

Recorded in St. Louis in May, 1961, by SAMUEL CHARTERS

VOLUME 3

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FS 3816

The Blues in St. Louis

Henry Townsend

Henry Townsend, voice, guitar and piano
Tommy Bankhead, electric bass



FOLKWAYS RECORDS FS 3816

The Blues in St. Louis ***Henry Townsend***

SIDE ONE

Band 1. Cairo Is My Baby's Home	3:35
Band 2. Tired Of Being Mistreated	2:56
Band 3. Rocks Have Been My Pillow	3:15
Band 4. The Train is Coming	3:44
Band 5. She Just Walked Away	3:10

SIDE TWO

Band 1: I Asked Her If She Loved Me	2:52
Band 2. I Got Tired	3:05
Band 3. My Home Ain't Here	2:45
Band 4. All My Money Gone	2:48
Band 5. She Drove Me To Drinking	2:37
Band 6. My Baby Have Come Back	2:35

Recorded on May 17, 1961 at Technisonic Studios, with the assistance of Ann Charters.

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DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

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THE BLUES IN ST. LOUIS

Volume 3

HENRY TOWNSEND

I don't remember who it was that gave me Henry Townsend's address, but it must have been Charley O'Brien, the lieutenant on the St. Louis Police Department's vice squad who helped me so much with the recordings I did in St. Louis in 1961. What I do remember is feeling a little surprised when I met Henry, and he turned out to be a pleasant, well-dressed, relaxed man in his early fifties who had sensibly decided to give up the blues when he found he couldn't make a living as a musician and was working as an insurance collector. So many of the older singers we were finding at this time were poor and confused, some of them alcoholic, many of them sick, but Townsend had managed to avoid all of this, while still keeping his feeling for the blues. When I first met him someone in the room - it was a neighbor in the apartment in a new building where he lived with his family - asked me why I was bothering to record somebody like Henry, who was more part of the past than he was of the 1960s music scene. While I was trying to think of something to say it was Henry who answered quietly for me, "To preserve the tradition."

I was also surprised to find that Henry was so young. Most of us who were searching out the bluesmen who had recorded in the first period of interest in the 1920s were young enough to think of anyone over forty as an old man, but some of the musicians we met and worked with really weren't very old. Townsend had begun recording at the end of the '20s - in the middle of November, 1929, in fact, which was about as close to the end of the '20s as you could come - and when he did his first

sessions in Chicago he was only two weeks past his twentieth birthday. Between his first two releases - for the legendary Columbia Records 14000 series - and his two releases for Bluebird in 1937 he also managed to do two songs for the other legendary blues series of the '20s, the Paramount 13000 series, and another single for Bluebird in 1935 - and then his early recording career was finished and he was just twenty-eight years old. In 1961 he still was playing occasional dance jobs, he had a new guitar, and it seemed perfectly understandable to think of recording again. He didn't think there would be much chance of anything he was doing selling very well, but he was interested in giving it another chance.

One of the things I remember most about working with Henry was that this was the first time I'd ever recorded anyone playing an electric guitar. Somehow I'd managed to stay with acoustical blues or traditional New Orleans bands in all the sessions I'd done before. He also asked if he could work with another musician, because he was used to being in a group when he played now. When I met him for a rehearsal there was not only an electric guitar, there was also an electric bass. A young musician named Tommy Bankhead, from the Mississippi delta, had worked occasionally with him in a band and he was interested in trying to work out bass patterns that would fill in for what to them were the missing piano and drums. Bankhead had gigged around with a number of well known bands, including Elmore James, and even knowing as little as I did about what kinds of bass lines he was looking for I realized that he was an excellent musician. The first thing they played together wiped out my prejudices against electric instruments. It wasn't electric guitars that had changed the blues - the life, the society, the people who created the blues had changed, and they needed new instruments to express the new conditions of their lives.

Still, I couldn't stop looking for roots and sources, and I asked Henry if he knew any older numbers. As he worked his way through the

songs he wanted to record he began playing something that I'd never heard before. They'd been rehearsing for a couple of hours and he was beginning to remember songs he hadn't thought of in a long time. What he was playing and singing had a distinctive double time rhythm, a kind lazy, rolling feel that flowed as much through the melody as it did through the accompaniment. The words were about Cairo, Illinois, a small town at the southern tip of Illinois, where the Ohio River flows into the Mississippi, and the piece had some of the rolling quality of Cairo's rivers. Then I realized I had heard it before. It was something called "Cairo Blues" that had been recorded by a St. Louis singer named Henry Spaulding a few months before Henry had done his first recording. I called across the room to him, "Wasn't that Henry Spaulding's tune?" Townsend smiled and nodded, "Henry and I was together at the Golden Lily on Market Street for a long time." Of all the songs that they recorded it was the "Cairo Blues" - or "Cairo Is My Baby's Home" as we called it finally - that stayed in my mind the longest, with its mood of gentle nostalgia for a moment that was almost lost to memory.

I saw Henry again the next summer, when I filmed him performing for a sequence in the movie "The Blues." We sat in his apartment and listened to the blues and he tried out some new things on the guitar. Though neither of us was very sure about what might happen next it seemed unreasonable to think that his new musical career would end there, and within a short time he began to play, record, and finally tour again. In the 1970s he even got as far as Europe with a blues tour, and he continued performing regularly until he began having problems with his health. The sequence we did in his apartment never made its way into the film, but in a way it didn't seem to be necessary to Henry to be there. So much had already happened that he'd never expected, and the songs he played for me so many years ago seemed more a beginning of a new career than the ending of a career he'd begun when he was so young and then

almost forgotten. As Henry said when we finished recording, "Well, we'll see if something comes of it."

Samuel Charters

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