

# AMERICAN SKIFFLE BAND

FA 2610

Folkways Records & Service Corp., New York



THE MEMPHIS JUG BAND  
CANNON'S JUG STOMPERS

THE MOBILE STRUGGLERS

carlis

descriptive notes are inside pocket

recorded in Alabama. Texas & Tennessee  
by Samuel B. Charters



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FOLKWAYS RECORDS Album No FA 2610

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GUS CANNON 1925? (S.CHARTERS PHOTO)

#### THE SKIFFLE BAND

##### An Introduction

Samuel Barclay Charters

There was always music in the streets of the South. Singers, instrumentalists, evangelists. The cries of a man selling fruit become little songs. The smaller cities were shopping centers for the farm families around them and the streets on the weekends were crowded. Musicians, colored, white, some of them blind, stood on street corners or in doorways with a tin cup or a hat in front of them, playing and singing for a little money. For horse race or county fairs, with their crowds and excitement, there were little instrumental groups. Children playing on homemade instruments, string bands of all kinds, and skiffle bands.

The skiffle band was an instrumental group that used homemade instruments,\* like washboards, jugs, harmonicas, kazoo, washtub basses, tin flutes, slide whistles, or woodblocks with a guitar or banjo and a lot of singing. There was no special music. They played popular songs, waltzes, comic songs, minstrel show walk-arounds, anything that was well received. There were white skiffle bands and colored skiffle bands. There was a long European tradition of street entertaining, with instruments like guitars and one string basses, and there was a long African tradition of wandering minstrels with zithers or harps and drums. The instrumental styles were so much alike it was often hard to tell one group from another on the early recordings.

\* Most of these instruments have a primitive counterpart many of African origin. (M.A. Production Director)

After three young men playing a comb, a kazoo, and a banjo and calling themselves the Mound City Blue Blowers made a hit record of "Arkansas Blues" in the early 1920's skiffle instruments became popular on the vaudeville circuits and in occasional jazz bands. When the first race recordings were made in the South about 1927 a few genuine skiffle bands were recorded. Most of the records were long blues vocals with an instrumental accompaniment, but there was a core of instrumental music with a tight, hot rhythmic feeling and a strong melodic line, almost strident in quality. This was the distinctive skiffle sound, the sound that no other group had. The bands in Memphis, the Memphis Jug Band and Cannon's Jug Stompers, were extensively recorded, but there are scattered recordings done in cities like Dallas, Cincinnati, and Nashville with this same swinging, exuberant sound.

Since the '20's the skiffle band has almost disappeared. For most of the younger colored musicians street entertaining has many unpleasant social implications, and the older musicians were very unpopular with local police in the depression years. The radio and the phonograph have had so much influence that the skiffle sound has almost been lost. There are a few groups still playing, but in many cities, like Memphis, it is against the law to play on the streets, and the musician's union makes it almost impossible to play indoors.

The recordings here were done in the South between 1954 and 1957, in Alabama, Texas, and Tennessee. The musicians were all older men, and they had been playing most of their lives. One of the groups, the Mobile Strugglers, was still together, after more than twenty years of playing. For the Memphis musicians, two from the Memphis Jug Band and Gus Cannon, it was the first time together as a skiffle band in many years. From all of them there was a lot of music, and every now and then a moment of the skiffle sound.

#### SIDE ONE - THE MOBILE STRUGGLERS - Recorded in Mobile, Alabama, July 18, 1954

Band 1. COME ALONG COME ALONG. LITTLE CHILDREN, WHILE THE MOON IS SHINING BRIGHT ... MY MISTRESS PROMISED ME WHEN SHE DIED SHE'D SET ME FREE ... I DON'T BELIEVE SHE'S GOING TO DIE AT ALL ... COME ALONG, LITTLE CHILDREN, WE'RE GONNA RAISE A RUCKUS TONIGHT.

Raise a Ruckus Tonight - Ollie Crenshaw, kazoo, guitar, and vocal; Moochie Reeves, guitar and vocal; Tyler Jackson, washtub bass and vocal.

Band 2. I WANT YOU TO ROCK ME UNTIL THE SUN GOES DOWN ... I WANT YOU TO ROCK ME LIKE YOU ROCK YOUR BABY CHILD ...

Rock Me, Baby - Moochie Reeves, guitar and vocal; Ollie Crenshaw, guitar; Tyler Jackson, washtub bass.

Band 3. My Bonnie Lies Over The Ocean - Ollie Crenshaw, kazoo, guitar, and vocal; Moochie Reeves, guitar and vocal; Tyler Jackson, washtub bass and vocal.

Band 4. TROUBLE TROUBLE'S FOLLOWED ME ALL MY DAYS ... IT SEEMS LIKE TROUBLE'S GONNA CARRY ME TO MY GRAVE ... IF I HAD WINGS LIKE OLD NOAH'S MOVE I WOULD HOIST MY WINGS I WOULD FLY TO THE WOMAN I LOVE.

Trouble Trouble's Followed Me All My Days (Crenshaw) - Ollie Crenshaw, vocal and guitar; Moochie Reeves, guitar; Tyler Jackson, washtub bass.

VIRGIL PERKINS AND JACK SIMS - Recorded in Houston, Texas, November 6, 1955.





Me, Baby" was a popular record in the 1930's, and Moochie learned it from the record. "Raise A Ruckus Tonight" is widely known in the South, and is probably of minstrel show origin.

Virgil Perkins, the washboard player, was an old member of the Strugglers, and his sister had his address in Houston. He was not used to singing, but he was a stunning washboard player and a natural entertainer. He was working as a gardener, playing a little for the fun of it. His playing was rhythmically very supple, with a great deal of tonal variety. He would use the metal scrub board, the boards wooden sides or a pan lid nailed on the top. He was an exciting musician, and in both "Goin' Around the Mountain" and "John Henry" there was a strong, sharp beat. Both the songs had been favorites of the Strugglers.

SIDE TWO - THE MEMPHIS JUG BAND AND GUS CANNON -  
Recorded in Memphis, Dec. 5, 1956

Band 1. Harmonica and Guitar Blues - Will Shade, harmonica; Charlie Burse, tenor guitar.

Band 2. YOU'VE BEEN TIPPIN' 'ROUND ON ME BABY ... BUT THAT AWFUL TIME'S GONNA TELL. ALL RIGHT, BABY, THAT'S ALL RIGHT ...

Tippin' 'Round (Burse) - Charlie Burse, tenor guitar and vocal; Will Shade, guitar; Gus Cannon, jug.

Band 3. Interview - Gus Cannon

a.) Old John Booker, You Call That Gone - Gus Cannon, 5-string banjo and vocal

b.) Kansas City Blues - Gus Cannon, 5-string banjo and vocal

Band 4. WHAT YOU GONNA DO, BABY ... WHEN YOUR TROUBLE'S GET LIKE MINE. TAKE A MOUTHFUL OF SUGAR ... DRINK A BOTTLE OF TURPENTINE. I ALL CAN'T STAND IT ... I ALL CAN'T STAND IT.

What You Gonna Do, Baby, When Your Troubles Get Like Mine (Shade) - Will Shade, guitar and vocal; Gus Cannon, interjections

Band 5. Interview - Will Shade and Charlie Burse

Band 6. NICKEL'S A NICKEL. DIME'S A DIME ... HOUSE FULL OF CHILDREN, NONE OF THEM'S MINE ... TAKE YOUR FINGERS OFF IT, YOU KNOW IT DON'T BELONG TO YOU.

Take Your Fingers Off It - Will Shade, harmonica and vocal; Charlie Burse, tenor guitar and vocal; Gus Cannon, jug.

Will Shade, the leader of the old Memphis Jug Band, was working in a tire vulcanizing plant in Memphis, and he got in touch with Charlie Burse, who had been with the Memphis Jug Band on most of the Victor Recordings. Neither of them had seen Gus Cannon for several months, but Shade thought he might be able to locate him. I went to pick up Shade at his room, and he, Burse, and Gus Cannon were sitting there waiting for me. Somebody had seen Cannon going into a laundry and told him Shade was trying to find him. Cannon, who was 73, was working as a handyman for a wealthy family outside of town. Burse was in business for himself as a house painter.

Victor had done a lot of recording in Memphis, and paid Shade a weekly salary from 1927 until about 1931. He wrote most of the songs the Memphis Jug Band recorded, kept the group together, and handled the business arrangements. He had been playing around on the streets in Memphis, and got the idea for a jug band from the recordings of Clifford Hayes' Louis-

Band 5. Interview - Virgil Perkins

Band 6. WHITE MAN HE SLEEPS IN A ROSEWOOD BED ... BROWNSKIN HE DOES THE SAME ... BLACK MAN MAKES HIM A PALLET DOWN ON THE FLOOR BUT HE'S SLEEPIN' JUST THE SAME

Goin' Around The Mountain - Virgil Perkins, kazoo, washboard, and vocal; Jack Sims, 12-string guitar.

Band 7. John Henry - Virgil Perkins, kazoo, washboard, and vocal; Jack Sims, 12-string guitar

I heard Ollie Crenshaw and Virgil Perkins playing together on a street corner in Mobile one hot summer night in 1951, and when I went back to Mobile in 1954 three of us walked the streets for days without finding them. Virgil had moved to Houston, and Ollie had gone to Selma, Alabama. They were both members of a band called the Mobile Strugglers. There was no steady personnel, and about fifteen men were more or less attached to the group. A violinist named Fields was the bands nominal leader, but he was quite sick. A small group had been in New Orleans for a Mardi Gras in the 1949's and later recorded for Bill Russell in Montgomery, Alabama, but neither Ollie or Virgil had been with them. As we were about to leave a women called to us that she had just seen two of the band driven by in a truck. Ollie, a guitarist named Moochie Reeves, and a washtub bass player named Tyler Jackson had come down from Selma for the weekend to move some furniture.

Moochie and Ollie had their instruments with them, but Tyler Jackson had been drinking the night before and was in jail. \$12 bail got him out and \$1 got him a new washtub. He and Ollie found a broomstick and a piece of clothes line to put together a washtub bass. Moochie and Ollie were sharecropping a small farm outside of Selma; Tyler was working as a bricklayer in Montgomery, Alabama. They had brought the instruments with them to play for old friends.

The Strugglers had always played on the streets, and their music had a strong, almost shouted quality. They were trying for volume, and vocal subtleties were not particularly important. Moochie did most of the singing because he had the heaviest voice. The music was harmonically uncomplicated, the rhythms strong dance rhythms. Ollie played with finger picks, Moochie with a flat pick.

Most of the music was derivative. They played popular songs, blues, waltzes, comic songs; anything that would get something into the hat. Ollie's blues, "Trouble Trouble's Followed Me All My Days", a beautifully sustained and developed rural blues, but "Rock





ville, Kentucky, group, The Dixie Jug Blowers. Burse joined him about 1928, and they are still playing with a small group that has Shade playing either jug or washtub bass. Burse had recorded in the 1930's with a group called Charlie Burse's Memphis Mudcats, but the records were not successful.

Cannon was an older man, from Red Bank, Mississippi, and he'd been a medicine show entertainer most of his life. He saw a man named Bob Dennison, from Nashville, playing a piece of pipe in a tent show, and he had a small metal jug made with a kazoo attached. He played the jug and kazoo along with his banjo, and finally got a small group to record with Victor under the name Cannon's Jug Stompers. The Jug Stompers, with the excellent harmonica player, Noah Lewis, played some of the most exciting skiffle music that was ever recorded.

The four of us divided up the little money I had - leaving me \$2.83 to get back to New Orleans. The music was exuberantly careless, and they played until it was too dark to see the instruments. Cannon played two of the songs he had used on the medicine shows, Jim Jackson's famous "Kansas City Blues", and a very old banjo song, "Old John Booker, You Call That Gone", just as he'd played them on small, torchlit stages in fields and on street corners throughout the South. He changed tempo freely, mugged at the audience, laughed at the songs, and danced some with his playing. It was a fine medicine show pitch. He played the banjo with his fingers, rather than with a pick, and the banjo was tuned C-G-B-D, with a G' drone string.

Burse and Shade were very used to recording, and used songs they had been writing in the years since the Memphis Jug Band had recorded. "Take Your Fingers Off It" was recorded by the band about 1928, and uses one of the most popular melodies in the early jazz period. The best known version is probably with the words "You Got To See Your Mama Every Night". Cannon used a number of different approaches to the jug, blowing directly into it at one point.

The Memphis music was different from the music of the Mobile Strugglers in both style and material. The Memphis musicians were not primarily street singers, and they didn't use the popular material that the Strugglers had to use to earn a little money. They were much more self-conscious about their music, and very concerned about singing their own songs. Their playing was not strongly rhythmic, but they played with a light, swinging beat, and a fine awareness of vocal style. They were elderly musicians, remembering a day - and a sound - that had long since passed.

The recordings in each case were done by S.B. Charters.



EARLY PICTURE OF A JUVENILE "SKIFFLE BAND"  
FOLKWAYS PICTURE