FOLKWAYS RECORDS / NY

CAT-IRON

SINGS BLUES AND HYMNS

recorded by Frederic Ramsey, Jr.

photograph by Frederic Ramsey, Jr.

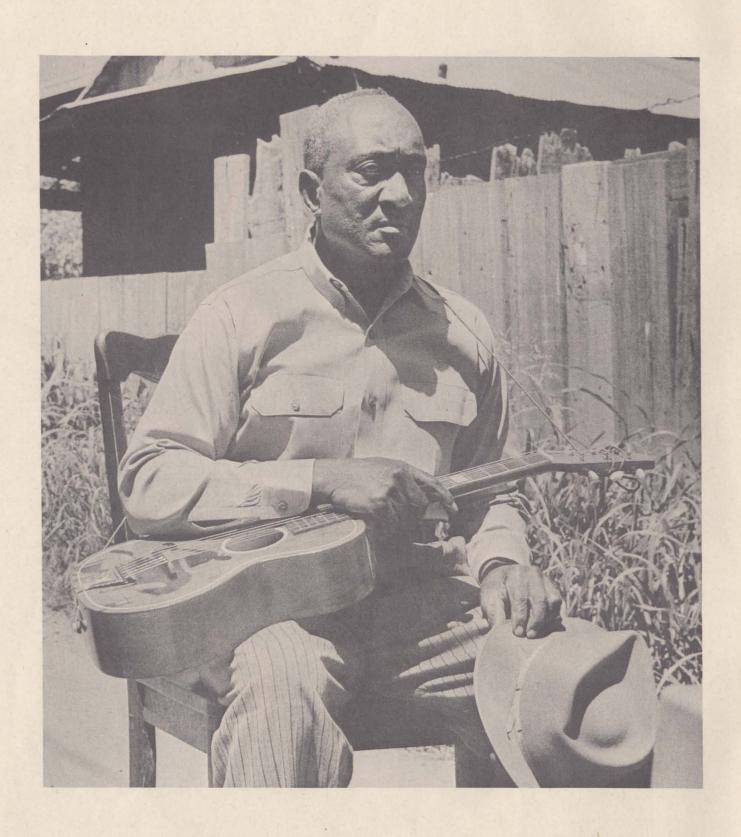
CAT-IRON

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The Saturday Review

LINES FROM BUCKNER'S ALLEY

By FREDERIC RAMSEY, JR.

Jimmy Bell in town, Lord, he walkin' round . . .

THE singer was Cat-Iron, and we were sitting in the front room of his neat, box-like, white-clapboard home at Number Seven, Buckner's Alley. The alley cuts through a strip of bottomland just back of the bluffs, once the site of a sawmill operated long ago by a man named Buckner. Buckner had given his name to the Bottom, and rows of narrow. board shacks had been thrown up along the traces of old pathways. One of the pathways had got to be known as "Tin-Can Alley," but then Buckner's name had overridden that, too, and both the alley and the bottom claim him today. Just east of the Mississippi and well below the high ground of historic, antebellum Natchez, the Bottom exists as a No Man's Land loosely appended to, but not a part of, old Natchez For "No Man," you can also read "Negro."

We had come there because Thurman Monroe had said that Cat-Iron knew a lot of the old blues, and had even made up a few of his own.

"I guess he's what you might call a folk-singer," Monroe had added. I had met Monroe only an hour

I had met Monroe only an hour before. I had stopped my car at a small frame cottage set in lawn and

shaded by a chinaberry tree, in another part of Natchez. A Negro of medium height and stout build, dressed in white shirt and dark trousers, was cutting the grass with a big, old-fashioned hand lawnmower, while another man stood under the chinaberry tree, fingering the valves of a highly polished trumpet, blowing short, experimental runs as his cheeks puffed and flattened. This was Thurmond Monroe, alto saxophone player with the Otis Smith Orchestra of Natchez.

We found Cat-Iron on his narrow front porch, seated in a worn wicker chair and leaning forward to face a mirror of broken glass that had been placed on a cross-strut of the porch-screening. With deliberation, he was scraping at a bristly, gray stubble, using a safety razor. A stick of soap—no water—stood upright beside the mirror.

"I don't sing blues much any more," Cat-Iron explained after we had crowded two more chairs close beside him on the porch. "Just church music. You know, since I been converted, I sing the hymns."

"Aw Cat," Monroe pleaded, "you know three-four Saturdays ago I gave you three-fifty worth of quarters and dimes, just to hear you play some of those old ones. Remember?" Then he turned to me. "Our band plays anything, nowadays—rhumbas, Calypso, bop, pops—a bit of the blues. I think I'm really closer to blues than anything, though. But the public wants variety."

"I got no guitar, either," Cat replied as he went on scraping.

"Well, we could go down to Hawkins's, and borrow his."

When we got back the mirror, razor, and stick of soap were gone. Seeing Cat-Iron stand for the first time, I was impressed by the stocky build of his short frame. He looked hard, all muscle, gone to some flabbiness, but still hard in general outline. He wore a gray shirt open at the neck, cotton duck work pants, thick leather bottom-boots laced loose and folded down from the top. When he walked, he rocked.

"Let's go inside," he said as he took the guitar Monroe handed him,

nodding his head toward the door. It was a large head, fitting the body that bore it; he had put on a soft, gray felt hat which cut across its elliptical form, concealing his forehead, but allowing light to sneak in under the brim and pick up the prominent lines of his long, straight nose and full, out-curved nostrils. The eyes, just above the cheekbone's highlight, were deep-set, with folds of flesh curving back from the ridge of the bone. His teeth, when he smiled, showed irregular.

Inside, I sat on the sofa while Monroe leaned back in a chair tilted against a windowsill. Cat set the guitar on his lap and began to tune up the strings. When they were right he placed the guitar on the bed beside him, rose, crossed the room to a veneer-dark dresser, and returned with a small, flat-sided medicine bottle. Taking up the guitar again, he applied the flat side of the bottle to the strings at the neck of the instrument, sliding it across the frets as he picked chords.

With the first notes, we knew we were in blues territory.

But it took some time to go beyond the first boundary. First Cat-Iron sang a hymn, "When the Saints Go Marching In." He sang it with feeling, with power, with compelling rhythm; he embellished it, on his guitar, with ornaments that could only come from years of blues-playing. Then we heard "When I Lay My Burden Down." Cat-Iron might be singing religion, but he was playing it with the heart of a blues-man.

We waited, politely. Monroe looked up at conclusion of the second hymn as Cat-Iron began to re-tune his guitar.

> "I had it in bass-tone before," Cat-Iron explained. The word "bass" sounded like a fish, not a singer's register. "Now, I'm putting it in E natural."

The two selections that came next were fine—at the top of the list, as far as blues-playing can go—but I still had the impression that Monroe was waiting. No performer of Cat-Iron's experience chooses to run in his best piece at the head of a concert.

He got greenback enough, sweet babe, to make a man a suit . . .

With "Jimmy Bell," Cat-Iron seemed to be throwing the lines away as he worked into the song. Yet there was a hard intensity to his voice, an insistence, that made us want



-Frederic Ramsey, Ja

Cat-Iron-"he looked hard."

to go along with him, to hear every word, to get it all. I began to know what Monroe had been waiting for. Cat-Iron was talking language now, the language of the blues; clipped, sparse, but with a world of experience and observation rolled into it.

I wondered if it was a language that could be understood at all outside Buckner's Bottom-away from the South. It is so specific in reference, so regional in character, so underplayed in humor that its keenest turns are easily lost. Yet blues as they have been sung in this countrywell over sixty years—are an overly neglected body of genuinely poetic outpourings. Even if they must be classified as minor lyric expression, they are worth some effort. They merit, at the least, the care that our writers and scholars have lavished upon the madrigal, the sonnet, the

The particular richness of the blueslanguage derives from its preservation of a vast, communal, folk-expression. In the earliest days of blues, the lines came to the guitar as everyday speech.

When you see me laughin', I'm laughin' to keep from cryin'.

Every blues-singer, up to and including Cat-Iron, has always sat down to play in the company of others. They may not have been there, in the room or under the tree, but they were at his shoulder, whispering the lines, the rememberings, the names of places and the names of men and women. This was their public domain. At this stage, no one exerted the control of copyright. And before this stage, there was still another-the utterances of the very first bluessingers. It must have come from the giant effort of a transposed people to find meaningful expression in a strange language.

Once that effort had got under way, its multiplication was fruitful as are the first pages of Genesis. There are some specific examples of the process: Leadbelly, traveling and playing with Blind Lemon Jefferson all over Texas, founded his abundant repertoire on lines remembered from Lemon and others encountered on their travels. Horace Sprott, working and listening in the cotton fields just north of Selma, Alabama, never forgot, among hundreds of lines he knew, the particular verse of an unknown singer called Smokestack Lightning:

I followed my baby to her buryin' ground . . . long, old lone-some day!

Big Bill Broonzy, whose book, "Big Bill Blues," tells so much of this process of enrichment and cross-fertilization, has recalled, on a recent Folkways record that bears his name, the story of one C. C. Rider, a wandering blues-man who sang:

My home is on the water, and I don't like no land at all I'd rather be dead than stay here and be a dog.

Rider's song has become classic, and is known to almost every player in the country; it has been recorded many times, with many variations.

This elastic process of invention, exchange, and improvisation created a literature. For the blues-man who had it committed to memory, it was an important working tool—handy, pithy, complete. It has never found its way into print, and we shall have a stunning anthology when it does.

THE real test of creativity, for the blues-man, is his ability to put the wandering couplets of this literature together. In the hands of the lesser talent—and there are many of these—the result is a hacking hodge podge of unrelated fragments. From a sensitive minstrel, the song pours out as a skilful, mellowed blend. It is a lyric, personal statement, yet it contains elements of a universal, folk-shared experience.

Since the shared experience is that of the Southern Negro, there are the deeper notes of suffering, of hard times, of loneliness. There are also sly and salty twists of humor, fortified by a mastery of innuendo that may have roots in West African song and social life.

There is also love. In language as tender and as brutal, as outspoken and wistful, as our English can become, the vapors and excursions of love are celebrated in the bluessinger's vagrant lines:

Ain't got nobody to feel and care for me

Ain't got nobody to feel and care for me

Says all I had, done caught the train and gone.

Said, I went to the depot, I looked up at the sign

Said, I went to the depot, I looked up at the sign

Said, there ain't nothing I seen would bring my baby back.

Cat-Iron had sung the lines for us only a moment before. This was the language he was singing; this was the world to which I had been admitted, a passenger without portfolio sitting on a slump-backed sofa in a cramped living room.

The dedicated blues-singer-and

Cat-Iron was showing us that he belonged here—is like an actor who delivers the prologue or epilogue to a play. He moves with economy; he sums up; he lifts a curtain, he lets it fall. He relates a story, and sometimes he is part of it. It is up to the listener to know when, and how.

In two lines, Cat-Iron had moved in on Jimmy Bell, and he had moved us with him. This man walking around town is no ordinary sawmill hand or cropper or cotton-chopper; he's got greenbacks enough, sweet babe, to make a man a suit.

And just as Cat-Iron could mix with Jelly Roll Morton, Jimmy Bell could mix with the rousters and gamblers and touts Jelly Roll has described: "Those boys I used to sing with were really tough babies. . . . It was a miracle how those boys lived. They were sweetback men, I suppose you'd call them—always a bunch of women (sweet babe) running after them. . . . They dressed very well and they were tremendous sports. It was nothing like spending money that even worried their mind (he got greenback enough).

"But they all strived to have at least one Sunday suit (to make a man a suit), because without that Sunday suit you didn't have nothing. You should have seen one of those sports move down the street (Jimmy Bell in town, Lord, he walkin' 'round')... walking along with a very mosey walk they had adopted from the river, called shooting the agate..."

Jimmy Bell told his sister, all you need is not t' shout If you don't pay your money, deacon gwine to turn you out

Cat-Iron was telling us; Jimmy Bell was not only a gambler, he was a man who would try to talk his sister out of being a church member. "You don't have to go to church, and you don't have to shout." Shout is a word of many shadings; one of them implies that there are plenty of persons who put on a display of emotion in church, feigning more conviction than they feel. They are conforming, and Jimmy Bell doesn't buy it. "Settle the business; just don't pay your church dues, and the deacon, who keeps his eye on the receipts, will read you off the roster of saved souls." Cat-Iron prepared us for his next scene: Jimmy Bell as Devil's Advocate.

Jimmy Bell in the pulpit, the Bible in his hand

It is Sunday, and Jimmy Bell has come up from Natchez-under-the-Hill, as veritable an Inferno as ever existed. In the history of Natchez, it was the port that harbored a tough breed of river bullies, adventurers, and prostitutes. At one time inhabitants of the port engaged in combat with the more respectable citizens on the hill, and were dispersed with a dousing from fire-pumps. Jimmy Bell carries more than the threat of mere physical violence; in his Mephistophelian role, he will undermine with subtlety:

All them sisters sittin' back in the corner, cryin'
Jimmy Bell my man,
Jimmy Bell my man.

Bell has been a pretty efficient Mephistopheles; he has already seduced a fair proportion of the distaff side of the congregation and even in church they are wrangling for his favors ("always a bunch of women running after them," as Jelly Roll spoke it).

Jimmy Bell told the sext(i)on, go an' tone the bell 'Cause some of these members here sure is goin' to hell

Jimmy Bell knows what he's talking about. However, he does not disappear in a flash of fire and puff of smoke: Jimmy Bell told his wife, told his
wife that night

If the time don't get no better
here, babe,
up the road I'm goin'
up the road I'm goin'.

Instead, he goes home to his wife. Only now has Cat-Iron introduced her; she couldn't have been very important. Bell returns to character, is a human being again, and is exposed as simply a hungry grifter ("It was a miracle how those boys lived"), suffering, perhaps, from a touch of remorse and appetite.

CAT-IRON'S principal leaves the stage, singing a line that is both common tag and common property to all who make a living as hoboes, drifters, gamblers—and blues-singers:

If the time don't get no better here, babe, up the road I'm goin' up the road I'm goin'.

Cat-Iron laid his fingers across the still-vibrating strings. In the quiet that followed, Thurman Monroe's chair came back to the floor with a creak and a tap. He opened his eyes.

"I wish I could sing like that, Cat."
"Come back some time, I got some

more."

We rose together. It was time to go up the road.



PHOTOS BY FREDERIC RAMSEY, JR.

SIDE I, Band 1: POOR BOY A LONG, LONG WAY FROM	HOME	If you don't pay your money, deacon gwine to turn you out	
I'm a poor boy, I'm a long, long way from home I'm a poor old boy, long way from home		going to turn you out,	(2)
I'm a poor old boy, I'm long way from home		Jimmy Bell in the pulpit, the Bible in his hand	
Ain't got nobody to feel and care for me Says all I had, done caught the train and gone	(2)	All them sisters sittin' back in the corner, cryin' Jimmy Bell my man	
Said, I went to the depot, I looked up at the sign		Jimmy Bell my man	(2)
Said, I went to the depot, I looked up at the sign		Jimmy Bell told the sexton, go an' tone the bell,	
Said, there ain't nothing I seen would bring my baby back		'Cause some of these old members here sure is goin' to hell sure is goin' to hell	
Vicksburg on a high hill, N'Orleans just below If she don't come tomorrow, make me beg my bone Well, you don't want me, whyn't you tell me 'fo: Woman, if you don't want me, whyn't you tell me	,	sure is goin' to hell 'Cause some of these old members here, yes, sure is goin' to hell	
'fore If you don't want me, whyn't you tell me 'fore?		Jimmy Bell told his wife, told his wife that night,	
SIDE I, Band 2: DON'T YOUR HOUSE LOOK LONESOME		If the time don't get no better here, babe, up the road I'm goin' up the road I'm goin'	(2)
Don't your house look lonesome, your biscuit roller done gone			
Don't your house look lonesome, when your biscuit roller done gone		SIDE I, Band 5: I'M GOIN TO WALK YOUR LOG	
Don't your house look lonesome, find your baby done gone		I'm gwine 't'put 't on strong, put my (stumps) on strong	
Tell me, Corinna, where you stayed last night	(3)	When I git you back from rollin' I'll walk you burnin' log	
I got something to tell you, woman,		walk the (bully) burnin' log	(2)
make the hair rise on your head I got something to tell you woman, make the spring cry on your bed	(2)	When I get you back from rollin' (for) I'll walk your log	
Don't your house look lonesome, when your biscuit roller done gone Don't your house look lonesome,		Got a girl uptown, treat me like a child Yes, she feeds me off of so many diff'ent dice She's bout to run me wild	
your biscuit roller done gone Don't your house look lonesome, you find your baby done gone		She 'bout to run me wild 'bout to run me wild	
Now I don't know what makes grandpa crazy 'bout my grandma so She got the same old jelly she had,		Yes, she feed me off so many diff'ent dice She 'bout to run me wild	
forty years ago.		I'm gwine to walk your log, gwine to walk your log	
SIDE I, Band 3: TELL ME, YOU DIDN'T MEAN ME NO	GOOD	When I get you back from rollin' far, I walk your burning log	
Tell me, you didn't mean me no good Tell me little woman, you didn't mean me no	(2)	Mary had a lamb, tied him on the track An' every time the whistle blow, the lamb he'd ball the jack Lamb'd ball the jack	(2)
Don't your house look lonesome,		An' every time the whistle'd blow, the lamb he'd ball the jack	(2)
your biscuit roller done gone Don't your house look lonesome,	(2)	I'm gwin' t'put 't on strong, put my stunts	
you find your baby done gone	(0)	on strong When I get to rollin' in my good curse on,	
Got a little low mama, long tall mama too Tell my little low mama, what my long tall mama can do	(2)	I put my stunts on strong.	
Got something to tell you,		SIDE I, Band 6: GOT A GIRL IN FERRIDAY, ONE IN GREENWOOD TOWN	
make the hair rise on your head Got something to tell you, woman,		Got a girl in Ferriday, one in Greenwood town	
make the hair rise on your head I got something to tell you, make the spring cry on your bed.		Got a woman in Ferriday, one in Greenwood town Got a favorite down Natzhez on the Hill	
SIDE I, Band 4: JIMMY BELL		I'm going tell you women, just how to keep your man at home You got to eagle rock him whiles he saddle on	(2)
Jimmy Bell in town, Lordy, (or, Lord, he) walkin' 'round		Tell me way down in Lousiana, hoodoo's over there	(2)
He got greenback enough, sweet babe, to make a man a suit		Says, I'm goin' to hell an' have my fortune told	, ,
make a man a suit make a man a suit He got meerbeak anough givest habe		Said, I went to the gypsy, had my fortune told Said, I went to the gypsy, had my fortune told	
He got greenback enough, sweet babe, make a man a suit		You gotta tailor-made woman, she ain't no hand-me-down	
Jimmy Bell told his sister, all you need is not 't shout		I don't want no black woman, fryin' no meat for me For she studies evil, she's liable to poison me	(2)

I'm going tell you something, what a Louisiana
woman will do

She'll steal your man, and she don't care
what she'll do

You can always tell when your woman got another man (2)
Tell your meals aren't ready, and your house ain't never clean.

SIDE II, Band 1: WELL, I'M IN YOUR HAND

Well, I'm in your hand, I'm in your hand, I'm in your Well, I'm in your hand, I'm in your hand, I'm in your hand Throw your lovin' arms around me O Lord, I'm in your hand Well, I died, I died, I'm in your Well, I died, I died, I'm in your hand Throw your lovin' arms around me,
O Lord, I'm in your hand Well, I've got the word, I've got the word, I'm in your Well, I got the word, I got the word, I'm in your hand Throw your lovin' arms around me 0 Lord I'm in your hand, I'm in your hand, my father dear Well, I'm in your hand, I'm in your hand, my father dear Throw your lovin' arms around me, O Lord, I'm in your

SIDE II, Band 2: WHEN I LAY MY BURDEN DOWN

Glory, glory, hallelujah, when I lay my
-- my burden down
O glory, glory, o hallelujah, o when I lay my
-- my burden down
Yes, I'm goin' home to -- goin' live with Jesus) (2)
O, when I lay my -- my burden down

You ought to pray so -- o God can use you
O, any time, Lord, or anywhere
You ought to pray so -- o God can use you
O, any time, Lord, or anywhere
O glory, glory, o hallelujah, o when I lay my
-- my burden down
Glory, glory, o hallelujah, o when I lay my
-- my burden down

SIDE II, Band 3: OLD TIME RELIGION

O, gimme that old time religion, gimme that ole, gimme that ole, O Lord, O, gimme that ole time religion gime that ole gimme that ole, O Lord

O, it is good when the world's on fire

it is good when
it is good when the world's on fire. Lord

it is good when the world's on fire, Lord

O, it is good for my dear old mother
it is good for my

it is good for my dear old mother, Lord

O, gimme that ole,
gimme that ole,
gimme that ole, Lord, 'sgood enough

O, it is good for my dear old father
It is good for my dear old father, Lord
O, gimme that ole,
gimme that ole
gimme that ole, Lord

O, it is good for the Hebrew children It is good for the Hebrew child'en, Lord,

O, it is good when I am dyin It is good when I'm dyin', Lord, O, gimme that ole, gimme that ole, gimme that ole, o Lord

Good Lord, fix me right, Lord fix me right

If I die on the battlefield, Lord fix me right

SIDE II, Band 4: FIX ME RIGHT

Good Lord, fix me right, Lord fix me right If I die, O let me die Lord fix me right 0000 When I was a sinner, When I come to find out, I was on the road to hell O lord, fix me right, Lord fix me right If I die on the battlefield, Lord fix me right I'm comin' but my way is hard comin' but my way is hard If I die on the battlefield, comin' but my way is hard O, please fix me right, please fix me right If I die on the battlefield, please fix me right I'm goin' out in your name, goin' out in your name If I die on the battlefield, goin' out in your name O, please fix me right, please fix me right, If I die o let me die, please fix me right, O, Jesus done fixed me right, Jesus done fixed me right If I die on the battlefield, Jesus done fixed me right I'm comin' on my bended knee, comin' on my bended knee If I die on the battlefield, comin' on my bended knee

SIDE II, Band 5: 0, THE BLOOD DONE SIGNED MY NAME

O, the blood, o the blood, o the blood done
O, the blood, o the blood, o the blood done
washed me clean
O, the blood, o the blood done

O, the blood done washed me clean

An' it ain't no use in your talkin')
Don't you see what the blood done done)

An' it ain't no use in your talkin'

O, the blood done washed me clean

Don't you see what the

I tracked him, I tracked him, I tracked him
I tracked him, I tracked him, Lord I tracked
him by his blood
I tracked him, I tracked him
O, I tracked him by his blood
Don't you see, don't you see
what the blood done done

(3)

O, the blood done give me a home

SIDE II, Band 6: WHEN THE SAINTS GO MARCHING HOME

0, when the saints to marching home
0, Lord, I wants to be in that number
0, when the saints go marching in
0, Lord, I used to have some playmates
To talk and walk and talk with me

O, since I got my soul be converted
O, will they turn they (eir) backs on me

O, when the saints go marchin' home O, when the saints go marchin' in O, Lord, I wants to be in that number C, when the saints go marchin' in.

NEW NUMERICAL LISTINGS

Old Numbers are in Brackets ()

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FA2009 (9) All Day Singin', Van Wey FA2010 (10) Lonesome Valley, Folksongs FA2011 (11) Dust Bowl Balalds, Guthrie FA2013 (13) Railroad Songs, Houston	FJ2809 (71) Anthology No. 9, Piano FE4454 (454) Folk Musi FJ2810 (73) Anthology No. 10. Boogie, K. C. FE4458 (458) Indian Mu	ic of Jamaica FW6824 (824) Gospel Songs, Bohamas FC7250 Jamaican Songs, Benett ic of Greece FW6825 (25) Cantorials, D. Kusevitsky usic of the Upper Amazon FW6825 (826) Jewish Folk Songs, Olf CHILDREN'S SPECIAL & HISTORICAL 10"		
FA2013 (13) Railroad Songs, Houston FA2014 (14) Rock Island Line, Leadbelly No. 2 FA2019 (19) Sea & Logger Songs, Eskin FA2021 (21) Seeds of Love, Summers	AMERICANA 2-12" FE4461 (461) Jamaican FE4462 (462) Wolf Musi	Pream Songs from Malaya FW4827 (827) Jewish Folk Songs, Vol. 2, Olf FC7307 (7) Music Time, Bailey. 1 Cult Rhythms FW4828 (828) Ukrainian Christmas Songs FC7308 Rhythms for Children, Jenkins sic of Senegal & Gambia FW4830 (830) Songs & Dances of the Basaue FC7312 (712) First Album of Jazz, Hughes of the Canadian Plains FW4831 (831) Folk Songs of Newfaundland Mills FC7301 (740) Reviews of the World Hughes.		
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