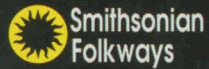


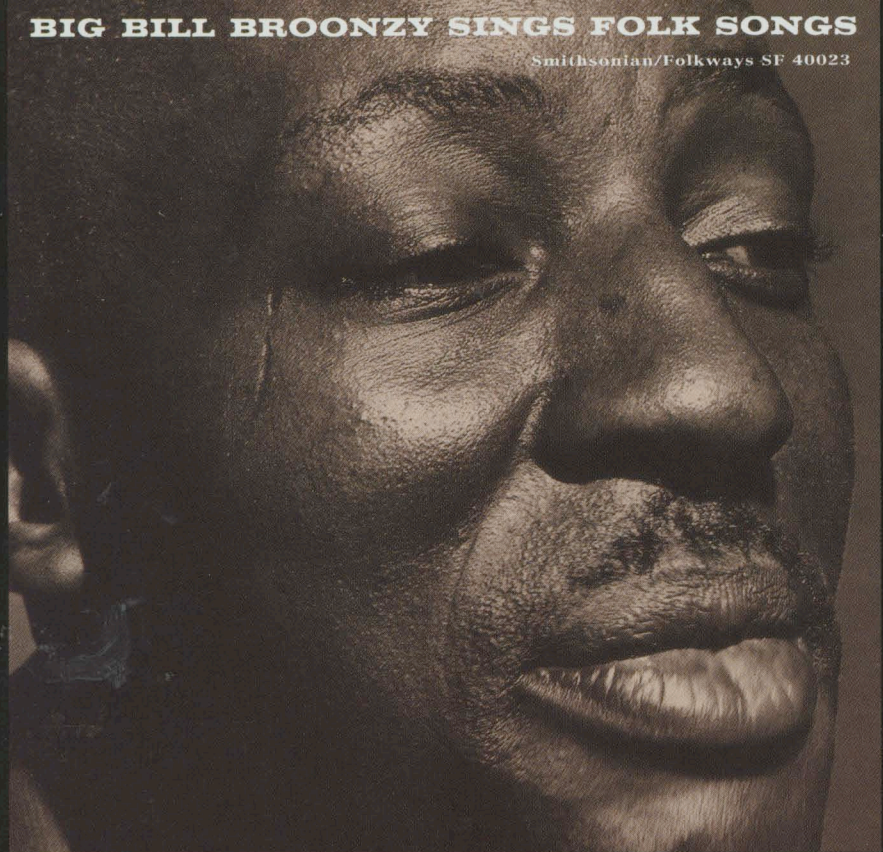
BIG BILL BROONZY SINGS FOLK SONGS

Smithsonian/Folkways SF 40023



Smithsonian/Folkways Records
Office of Folklife Programs
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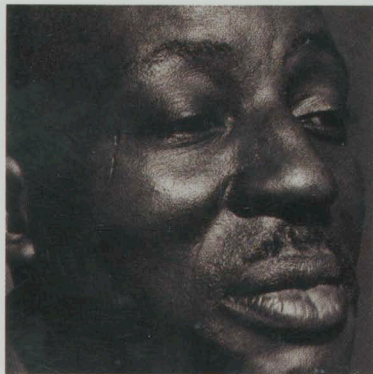
Big Bill Broonzy

Sings Folk Songs



1. **Backwater Blues** 2:47
2. **This Train** 2:57
3. **I Don't Want No Woman (To Try to Be My Boss)** 3:05
4. **Martha** 4:57
5. **Tell Me Who** 3:39
6. **Bill Bailey** 1:53
7. **Alberta** 2:09
8. **Goin' Down This Road** 2:19
9. **Tell Me What Kind of Man Jesus Is** 2:12
10. **John Henry** 4:42
11. **Glory of Love** 3:22

Recorded by Moses Asch and W.F.M.T.
Song texts and background notes by Charles Edward Smith
Cover Design by Ronald Clyne
Digitally remastered by Dr. Toby Mountain at
Northeastern Digital Recording, Inc.
Previous Folkways issue: FA 2328



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Smithsonian Folkways Records

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PIANIST: "OF COURSE, IF YOU JUST WANT THE COMMON CHORDS..."

BIG BILL: "WELL, I'M ONLY A COMMON BLUES SINGER". —quoted in *Melody Maker* (London)

"I suppose Bill made more friends in this country than any American singer since Armstrong first came here," wrote Max Jones in *Melody Maker* (London, 8/23/58), recalling Big Bill Broonzy's European tour of 1951. "Now, regrettably, he is dead. And it is unlikely that we shall ever hear the old-time country style of blues performed as impressively again." And in his own country, *Time* (9/1/58) paid him a tribute and gave him an epitaph: "Big Bill's blues," it noted, "were the simple, free-wheeling poetry of fresh-plowed earth and cotton fields under a hot summer sun. His blues were the big city, too, its tenements, its bread lines, its cheap women sneaking out of a man's bed at midnight to steal his day's pay . . . Bill never saved the money he earned, and when a new generation cramped his country style, he was broke all the time."

When still a young man Bill started to preach but gave it up—the call wasn't strong and playing the fiddle was more his style—so he wound up on what used to be called the sinful side, preaching the blues. And the term preaching is not so far off, at times. He sang gospel songs throughout his life but seldom did so publicly and began to record them only late in life when listeners encouraged a broad repertoire encompassing his entire background.

This album, that Moe Asch has put together from various tapes, reflects the breadth of Big Bill Broonzy's programs in his most mature period as a folk artist and has, consequently, the dramatic impact of his best albums. It has, as well, an inescapably personal quality. Songs on Side 1 were recorded not long before his death. Friends, including Martha Ledbetter, came into the studio while the session was being taped. You can hear them in the background now and then and their presence is also felt in the manner in which certain lines are delivered. Since his throat had suffered damage, it was not surprising that at times his vocal chords balked at the punishing demands made on them but, oddly enough, this wasn't so apparent in his singing as it was suggested by his facial expression as seen through a control room window. There were a few false starts, but certainly no more than one might expect. On "Martha," in which he employs hard, taut tonalities, he compensates for the strain in his voice by making it contribute to the resultant timbre—just as a jazz musician will sometimes compensate for a *fluff* (bad note) by fitting it into his improvisation. He was in good humor and what with a real Martha in the studio, that one was a ball!

As will be obvious to the listener, some titles of Side 2 were taped at a concert with Pete Seeger, whose instrumental style (usually a 5-string banjo as lanky as himself) is as distinctive as his fine singing voice that joins in the singing of "John Henry." The first side is generally of a more intimate character. Bill was recording for Folkways but he was also singing for friends and this mood is sustained from "Backwater Blues" to the three blues, diverse in tempo and mood but all about women. The second side is Bill Broonzy's own hootenanny, the good meat of it sandwiched between a fine and rowdy "Bill Bailey" and an amusing—only might say folk-ler-ized version—of a pop song. The meat is, as they say, of the best, country-ered—"Alberta," "Goin' Down This Road," "Tell Me What Kind of Man Jesus Is," and a "John Henry" that has steel and sinew in the singing.

Bill sang his way through the depression, using an old levee camp holler for the first line of his "WPA Rag"—"Oh I feel like hollerin' but the town is too small"—and, finally, singing jobs and money running out before the depression was over, worked on a street-paving job in Chicago. John Hammond brought him to New

York for the "Spirituels to Swing" concert late in the 1930s but though this brought recognition of Big Bill as a folk artist, the new audiences that were just then beginning to support blues (as well as folk music in general or jazz) were not large enough to count for much economically. At the end of the next decade he was the recipient of a most unusual stipend, a \$110 an hour maintenance job at Friley Hall, men's dormitory, Iowa State College.

Some of Bill's newly acquired fans resented his having to take a menial job, particularly after a mop-and-pail "gag" snapshot of Bill in overalls was published—but this was misplaced, or at least misdirected, zeal. After all, there was then no "Blues Singer in Residence" sinecure, nor is there likely to be. Meanwhile, the year or so at Iowa State gave Bill a breathing spell in which he regained confidence in himself and brought new strength to his blues. In a special way this period of relative security, in which he sang informally for such as cared to listen and only slightly more formally, on occasion, was fruitful. He dug into his past for half-forgotten songs from his country background—so little of which had been used up to that time in recordings—and this helped to prepare him for his first European tour and for the brief years of limited success that followed.

By the time the depression was over a new generation of Negroes had grown up in the North, of parents who had migrated north around the time of the first World War. Following the Supreme Court decisions on segregation, which reflected a new wave of concern for human rights as well as economic necessity, and the enthusiasm for the rise of former African colonies to statehood, country blues would achieve a broader, more balanced audience. Meanwhile, old styles of blues and blues singing were temporarily in eclipse. And though Bill found audiences in small clubs of Chicago's South Side, few from these audiences in small clubs would or could afford to come to the concerts that gave blues a place of respect in American folk music. In an article published in 1951 on Big Bill's "soul-moving" music, *The Negro Digest* anticipated—in the manner of its praise for Bill's talent—the remarkable upsurge of pride in the past that was to give Negroes of the North a "home" feeling for songs that were rooted in the American South. But before this change in attitude was to occur, Bill had the shock of singing, sometimes, to deaf ears. The criticism that he was too much "country"—or that he was not musically right, when he knew he was (to which we'll return later)—bothered him. He talked of it often, sometimes with penetrating insight.

"Young people have forgotten to cry the blues," he once remarked. "Now they talk and get lawyers and things." In telling his own story (for *Big Bill Blues*, Grove Press) to Yannick Bruynoghe—this laudable enterprise began in Paris, 1953—Bill said, "Some Negroes tell me that the old style of blues is carrying Negroes back to the horse-and-buggy days and back to slavery—and who wants to be reminded of slavery?—and some will say this ain't slavery no more, so why don't you learn to play something else?" And in 1956, when the country blues were slowly beginning to win new popularity (though not of a mass-media kind), Bill said of the younger generation's preference for teenage taffy in 2/4 time, "I don't blame them, it's like clothes, you can't expect people to like the same styles all the time." It is to be wondered at that Bill spoke wistfully of the unexpectedly enthusiastic European audiences:—"Even when they don't know what I'm singing, the people over there like a rocking beat."

Big Bill was never a great financial success, despite the many records he made. He told Art Hodes (*The Jazz Record*, March, 1946): "None

of us would ever make enough money just playing music. I had to have my day job and play music at night." And, again, in 1956 (Oakland, Cal., Tribune): "I always worked at all kind of hard jobs. I never was able to rely on my own music alone till 1953."

In a very real sense the European tour (1951) which the pioneer French jazz critic, Hugues Panassie, arranged for him, gave back to Bill Broonzy his reason for singing. Max Jones (*Melody Maker*, 8/23/58) wrote of Bill's first London concert at Kingsway Hall in 1951. "He found here an audience receptive to the best songs in his extensive repertoire and to his finest feats of guitarmanship, an audience that regarded him as a combination of creative artist and living legend."

In another paragraph Max singles out some of the qualities that make Big Bill's singing a fresh delight, even with repeated listening: "The voice was a shade less powerful than I had guessed it to be from American records (not one had been issued here). But it possessed all the strength and virility needed for the toughest blues; and Bill displayed flexibility, inventiveness and an expressive range far beyond anything I expected. Other surprises were the immense sound and swing of the guitar playing, the dexterity revealed in solos, the richness of the accompaniment, and the wonderful relationship between vocal and instrumental parts . . . In Britain he played a significant part in building up a relatively large audience for blues and folk-song."

Oral traditions of Afro-American music have often—and necessarily, if the music was to evolve—been at odds with popular conventions. Bill once expressed it this way: "When my song sounds good to me and for me to really sing the old blues that I learned in Mississippi I have to go back to my sound and not the right chords as the musicians have told me to make. They just don't work with the real blues." (*Big Bill Blues*.)

This bugaboo pursued him even to Europe. Humphrey Littleton, English trumpeter who brought a "traditionalist"-style jazz band into Mainstream, recalled (*Melody Maker*, 8/23/58): "Big Bill was a difficult man to accompany. No, that's not quite accurate—he was an impossible man to accompany, except on the rare occasions when he sang a conventional twelve-bar blues." A further remark clarifies Humph's understanding of Bill's "country" style: "He was sensitive to the jibes of the schooled players who accused him of bad chords. He knew he was right—and yet, by the book their arguments were convincing. By the standards of the more sophisticated 'modern' blues, his chords were 'wrong' and his measure erratic."

Now and then, in his last years, friends would catch in Bill's face a look like that of a bewildered Samson wondering where his strength had gone. It is possible that he sang when he shouldn't have risked the effort, because at times the song was more important than the pain in his throat; he took a slug of whiskey for one pain and sang a song for the other. Bill was a man who liked to sing the blues all night and, sometimes, drink a lot and talk a lot. He liked horse-play and foolish pranks, fishing and watching baseball games and, in his own way, he had his own kind of unique, deep-South pride—like to take a poke at segregation—that rode him like the Old Man of the Sea rode Sindh—with voice and guitar.

"Broonzy's incentive for writing the blues," *The Negro Digest* observed, "stems from a deep and bitter memory of the days when he worked on the railroad and at levee camps in Arkansas, as well as the never-break-even days on the tenant farms of the South." Of that early life Bill

commented, "When you work twelve months of the year as a farmer and don't come out of debt, the boss has to give you food on credit 'til the crop is sold, you can't do nothing but get the blues." But, as he himself so eloquently demonstrated, you can sing the blues and this helps to sustain the singer and those who listen. In a social setting where even an old man may be called "boy"—not, by the way, unique in the South—a song with the title "I Wonder When I'll Be Called a Man" (in *The Country Blues*, FS 2326) makes sense.

Whether he was working for others or helping the family to share-crop, music was never far away from Bill's thoughts. Having an uncle who sang and a father who sang, helped—but how did he figure he'd some day shout the blues? "I'd go out in the woods and get up on a stump and sing. Boys thought I was crazy. They'd say, 'Boy, you're the craziest guy in Langdale!'" In those days track-lining gangs had a singer who'd lead them through the work motions. This seemed a lot more important to a youngster than field hands chopping rust-purple cotton stalks to the rhythm of their songs. A man who later became his friend in Chicago, John Estes, was such a singer. "I would run off from home," Bill said, "just to work under John Estes' singing and he would let me sing with him some times."

"Backwater Blues" is sung with deliberation and restraint, to his own very fine guitar accompaniment. Though Bill must have seen high water on its destructive rampage more than once, his most vivid recollection of working on the levee—after all, he was young then—was (*Big Bill Blues*) getting back to camp in the dawn after a night of carousing, catching his mule and getting out on the levee.

"I may never run my train off the track," Harriet Tubman, the great leading spirit of the Underground Railroad, once wrote, "and I never lost a passenger." Whether or not the gospel train spiritual was ever used as a signal song on that trail-blazing track to freedom, it has certainly been put to a wide variety of uses since. After Emancipation it came north with groups of singers and helped raise funds for the small struggling Negro colleges. Rosetta Tharpe—still going strong in the gospel field with that sturdy voice of hers—sang it at Cafe Society (N.Y.), wearing an evening gown and playing a gaudy guitar. And the gospel train is still bound for glory, its drivers rolling to today's rhythm in the ways of black and white—"Everybody ride it is treated just alike . . ."

Two other songs in this album belong in the spiritual and gospel tradition. One is the plaintive "Tell Me What Kind of Man Jesus Is"—

"Spoke to the wind,
Wind stopped still . . ."

--and the other is a song that's been around since slavery days. In countless versions it has alternated between sacred and secular. Woody Guthrie took to down Route 66, leading the migrants out of the dustbowl, and by now it's as familiar as almost anything in the folk repertoire. Which is as it should be. When it's sung as Bill does it here, and to a lusty rhythm, it wears well!

In this album many facets of Bill's voice and guitar technique, such as those mentioned in *Melody Maker*, are displayed. There is perhaps greater deliberation and an almost classical use of blues techniques in some performances of Side A, a loose, more broadly "country" presentation on some tracks of Side B. But though the former has some superb wailing and coordination of voice and guitar—e.g., the worrying of tone and the "second voice" of guitar on the "women" blues—there are also special qualities

that make Side B an exceptional listening experience. For example, there is an irresistible exuberance as Bill and Pete Seeger come on with "John Henry"--and "Alberta," even to the amusing opening, is strongly sung and thoroughly delightful.

Though Bill knew he was no longer a well man, and probably wouldn't be, he spoke as cheerfully, at times, as though there were many more concerts, here and abroad, as well as recording sessions. But by July, 1958, Big Bill Broonzy, like the legendary John Henry, was sick and couldn't get well. In that month he wrote to Dave Stevens who--with Lonnie Donegan, Chris Barber and other friends in England--had planned a benefit concert for him--"Please don't think hard of me for not writing you all. I can't see, I am almost blind and my mind is not so good. I am so nervous . . .". The benefit concert realized more than five hundred pounds but before it could be allocated for Bill's use, his widow, Mrs. Ruth Broonzy, cabled them the news of his death from cancer, August 14, 1958.

This is, in a sense, a memorial album. It is made up of carefully selected performances from those recorded but never before released, several of them from his last recording session for Folkways. It is hoped that it will serve as a tribute, bringing to the listener an appreciation of the blues background and of those qualities that distinguished Big Bill Broonzy as one of the great blues singers of our time.

— Charles Edward Smith

Acknowledgments: Dr. Marshall W. Stearns and the Institute for Jazz Studies.

BACKWATER BLUES

It rained five days and the clouds turned as dark as night (2)
Lord, there was trouble taking place in the lowlands that night.

I got up one morning--po'me--I couldn't even get out of do' (2)
'Cause there were thousands and thousands of poor people--I declare didn't have no place to go.

Then I went and I stood upon a high--high old lonesome hill (2)
Lord, and all that I could was look down on the house where I lived.

Then it thundered and it lightened and the winds began to blow (2)
Lord, there was thousands and thousands of my poor people at that time--they didn't have no place to go.

THIS TRAIN

This train is bound for Glory, this train (3)
Don't ride nothin' but the righteous and the holy.
This train is bound for Glory, this train.

This train don't carry no gamblers, this train (3)
No midnight rambles--no bar fliers.
This train is bound for Glory, this train.

This train is built for speed now, this train (3)
Fastest train you ever did see now.
This train is bound for Glory, this train.

This train don't carry no liars, this train (3)
No hypocrites and no bar fliers.
This train is bound for Glory, this train.

This train is solid black now, this train (3)
Where it carry you you don't come back.
This train is bound for Glory, this train.

This train you don't pay no transportation (3)
No Jim Crow and no discrimination.
This train is bound for Glory, this train.

This train don't carry white, this train (3)
Everybody ride it is treated just alike.
This train is bound for Glory, this train.

Repeat verse one.

I DON'T WANT NO WOMAN (TO TRY TO BE MY BOSS)

Chorus:
I don't want no woman--ah--to be my boss,
Yes, she'll put your head in a trough--feed you like you's a hoss.

Now, she'll tell you when to go to bed--tell you when to get up,
Tell you where to go and if you say something she'll tell you to hush.
I don't want no woman--ah--to be my boss
Yes, she'll feed you in a trough--feed you like you's a hoss.

Now, she want to know when you come--want to know when you go
Want to know what you're doin', boy, you been out with your so-and-so.

(Chorus)

Now, when you come home she'll watch you get into bed,
She'll watch you and she'll tell you, boy, where to put your head.

(Chorus)

Now, the next woman I get--I gotta be the boss,
I want her to understand so that I won't be double crossed.

(Chorus)

MARTHA

I got a gal named Marthy and she lives up on the hill (2)
Yes, she ain't so good lookin', Lord, but she gives poor Bill a thrill.

Now, in my dreams I can see Martha come tiptoein' down the road (2)
Now, when I see her walkin'--I declare--she sends my very soul.

So now, don't cry Martha--come here and let Bill dry up your tears (2)
I haven't been gone but 18 months, baby, I know it seems like a million years.

I didn't leave home, Marthy, 'cause I wanted to be away from you (2)
Now the other men want to protect their women, Marthy, and I had to go to protect you too.

I'm on my way home, now, Marthy, I'm comin' home to stay (2)
Now, if you give me a chance, Marthy, I'll make up for every day.

TELL ME WHO

Now, tell me who, baby, who that been foolin' you (2)
Tellin' you you're 5 feet 7, baby, and you's pretty too.

Now, they been tellin' you your hair had ocean wave,
But when you come home to me, baby, you look like one of the rats that stayed.

(Chorus)

Gal, you got them cutie legs, baby, them model thighs,
Great big head, baby, and them bedroom eyes.

(Chorus)

Gal, I give you money just to spend, on yourself,
Gal, you take my money, woman, you go and spend it on somebody else.

(Chorus)

Now, when you gets high you loses your hat,
You're always losin' somethin', baby, I don't care where you're at.

(Chorus)

Gal, you know you need [. . .] and you walk around like a horse,
You know you can't see straight, baby, 'cause your eyes are crossed.

BILL BAILEY

Why don't you come home Bill Bailey, why don't you come home?
She cried the whole night long.
Remember that rainy evening you drove me out,
Didn't have nothing but a fine-tooth comb.
Why don't you come home Bill Bailey, why don't you come home?
She moaned and she groaned the whole night through,
Bill, it's a shame but I know that I'm to blame--
Bill Bailey won't you please come home.

Why don't you come home . . .
I'll do the washing, honey, I'll pay the rent,
Although you've done me wrong.
Why don't you come home . . .

ALBERTA

Alberta, Alberta, Alberta
Alberta, Alberta, oh, Alberta.
I been gambling all night and I lost all of my money
So ride, Alberta, ride,
Ride, ride to me.
I don't care what time of night--
Long as you just treat me right.
Baby, 'n' ride, ride to me.

Oh, ride, Alberta, ride.
Ride, ride to me.
You don't need no saddle, baby,
You don't need no gun;
Baby, just ride, ride to me.

Oh, ride, Alberta, ride,
Ride, ride to me.
Tighten down your hat,
I don't care where you're at;
Baby, just ride . . .

Oh, ride . . .
Oh, saddle up your pony.
Put everything you got on it,
Baby, just ride . . .

GOIN' DOWN THE ROAD

Goin' down the road now feelin' bad, baby.
Goin' down the road feelin' so low and bad,
I ain't gonna be treated thisaway.

I'm tired of eatin' your cornbread and beans,
baby . . .

These two dollar shoes is killin' my feet . . .

Takes a ten-dollar shoe to fit my feet . . .

Repeat verse one

I'm going where the chilly wind don't blow . . .

I'm goin' where the weather suits my clothes . . .

Verse one.

TELL ME WHAT KIND OF MAN JESUS IS

Ananias, Ananias, tell me what kind of a man Jesus is.

Spoke to the wind--wind stopped still.
Tell me what kind of a man Jesus is.

Ananias . . .
Spoke to the sea--sea got calm . . .

. . . Spoke to the sick--sick got well . . .

. . . Spoke to the dead--the dead did rise . . .

JOHN HENRY

John Henry said to his captain, a man ain't nothing but a man--
Before I let your steel drill beat me down
I'll die with my hammer in my hand . . .

John Henry said to his shaker, now man, why don't you sing?
I'm shaking twelve pounds from my hips on down.

Man, don't you hear that cold steel--
Man, don't you hear that cold steel ring . . .

John Henry hammered in the mountain, and the mountain was so high.
And the last words I heard him say:
Gimme a cool drink of water 'fore I--
Gimme a cool drink of water 'fore I die . . .

John Henry went down that railroad track with a twelve-pound hammer by his side.
Yes he went down the track but he never came back.
'Cause he laid down his hammer and he--
He laid down his hammer and he died . . .

John Henry had a little woman and the dress that she wore was red,
And the last word that I heard that little girl say, said,
I'm goin' where John Henry fell--
I'm goin' where John Henry fell dead . . .

John Henry had a little woman--her name was Polly Ann
John Henry took sick and had to go to bed.
Polly Ann drove steel like a man . . .

John Henry was a little baby and they held him in the palm of a hand.
And the last word that I heard his poor mother say:
He's gonna be a little steel-drivin'--
He's gonna be a little steel-drivin' man.

GLORY OF LOVE

Give a little--take a little,
Let you poor heart bleed, babe, a little,
But, baby, that's the glory of love.

Cry a little--sigh a little,
Let your cry roll by, babe, a little,
But, baby, that's the glory.

Long as there's just the two of us

Long as there's just the two of us
Hold each other's arms.

Baby, win just a little--lose a little,
Sometime have blues, babe, a little,
But, baby, that's the glory of love.