## BLUES ROOTS/MISSISSIPPI Compiled and Annotated by Samuel Charters/RBF 14



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TOMMY JOHNSON - Canned Heat Blues TOMMY JOHNSON - Big Fat Mama Blues TOMMY JOHNSON - Big Road Blues MISSISSIPPI JOOK BAND - Barbecue Bust JOE WILLIAMS - My Grey Pony BO CARTER - Cigaret Blues BO CARTER - All Around Man ROBERT JOHNSON - I Believe I'll Dust My Broom ROBERT JOHNSON - Honeymoon Blues CHARLIE McCOY - That Lonesome Train Took My Baby Away TOMMY McCLENNAN - Whiskey Head Man RCBERT PETWAY - Bertha Lee Blues SONNY BOY WILLIAMSON - Until My Love Come Dowa

Traffic .

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## FOLKWAYS RECORDS Album No. RBF 14 © 1966 by Folkways Records & Service Corp., 43 W. 61st St., NYC, USA 10023

**BLUES ROOTS/MISSISSIPPI** 



So much already written about the Mississippi blues - the blues heartland of the delta counties the sun baked cotton plantations and the harvest of music and musicians for more than fifty years. But still an elusiveness to the men themselves - how can you understand a field hand finding in himself and his life the material for the sensitive, poetic expression of the delta blues? But the music was created, the root for so much of today's music. More than just the music, a fierce honesty in the expression that has forced other music, other singers to find the same honesty in themselves - so another group of delta blues to search again for the roots and sources of the musical style. These songs go on from the earth sources of Charley Patton, Son House, Willie Brown to the changing, developing sounds of the late 'twenties and 'thirties - the patterns of change and movement as the blues roots go deeper into the delta soil.

## SIDE A

Band 1. Tommy Johnson -- "Canned Heat Blues"

Cryin' canned, canned heat, mama, Cryin' sure enough killing me, Cryin' canned heat, mama, Sure enough killing me, ... take these canned heat blues.

Cryin' ma, mama mama, Know canned heat killin' me, Cryin' mama, mama, mama, Cryin' canned heat is killin' me, Canned heat don't ...

I woke up, up this mornin' Canned heat on my mind, Woke up this mornin' Canned heat was on my mind, Woke up this morning', babe, canned heat, lord, on my mind.

Cryin' lord, lord I wonder, Canned heat, lord, killin' me,

Worrying 'bout my soul,

I woke up, up this mornin' Cryin' canned heat got my bed, Run here somebody, Take these canned heat blues.

(repeat)

Cryin' mama, mama, mama, Cryin' canned heat killin' me, They took my soul, lord, They gonna kill me dead.

Band 2. Tommy Johnson -- "Big Fat Mama Blues"

Cryin' big fat mama, meat shakin' on her bones, (Tellin' me to shake it) ...

I'm goin' away mama, won't be back til fall, Won't be back til fall, umm, Goin' away mama, won't be back til fall, Big fat mama with the meat shakin' on her bones.

I um, got to, mama, got to, mama, go, um, Don't you hollar, got to, mama, go, Big fat mama, lord, with the meat shakin' on her bones.

(Telling me to shake it) ...

Um, what's the matter, rider, Where did you stay last, where did you stay last night, um, What's the matter, rider, Where did you stay last night?

(Hair all down, baby) you won't treat me right.

Um, big fat mama, meat shakin' on her bones, Meat shake on her bones, umm, Big fat mama, meat shakin' on her bones.

Band 3. Tommy Johnson -- "Big Road Blues"

Cryin' ain't goin' down this big road by myself, Now don't you hear me talkin', pretty mama, lord, Ain't goin' down that big road by myself,

If I don't carry you, goin' carry somebody else.

Cryin' sun goin' shine in my back door someday, Now don't you hear me talkin', pretty mama, lord,

Sun goin' shine in my back door someday, And the wind going change and blow my blues away.

Baby, what makes you do like you do do do, like you do do do,

Don't you hear me now,

What makes you do me do I like you do do, Now you say you going to do me like you do old cherry red.

Take the poor boy's money, now, sure lord, won't take mine,

Now don't you hear me talkin', pretty mama, Takin' the poor boy's money, sure enough won't take mine,

Takin' the poor boy's money, now, sure lord won't take mine.

(repeat first verse)

Cryin' sun goin' shine, lord, in my back door someday,

Now don't you hear me talkin', pretty mama, lord,

Sun goin' shine in my back door someday, And the wind goin' blow my blues away.

Most of the delta singers drifted in and out of Jackson during the 'twenties. Charley Patton, Son House, Skip James, probably all of the others at one time or another. Jackson wasn't much of a place, but it was the closest thing to a city that Mississippi could offer, and in the cities there was usually some kind of work playing music. The strongest influence on the music in the town's Negro neighborhoods, as well as on most of the young country singers who hung around the town for more than a few weeks, was Tommy Johnson, who was living, as one of his younger pupils. Shirley Griffith, remembers, ".. in a big house on River Front Street." Ishman Bracey has told Dean Wardlow that Johnson was born in Crystal Springs, in Copiah County, about 25 miles to the south of Jackson. Griffith, who was found by Art Rosenbaum in Indianapolis, said that Johnson was nearly fifty when he met him in Jackson in the late 'twenties, so Johnson would have been born about 1880. In the picture that was taken of him at the time of his recording sessions in 1928, however, he looks younger; so Griffith may have thought he was older than he was. He moved into Jackson about 1926 and lived there for a number of years, occasionally traveling to other Mississippi towns to sing. Nearly every one of the men who encountered him during these years remembers him as a near alcoholic, who drank almost anything. He finally went back to Crystal Springs and was living there at the time of his death in the mid-1950's...

Griffith told Rosenbaum that "Tom was practically a genius on the guitar, " and in discussing "Big Road Blues" as Griffith had learned it from Johnson Rosenbaum concluded, "Unlike most blues guitarists who have a characteristic style which they freely apply to the various blues they sing, Johnson seems to have worked out a set accompaniment which fit the special character of each blues he did, and which he played pretty much the same each time. Here, the idea of walking down a road is suggested in the guitar bass line. Shirley says that Tom could stop the strings of the guitar from above when playing this blues, as one would play a piano, rather than bring his left hand around the neck from the bottom in the usual way ... " The bass figure in "Big Road" was one of Johnson's most widely imitated guitar patterns. It was strongly pianistic in style, with its close relationship to the boogie "walking bass," and it may have been because of this that Johnson would sometimes play it pressing down on the strings with his left hand as a pianist would press down on the piano keys. Nearly every one of the young Jackson singers learned this figure of Johnson's, and it has been recorded almost as he played it by Griffith, by K. C. Douglas, who also learned some of his style from Johnson, and by the older Meridian singer Babe 'Stovall, who was in and out of Jackson when he was a young man...

One of the most moving of his pieces was the slow, brooding "Canned Heat Blues," which was perhaps the most lyric of his blues. The text, which was concerned with drinking Sterno, had a lingering sadness in his insistence that his alcoholism was killing him.

Band 4. Mississippi Jook Band -- "Barbecue Bust"

One of the wildest and most exciting of the Mississippi "juking" bands was a three piece group with piano, guitar, tambourine, and sometimes a doubling on kazoo, probably by the tambourine player, that was recorded in Hattiesburg in the summer of 1936. The group was called the Mississippi Jook Band, and probably included the blues singer Blind Roosevelt Graves, his brother Uaroy, and a piano player named Cooney Vaughn. Graves and his brother had recorded both blues and gospel songs for Paramount in the late 1920's, but the four sides that were released, "Hittin' The Bottle Stomp," "Skippy Whippy," "Dangerous Woman," and "Barbecue Bust," were closer to the rougher country barrelhouse tradition that they were to the blues. Vaughn had an uninhibited country rag time style, and the little band moved with an exuberant, strutting sound.

## Band 5. Joe Williams -- "My Grey Pony"

- I got me a pony, lord, she don't ... Well, I got me a pony, lord When I get in my bed, mama, baby tightens up on the reins.
- Well, I got somethin' to tell you, mama, when I get a chance,
- Mama, I got somethin' to tell you, lord, when I get a chance,
- I don't want to marry, baby, just want to be your man.
- I got a brown skin woman, she don't pay me no mind, (repeat)
- And I know you goin' miss me, baby, when I leave this town.

And I know my woman, she goin' scream and cry,

Lord, I know my woman, she's goin' scream and cry, (spoken) aw shucks,

When she gets that letter, baby, lord I pass my ...

- I got me a grey pony end of my pasture somewhere,
- I got me a grey pony end of my pasture somewhere,
- I'm goin' find my woman, baby, in this world somewhere.

Fare thee well, maybe tomorrow or today, Fare thee well, mama, maybe tomorrow or today,

I want you to know, babe, I didn't come here to stay.

I ain't got nobody to talk baby talk to me, Well, I got nobody, mama, talk baby talk to me, Said my mama's gettin' older, her hair done got grey,

(Spoken) Why break her heart?

Lord, my mama she got older, now, her hair done got grey,

Well, well, why break her heart, you know, Lord, treat her this way.

Fare thee well, maybe tomorrow or today.

By the middle of the 'thirties, as the Depression deepened, the delta music began to change, the concept of the blues as song shifting to a more assertive, a more obvious expression.

In the new stylistic emphasis there was less concern with the complex musicianship that had led to guitar accompaniments like Willie Brown's "Future Blues" and to the beautifully ordered melodies like Tommy Johnson's "Cool Drink Of Water Blues," instead there was a heightened emotionalism, a new intentness. It was the same urgency that dominated Patton's style, but the rhythms had been subtly altered to suit new dancing styles, and a new city audience. One of the first Mississippi men to record extensively in the developing style was Joe Williams, who was in his thirties when he began recording in 1935, and living in St. Louis. He was born in Crawford, Mississippi, in Lowndes County, about seventy miles north of Meridian. Like Sam Collins he grew up out of the delta counties, and this was a shaping factor in his musical development. He was one of sixteen children, and he decided when he was still young that he didn't want to stay in the fields as a laborer. He made his own guitar when he was four and a half, and by the time he was in his teens he was already writing blues. For most of the 'twenties he was drifting around the South, working in levee camps or in the line camps in the back country, playing music for dances and parties. For two or three years he lived in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, working at parties for a local pimp named Totsie King; then finally, in the worst of the Depression, made his way to St. Louis where he settled down. His cousin J. D. Short, who recorded for Paramount and Vocalion, had been living in St. Louis since 1925 and he and Joe worked around St. Louis together until J. D. began playing saxophone and clarinet with Douglas Williams' dance band.

Although it was his style of performance rather than his compositions that gave him his distinctiveness he had considerable variety in his early recordings, and one of his pieces, "Baby Please Don't Go," is still a popular blues. One of the most interesting of the early releases was a fine "My Grey Pony," with some similarities to Patton's style in "Pony Blues," but with a distinctive accompaniment and phrase pattern...

Band 6. Bo Carter -- "Cigaret Blues"

- Says, I come over here, sweet baby, 'cause I'm all alone,
- Haven't got nobody just to carry my smokin' on, Won't you just draw on my cigaret, smoke it there all night long,
- Just draw on my cigaret, baby, until you make my good ashes come.
- Now I got to go up to the country just to get my cigaret boiled,
- The women round this place wanna let my cigaret spoil,
- Won't you just smoke my cigaret, draw it there all night long,
- Just draw on my cigaret, baby, until you make my good ashes come.
- I come over here, sweet baby, just to get my ashes hauled,
- Lord, the women at the other place goin' to let my ashes spoil,
- Won't you just draw on my cigaret, smoke it there all night long,
- Just draw on my cigaret, baby, until you make my good ashes come.

Here's one thing I want you to know 'fore you leave from home,

My cigaret ain't too big and you know it ain't too long,

Won't you just draw on my cigaret, smoke it there all night long,

Just draw on my cigaret, baby, until you make my good ashes come.

Band 7. Bo Carter -- "All Around Man"

Now I ain't no butcher, no butcher's son, I can do your cuttin' til the butcherman comes, 'Cause I'm an all around man, oh, I'm an all around man,

I mean I'm all around man, I can do most anything that comes to hand.

Now I ain't no plumber, no plumber's son, I can do your screwin' til the plumberman comes, 'Cause I'm an all around man, etc.

Now I ain't no miller, no miller's son, I can do your grindin' til the millerman comes, 'Cause I'm an all around man, etc.

Oh baby, you know I'm all around man.

Now I ain't no milkman, no milkman's son, I can pull your titties til the milkman comes, 'Cause I'm an all around man, etc.

Now I ain't no springman, no springman's son, I can bounce your springs til the springman comes,

'Cause I'm an all around man, etc.

Now I ain't no augerman, no augerman's son, I can bore your hole til the augerman comes, 'Cause I'm an all around man, etc.

Bo Chatman, under the name Bo Carter, had considerable success as a soloist, and recorded more than a hundred titles between 1928 and 1940. He had developed a musical idiom with some of the immediacy of blues artists like Lonnie Johnson and Tempa Red, and he was able to reach both a white and Negro audience. For some of his recordings he used the erotic symbolism that had become popular in the "party record" business, and he seems to have been sold to the white market on this basis. He had other pieces, however, like "Be My Salty Dog," with its momentary similarities to John Hurt's "Candy Man," and his first songs like "I'm An Old Bumble Bee," taken from Memphis Minnie's Columbia recording which had been released a few months earlier, and "I've Got The Whole World In My Hand, " which were sung with some feeling and taste. He is still living in Memphis, blind and unable to play, his wife asking people to leave him alone so that he can think about the life to come instead of the blues. Their house is a shabby wooden building on the same rutted alleyway behind Beale Street where Will Shade of the Memphis Jug Band still lives in helpless squalor.

SIDE B

Band 1. Robert Johnson -- "I Believe I'll Dust My Broom"

> I'm goin' to get up in the morning, I believe I'll dust my broom, (repeat)

Then the black man you been lovin', Girl friend, can get my room.

I'm goin' to write a letter, telephone every town I know, (repeat)

If I can't find her in West Helena, she must be in East Monroe, I know.

I don't want no woman wants any downtown man she meets, (repeat) She's a no good pony, They shouldn't allow her on the streets.

I believe I believe I'll go back home, (repeat) If you mistreat me here, babe, but you can't when I go home.

(And) I'm getting up in the morning, I believe I'll dust my broom, (repeat) 'Cause then the black man you've been lovin,' Girl friend, can get my room.

I'm goin' to call up China, see is my good girl over there, (repeat)If I can't find her on Philippine Islands, She must be in Ethiopia somewhere.

Band 2. Robert Johnson -- "Honeymoon Blues"

Betty Mae, Betty Mae, you shall be my wife someday, (repeat)

I want a little sweet girl that'll do anything that I say.

- Betty Mae, you is my heartstrings, you is my destiny, (repeat) And you rode across my mind, baby, each and every day.
- Little girl, little girl, my life seems so misery, (repeat) Babe, I guess it must be love now, um Lord, that's taking effect on me.

Someday I will return with the marriage license in my hand, (repeat)

I'm going to take you for a honeymoon to some long, long distant land.

... Because he was influenced by so many singers it's difficult to speak of Johnson's musical style ... but his emotional life was less confused. There were things that obsessed him, and he sang about them again and again, even though he was nervous and withdrawn when he was with other people. Townsend said, "If he wanted something he would just bring it to you, but the feeling he had deep inside was hard to tell about..." He was also shy. Don Law, the man who recorded Robert in San Antonio asked him to play for a group of Mexican musicians, and he finally played for them facing a wall looking the other way. But there was little shyness in his singing. He sang with the raw openness of a seventeen year old, and many of the songs had an almost tormented cry. Many blues men spent a lot of time thinking about women, but Son House remembers that Robert was compulsively driven by sexuality. The relationships at least left Robert with names to use in his songs. His "girl friends" - the term he used in "When You Got A Good Friend" -

included Beatrice in "Phonograph Blues," Bernice in "Walking Blues," Thelma in "I Believe I'll Dust My Broom," Ida Bell in "Last Fair Deal Gone Down," Pearlie Mae in "Honeymoon Blues," and Willie Mae in "Love In Vain." There is no way of knowing who they were, or if they were anything more to him than someone to spend a few nights with in a new town. The names usually were included in a conventional verse.

I'm goin' write a letter, telephone every town I know.

- I'm goin' write a letter, telephone every town I know.
- I can't find my Thelma, she must be in East Monroe, I know.

(I Belive I'll Dust My Broom)

At his last session, in a Dallas office building in June, 1937, he even suggested that he was going to marry one of them, Betty Mae.

- Betty Mae, Betty Mae, you shall be my wife some day.
- Betty Mae, Betty Mae, you shall be my wife some day.
- I wants a little sweet girl that will do anything that I say ....
- Someday I will return with the marriage license in my hand.
- Someday I will return with the marriage license in my hand.
- I'm going to take you for a honeymoon in some long, long distant land.

But the next song of the session was one of the most touching of all the blues love songs, "Love In Vain," and the girl that he mentioned in the song was someone else, Willie Mae.

Band 3. Charlie McCoy -- "That Lonesome Train Took My Baby Away"

> Woke up this morning, found something wrong, My loving babe had caught that train and gone, Now I want you to starch my jumper, iron my overalls,

I'm going to ride that train that they call the Cannonball.

Mister Depot Agent close your depot down, That woman I'm loving she's going to blow this town.

- Now that mean old fireman, that cruel old engineer,
- Goin' a take my baby and leave me lonesome here.

There ain't no tellin' what that train won't do, It'll take your baby and run right over you,

Now that engineer man ought to be ashamed of himself,

Take women from their husbands, babies from their mother's breast.

Charlie McCoy -- "That Lonesome Tain Took My Baby Away" (continued)

I walked down the track when the stars refused to shine,

Looked like every minute I was going to lose my mind,

Now my knees was weak, my footsteps was all I heard,

Looked like every minute I was steppin' in another world.

Mister Depot Agent close your depot down, That girl I'm loving she's going to blow this town,

- Now that mean old fireman, that cruel old engineer,
- Goin' a take my baby and leave me lonesome here.

... Charlie McCoy usually played the mandolin or a banjo-mandolin, with the mandolin finger board and a skin banjo head... His blues had a derivative quality, but sometimes there were moments of brilliance. For his "That Lonesome Train Took My Baby Away" McCoy had developed a fast, raggy mandolin accompaniment, and the blues was an effective elaboration of one of the standard "leaving" themes, even though his singing had an amateurish quality. The piece would have gotten everybody out on a dance floor for a noisy minute of loose legged movement. The song had some of the feeling of a delta blues in the text, even though the music was closer to country ragtime.

Band 4. Tommy McClennan -- "Whiskey Headed Man"

(Spoken) This is Tommy McClennan. The one that put out "The Whiskey Headed Woman Blues." Instead of putting out "The Whiskey Headed Woman Blues," I'm going to put out "He's a Whiskey Headed Man," just like myself and all the rest of you whiskey headed men.

- Now he's a whiskey headed man, and he stays drunk all the time,
- He's a whiskey headed man, and he stays drunk all the time,
- Just as sure if he don't stop drinkin', I believe he's going to lose his mind.
- Now every time I see this man, he's at some whiskey joint.
- Trying to catch a big bet so he can get him one more half a pint,
- 'Cause he's a whiskey headed man, etc.
- Now every time I see this man, he's standin' on the street.
- Laughin', grinnin', talkin' with most every man he meets,

'Cause he's a whiskey headed man, etc.

- Now every time I see this man, he's at some whiskey joint,
- Sniffin' around that back door, baby, beggin' for one more half a pint,

He's a whiskey headed man, etc.

(Spoken) Heh, man, quit kiddin'. Just like myself. I like my whiskey and I like my gin. Sure as you're born. Yeah. Played a long time.

(repeat first verse)

... By the late 'thirties the rough, shouted blues had become almost a mannerism, and some Mississippi singers developed a style that was even more intense than Williams'. One of the most successful was Tommy McClennan, who was born on a farm owned by J. F. Sligh about nine miles outside of Yazoo City in April, 1908. Yazoo City is in Yazoo County about forty-five miles north of Jackson on the Clarksdale Road. He was already playing when he was in his teens and people in Yazoo City still remember his version of the juking song "Bottle It Up And Go." He was living on Charles Street in Jackson during much of the period when he was recording, a small thin, nervous man who drank heavily. He did a "Whiskey Head Woman" on his first session in 1939, and it was successful enough for him to follow it with a "Whiskey Head Man" the next year. The blues had not only become consciously roughly and assertive, in McClennan there was a self-conscious glorification of his own roughness.

Band 5. Robert Petway -- "Bertha Lee Blues"

- Bertha Lee, you sure have been good to me, (repeat)
- You been good, Bertha Lee, that's you're intent to be.
- You sure have, baby.
- Bertha Lee, honey, please don't you stray from home.
- (Spoken) I'm talking about you, Bertha Lee.
- Bertha Lee, honey, please don't you stray from home.
- If you do, Bertha Lee, something sure is goin' to go wrong.

(Spoken) Yes, yes ... Well, all right.

Bertha Lee, why don't you come back home to me, (repeat)

If you don't Bertha Lee, oh babe, I sure can't sleep.

- Looka here now, Bertha Lee, I don't want you to run around,
- Oh Bertha Lee, I want you to leave with the running around.

If you do, Bertha Lee, I'll lay my money down.

(Spoken) Yes, yes ... Oh, Lord.

... McClennan was so successful that another singer, Robert Petway, whose singing was very similar to McClennan's, had some of the same success recording in 1941 and 1942. His beat was heavier and more regular than McClennan's but the rest of the style, in the coarse shout of the vocal line and the fierce assertiveness, was similar to McClennan's. The emotionalism of Williams and McClennan had so fully realized some of the implications of the early delta style that it was not until the Mississippi men began using electric instruments a few years later that the delta blues was again able to move and develop as a vital, living song form.

Band 6. Sonny Boy Williamson -- "Miss Louisa Blues"

Now ever since, Louisa, you've been gone my life don't seem the same, (repeat) Now you know it really breaks my heart to hear anybody call Miss Louisa's name.

Now Miss Louisa she mistreated me and she drove me from her door, (repeat) Now that will be all right, Louisa, you will have to reap just what you sow.

Sonny Boy Williamson -- "'Miss Louisa Blues" (continued)

> Now Louisa, you know I have been the very best that I could, (repeat) Now if you don't treat me no better, lord, I sure wish you would.

> Now but that will be all right, Louisa, you will come back home some day, (repeat) Now I'm scared when you get back, Louisa, you will have no place to stay.

Band 7. Sonny Boy Williamson -- "Until My Love Come Down"

- Now you got fruit on your tree, lemons on your shelf,
- You know, lovin' mama, that you can't squeeze them all yourself,
- Now I say please let me be your lemon squeezer,

Now while I'm in your lonesome town,

Now if you let me be your lemon squeezer until my love comes down.

- Now it makes no difference, baby, what your mama don't allow,
- Come on let me squeeze your lemon, baby, I mean anyhow,
- Now I say please let me be your lemon squeezer, etc.

I like the apples in your tree, I'm crazy about your peaches too,

I'm crazy about your fruit, baby, 'cause you know just how to do,

Now please let me be your lemon squeezer, etc.

Now it ain't but the one thing, baby, now that it really makes me cry,

(What man?)

- I asked you about your lemons, baby, and you ups and tells me a lie,
- Now please let me be your lemon squeezer, etc.

Sonny Boy Williamson was the first modern style harmonica player. Raised in the central Mississippi blues environment he moved to Chicago in the mid-1930's and became part of the studio group centered around Big Bill and Kikomo Arnold. Like McClennan he was a strong personality, and he left a deep imprint on the changes in the blues that came with the war. He was stabbed to death coming home from a club date in 1948.

The material for these notes is from the Mississippi chapters in the forthcoming Oak Publications study, "The Blues Men," by Samuel Charters.

LITHO IN U.S.A.

Transcriptions by Ann Charters.



