

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FA 2387

MEMPHIS
SLIM
FAVORITE
BLUES
SINGERS

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FA 2387

SIDE 1

1. Introduction (1:27)
2. Won't Do That No More (3:45)
(Roosevelt Sykes)
3. When I've Been Drinking (2:57)
(Big Bill Broonzy)
4. Mojo Blues (3:35)
(Walter Davis)
5. Broke and Hungry (3:30)
(Walter Davis)
6. Muddy Water (2:30)
(Yes Yes Girl)
7. Prison Bound (3:25)
(Leroy Carr)

SIDE 2

1. Queen Bee (2:10)
(Memphis Minnie)
2. Back Water Blues (3:42)
(Bessie Smith)
3. It Was a Dream (4:12)
(Big Bill Broonzy)
4. Mean Mistreating Mama (3:43)
(Leroy Carr)
5. Digging My Potatoes (2:00)
(Big Bill Broonzy & Washboard Sam)
6. Yancy Special (Instrumental-piano) (4:35)
(Jimmy Yancy)

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MEMPHIS SLIM FAVORITE BLUES SINGERS

MEMPHIS SLIM RECALLS HIS FAVORITE BLUES SINGERS

Blues from the Twenties Into the Forties

Notes by Frederic Ramsey, Jr.

Memphis Slim (b. Peter Chatman, Memphis, Tennessee, September 3, 1915) has been cited by the French blues scholar Jacques Demetre as among the "very rare musicians" who have managed to move about freely and in and out of "borders" established by such terms as "middle blues" and "rhythm and blues." Demetre's succinct estimate of Memphis Slim's ability to "keep in touch" was written in Paris, 1958 (*Le Jazz Hot*, #128) and still holds, simply because "borders" although they tend to limit less vital musicians, have never meant much to performers of Memphis Slim's calibre.

Stanly Dance writing in the British "Jazz Journal" has said of Slim's song: "It's an outdoors voice with a hard voice that suggests inflexibility, but it bends at the right times. It has a sombre gravity, dignity, shyness, and a shade of melancholy. As he sings, he often seems to withdraw into memories, fond and sad, of other days, other places and other faces." And the American writer Nat Hentoff responded (*Notes to Candid* 8024, "Memphis Slim, U.S.A."): "I would add that Slim also is vigorously capable of celebrating the present. He lives life as it comes, and does not lose the pleasures at hand for all his vivid memories of the past."

Present and past, fond and sad, bawdy and gutsy blues are celebrated in this record of Memphis Slim's. "I'm doing something that I've always wanted to do," he tells us in a brief, soft-spoken introduction with piano. "This is my interpretation of some of my favorite blues singers - some of the greatest blues singers of all time...that are responsible for the blues as they are today."

Peter Chatman is not an amateur. As much as any man alive, he was there - he moved in the circle of blues singers and players who set the tone for the nineteen twenties, thirties and forties in Memphis, Chicago, New York, and beyond. Beyond, as applied to this particular group of musicians, means Europe in the fifties, sixties, and seventies. He has recorded hundreds of blues, many his own, some collaborations with others. Among them: Beer Drinking Woman (with Washboard Sam), Every Day (sung by Joe Williams with the Count Basie Orchestra), Woman Blues Boogie, Crowing Rooster Blues (with Lonnie Johnson), Down Home Blues. It's a memorable span of time, people, experience.

He began in Memphis, where he was born. His father, also Peter Chatman, sang blues and played piano and guitar. The elder Chatman ran juke (or "jook") houses and son Chatman probably had much early opportunity to hear more of the juke joint's supply of recordings and visiting talent than many youngsters his age. He was singing and playing the piano on his own and was first hired to do so in 1931, at 16. "By the time he was half way through Lester High School," according to Raeburn Flerlage, "he was beginning to be recognized." (Note: The writer is indebted to Flerlage and to Charles Edward Smith for data about Chatman's early life in Memphis written by Smith in the *Notes* to Folkways FA 3524 - "The Real Boogie Woogie - Memphis Slim, Piano Solos")

While quite young, then, Slim must have been exposed to the current output of blues men and women, piano and guitar players known and recorded, unknown and active. He knew the records of Clarence Williams, Leroy Carr, Piano Willie, Little Brother Montgomery, Roosevelt Sykes, Speckled Red (Rufus Perryman). There's a good likelihood that he both heard and knew members of the Memphis Jug Band, then so popular that Victor was recording them at the Peabody Hotel in Memphis from 1927 through 1930. It's also likely that he knew and first heard Memphis Minnie at the same time. Memphis Minnie was born Minnie Douglas, June 24, 1900, in Algiers, Louisiana. When she was seven, her family moved to Walls, Mississippi, a crossroads settlement along Highway 61, some 12 miles below Memphis. At 15, she was singing on the Memphis streets as "Kid Douglas." She recorded as vocalist with the Jug Band in 1930.

But the young Memphis Slim never recorded in Memphis. He stayed there until 1939, when he was 24, then left for Chicago. The years from 16 to 24 were good enough for training and experience, for Saturday night gigs and listening to others. But by 1939, Memphis no longer offered much in the way of jobs or opportunity for the piano-playing entertainers and blues singers. Honky tonks (live talent) were losing out to juke joints (plug a nickel and hear a recording). The depression didn't help.

The great technological dispossession, the shift from live to canned talent, a shift largely initiated and engineered in Hollywood but touching all sectors of the entertainment industry, had by 1930 begun to affect talent everywhere. Joseph P. Kennedy bought into Hollywood and the music business when he realized the potential for putting everything into reels of film or onto records, and collecting a million times over for each single performance. The Radio Corporation of America, controlled by Kennedy, purchased the Victor Talking Machine Company in 1930.

The decade of the twenties, which had witnessed discovery and encouragement of a horde of talented blues and jazz musicians, was over. Victor stopped coming to Memphis and from then on, Memphis groups like the Jug Band traveled to Chicago for recording sessions. The talent moved with the studios and by 1939, most musicians from the Deep South, Midwest, and places like Memphis and St. Louis, had gone to Chicago. Peter Chatman got the message. "I left like a fast freight," he has recalled.

Chicago was seedy and cold and corrupt. The blues men and women met here, and stayed together - a micro-world of talent specializing in a kind of "other" entertainment for the disfranchised, dispossessed, "relocated" Negroes who had moved to Chicago from southern and middle western states. In slop joints and tonks, in buffet flats and at rent parties, the blues men and women kept alive some sense of the music their listeners had grown up with, and could still remember. They all knew each other, and they all learned from each other.

The birth dates and places of the blues men and women whose songs Chatman has selected for recall on this record document where they came from, their ages, and suggest the musical resources they grew up with:

ROOSEVELT SYKES - b. Helena, Arkansas January 31, 1906

BIG BILL BROONZY - b. Scott, Mississippi June 26, 1893

WALTER DAVIS - b. Grenada, Mississippi March 1, 1912

MERLINE JOHNSON - b. c. 1915, birthplace not known (YAS YAS GIRL)

LEROY CARR - b. Nashville, Tennessee 1905

MEMPHIS MINNIE - b. Algiers, Louisiana June 24, 1900

BESSIE SMITH - b. Chattanooga, Tennessee April 15, 1895

WASHBOARD SAM (Robert Brown) - b. Memphis, Tennessee 1910

JIMMY YANCEY - b. Chicago, Illinois c. 1894

The songs were for the most part composed and recorded in or near Chicago for the first time in the period 1927 through 1941. The one exception is Bessie Smith's Backwater Blues, written just before the disastrous flood of April-June 1927, and recorded in New York. A legend has persisted about the time of composition. It has been reported by one blues scholar that "the great Negro impresario Mayo 'Hank' Williams" asked Leroy Carr "to write in competition with other artists, a piece relating to the famous flood of the Mississippi in the spring of 1927.... It was Bessie Smith's Backwater Blues that Williams used." But Bessie Smith's Backwater Blues was recorded by Columbia on February 17, 1927.

"When Memphis Slim first came to Chicago and I met him there," Big Bill Broonzy says in his book "Big Bill Blues," "he was playing and singing exactly like Roosevelt Sykes. That was in 1939. I told him about playing like Roosevelt, which he denied, but I knew better that he was certainly playing like Roosevelt.

"So he made some records, just him playing the piano and another boy playing a tub with a string and a stick on one end of the string and the other end running through the bottom of the tub, he picked that string and pushed that stick back and forth to change the tone...

"Me and Memphis Slim got to be good friends and I liked him very much...In 1940, February 18, my piano player Joshua Altheimer died, so I asked Memphis Slim to play with me and so he did. We played at the 1410 Club, at the Ruby Tavern, in New York at Town Hall, the Regal Theatre, the 8th Street Theatre, the Beehive in Chicago and many other places...

"So one day I finally told to Memphis Slim: 'You're good enough now to go on your own. You don't need Big Bill or no other blues singer with you. Just get you some good musicians to play with and you'll be Memphis Slim like I'm Big Bill!' And so he did."

In the thirties and forties Chicago's southside school of informal blues, piano, and guitar instruction flourished, although unaccredited. There were no classrooms, so there was no overcrowding. But there were many, many teachers and long waiting lists of pupils. Sleepy John Estes, Scrapper Blackwell, Bumble Bee Slim (Amos Easton), Big Maceo Merriweather, Tampa Red (Hudson Whittaker), Papa Charlie Jackson, Lonnie Johnson, Sonny Boy Williamson, Tommy McClennan, Bill Jazz Gillum are just a few of the names of bluesmen who performed in, or came to Chicago to record. Piano players abounded - among them, Speckled Red (Rufus Perryman), Kokomo (James) Arnold, Black Bob, Georgia Tom Dorsey, Blind John Davis, Horace Malcolm, Pinetop Smith, Meade Lux Lewis, Richard M. Jones, Albert Ammons, Charlie Spand and Cripple Clarence Lofton are just a few in addition to those already named who were part of the scene and who also recorded prolifically. The blues women included Georgia White, Lil Johnson, Merline Johnson (Yas Yas Girl), Lil Green, Mary Johnson (wife of Lonnie), Bertha Chippie Hill, among others. Memphis Minnie, already named, was a dominant figure. Two women who did not figure in the Chicago scene of the thirties and forties were Bessie Smith, who died on highway 61 above Charksdale, Mississippi, in 1937, two years before Memphis Slim came to Chicago; and Ma Rainey, whose last recording was made in Chicago December, 1928. Ma Rainey died at Columbus, Georgia, December 22, 1939. Both women left recordings whose influence is still felt.

Some idea of how the blues artists worked and learned from each other and more often than not got into serious trouble in Chicago's unfriendly surroundings comes from their own recollections. Big Bill Broonzy was prolific in his recall - as with his song - of all the men and women who lived through that period, Broonzy alone managed to get enough down to fill a book. ("Big Bill Blues" - as told to Yannick Bruynoghe, Cassell & Company, London, 1955).

"Me and Sonny Boy and Memphis Slim played together for a long time and every time Sonny Boy would get drunk he would jump on me or Slim for a fight...Sonny Boy Williamson had a special way of playing the blues on a French harp, better known as a harmonica. He could blow it and sing it at the same time...He was a favorite of the blues singers and he made records with a lot of artists and played in clubs with them, such as Lonnie Johnson, Big Bill, Josh Altheimer, Blind John Davis, Bob Call, Walter Davis, Memphis Slim, Sunny Land Slim, Eddie Boyd, Joe Williams and a lot of others.

"Sonny Boy was about six feet tall, very dark and with a lot of hair on his head. In 1948 he was playing at a place called the Plantation Club when he got stabbed in the head on his way home. He made it home but he died before they could get him to the hospital. The Plantation is in Chicago on 31st Street. He was shipped to Jackson, Tennessee to be buried. That was his home. He was thirty-two years old when he died. He was stabbed in the head with an icepick - that's a real sharp piece of steel that they use to break up ice with."

Lonnie Johnson, talking with Paul Oliver ("Conversation with the Blues," Horizon Press, 1965), also recalled Williamson, and the world they shared: "Sonny Boy - I'll tell you what he did. He worked to help the people with somethin' to eat and somethin' to drink. When pay-day come he didn't have anything - he had no pay-day. He was just good - he bought everything they wanted to drink; everything they wanted to eat. That's all he did, was work for them. And why they would kill a great guy like that I don't know but they did..."

"Well...a little later on I went on work for Ruby Gatewood on West Lake and North Artesian Avenue. Ruby

Gatewood's Tavern - only we called it the Gate. There was always a bunch of blues singers at Ruby's...well she had Kokomo Arnold after he finished at the Club Claremont on 39th and Indiana...and Big Bill was there, and Memphis Minnie. But they wouldn't stay too long you know. Ruby Gatewood was a hard person to work for. That's right. You work all right - but try and get your money! Memphis Slim was the only one could get it, he'd go behind the bar and get it. Go to the cash register and just take it. He was the only one would do that. The union got behind her - and still didn't make no difference."

It was all this and more too for women who sang blues. Many of their male partners frequenting the blues world were pimps whose chief interest was the money that women could earn and deliver.

"These musicians was not seen in the day," Bill Broonzy recalled. "Them men didn't know how cotton and corn and rice and sugar-cane grows and they didn't care. They went out, dressed up every night and some of them had three or four women. One fed him and the other bought his clothes and shoes. These is the men that wear ten-dollar Stetson hats and twenty-dollar gold pieces at their watch and diamonds in their teeth and on their fingers.

"This kind of men caused Bessie Smith and her sisters, Ma Rainey, Ida Cox, Memphis Minnie, Merline Johnson, Victoria Spivey, Lil Green and a lot of other women blues singers to sing the blues. The women get the blues from all the trouble those men give them, but these men don't have the blues, hell no.

"So you know how these songs started, songs like Me and My Chauffeur, Grave Digger Blues, See See Rider, King Size Papa, My Mellow Man, Deep Sea Diver, My Man Ain't Come Up To My House and a lot more blues the women sang about how much they loved their sweet papa and what they done for them and how the man could love them.

"If this man left one of the women and got another one and if she couldn't find him to kill him, she would sing about what she would like to do to him or what she would do to get him back."

"Observers" or "reporters" of the Chicago scene of the thirties and forties never managed to frequent the world of the singers. Not many writers were interested in what then seemed obscure personalities and a world, that if they thought about it at all or brushed casually against it, seemed more like a lower ring of Dante's Inferno than anything they could relate to well-ordered "American" existences. This was especially true of the white literary establishment; even among Negroes, there were very few who bothered to tangle with it. Outstanding among Negro writers for awareness of the blues world were Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes, both poets as well as prose authors. Ralph Ellison had not come on the scene, nor had Richard Wright yet discovered, as he did years later in Paris, the blues of Bessie Smith.

Perhaps it was pure chance that drew Langston Hughes to an obscure night club in Chicago on New Year's Eve of 1942. More than likely, he knew what he was doing, and where he was going. At any rate, Langston Hughes' brief article, "Here to Yonder," published in the Chicago Defender, January 9, 1943, qualifies as one literary piece by a writer who chose to be there, and to get something onto a typewriter.

"Memphis Minnie," Hughes reported, "sits on top of the icebox at the 230 Club in Chicago and beats out blues on an electric guitar. A little dun colored drummer who chews gum in tempo accompanies her, as the year's end - 1942 - flickers to nothing and goes out like a melted candle.

Midnight. The electric guitar is very loud, science having magnified all its softness away. Memphis Minnie

sings through a microphone and her voice - hard and strong anyhow for a little woman's - is made harder and stronger by scientific sound. The singing, the electric guitar, and the drums are so hard and so loud, amplified as they are by General Electric on top of the icebox, that sometimes the voice, the words, and the melody get lost under sheer noise, leaving only the rhythm to come through clear. The rhythm fills the 230 Club with a deep and dusky heartbeat that over-rides all modern amplification. The rhythm is as old as Memphis Minnie's most remote ancestor.

Memphis Minnie's feet in her high-heeled shoes keep time to the music of her electric guitar. Her thin legs move like musical pistons. She is a slender, light-brown woman who looks like an old-maid school teacher with a sly sense of humor. She wears glasses that fail to hide her bright bird-like eyes. She dresses neatly and sits straight on her chair perched on top of the refrigerator where the beer is kept. Before she plays she cocks her head on one side like a bird, glances from her place on the box to the crowded bar below, frowns quizzically, and looks more than ever like a colored lady teacher in a neat Southern school about to say, "Children, the lesson is on page 14 today, paragraph 2."

But Memphis Minnie says nothing of the sort. Instead she grabs the microphone and yells, "Hey, now!" Then she hits a few deep chords at random, leans forward ever so slightly over her guitar, bows her head and begins to beat out a good old steady down-home rhythm on the strings - a rhythm so contagious that often it makes the crowd holler out loud.

Then Minnie smiles. Her gold teeth flash for a split second. Her ear-rings tremble. Her left hand with dark red nails moves up and down the strings of the guitar's neck. Her right hand with the dice ring on it picks out the tune, throbs out the rhythm, beats out the blues.

Then, through the smoke and racket of the noisy Chicago bar float Louisiana bayous, muddy old swamps, Mississippi dust and sun, cotton fields, lonesome roads, train whistles in the night, mosquitos at dawn, and the Rural Free Delivery that never brings the right letter. All these things cry through the strings on Memphis Minnie's electric guitar, amplified to machine proportions - a musical version of electric welders plus a rolling mill.

Big rough old Delta cities float in the smoke, too. Also border cities, Northern cities, Relief, W.P.A., Muscle Shoals, the jooks, Has Anybody Seen My Pigmeat on the Line, See-See Rider, St. Louis, Antoine Street, Willow Run, folks on the move who leave and don't care. The hand with the dice ring picks out music like this. Music with so much in it folks remember that sometimes it makes them holler out loud.

It was last year, 1941, that the war broke out, wasn't it? Before that there wasn't no defense work much. And the President hadn't told the factory bosses that they had to hire colored. Before that it was W.P.A. and the Relief. It was 1939 and 1935 and 1932 and 1928 and years that you don't remember when your clothes got shabby and the insurance relapsed. Now, it's 1942 - and different. Folks have jobs. Money's circulating again. Relatives are in the Army with big insurances if they die.

Memphis Minnie, at year's end, picks up those nuances and tunes them into the strings of her guitar, weaves them into runs and trills and deep steady chords that come through the amplifiers like Negro heartbeats mixed with iron and steel. The way Memphis Minnie swings it sometimes makes folks snap their fingers, women get up and move their bodies, men holler, "Yes!" When they do, Minnie smiles.

But the men who run the place - they are not Negroes - never smile. They never snap their fingers, clap their hands, or move in time to the music. They just stand at the lick counter and ring up sales on the cash register. At this year's end the sales are better than

they used to be. But Memphis Minnie's music is harder than the coins that roll across the counter. Does that mean she understands? Or is it just science that makes the guitar strings so hard and so loud?"

Whatever happened to it all? Many of the blues men and women who were there are now gone, or aging, infirm, unable to play. But Peter Chatman the young man who came to Chicago from Memphis in 1939 at 24 years, is among the survivors and still active. And there's still a blues scene in Chicago, carrying forward into the seventies the seed planting of the earlier generation of the 30's and 40's. Some of the participants are Buddy Guy, Junior Wells, Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Otis Rush, B.B. King, Bobby Bland, Hound Dog Taylor.

A number of older and younger bluesmen appeared at the Newport Folk Festival in the summer of 1969. But the thrust of what the blues men and women of the thirties to forties period had done was felt most abroad. Big Bill Broonzy, in a concert tour arranged by Hugues Panassié in the summer of 1951, carried his work to a more receptive audience than had ever responded to blues people in their homeland. "In Britain," reporter Max Jones wrote, "he played a significant part in building up a relatively large audience for blues and folk song."

And by 1969, it was possible, as author Paul Oliver did in his "Story of the Blues," to look backward to what Broonzy, Memphis Slim (who made his last Chicago record date in 1949, then settled more or less permanently abroad, where he now records and concertizes) and others had carried forward into music both here and abroad. "In Great Britain," Oliver reported, Broonzy's "large following began to create their own music in imitation of the rent-party and country dance musicians. Noisy, unsubtle, depending heavily on the repertoire of Lead-belly and Broonzy, 'skiffle' was a rough outcrop from the New Orleans jazz revival of the early fifties." Perhaps it would be going back too far to say that the jazz revival of the early fifties had in its time owed a lot to the earlier jug, washboard skiffle recordings of the twenties, thirties and forties, and to note that Memphis Slim's recording career had begun, in Chicago, 1940, with a band that consisted of piano, French harp, washboard, tub bass, as Broonzy recalled in his book. And that it was the earlier skiffle and jug bands from Memphis and elsewhere, in the twenties, that had helped to shape musical evolution of many of the Chicago blues men and women of the thirties and forties.

"The growth of blues interest in Europe, and Great Britain as far as 'beat' music is concerned in particular, is a phenomenon that deserves more attention of itself," Oliver wrote. "When Big Bill Broonzy died, (in 1958) Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry took his place, and his pianist after the death of Joshua Altheimer, Memphis Slim...became exceedingly popular in France." Blues then, and skiffle, had found a wider base of support when transposed to England and the Continent in the early to late 1950's - and into the present.

The transposition made waves. For the first time, young white musicians were being exposed on a large scale to a music made by American Negroes that appealed to them as exotic, vital, inspiring. A music that had previously operated almost exclusively on a basis of appeal to Negroes in segregated slums like the south side of Chicago, broke out of the cultural isolation that had prevailed in the United States.

There was one thing about the break-through that was not new, however. Once more, it would not be Negro musicians who would benefit largely from the cross-over exactly as it had been earlier in the United States, when Fletcher Henderson's arrangements for the Benny Goodman swing band of the 1930's helped to create a new

vogue in dance music called swing, and made millions for white dance bands, agents, record companies. Then, the great Negro jazz musicians like Sidney Bechet, who couldn't find employment in the U.S., moved abroad. Others, like Jelly Roll Morton, stayed in the States and died - in poverty and obscurity.

As Oliver has pointed out, the terms 'discovery' and 're-discovery,' though widely used terms mean recognition by the white community, or a part of it at least, in the United States and Europe."

"This is ironic," he concludes, "and the irony goes deeper, for it was The Beatles and the Liverpool 'beat music scene' which largely changed attitudes and gave rise to a whole generation of guitarists and white blues singers in both Europe and America and changed the popular music of the world."

All of this may help to explain the modesty of Peter Chatman's quietly spoken preface leading into his musical recall of blues singers and the Chicago blues scene of the nineteen thirties and forties: "This is my interpretation of some of my favorite blues singers - some of the greatest blues singers of all time - 'course you know that they are responsible for the blues as they are today."

Perhaps you didn't know it - "of course." Not with that much casualness and certainty, at any rate. You would have to have been there and learned it and lived it, the way Memphis Slim did. And you would have to be extraordinary, as Memphis Slim demonstrates that he is, to get it all together and bring it back so vividly for any one with time to listen.

