And started running to the ground and was busting like eggs.
My knife in my hand when I walked in,
And this is just a how the little story begin.

Oh, man, was I mad! My window shades closed?
It wasn't even dark. Who went out the back?

Now, from the wine bottles and the cigarette butts,
It was plain to see they'd been living it up.
I looked in my bed where I had to sleep
And there's a strange pair of socks from another man's feet.

Oh, man, was I mad! Was I mad, man?
My window shades closed? It wasn't even dark.

She made a pass for the yard; she was trying to get away,
But I was hitting her with the blade every jump she made.
I cut and I stuck until she ran out of blood,
And my whole front yard looked like a painted flood.

Oh, boy, was I mad! My window shades closed?
And me not at home? Who went out the back?

I walked down to the river; oh man, was I mad.
I could look through muddy water and see dry land.
She was gone and there was no coming back,
But who's gonna tell me who went out the back?

Oh, I'll find him, boys; I won't lie.
And when I do, I'll plant him by her side.

Side II; Band 4. SEE THAT MY GRAVE IS KEPT CLEAN

The only spiritual ever recorded by Jefferson.

Blind Lemon Jefferson, Paramount 12608 (1928)
Dave Van Ronk, Folkways FA-2383
Smith Casey ("Two White Horses"), Library of Congress, AFSL-4
Tom Dutson ("Dig My Grave With a Silver Spade"), Folk-Lyric LFS A-6

SPOKEN:
"This is a number by old Blind Lemon Jefferson. I heard him play it in person over in Dallas, Texas. I'll try to do

it as much like him as I can. It's titled to 'See That My Grave is Kept Clean'."

Well, there's one kind favor I'll ask of you,
Well, there's one kind favor I'll ask of you,
Well, there's one kind favor I ask of you;
See that my grave is kept clean.

There's two white horses, side by side,
Well, there's two white horses, side by side,
Well, there's two white horses, side by side;
They takin" me for my last ride.

Did you ever hear a church bell tone?
Did you ever hear a church bell tone?
Did you ever hear a church bell tone?
You may know that the poor boy's dead and gone.

Well, there's one kind favor I'll ask of you,
Well, there's one kind favor I'll ask of you,
Well, there's one kind favor I ask of you;
See that my grave is kept clean.

You may dig my grave with a silver spade,
You may dig my grave with a silver spade,
You may dig my grave with a silver spade;
Oh, let me down with a golden chain.

My heart stopped beating, my hands got cold,
My heart stopped beating, my hands got cold,
My heart stopped beating, my hands got cold;
Wasn't long before my eyes was closed.

Side II; Band 5. I'M GONNA FIND MY WOMAN

Rhodes learned this from Blind Boy Fuller, who recorded it as "Worried and Evil Man Blues" (Columbia 37779). Fuller also recorded a "Looking for My Woman" (Vocalion L2956) in 1935, which may have been the same song; I have not been able to obtain a copy for comparison. Rhodes' "I'm Gonna Find My Woman" differs from "Worried and Evil Man Blues" mainly in that Rhodes makes a substitution for Fuller's last stanza. Fuller sings:

"You know I got a new residence, boy, I think it must be best,
Hey, hey, I got a new residence, I think it must be best,
'Cause these here North Carolina women just won't let Blind Boy Fuller rest."

Rhodes drops this brag verse and substitutes an innocuous blues commonplace. Rhodes seems to make a practice of this sort of substitution when he can do so without disrupting the song. In "Blues Leaping From Texas", for example, he drops one of Jeffer-

son's "black cat bone" stanzas. Rhodes keeps brag verses only when the song is built around them, as in the following song, "If She's Your Woman".

Well, I don't see how these worried men can sleep,
Well, I don't see how these worried men can sleep,
When they stay up all night like some police on his beat.

Well, I was up all night, baby, feet got soaking wet,
Well, I was up all night, woman, feet got soaking wet;
I didn't find my baby; haven't stopped walking yet.

But I'm gonna find my baby; don't think she can't be found;
I said, hey, hey, don't think she can't be found.
I'll walk this hard, hard street till my mustache drags the ground.

Lord, I hate to hear that evenin' whistle blow,
I say, yeah, yeah, evenin' whistle blow;
My gal's gone to Chicago and won't be back no more.

Side II; Band 6. IF SHE'S YOUR WOMAN

SPOKEN:
"This is one of Blind Boy Fuller's old numbers, titled 'If She's Your Woman'."

If she's your woman, you better pin her to your side;
If she flags my track, I'm sure gonna let her ride.

Did she find that letter that I dropped in her backyard?
Said I want to come and see her, but her bad man got me barred.

Just as sure as the bird flies in that sky above,
Life ain't worth living when you ain't with the one you love.

I love her, and she know it, but I just can't help myself;
It's the woman that I'm loving, Lord, I don't want no one else.

Well, I'm going up the country, Lord, I can't carry you,
'Cause there's nothing up the country that a monkey girl can do.

She may be your woman, but she come to see me some time;
She come so regular ever, came to believe she's mine.

You better stop that woman from smiling in my face;
Wake up some morning, I'll be done done took your place.

Side II; Band 7. FAST LIFE

Unencumbered by the burden of Calvinism, Negro folk music — especially blues — treats sexual activity as seriously or as humorously as it treats any other kind of human activity. Although blues eroticism often degenerated into frank obscenity during the days of "race recordings", the tradition of considering sex as reasonable a subject for musical investigation as being broke or lonesome survived. I think "Fast Life" is a good example of such a song. It seems to be intended as an aging prostitute's lament as she considers her ambivalent position: she would, perhaps, like to leave the Profession (which is, really, a young woman's trade, both because of the simple physical stamina it requires and because of client's tastes), but there is nowhere else to go. The slang term "fast life" generally means a life of dissipation; "fast" was commonly used in the early part of this century to refer to a hurried coitus, especially when it was used in connection with prostitution. This song seems to intend both meanings of the expression. Such a serious neutral presentation of an aspect of the Profession, expressing neither approbation nor condemnation, is very rare in white American folk song, in which sex is usually presented either as something bawdy or something reprehensible, but almost never as something natural.

I wonder why fast life keeps on following me,
I wonder why fast life keeps on following me;
Seems like the fast life is gonna never let me be.

Don't pay nobody try to live this life so fast,
Don't pay nobody try to live this life so fast;
Yes, take it slow and easy, just as long as it will last.

Fast life, fast life, won't you see me once again?
Fast life, fast life, here to see me once again;
I might as well to decide, oh, fast life must be my friend.

Side II; Band 8. WHOSOEVER WILL, LET HIM COME

SPOKEN:
"When I was a little kid, just barely can remember, and I imagine my old forefathers 'way back, they all sung this. It's a church song. They all sung this song and I still like it. It makes me think of 'way back seventy or eighty years ago. If I can get it together..... 'Whosoever Will, Let Him Come'."

Oh, whosoever will, let him come, let him come,
And drink of the life giving stream.

Well, I came to Jesus as I was
Wearied and wounded and sad;
Well, I found in Him, Lord, a resting place,
And He has made me glad.

Oh, whosoever will, let him come, let him come,
And drink of the life giving stream.

Was Grace that taught me how to fear,
And Grace will lead me on,
As long as I go bow and call
Upon my Savior's home.

Oh, whosoever will, let him come, let him come,
And drink of the life giving stream.

TECHNICAL NOTES:

The original tapes were made at 7.5 i.p.s., full-track, on a Roberts 191 recorder, using an EV-636 microphone, on 1.5 mil Scotch plastic tape. Rhodes plays a Gibson f-hole guitar with flat-wound strings (unamplified) and a borrowed 12-string guitar. The entire collection from Indiana State Prison was recorded March 29-31, April 20-25, and July 1-3, 1962, and is on deposit at the Indiana University Archives of Folk and Primitive Music under the following accession numbers: 62-4-28 (11), 62-6-18 (21), 62-8-9 (27); the original tape numbers are T-7" 465-498, 503, and 539-543.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I want to thank Warden Ward Lane, of Indiana State Prison, not only for permitting me to visit his institution, but for arranging things so that I was able to work without any administrative or custodial observation or interference; without this courtesy, I am sure that the collection process would have taken place under strained conditions and the results would have been of very limited value. I also want to thank Palmer Myran, the prison's Music Director, for his help in arranging interviews and recording sessions; George List, Director of the Archives of Folk and Primitive Music, for lending me tapes and equipment; the many inmates of Indiana State Prison who performed many unexpected and much appreciated services and who accepted me as a friend, rather than as an investigator; and my wife, Sue, who transcribed the songs on this record.

Bruce Jackson
86 Bow Street
Arlington, Mass.