

MUSIC FROM THE SOUTH

Field recordings taken in Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi under a grant from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation by Frederic Ramsey, Jr. With photographs, notes, and personnels.

VOLUME **5** SONG, PLAY, AND DANCE FOLKWAYS RECORDS FA 2654



MUSIC FROM THE SOUTH

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

PHOTOGRAPH BY FREDERIC RAMSEY, JR.

FOX CHASE
BUCK DANCE BY HARRY RUTLEDGE
TAKE ROCKS AND GRAVEL (TO) MAKE A SOLID
ROAD (RAILROAD BLUES)
ME AND MY SHORT BOX (or PORK CHOP)
SATURDAY NIGHT HOE-DOWN (tagment)
I FEEL GOOD NOW, BABY
BLIND CHILD
HEAD-SHOULDER BABY
I ASKED MY MOTHER FOR FIFTY CENTS

TALK ABOUT JESUS
BLUES
HOOTCHE KOOTCHE
IT'S TIGHT LIKE THAT
SEE SEE MAMA
MEMPHIS MAIL
BUCK DANCE BY JOE TUCKER
FORTY-FOUR
EASY RIDER

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INTRODUCTION

All recordings presented on ten 12" longplay records by Folkways under the series title, "Music from the South," are the outcome of work carried on during 1954 in Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi, under a grant from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation.

Our broad purpose was to explore the Afro-American musical environment in as many areas of the South as time and the Fellowship permitted. As a tentative but not binding objective, we hoped to tap as many sources as possible that would lead us back to the music and the story of the period 1860 to 1900 -- roughly, to years just before and after Emancipation (1863), or to that other date used so generally for southern reckoning, the year of "the Surrender." (1865)

For this reason, the majority of persons who were sought out, and who recorded, were between 60 and 95 years old. Exceptions were made whenever younger persons (Scott Dunbar, Ella Cash, Dorothy Melton, young gospel singers, and children who sang play songs) played and sang in any one of several ways -- e.g., word content, playing style, vocal style -- that related to the earlier period. The period 1860 - 1900 was not chosen for spurious or capricious reasons. It is a period which saw the development, principally in New Orleans, of a dance music which later evolved into the form, or forms of a form, which is now called jazz. It is doubtful, however, if the word "jazz" worked its way into our common speech much before the years of World War I, and even then not as a tag for music.

It is not doubtful, however, that the musics played in New Orleans related to the folk backgrounds of those who played. The environment of New Orleans itself was urban; yet many musicians who came to play in New Orleans came directly from the country, or

sprang from country stock that had emigrated to New Orleans. This is not to say that all early dance music of New Orleans was purely country or folk in origin; quite the contrary, the urban music that developed was a fusion of many complex elements, of which "country" was one part. It seems possible, now, to say that some of the country elements may have come in through the horns, which are closest to the human voice. But again, not all music played by horns was country music. Other country elements were carried in directly by voice, and by the accompanying instruments, the guitar and banjo. The city contributed a well-established tradition of fairly sophisticated reed-playing, the proficiency which musicians developed by playing on hundreds of occasions in march and dance bands, and the cosmopolitan, "mixing" attitude which permitted so many elements -- Africanisms, Spanish melody and rhythm, Caribbean music, and European classic music -- all to come together.

But along with all this, there was always an undertone, felt probably more by "American" Negroes than by the Creoles, of the music from a country environment. This is the background of music which can be loosely grouped as comprising chants, jubilees, hymns, and spirituals, on the religious side, and the field hollers, play songs, blues, reels, and rags, on the secular side.

"Each Sunday Bolden went to church," it was once stated by Bud Scott (veteran guitarist, 1890 - 1950. Record Changer, September, 1947), "and that's where he got his idea of jazz music. I think I am the first one who started four beat for guitar and that's where I heard it . . . all down strokes, four straight down."

It is even possible, that in the earliest, most fluctuant period when the new, evolving music was being played, less of the country influence predominated.

SONG, PLAY AND DANCE

By

Frederic Ramsey, Jr.

But as the music developed more and more into a new way of playing, the country repertoire began to be incorporated into the new music with greater frequency. It is for these two principal reasons -- the presence, in early bands, of country horn men, and the presence, in later performances, of a repertoire of country songs, that it was felt that more of the country material, especially material relating to the formative years of the new music, should be sought out and recorded. Our method was to go into the most remote rural regions and seek out, by word-of-mouth enquiry, all persons who could sing, play, or dance. Except in New Orleans, no one "took us" to persons who would record. We found them ourselves, and talked with them in their own homes. The recordings were taken in cabins, on front porches, in fields and in yards. No one was ever asked to "come into town" or "make an appointment at a studio" when we wanted to get something down on tape. The tape, the microphones, and the recording machines went to the people who talked and sang and played for them. It was our feeling that it was easier for any one to remember, to talk, and to sing, when surrounded by his children, his friends, by interested neighbors and familiar passersby. We sought the everyday environment to which so much of music heard in the South relates.

Some rules of exclusion were maintained. Aside from work in the New Orleans area, recordings were taken in regions where no one else had worked. Our reason for this was simply to avoid duplication of material obtained by other collectors. For example, the county in western Alabama, Livingston, where both the Lomaxes and Harold Courlander had worked, was not selected for any recording. It was felt that the Lomaxes and especially Courlander, whose magnificent "Negro Folk Music of Western Alabama" is represented on Folkways P 417 and P 418, had already done this specific job. It was required to find new persons whose song and recollection could be tapped.

Another rule of exclusion applied to persons who had already recorded, and to professional performers. With the single exception of Elder David Ross of New Orleans, who had recorded privately for Dick Allen and Sam Charters of that city, no person had, at the date of recording, done previous work before the microphones. Every person heard in the entire series of "Music from the South" is, therefore, new to records. None are professionals.

By avoiding duplication, we wished to show both the richness and range of new material still to be heard in the South. It is hoped that this demonstration will stimulate others to collect material which, of later years, has been assumed by many to be no longer extant.

It is this writer's conviction that a few months of work in some counties of the states selected has only begun to assess the wealth of material available. Before it can be assumed that southern music is extinct, we shall have to hear from every county and every sub-division of every county. Our work can only be regarded, in comparison to such an extensive and long-range project, as a series of experimental drillings. Much remains to be found, and much remains to be recorded and documented. It might not hurt, however, to point out that the time for such work to be accomplished falls within the next ten, possibly twenty, years. For the strong tradition of music, and the way of life which engendered it, lamented or lamentable as that may seem, are both fading irrevocably as changes come to the South.

-- Frederic Ramsey, Jr.

Ever since the 1920's, when record companies began to send weighty "portable" apparatus to southern cities to record Negro musicians, there has been evidence that performers were numerous in certain districts. The fact that so much talent was available when machines were set up in cities like New Orleans, Louisiana, Jackson, Mississippi, or Atlanta, Georgia, pointed to a large group of singers and a large repertoire of song. Although this procedure provided fairly thorough coverage of certain urban centers, it still left open the possibility that many less professionally minded singers did exist in smaller cities and remote country areas. Further, the ample repertory of song brought in by men who did get to the temporary recording studios seemed to reveal that there was more music to be heard throughout the South than could be discovered by commercial methods.

Later, recordings taken for the Library of Congress by John and Alan Lomax uncovered still further evidence of a widespread musical tradition. In general, the Lomaxes excluded professionals and took many recordings in state penal institutions, as they were looking especially for survivals, especially of secular music, that had been preserved in these islands of exile.

This meant that even as late as 1954, little recording had been done of everyday singers and players who were still performing in city homes and remote country areas.

The tapes heard in this fifth volume of "Music from the South" group performances taken in two country areas and one home in a smaller city. All music is played by non-professional musicians; the Vicksburg musicians, however, do come closer than the others to professional status. They have played for parties, although none makes his living from music alone.

In Alabama, several kinds of music and dance were found to exist side by side, and no attempt was made to separate them. Thus, on the first side, there is a Fox Chase played by Horace Sprott on the French harp, or harmonica, in the traditional manner. It is a style suggesting Sonny Terry, and a country music built of mimicry of country sounds. It is followed by a buck dance from Harry Rutledge with harmonica accompaniment by Sprott. These two neighbors often share whatever seasonal work they can get; the week before, they had put in long hours on a log crew clearing bottomland timber. (see photograph, Sprott folder).

Led by Sprott, some of the men present got together quite spontaneously to sing an old blues, Take Rocks and Gravel to Make a Solid Road. No one was trying for a polished performance, and it is a good illustration of the way a song will come out whenever people of this region get together. All these recordings were taken in a three-room cabin on a Saturday morning, with the cabin floor swaying from heavy throbs of the buck dance.

On a Saturday evening one week later, recordings were taken in a neighboring dog-trot cabin, with a large group of people coming and going all

night long. It was a good time, with youngsters dancing while Philip Ramsey and his wife played the guitar or while Philip and Sprott filled in with song, harmonica, and guitar. At one point in the evening, a group of younger girls came up and wanted to sing a religious song. Philip said, "ain't going to be nothing good," but he pulled up alongside them anyway and came in with them on his guitar as they sang Talk About Jesus. Bands 7, 8, and 9 were taken three weeks later in Harry Rutledge's home while catfish from the nearby Cahaba were sizzling in the kitchen lean-to. The children, who up to that time had contributed only the one song that ends this side, came up that evening with three; dancing, patting their hands, and bringing back some very old words in very high spirits.

The Vicksburg recordings were taken on a hot, hot evening in the small front room of Tom Johnson, a butcher in a general store of the Marcus Bottom district. All along the Mississippi, I had been hearing about "those little old string bands, used to make pretty good music." Once, the string bands were quite numerous; little, informal organizations, often made up of amateur musicians, who roamed the streets on holidays and at a carnival time. In some districts, they played for private parties, or got together to serenade a friend. To the best of our knowledge, only two recordings of string bands had ever been made: one, the now very rare session with four string instruments, organized by Dr. Edmond Souchon of New Orleans; and the other, a record taken by William Russell in Alabama of a string band calling itself "The Mobile Strugglers." The New Orleans group, known as "The Six and Seven-Eighths Band," had recorded for a "New Orleans Originals" label. I had hoped to get down still another group from a new region. When I first talked with Tom Johnson, he told me that he knew several men who had once played in string bands, and promised to try to get a few of them together for a session. "We don't want you to fire no blank cartridge in Vicksburg," he assured me with some pride.

As the day of the session arrived, the hope of getting a full complement of musicians for a string band dwindled. A handful of old-timers showed up for the date, but none of them had instruments. So they took turns on the guitar and mandolin provided by the owner of the store where Tom worked. Toward the end of the evening, John Copeland, playing a mandolin, and Johnson, playing guitar, got into the feeling of the music and played several titles that are old favorites with them. Four of these are included here: two blues, See See Mama and their version of the Memphis; a fast, light rag, described as "an old hootchie kootchie routine," and Tom Johnson's version of It's Tight Like That, a tune that has rolled across every boundary line of the South, picking up a different set of lyrics with each crossing. The two strains of jazz evoked by their music are quite different, and suggest that in Vicksburg, an old, wide-open town, musicians from all up and down and across the river may have left their imprint. In the rag, there's something of the feeling of the old Bennie Moten Kansas City Orchestra; in the Blues, and in Hootchie Kootchie, there are echoes of the tenderloin circuit as Jelly Roll Morton knew it. They are included here as samples of a way of playing that has been very little documented; nor is it likely that many more string band recordings will ever be made.

In southwestern Mississippi, and at the very end of a trail that fords creeks and winds through high bluffs and under tall groves of cypress and swamp oak,

Scott Dunbar lives in a cabin anchored by wires to nearby trees. The cabin is in a clearing, and at the edge of the clearing, the ground drops down sharp to the edge of Old River Lake. The lake used to be part of the Mississippi River; but a cut-out changed the course, and now the lake is a fisherman's paradise. Dunbar presides over it with all the knowing that years of experience can bring. He makes his living by taking parties out on the lake when the catfish are biting. If they're not biting, he simply won't go out; his word is rule. He is prognosticator and weather bureau and guide all in one.

At night, when the small fleet of outboard motors is tied up at the lake's edge, Scott pulls out his guitar and "touches it up." His wife, Celeste, stands by, and his two daughters take their places on a bench pulled up alongside a table under a big swamp oak. In the tall, moss-textured cypresses overhead, cicadas are already singing, and from across the lake, a hollering of alligators booms a response. Working his way into a tune, Scott hums it along with the strings that begin to move under his fingers. His foot, pounding the caked mud, keeps time; the dry dirt comes up in clouds of dust, and soon the cake is patted smooth.

Some of the numbers Scott plays are "made-up tunes," like Sweet Mamma Rolling Stone, or 44 Blues, songs he has fashioned for himself from other songs. He plays the old river song, Tell Ma, Alberta, and Celeste sings with him for a blues, Vicksburg on a High Hill, Mamma. Some of the songs have come to him, as did Memphis Mail, from old-timers in the region who have danced and played before him; some are from the juke boxes. There are relatively few of these in Wilkinson County, Mississippi. Others are old rousters' river songs, picked up from the men who still beat their way through along the bottomlands. The old river tradition with its outlaws and bad men who take to the brush and bayous for cover, still runs strong along these banks.

Still playing, Scott shifts into a reel, smiling a little at his daughter, Rose; she gets up from the bench and gropes her way, softly and lovingly, into motions made up as she goes along. She dances for the earth, bending over it with arms outstretched and ready to embrace; her hips sway over and across it, up and down with the thrust of the rhythm.

One day, we cranked our cars and went over the dusty roads to Fort Adams, and then from Fort Adams back along the bluffs from where we could see the swamp and brush and gaugmire and twisting river. Louisiana was on the other side. Near Pond, which is a crossroads a few miles up the road from Pinckneyville, we gathered at Uncle Rich Jolla's home. Joe Tucker, Scott's neighbor at Old River Lake, came along, and when a few tunes had been played on the guitar, Joe leaped into a buck dance on the loose board floor of Uncle Rich's front porch. He flew so high so fast it was hard to see his feet; only the steady roll of the boards was proof that he was coming down as fast as he went up.

Some one asked if Scott knew the "Easy Rider." He began to play it, and Rose Dunbar came forward from the little group gathered around Scott. She was dressed in a neatly tailored pair of matador slacks, with a printed flower blouse and sash to match. The colors all began to spin and mix as she threw herself into motion. Somehow, the song and dance caught fire; Scott leaped up from his chair to join the dance, still playing his guitar and singing. Celeste, dancing too, pointed at Rose and shouted out her lines, the old lines that have echoed up and down the

bottoms long before they got into the jazz lyrics of New Orleans.

"Come here mamma, look at sis,

She's standin' on the corner tryin' to do that twist,

Come here, you. . .tryin' to be a woman an' you don't know how"

while Rose stayed with it, proved it to the ground that she did know how. With Scott's final "Hooo!" and the last notes of the guitar, she flopped down on her chair, panting, while Scott pulled out a big red handkerchief and wiped the sweat from his face.

Celeste got her breath back first. Turning to the white-haired man who had stood by, smiling and keeping time gently as a deacon of the church knows how to do, she grinned broadly, pulling in her breath before she spoke: "Now, Uncle Rich. . .that wasn't none of me!"

SCOTT AND CELESTE DUNBAR, recording for the portable tape machine. Their home is in background.

PHILIP RAMSEY, guitar player heard on Side 1. He stands before front door of his cabin, near Dobine Creek.



ROSE DUNBAR, DANCER

CHILDREN CROSSING FIELD, near Scott Station, Alabama.

MUSIC FROM THE SOUTH, VOLUME 5: SONG, PLAY AND DANCE

Side 1

BAND 1

SELECTION 1: FOX CHASE

HORACE SPROTT, Harmonica and voice. Recorded near Cahaba River, Perry County, Alabama, April 10, 1954.

TIME: 1:37

BAND 2

SELECTION 2: BUCK DANCE BY HARRY RUTLEDGE

With HORACE SPROTT, harmonica. Near Cahaba River, Perry County, Alabama, April 10, 1954.

TIME: 0:55

BAND 3

SELECTION 3: TAKE ROCKS AND GRAVEL (TO) MAKE A SOLID ROAD (RAILROAD BLUES)

HORACE SPROTT, voice, harmonica; group. Near Cahaba River, Perry County, Alabama, April 10, 1954.

TIME: 2:42

BAND 4

SELECTION 4: ME AND MY SHORT BOX (or PORK CHOP)

MRS. PHILIP RAMSEY, guitar and vocal. Recorded near Dobine Creek, Perry County, Alabama, April 17, 1954.

TIME 2:52½

BAND 5

SELECTION 5: SATURDAY NIGHT HOE-DOWN (fragment)

HORACE SPROTT, harmonica, and PHILIP RAMSEY, guitar and kazoo. Near Dobine Creek, Perry County, Alabama, April 17, 1954.

TIME: 1:50

BAND 6

SELECTION 6: I FEEL GOOD NOW, BABY

PHILIP RAMSEY, guitar and vocal, with HORACE SPROTT, harmonica. Near Dobine Creek, Perry County, Alabama, April 17, 1954.

TIME: 3:22

ends on "That's a thriller, let's go!" . . .

BAND 7

SELECTION 7: BLIND CHILD

Group of children, including BERENICE and EUNICE FORD, BESSIE LEE DANIELS, and others. Near Dobine Creek, Perry County, Alabama, May 8, 1954.

TIME: 2:23

BAND 8

SELECTION 8: HEAD-SHOULDER BABY

Same group, place, date, as for 7 (above).

TIME: 1:04

BAND 9

SELECTION 9: I ASKED MY MOTHER FOR FIFTY CENTS

Same group, place, date, as for 7 and 8 (above)

TIME: 1:19

BAND 10

SELECTION 10: TALK ABOUT JESUS (Note: cf. DIDN'T HE RAMBLE)

Group of children, including ROSEMARY DANIELS, BERENICE FORD, EUNICE FORD, others; accompanied by PHILIP RAMSEY, guitar. Near Dobine Creek, Perry County, Alabama, April 17, 1954.

TIME: 1:33

Side 2

BAND 1

SELECTION 1: BLUES

Mississippi String Band. TOM JOHNSON, guitar, and JOHN COPELAND, mandolin. Vicksburg, Mississippi, June 29, 1954.

TIME: 2:24 (incl. tune-up @ beg.)

BAND 2

SELECTION 2: HOOTCHIE KOOTCHIE

Mississippi String Band. JOHN COPELAND, guitar; TOM JOHNSON, mandolin. Vicksburg, Mississippi, June 29, 1954.

TIME: 1:52

BAND 3

SELECTION 3: IT'S TIGHT LIKE THAT

TOM JOHNSON, vocal and guitar; JOHN COPELAND, mandolin. Same date, place, as above.

TIME: 2:03 (incl. tune-up)

BAND 4

SELECTION 4: SEE SEE MAMA

TOM JOHNSON, vocal and guitar; JOHN COPELAND, mandolin. Date, place, as above.

TIME: 2:00

SIDE 2

BAND 5

SELECTION 5: MEMPHIS MAIL
(comes in on quick gain)

SCOTT DUNBAR, guitar. Recorded near Old River Lake, Mississippi, June 24, 1954.

TIME: 3:06

BAND 6

SELECTION 6: BUCK DANCE BY JOE TUCKER
(comes in on guitar note full level)

SCOTT DUNBAR, guitar. Near Pond, Mississippi, June 25, 1954.

TIME: 2:12, ends on "That's enough!"

BAND 7

(next band comes in on guitar strum... "Forty-four comin' up... Dunbar... by Scott Dunbar...)

SELECTION 7: FORTY-FOUR

SCOTT DUNBAR, guitar. Near Pond, Mississippi, June 25, 1954.

TIME: 4:13

ends on ... "That's enough, now. . ."

BAND 8

SELECTION 8: EASY RIDER

SCOTT DUNBAR, guitar and vocal; CELESTE DUNBAR, vocal; ROSIE DUNBAR, dancer. Pond, Mississippi, June 25, 1954.

TIME: 3:43

For Additional
Information About
FOLKWAYS
RELEASES
of Interest

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