

FOLKWAYS RECORDS, NY FG 3586

BIG BILL BROONZY



interviewed by

STUDS TERKEL

*introduction by
Charles E. Smith*

PLOUGH-HAND BLUES

C.C. RIDER

BILL BAILEY

WILLIE MAE BLUES

THIS TRAIN

MULE RIDIN', TALKING BLUES

KEY TO THE HIGHWAY

BLACK, BROWN AND WHITE

JOE TURNER NO. 1

Rosenhouse



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BIG BILL AND THE COUNTRY BLUES

by
Charles Edward Smith

"I don't want the old blues to die because if they do I'll be dead, too, because that's the only kind I can play and sing and I love the old style."
-- Big Bill Broonzy in "Big Bill Blues"

The country blues draw upon the warp and woof of folk music, weaving a fabric that is sometimes a gaudy patchwork, sometimes a pattern breath-taking in its simple sureness of design. The blues are not really very old by that name, possibly not much older than jazz, which acquired its present name only in this century. But though the blues, by that name, seem rare before the 1890's, the songs they describe are probably as old as the spirituals, to which they may have played a secondary, secular part prior to Emancipation. Both are related to chants and hollers and to a thousand and one other influences as well.

And though the sacred and "sinful" songs were often regarded as incompatible -- and there were those who would sing the one but never the other -- the tonal and rhythmic heritage knew no such barriers and was in some respects the same for both. In fact, the number of singers known to have sung both but who kept them in separate compartments, so to speak, increases with our knowledge of singers and songs. And in any case, it was the social milieu of each that was regarded as separate, not the music. This was dramatized in Big Bill's life when he had to choose between being a part-time preacher or a country fiddler who sang songs. The choice was a happy one for those who love country music and the blues.

The country blues singer, like the urban blues singer of that period, was not limited to blues. He played and sang all manner of songs, and often supplied music for dancers. He was country cousin to those itinerant piano players whom Jelly Roll Morton called "single-handed entertainers". Big Bill played for dancers at two-way picnics (segregated, but sharing the same music) and Ma Rainey, the first great urban blues singer, sang novelty songs behind the Coleman lanterns that marked off the footlights in the tent shows of the minstrels. Both were singing blues when the name for these songs really began to catch on. At that time, in the north, the blues were relegated to an inferior place and derogated as "down-home" music but in both city and country music in the South, as regards Negro audiences, the blues often climaxed a performance.

Though the general use of the term blues was late in taking hold -- and thus given a tremendous boost on the popular music scene when W. C. Handy first published one -- the word had been used in songs and about songs long before it came into general use. No one knows exactly how early the blues, to distinguish these songs so closely related to the so-called "primitive" spirituals, were first given that name. What Big Bill says on this point, in his interview with Studs Terkel, may have been true for his locality* but from evidence

* Does this indicate that the use of the word caught on more rapidly in cities? The evidence is of course too fragmentary to say. Big Bill's remark that faster-tempo tunes were slowed down to become blues is interesting, especially as regards the melodic richness and variety in blues. Conversely, blues have supplied the melodies for countless tunes, probably hundreds, if not thousands, in the Rock and

Roll field alone (which also borrows from spirituals). Jazzmen increased the tempos of both blues and early rags, converting them into joys and stomps. Many a Tin Pan Alley song was parlayed into a money rider from a simple blues origin. Some very fine songs in show music and popular music are based on blues, one of the best being Gershwin's Summertime.

at hand it would appear that the blues were called that, at least by some of the men who sang and played them in the low-life dives of New Orleans, in the 19th Century. The low drags were often blues (known all over the South and in early ragtime; even in urban centers of the North) and oftentimes the "coon shout," which was called that even in The Freeman, a leading Negro weekly, was closely related to the shoutin' blues style. The word blues was used at least as early as Elizabethan times and the connotation in which it was applied to songs and music emerged naturally from language uses, just as did so many other words used in jazz today, including the word jazz itself (in which there is a scholarly choice of both Anglo-Saxon and African derivation).

It is very likely that the musical form and, to some extent, the singing style of blues dates from slavery days and shares with the spirituals both a Western European and an African heritage. Since the latter has been an oral heritage, documentation is sparse. Nevertheless, facets of blues and spiritual singing such as melismatic phrasing (many notes to a syllable), quavering, and antiphonal practices, reflect both backgrounds. (There are some excellent chapters that throw light on this subject in Marshall W. Stearns' "The Story of Jazz," Oxford University Press, 1956.)

Blues and spirituals are indigenous American music, the basic forms of which were created slowly, over a long period of time. Yet the emergence of blues, in somewhat definitive form (often, but not always, of 12 bars and observing generally, but again not always, certain scalar conventions) belongs to a later period than that great flowering of spirituals, called freedom songs, that occurred during slavery. Following Emancipation the burden of song began to channel more strongly into blues (by whatever name they were then called) and this process was greatly accelerated toward the close of the century by the impoverishment and disillusionment resulting from the triumph of "white supremacy" legislation. An ethnic grouping was thus re-affirmed, but not only in the joy of a common cultural heritage, in the bitterness, as well, of a denial of social and political rights contrary to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. One might say that in the Opinion handed down in Plessy vs. Ferguson (1896) the United States Supreme Court influenced the growth of the blues.* Once again slavery, this time the slavery of segregation, was the mid-wife in the birth of a new music.

Though many blues reflect labor problems or are found, on analyses, to be blues of social protest, there is little resembling contrived social propaganda in blues. They deal most often with the miseries and good and evil of human beings and large social concepts are dramatized in terms of everyday life. The blues deal with the intimate, the familiar, the joy of life as well as its sadness.

In these days, when almost all singers take a whack at them, only a limited number -- some of them even now little known to the public -- carry on the tradition of blues related to song and saga. When Jelly Roll Morton and other jazz pioneers were growing up, the blues saga -- the blues that told a story, often a long and involved one -- was commonplace; by the time he was playing jazz in Chicago, around 1920, the blues saga (except amongst country blues singers, whether in city or country) was almost passé. Even the shorter blues, such as those sung by Bessie Smith, when sung by non-blues singers (i.e., non-blues in their backgrounds, without respect to their handling of the media) tended to lose the story lines. This may have resulted, at least partly, from the inability of blues, in the 1920's and 1930's, to buck the popular tide. In the 1920's, for example, cultural prejudices often gave them a second-class rating, even amongst Negroes. A few singers here and there, happily, carried on the old styles and old traditions, even while forging out in new directions. Lead Belly, for example, and Big Bill Broonzy and Brownie McGhee. But the best blues in Harlem, in that decade, were often sung in cellars, and if you wanted to hear one of the greatest singers of spirituals you waited on a corner until Blind Willie Johnson came along with his guitar and his tin cup.

In the spirituals the sense often had a double-meaning either as a general or as a specific reference to freedom. And just as an English folksong in the Southern highlands took on the local color of an area, a spiritual, sung with almost identical verses in differing localities, might have quite different significance

* But to his eternal credit, Justice Harlan dissented, saying, among other things, "Our Constitution is color-blind and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law. The humblest is the peer of the most powerful. The law regards man as man and takes no account of his surroundings or of his color when his civil rights as guaranteed by the supreme law of the land are involved. . . . We boast of the freedom enjoyed by our people above all other peoples. But it is difficult to reconcile that boast with a state of the law which, practically, puts the brand of servitude and degradation upon a large class of our fellow-citizens, our equals before the law." ("Introduction To American Constitutional Law," by Francis H. Heller; Harper's, 1952.)

from one section to another, especially where the words were code for an escape to freedom via the Underground Railroad. Specialized meanings occur in blues, though not of the same kind, and by no means with the same degree of secretiveness.

The blues were less secretive than the spirituals, less apt to have hidden meanings, because, for one thing, the share-cropper had at least a little more privacy than the slave and could sing songs amongst his own people that he would not permit himself to sing more publicly. Add to this the tendency of some plantation owners, whose overlordship sometimes approached that of prison farms, to condense a certain amount of letting off steam (even in slave songs, this was sometimes permitted) as in Big Bill's Key To The Highway --

"I've got the keys to the highway,
an' I'm billed out an' 'boun' to go..."

-- and one sees how the blues gradually took on characteristics of their own.

Folk music, by and large, is unwritten music, existing outside the framework of copyright laws and, one must admit, in a freer musical environment, and that goes as well for the poetry of folk lyrics. Words and phrases, melodic themes and in blues basic riffs, were utilized where they could be most useful, regardless of origin. Thus, a felicitous verse such as "The sun's gonna shine 'round my back door some day," might be used, as it was, by John Estes, Big Bill (Trouble In Mind) and many other singers. And, as I have noted elsewhere ("Brownie McGhee Blues," FP 30-2), the same word usage and even whole lines from English sagas appear in Southern folksongs diverse in nature, from mountain songs and folk tales to blues. This is a constant borrowing and giving that goes on all the time, and because of it our folk music is rich and deep.

Blues singers found dignity and pathos in the commonplace surroundings of their own lives, often in situations shabby and sordid (e.g. the mean-man-type blues of Ma Rainey), but often, as in Bessie Smith's Backwater Blues that may have had a country blues prototype, in settings at once personal and universal. Thus, the whole tragedy of a slave society is implicit in the song-saga of Joe Turner, the white-man-black-man, that expresses, more eloquently than any essays, our common humanity. (Included in both Big Bill sets.)

In his talks with Studs Terkel, in one of these two sets of songs by Big Bill Broonzy, and in his book, "Big Bill Blues," we learn how closely the creative singing of Big Bill is bound up with his life. And this is reflected in his songs, whether he is talking about his work as a plough-hand, the sort of discrimination he has had to endure because of his dark color, the hazards -- sometimes humorous, sometimes tragic -- of life and love, or the wonderful sharing of life and songs Bill Bill has enjoyed with his fellows. And the blues singer, as we've indicated, was really a modern minstrel, an entertainer who could play for dances, narrate local events, express depth of feeling in everyday terms, or amuse his listeners with pungently satirical animal and human fables as in Big Bill's Mule Walkin', Talking Blues.

"I was born in Mississippi and was partly raised in Arkansas," wrote Big Bill in "Big Bill Blues," "and I travelled from Mississippi to Arkansas until I got to be fifty years old." And elsewhere, too, for Big Bill went far afield with his guitar and his songs, and was in the Army during World War I. In 1939, when he appeared at the second "Spirituals To Swing" concert at Carnegie Hall, he was reluctant to sing certain songs known to share-croppers because, he told Sterling Brown and myself, he might have to go back to share-cropping again. So far as I know, he never had to.

In Paris he gave his first concert in 1951 -- he is well known in England, Belgium, France and other European countries -- and while there made a record of Black, Brown and White. When he returned to the United States and first tried to have it recorded he met with many objections from both Negro and white sources, though others fought for its acceptance. Big Bill remarks that some Negroes (as well as whites) don't like it because it says: If you's black, git back. "And I don't blame them because we all Negroes in the USA have been getting back all our lives and we's tired of getting back. But this song doesn't mean for a Negro to get back, it just tells what has happened on jobs where Negroes go." ("Big Bill Blues")

Big Bill is a wonderful story-teller when he is going good, which is often in the conversations with Stud Terkel, in one of these sets, and in the autobiography, as told to Yamick Brynogne, one of the few satisfactory jobs of this kind in the blues-jazz field. I needn't go into the details of Big Bill's life to any extent since it is treated most adequately in these sources. However, I note in Hughes Panassie's "Guide to Jazz" (Houghton, Mifflin, 1956) that his birthdate is given as June 26, 1893, and the place, Scott, Mississippi, and add it to the factual data in re. William Lee Conley Broonzy.

"Big Bill is one of the great blues singers," writes Hughes Panassie. "He sings with a spontaneity, a purity and a variety of inflection which have seldom been equaled. Unlike others who sing a whole blues in the same manner, Big Bill builds up his song with subtle gradations, culminating in a tremendous and moving final chorus. He is also a great guitar player of unusual talent and gets a magnificent tone from his instrument. His style is a model of purity in blues playing."

Big Bill's first instrument was a home-made violin, made out of a cigar box. He also played mandolin at one time. But it is difficult to think of him without his guitar, playing chords to punctuate the song, sometimes with ominous repeated phrases, as in Joe Turner, sometimes in a sort of stop-time accompaniment, or at other times rhythmically. At times the guitar sings out on its own in answering phrases, a second voice. And often he solos on guitar, as he did for dancers long ago -- "If we played and sang long enough to get them dancing then we could stop singing and just hit on the strings and say to them: 'Rock, children, rock,' and they would rock all night long. That's how I learned to play a guitar and not sing, and I got so that I could play four or five different styles without singing." ("Big Bill Blues") Big Bill played some Bop chords for us, to show us what they were, but he doesn't use them in his own work; Big Bill is strictly a country blues man.

In the blues -- and that means first of all the country blues -- one finds the most important single source for the root music of jazz. It is remarked that good jazz singers pattern their styles on the ways in which instruments are played (phrasing, composition, etc.) -- the latter, in turn, first derived their styles from vocal blues, which, as noted, were very much a part of New Orleans life during the earliest years of jazz. But to the blues singer himself the voice was an instrument, and a unique one, even before there were jazz bands. He approached that marvelously-constructed instrument of throat, palate, lungs, larynx and membranous reed both as traditional, similar in construction in a generalized way, to the vocal apparatus of others, yet unique, to be shaped from his heart and mind, beginning with the finger-print of the singer's craft, the breath-pattern, the vibrato.

The sense of wonder, of discovery, was perhaps the greatest heritage that the country blues passed on to the urban blues and, hence, to jazzmen in their search for an instrumental style, a way of blowing and phrasing, a tone and a rhythm. The possibilities of the human voice are not limited in blues singing style, as they sometimes are in concert training. Big Bill's voice quality, his way of shaping tonality, is extremely adaptable and varies from song to song. His best songs are such masterpieces of blues style that even his moderately good ones are commonplace by comparison. He draws freely on stylistic devices traceable alike to a Pilgrim Congregation in New England and African slaves in the South -- melismatic syllabification, a quivering melodic line. But the tonal-rhythmic matrix of his style could have come principally from only one source, that which is commonly called Afro-American.

One aspect of blues and spirituals that was a basic influence on jazz may be traced to the accommodation of African singing styles to the diatonic scale. I am not thinking now of the blue notes, which are of course important, but of tonal-rhythmic excitement and suspense that derives, at least partly, from long and short lines in songs, bounded by equal numbers of bars.* Even the shaping of words is modified and changed for singing purposes, as you'll note in listening to Big Bill, Bessie Smith or Blind Willie Johnson (the latter on spirituals). Necessity may well have been the mother of invention in the arts as well as in the practical sciences. In both, the creative effort often leads to the discovery of new forms and of beauty, whether in the dynamic balance of a hand-hewn axe handle or the crowding of syllables into a single line of blues.

Big Bill went literary on us a couple of years back and, with the help of Yannick Bruynoghe, had a book published in England. ("Big Bill Blues," Cassell, London; issued in the U.S. by Grove Press, 1956.) This was such an ambitious and admirable project that, when I reviewed it for the New York Times, I could not help but wonder just how it was put together. When Folkways began to plan these two long-play sets I wrote to Yannick Bruynoghe, who lives in Brussels where he edits a magazine, Jazz 57. "I was the first one to welcome Bill in Europe," Yannick wrote me. "That was July, 1951. Fanassé had arranged it, for the Hot Club of France, but Bill took a plane to Brussels and I went to greet him there. Of course I was thrilled by his wonderful personality. I really came to know him very well in 1953 -- we were both in Paris -- and it was then I persuaded him to write. He was quite enthusiastic about it. . . . I'm glad to insist on the fact that there has been no tape-recorder used, such as the publicity mentioned. Bill was writing himself most of the things. Of course, I had to work a lot on all that -- putting things together, changing some, dropping some pieces, etc. I also translated it into French. The main thing in my idea was to preserve his originality, his way of talking, even his accent." The results, as I said in the Times, were worth the effort.

"I have travelled all over the USA," Big Bill tells us, ("Big Bill Blues") "and also in Mexico, Spain, Germany, England, Holland, Switzerland, Italy, Africa, Belgium, France, trying to keep the old-time blues alive, and I'm going to keep going on as long as Big Bill is still living."

* The blues style of phrasing is one of the basic styles of jazz, perhaps the basic style, and may be traced directly to the country blues style discussed above.

BIG BILL AND STUDS TERKEL

Synopsis

TALK: Introductory remarks.

MUSIC I: FLOUGH-HAND BLUES

TALK 1: Talks with Studs about plows, including the middle-buster ("that's a man's job"), the Gee Whiz, a plow for tough grass, Johnson grass, cocoa grass.

The name C.C. Rider identified a singer of 1910. No one knew his real name but railroaders got to calling him C.C. Rider, after the blues verses he sang. "My uncle and his buddy sang the same tunes (as blues tunes) but a little faster," said Big Bill. He relates C.C. Rider to boats (it is usually related only to railroads) and shows how a folk song variant makes a glove fit to its own line of country, in this instance, the delta country near the Mississippi River.

Tells how a blues singer led a hobo life, how the one called C.C. Rider had a 1-string fiddle and "fast black," a banjo player, was C.C.'s buddy. Blues singers would get on a train and ride free.

MUSIC II: C.C. RIDER

This is Bill's original version of C.C. Rider, and a very good one it is. . . . "My home is on the water," sings Big Bill in this Mississippi variant of an old blues.

TALK 2: At 14 Bill played for picnics, called 2-way picnics. There were two stages, 1 "white" in front of the band, 1 "Colored" in rear.

Reminiscences about old blues singers who encouraged him to shift to bass fiddle and then, about 1920, to guitar. (Previously had got idea for 1-string fiddle from C.C. Rider and had made his own.)

He describes how fast tunes were drag-tempo'd to blues.

MUSIC III: BILL BAILEY

Fiddle tune on guitar. Uses this as an example. He is very fond of this ancient pop tune, as are jazzmen and Jimmy Durante.

TALK 3: Talks about jazz, explains how blues and jazz players were separate. "They'd hire us to sing blues in Louisiana and in Mississippi, hire jazz from New Orleans."

About making up blues. Takes a pocket knife as an example and describes various ways it might be used in song, its imagery differing according to how it might be used.

Talks about Willie Mae, background of next song.

MUSIC IV: WILLIE MAE BLUES

Willie Mae, it seems, "lives in the low low land. . ." The chords, while similar to those in Joe Turner, are cheerful.

TALK 4: Sacred and "sinful" music discussed. . . . also, how reels went into blues. How musical material got all mixed up. "I sing spirituals because I still love them." Places spirituals as preceding blues (though I expect hollers and simple blues, by whatever name, date from slavery days also-C.E.S.). Describes Mississippi country music before jazz was imported.

MUSIC V: THIS TRAIN

A wonderfully rhythmic version, sung with a beat. A stirring vocal performance, notable in quality of tone, use of tonal dynamics. Note how he uses a different approach to each verse, building up the performance compositionally.

"You don't pay no transportation,
No Jim Crow and no discrimination. . . ."

TALK 5: Talks about feeling in blues and spirituals. Talks of how one sings of what he knows, out of his own experiences, -- one person could sing of how a bomb dropped, another of how his male died and a man couldn't work his farm and lost his cotton. There is often a country eloquence in his speech.

He discusses talking blues.

MUSIC VI: MULE-RIDIN', TALKING BLUES

Opens with strong chords on guitar, repeated chords, rhythm style, brighter in tempo than similar chords on Joe Turner and cheerful, as in Willie Mae Blues.

If we could hear the originals of the Erer Rabbit tales -- some of them have been printed -- one would see that Big Bill's verses are related to them. These verses range from charming little tales about raccoons, rabbits and possums to amusing verses about fraills and frailties, with not-so-sly innuendos. Delightful fables of our time, deep South-born.

TALK 6: Talks about odd jobs. Tells how Charlie Seagram and he created Key To The Highway from older blues and new ideas.

MUSIC VII: KEY TO THE HIGHWAY

"I've got the keys to the highway, an' I'm billed out an' bound to go." Big Bill sings, with beautiful guitar accompaniment. But this is both a sharecropper blues and a love blues;

"I'm goin' down to the border,
down where I'm better known --
'Cause you haven't done, done nothin' here,
little girl, but drive a good man
from his home."

His voice is like an instrument, tonality moulded to expression.

TALK 7: Tells about 360 or so songs he has written, some given to others who were not so creative in thinking up material; blues is a reciprocal business.

Tells about Black, Brown and White and people's resentment of it. ("I was reminded of 'Gaste And Class In A Southern Town,' and the many descriptions of color and caste in New Orleans and other cities, by both Negro and white sociologists. Of course there are social situations in which Big Bill's 'peckin' order,' as one might call it, is turned inside out. . . . and that's what makes the world go round.") Tells of writing it out of his personal experience. . . . As he said, "Lots of people didn't like the words 'get back,'; they never had to get back, but I wrote it because I had to get back."

MUSIC VIII: BLACK, BROWN AND WHITE

TALK 8: Discussion of optimistic side of blues leads to Joe Turner. Joe was a Negro, Turner a white man. Old man Turner put Joe on a mule with corn, food, etc. No one ever saw them. Possibly a true story grown into a legend. Lead-in chorus dramatic, ominous, insistent under voice. . . .

MUSIC IX: JOE TURNER NO. 1 (BLUES OF 1890)

Some of the best blues guitar ever recorded and certainly this is one of the great blues of all time, expressing in ingenious symbolism the human tragedy of the slave society -- the black man on the mule going down the road we all must go, to the rich heartland of a common sharing of hopes and hungers. The singing and talking are folk eloquence at its best.

Although we didn't mention Studs Terkel above, since this is Big Bill's story, his function in it was more than a secondary speaking part. If a man is to talk freely and frankly, it is best that this be on a basis of friendship and that the interviewer have not only an appreciation of the person interviewed and of his art, but an understanding of it, so that superfluous remarks may be cut down to a minimum. It seems to me that Studs Terkel has maintained throughout a warm and friendly atmosphere and kept the conversation going along in channels of immense interest to all who love the blues and American folk music.

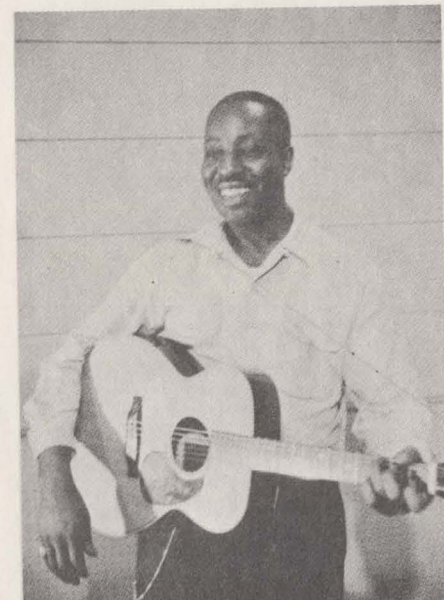


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