

ONE MAN BAND



PAUL BLACKMAN

BLUES

SHIEK OF ARABY

ALABAMA BAND

TAKE OFF

WHEN THE SAINTS GO MARCHING IN

CARELESS LOVE

ST. LOUIS WOMAN

SOME OF THESE DAYS

BLACKMAN BLUES

Rosenhouse

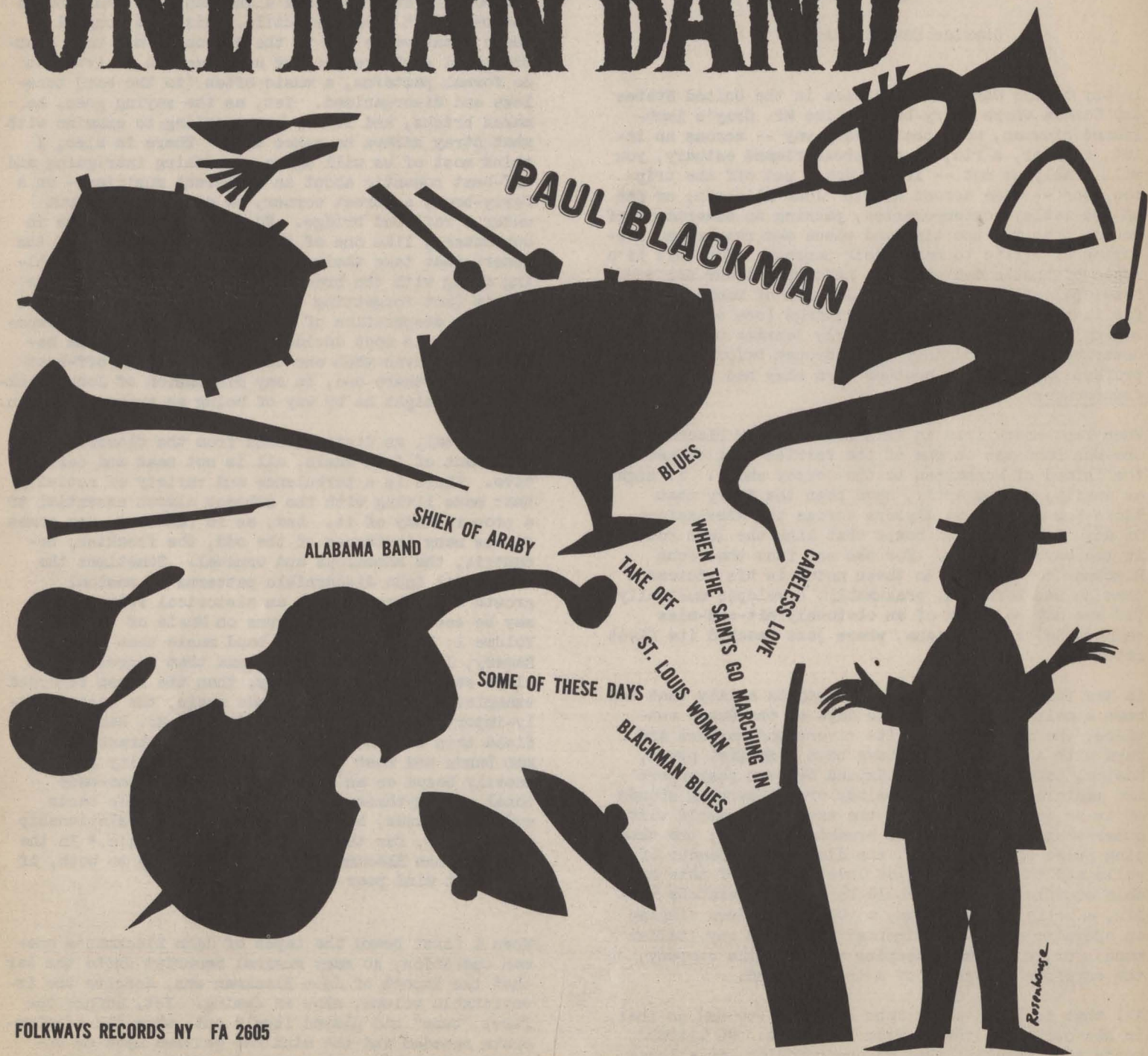
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ONE MAN BAND



FOLKWAYS RECORDS NY FA 2605

Reisenhouse



RIFFIN' JOHN AND HIS SCUFFLE SOUNDS

An Introduction

by

Charles Edward Smith

In any of the hundreds of cities in the United States and Canada where ferry-boats, like Mr. Gray's iamb-limned plowman, wend their weary way -- across an inlet, a river, a rio, or a cypress-rimmed estuary, you will likely as not -- if you don't put off the trip too long -- come across Riffin' John Blackman, or one of his motley contemporaries, packing an assortment of sounds that fit the time and place and require no historian or critic to mark their passage. For this is a music of hustle and scuffle, neither amateur nor professional, fitting no definition out of books. Scuffle is a slang word of many meanings (one of them relating to dance steps) that early jazzmen used to describe the period they went through before reaching professional status; another term they had for it was from hunger.

When last heard from in this setting John Blackman's One-Man Band was on one of the ferries that connect the island of Manhattan to the Jersey shore. It might as easily, and as aptly, have been the ferry that links New Orleans to Algiers across the Mississippi. Or any of a number of boats that link the land routes in the bayou country. For the one fact that John Blackman contributed to these notes is his statement that he was born and, presumably, developed musically (if one may so speak of an obviously hit-and-miss background) in Louisiana, where jazz reached its first maturity.

In New York in this century, as befits a city that has been a melting pot since the days of the Dutch settlers, the men who plied its rivers and harbors and bays with a saga of song have been a mongrel breed, musical tatterdemalions glimpsed between passengers and vehicles as wisps of melody or the surging sounds of it as it won or lost in the unceasing battle with other sounds, choppy waves breaking the bow, the thumping pulse of the engine, the discordant clamour of gulls and the whispering of lovers. Out of this amiable scuffle of noises could be heard a scratchy violin, a bellying accordion, a voice or voices singing an operatic air, a sentimental song or a gay Italian tune. Or, sometimes, keeping the seagulls company, the carefree cacaphony of a one-man band.

All that is known about John Blackman (to us) is that, in his own words, he is from Louisiana. We learned, quite accidentally, that on one occasion, at a local concert, he was invited to share the stage with Pete Seeger, who was presenting an informal concert of folk music, and these fragments of fact, and his music, are all we have to go on.

Among Blackman's qualities that make for enjoyable listening are an untiring rhythmic exuberance and his homespun humor, a brand of hokum that would be pure corn if it were not ingenious. In announcing Alabama Bound he states that this is a special arrangement, and chortles naively, "which all the numbers I play is a special arrangement ..." On Some Of These Days he describes the harmony (kazoo and cowbell) by explaining that "Guy Lombardo made this little arrangement here." On John Blackman Blues he sings traditional verses, concluding with:

"I got a gal, she's nine feet tall,
She sleeps in the kitchen with her head in
the wall,"

and then breaks up in a laugh.

A scholarly study of John's one-man band would be as fatuous as it would be futile. His is a mongrel music, that veers now to the diatonic, now to a flattened tonal style respecting no modes and arriving at no formal patterns, a music often (to the ear) toneless and disorganized. Yet, as the saying goes, he makes bricks, and it may be rewarding to examine with what stray straws he makes them. There is also, I think most of us will agree, something intriguing and off-beat romantic about an itinerant musician-- on a ferry-boat, a street corner, or at a hobo hangout under a railroad bridge. He seems to us, secure in our houses, like one of those trailing plants of the desert that take their sparse roots with them, rolling along with the breeze, as that tumble-weed tune has it (not forgetting the rain and the dust and the everyday desperation of merely existing). The romantic aspect is most decidedly in the eyes of the beholder but even when one discounts it, the off-beat quality is there and, in any discussion of John Blackman, that might be by way of being an appropriate pun.

In the real, as distinguished from the classroom, environment of folk music, all is not neat and definitive. There is a turbulence and variety of activity that make living with the subject almost essential to a proper study of it. And, as in folklore, one comes across many instances of the odd, the freakish, eccentric, the anomalous and unusual. Sometimes the latter fit into discernible patterns of musical growth and change. Such an historical relationship may be seen between the drums on Music of the South, Volume I, FP 650, in brass band music that Frederic Ramsey, Jr., recorded in Alabama that represents an older style, chronologically, than the first recorded examples of New Orleans parade music, the historically-important "jazz in brass" (though Mr. Ramsey's field trip was in the 1950's!). In contrast, one-man bands and most (though not all) novelty groups heavily based on an instrumentation of home-made tonal and rhythmic devices (such as skiffle bands and spasm bands) have only a peripheral relationship to jazz, or, for that matter, to folk music.* In the case of John Blackman there is a kinship to both, if you don't mind poor relations.

When I first heard the tapes of John Blackman's one-man operation, so many musical memories smote the ear that the impact of John Blackman was, despite the irresistible volume, slow in coming. Yet, before the first "tune" had played itself out, when the conglomerate receded and the mind had settled upon an unusual and -- by usual standards, either of folk or art music -- un-musical consonance, I realized that that was what I'd been hearing all the time and what had intrigued the ear, despite the confusing hodge-

podge. It was rather, in an odd way, like the satisfaction one gets when one's listening confirms the suspected presence of a theretofor hidden theme. Only in this instance it was, in a sense, the absence of any conventional theme or themes that was of interest.

If you listen for the melody on many of these tunes, you'll come up with a lot of flatted notes. And many people are so accustomed to this way of listening (anticipating specific tonal delineation; after all, this is usually what one has been taught to expect) that any other method of hearing sounds is not only alien, it seems well-nigh impossible. But putting aside such listening habits temporarily, the appeal of John Blackman's one-man band is an easy, rocking and raucous accessibility of rhythm, a delightful impinging of percussive tones -- and the much-flatted counter-theme to the seagulls and the ferry's crossing.

Also, one might suppose, there is an evocation of one's earliest musical memories, not of music as adults know it but of sounds as we become aware of them as children, the banging on tin pans, the whining of telephone wires and the swarming of bees, the twanging of wires (any wires, anywhere), the shrieks that seek the super-sonic (remember?), that scrape the palate and vibrate relentlessly in the ear ... But perhaps the one-man band will bring back, most of all, wistful recollections of our early omniscience, when the cacaphony of an old kettle could compete with Sousa!

You might say that people like John Blackman have made a profession out of the discarded instruments of the jazzman's first fumbings, in the ingenuous and sometimes ingenious invention of new music-making devices (usually imitative or simulating instruments) and in the judicious use of such instruments as the cymbal, stick-struck as in biblical times when (as celebrated in the last Psalm of the Bible) the faithful were adjured to praise the Lord in shards of sound from this ancient instrument.

* The spasm band was a sort of skiffle band, a street band of New Orleans. Because one or more of the men who played in such groups later played in jazz bands, some accounts of jazz erroneously described the spasm bands as early, crude jazz bands. The real contribution of one-man bands and novelty groups is in ideas that may, if they are of valid worth, be incorporated in techniques. (Thus the flood's freshet and the meandering brook feed the main streams.) In folk music, as in jazz, it is not the use of curious homemade instruments that is significant, however colorful and interesting this may be, but the freshness of instrumental usage, e.g. the five-string banjo, the country fiddle, the mouth-organ. And this is an improvisational tradition that novelty groups may influence and the spirit of which they may enter into by the back door, so to speak, like knights of the road!

John Blackman's One-Man Band, then, consists (like the items without which a bride might feel undressed) of something old, something new, something borrowed and, of course, something blue: Voice (singing and scat-singing); horn (toy kazoo); traps--drum (5-gal. oil can. On Side 1, nails punched through top of square can and covered with pad, simulate snare drum effect. On Side 2, the pad having taken a powder, the nails were removed.) Additional traps-- doorbell, cowbell, pineapple can tops, wood-blocks, cymbal. This outfit packs into a cardboard box, with which it is carried from place to place.

The various tonal and percussive devices are introduced with great zest by Riffin' John in Take-Off No. 1 and Take-Off No. 2. Both incorporate snatches of tunes associated with jazz and ragtime. The exuberant rhythms and the free-for-all impact of contrasting percussive sounds (like jugglers or a knife-throwing act, but an aural instead of visual melee) reminded me of James P. Johnson's description of a trick drummer of ragtime days who activated a wagon wheel behind his bass drum, on which were arrayed all manner of traps. (Though New Orleans had the tailgate, New York at least had one of the wheels!)

Obviously Riffin' John Blackman is not in the same league with Warren (Baby) Dodds (one of the great masters of New Orleans drums, heard on FP 30, who played a few homemade contraptions in his youth, before he could afford a drum) but nevertheless I thought of Baby, particularly on When The Saints Go Marching In, where the "drums" almost sing the famous old gospel song. The effect of contrasting rhythms also adds to the suggestion of marching bands related to jazz. On up-tempo tunes (e.g. Alabama Bound) the uncomplicated suggestion of such rhythms reminds one of some styles of Rock and Roll drumming.

On numbers where there is a slight drag, as on blues (e.g. Basin Street Blues) he seems almost to choke the beat (a trick done very rhythmically in jazz in brass, usually by the medium-sized drums). And he sometimes has what might be described as a Dixielandish yo-yo rhythm but instead of succumbing to a Dixieland bounce there is a powerful suck and snap -- the percussion (traps) and the tonality (voice and kazoo) are attenuated, never disparate-- like the ball attached to the paddle by a rubber band. "Keep that rhythm with it," says John on Take-Off No. 2, and that's what he does. This rhythmic effect is notable on Some of These Days, and elsewhere.

I notice in an English magazine there is quite a learned piece on the contraptions used in skiffle bands, which are enjoying a special popularity there where the generic term has been extended to singers who are categorized here as Rhythm and Blues or Rock and Roll, such as Lonnie Donnegan (who has popularized some of Lead Belly's songs). There are even comparisons of the washtub bass to the African earthbow. We needn't go into that here except to remark, for those interested in such relationships (of Blackman's 5 gal. oil can to its predecessors) that Folkways has an excellent set devoted to skiffle bands, FA 2610, and an LP set of folk music of western Alabama, FP 417, in which the relationships of African and American instruments are illustrated and discussed in an introduction by anthropologist Harold Courlander.

In listening to these tunes, if you accept the crudity (as I do) it will be not because you like it but because you know you'll live through it to

enjoy the many listenable qualities in the work of John Blackman. In his singing, and especially in the scat style he calls "riffin'," there is at times such felicitous use of his blatantly limited vocal resources as to recommend him for at least a consolation prize when John S. Wilson (ref. *N.Y. Sunday Times*, July 21, 1957) makes up his next honors list of "No Voice' Jazz." The piece referred to described singers who make some very solid bricks with (it must be noted) a little more straw than our one-man band has at his disposal. When Riffin' John starts flattin', he flats all over the place and your only recourse is to forget the diatonic scale and forget the melodic line (except in a few instances where he re-moulds it miraculously, if roughly) and listen to the interplay of tonality and rhythm.

The *Sheik of Araby* has a good riding beat, riffin' and scattin' chorus and whirlwind percussion breaks wind things up. After a slightly pedestrian kazoo chorus, *St. Louis Blues* picks up and finds both the vocal and the kazoo in an agreeable blues-jazz mood.

Side 1: *Take-Off No. 1*; *Some of These Days*; *Basin Street Blues*; *The Sheik of Araby*; *When The Saints Go Marching In*; *St. Louis Blues*; *The Blackman Special*.

Side 2: *Take-Off No. 2*; *Careless Love*; *Alabama Bound*; *John Blackman Blues*; *Some of These Days*.



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