



MEMPHIS SLIM

1959-1973

THE
FOLKWAYS
YEARS



Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

Memphis Slim: The Folkways Years 1959-1973

SFW CD 40128 ©©2000 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

- | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| 1 Joggie Boogie (3:28) | 12 If the Rabbit Had a Gun (3:00) |
| 2 I Left That Town—Harlem Bound (2:17) | 13 Backwater Blues (3:42) |
| 3 Key to the Highway (2:58) | 14 You Name It (2:10) |
| 4 Chicago Rent Party (3:54) | 15 M & O Blues (3:35) |
| 5 Stewball (3:36) | 16 Every Day I Have the Blues* |
| 6 The Dirty Dozens (2:51)* | 17 Just a Dream (4:12) |
| 7 Beer-Drinking Woman (2:32) | 18 Midnight Special (1:48) |
| 8 Walking Blues (3:12) | 19 The Bells (2:35) |
| 9 Pinetop's Boogie Woogie (4:11) | 20 Mean Old Frisco (4:10) |
| 10 San Juan Blues (2:22) | 21 The Gimmick (3:53)* |
| 11 Prison Bound (3:35) | |

*previously unreleased

This collection contains the best of blues pianist Memphis Slim's Folkways years and includes 3 previously unreleased tracks. The CD features solo performances, small ensembles, and accompaniment by Folkways artists including Willie Dixon, Jazz Gillum, and Pete Seeger. Slim plays highly personal interpretations of classic and original blues. 32 page booklet, extensive notes, lyrics, and photos. 65 minutes.



Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

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- 1 | **Joggie Boogie** (3:24)
- 2 | **I Left That Town — Harlem Bound** (2:15)
(Peter Chatman/ARC Music, BMI)
- 3 | **Key to the Highway** (2:54)
(C. Segar-W. Broonzy/Universal Duchess Corp, BMI; Wabash Music, BMI)
- 4 | **Chicago Rent Party** (3:53)
(Peter Chatman/Sony ATV Songs, BMI)
- 5 | **Stewball** (3:32)
- 6 | **The Dirty Dozens*** (2:48)
(Rufus Perryman/Unversal MCA Music, ASCAP)
- 7 | **Beer-Drinking Woman** (2:28)
(Peter Chatman/Universal Duchess Corp., BMI; Wabash Music, BMI)
- 8 | **Walking Blues** (3:08)
- 9 | **Pinetop's Boogie Woogie** (4:09)
(C. Smith/Universal MCA Music, ASCAP)
- 10 | **San Juan Blues** (2:19)
(Peter Chatman/ARC Music, BMI)
- 11 | **Prison Bound** (3:23)
(Leroy Carr)
- 12 | **If the Rabbit Had a Gun** (2:57)
(Memphis Slim)
- 13 | **Backwater Blues** (3:41)
(Bessie Smith/Edwin Morris & Co., ASCAP)
- 14 | **You Name It** (2:13)
(Memphis Slim)
- 15 | **M & O Blues** (3:35)
(Walter Davis, Jr./APRS, BMI)
- 16 | **Every Day I Have the Blues*** (2:23)
(Peter Chatman/ARC Music, BMI; Fort Knox Music, BMI; Trio Music, BMI)
- 17 | **Just a Dream** (4:10)
(W. L. Broonzy/Universal MCA Music, ASCAP)
- 18 | **Midnight Special** (1:47)
(H. Ledbetter/Folkways Music Publishers, BMI)
- 19 | **The Bells** (2:33)
- 20 | **Mean Old Frisco** (3:19)
(Arthur Crudup/Crudup Music, BMI; Universal Duchess Music, BMI)
- 21 | **The Gimmick*** (3:49)
(Memphis Slim)

*previously unreleased

MEMPHIS SLIM

THE FOLKWAYS YEARS 1959-1973



Introduction |

Peter Chatman—known as Memphis Slim—sustained his career as a semi-professional and professional blues pianist for nearly sixty years, from the late 1920s until his death in 1988. Like so many Black musicians—ranging from Josephine Baker and fellow blues pianist Champion Jack Dupree to jazz saxophonist Dexter Gordon—Chatman spent many years living and playing throughout Europe. Indeed, he expatriated himself for the last twenty-six years of his life, but his musical and cultural roots are in the American South, specifically in Memphis, Tennessee, where he was born on September 3, 1915.

This compact disc reassesses the career of Memphis Slim during a pivotal period. The majority of his recordings for Moses Asch were made between 1959 and 1963. These recordings mark a fundamental shift in Chatman's strategy—a sea change, really—as his records were aimed at a White (and international) audience for the first time. His first recordings (1940-41) for Okeh and Bluebird are small group efforts aimed at the increasingly urban blues audience. Likewise Chatman's post-war recordings for a series of small, independent record companies, such as Hy-Tone, Master, Federal, and Vee-Jay, were marketed to African Americans whose appetite for r & b was rapidly growing. But his Folkways recordings helped to set a new course for Chatman, one that eventually led to his expatriation and a new career playing for a largely White audience.

Chicago Bound |

Despite his nickname, Peter Chatman is almost never directly connected with Memphis and the sound of Memphis blues. The Memphis blues tradition is dominated by a guitar with vocal accompaniment, and artists such as Furry Lewis, Frank Stokes, and Memphis Minnie epitomize this sound. The Bluff City also supported several jug bands—The Memphis Jug Band (led by harmonica player and entrepreneur Will Shade), Gus Cannon's Jug Stompers, and Jack Kelly's South Memphis Jug Band—which thrived in the 1920s and 1930s. As a pianist and native Memphian, Peter Chatman was a bit of an anomaly. Not that he was the only Memphis-based blues pianist; Jab Jones, Roosevelt Sykes, Mose Vinson, and Booker T. "Slop Jar" Laury are just four of the better-known piano pickers who played at clubs along Beale Street as well as for house parties in other parts of the city. By and large, however, Memphis is not a city that has supported a strong blues piano tradition.

Like his father (whose name he received), Peter Chatman became a piano player. He also inherited his height (6'6") from his dad, and his robust appetite assured that he developed into a large and imposing man. Beginning in the late 1920s he spent many years playing in and around Memphis, traveling north to the "Bootheel" of Missouri, west to the juke joints of eastern Arkansas, and occasionally to neighboring Mississippi. The small clubs and barrelhouse joints provided him with steady employment. But Chatman was always on the move and playing at very rough juke joints where gambling, drinking, and music intertwined in patrons' attempts to escape the often oppressive and repetitive rhythm of rural Black life. Nonetheless, the pay was pretty good, and at least he was not in the hot fields all day. By the late 1930s he'd spent nearly a decade on the blues piano circuit in the mid-South, and it was time for a change. Chatman knew of Chicago's reputation as a blues town, so he joined the mainstream, along with fellow musicians Muddy Waters, Floyd Jones, and many others, and moved to Chicago in 1939.

By this time he was known as Memphis Slim, an accomplished, stomp-down blues piano player who could play boogie woogie with the best of them. Piano boogie woogie can be described as a form of the blues, one that underscores the importance of a powerful and inventive left hand such as Slim and Albert Ammons possessed. Nonetheless, it is a two-handed form of piano playing that suffers if the melodic figures performed by the right hand are underdeveloped. The left hand plays an ostinato bass line, figures that are repeated, often with minor variation. The terms "walking" or "rolling" are often used to describe these bass lines. Meanwhile the right hand is freer to improvise, sometimes with a device as simple as a single note that is repeated in a highly syncopated manner or a simple, melodic line that is changed every four to eight bars.

In addition to the live performances at clubs—many of them on the South Side of Chicago, home to many of the newly arrived Southern immigrants—Slim wanted the chance to record as well. His first three records were made in August 1940, for OKeh, a label affiliated with Columbia, and they sold fairly well. The band—His Washboard Band—included an unknown (and, according to Slim, blind) harmonica player, Leroy Batchelor, on string bass and Washboard Sam. The sound of and selections for his first session were typical of the popular small bands of the day. In all likelihood, the session was arranged by his friend, Big Bill Broonzy, a popular blues recording artist with strong and long-standing ties to the Columbia/OKeh and Vocalion labels.

Big Bill Broonzy, in fact, quickly became a fast and lasting comrade and, as he recounts in his autobiography (1992), helped to solidify Slim's musical reputation: "Me and Memphis Slim got to be good friends and I liked him very much. In 1940, February 18, my piano player Joshua Altheimer died, so I asked Memphis Slim to play with me and he did. We played at the 1410 Club, at the Ruby Tavern, in New York at Town Hall, the Regal Theater, the 8th Street Theater, the Beehive in Chicago and many other places.... So one day I finally told to Memphis Slim: 'You's good enough now to go on your own, You don't need Big Bill or no other blues singer with you. Just get you some good musicians to play with and you'll be Memphis Slim like I'm Big Bill.' And so he did!" Chicago was a hotbed of musical activity, and Chatman was right at home. Things were so good that it appeared Slim would stay in Chicago forever.

The ambience of the big city and its fast pace marked a distinct change from the country life that Chatman and so many of his contemporaries knew so well. But some of the younger club patrons had been born in Chicago or moved up North when they were children. For them, the South was like another country, albeit one that they might visit every year. Once again Big Bill observed and wrote about this younger generation

of club-goers: "Them men didn't know how cotton and corn and rice and sugar-cane grows and they didn't care. They went out, dressed up every night and some of them had three or four women. One fed him and the other bought his clothes and shoes. These is the men that wear ten dollar Stetson hat and twenty-dollar gold pieces at their watch and diamonds in their teeth and on their fingers" (Broonzy 1992).

Memphis Slim thrived in this invigorating atmosphere. He had plenty of work, played with some of the best blues musicians in the country, and his career was flourishing. Chatman continued to live and perform in Chicago throughout the 1940s and into the 1950s, appearing regularly in the clubs and recording for some of the small local record labels. The nature of his band slowly changed as he added two or three reed players and a brass player or two to the fundamental rhythm section. His 1946 recordings for Hy-Tone, for example, include Alex Atkins on alto and Ernest Cotton on tenor saxophone. The subsequent recordings he made for Miracle and Premium were in a similar vein; jaunty instrumentals like "Midnight Jump" or "Rockin' the House" were interspersed with slow, lowdown, sometimes haunting blues numbers such as "Blue and Lonesome," "Mistake in Life," and "Mother Earth."

These changes in his band and music were almost certainly encouraged by larger trends in African-American popular music, exemplified by Louis Jordan and his Tympani Five. His band was tight, well-rehearsed, and exceptionally popular. Between 1942 and the early 1950s Louis Jordan's blues-based jump tunes and novelty numbers seemed to be everywhere. You could hear "Five Guys Named Moe," "Outskirts of Town," and "What's the Use of Getting Sober (When I'm Gonna Get Drunk Again)?" on the radio, on your tavern's jukebox, or being performed by a local band. In short, Louis Jordan was a major star, and his brand of small group, jump blues, and r & b inspired Memphis Slim—and countless others—to shift their attention to this popular genre.

The Times They Are A-Changing |

Peter Chatman continued to play for mostly Black audiences, but by the late 1950s a pronounced shift was apparent. On August 18, 1959, Slim recorded one of his last sessions specifically aimed at a Black record-buying audience; these Vee Jay records (issued as singles and, in a presentiment of another trend in the record industry, as a long-playing album) utilize a typical outfit for this period. (By the late 1950s Chatman usually employed a guitarist, and most often this was Matt "Guitar" Murphy, who is perhaps best known to some music fans for his appearance in the first Blues Brothers movie.) The album contains some of the tunes most associated with Slim during the final thirty-five years of his career: "Messin' Around," "The Come Back," "Gotta Find My Baby," and the eternal "Mother Earth."

Within weeks of his last session for Vee Jay, Slim went into a New York studio to record his first solo album for Moses Asch, *Memphis Slim and the Real Boogie Woogie* (Folkways 3524). In some ways it represented the antithesis of his work during the previous twenty years: the session was solo piano and vocal and the material outside the popular mainstream. Asch may have been trying to economize—Slim hadn't played as a solo artist in years—but more importantly he was trying to reach back into Chatman's past. The session consists of mostly older material: "Cow Cow Blues," "44 Blues," "Roll and Tumble," and "Sail on Blues," which had become well-known during the 1920s and 1930s.

With this session Slim began a new career phase: he would be viewed as an "authentic" blues pianist with strong Southern folk roots. Asch was marketing folk music, of all sorts, to a broad audience, and Chatman's status as an r & b band leader didn't neatly fit the founder's concept of Folkways. Therefore he recast Memphis Slim as a blues

singer, a solo pianist, a purveyor of real boogie woogie with first-hand ties to Albert Ammons and Pete Johnson. In other words, Memphis Slim's Folkways debut was conceived as a long-playing record by a folk blues singer with his own strong piano accompaniment. Charles Edward Smith's original notes to this record quote Raeburn Flerlage, who wrote: "Slim has always been regarded (and regards himself) as having his roots and style firmly planted in Southern blues traditions.... [H]e feels that a real blues musician brings a blues flavor to everything he does.... It's a way of looking at things, a way of feeling the music, and a blues man always feels it that way, whether to a greater or lesser extent."

By 1960 Slim was creating a bifurcated career that encompassed his roles as a Southern blues singer/pianist and as a band leader trying to keep his finger on the pulse of Black popular music. But the pull towards the former (yet newly revived) status proved strong. Chatman recorded another solo album for Folkways in early 1960 with another carefully crafted title, *Memphis Slim and the Real Honky Tonk Sound* (Folkways 3535), that further underscored his authenticity. Asch, I suppose, wanted to make certain that the folk-music-buying public believed they were getting the genuine article, an artist with the proper musical and cultural pedigree. On that level, it made perfect sense to recast Slim in a role that he had earlier outgrown.

The concept of "authenticity" was clearly important to Asch; it was at the core of his vision of what Folkways represented and presented to the public. In writing about this issue Peter Goldsmith contends that Asch "insisted that the recordings he released had to be 'legitimate'—they had to express the truth. But by his own admission his definition of authentic expanded the longer he was in business" (Goldsmith 1998: 293). Such flexibility was tempered not only by the passage of time but also by the realities of commerce.

Chatman realized that Asch presented him with previously untapped opportunities. He was now being contacted by a greater number of record companies and booking agents looking for a blues pianist who could perform for diverse audiences. Less of his work and income was being derived from performing for the urban Black audience that had comprised his core audience for years. In 1960 Slim quietly slid into the slowly emerging overseas blues circuit. Europe was calling, and during the summer he toured with his old friend, Willie Dixon. They performed most often in England but also spent a great deal of time in western Europe. Their reception was not only warm; several European companies wanted to record their music. Slim quickly recorded for Storyville in Denmark (a relationship that lasted many years) and for the Polydor label in London. A Belgian crew shot a short film about his life, *Memphis Slim*, that year. During this initial touring he lived in Chicago part of the year and in Europe (preferably Paris) for long periods of time. Although he never severed his ties with the United States, and with Chicago in particular, by the middle of 1962 Slim became an expatriate.

Europe offered more new opportunities, which Slim quite happily embraced. He quickly settled into his new role of a "blues ambassador" from the United States. An accomplished performer, he found plenty of work across Europe. He appeared on television shows in Romania, Italy, Holland, and Switzerland. German Polydor, Storyville (an important Danish label operated by Karl Knudsen that featured many American blues and jazz artists), French Vogue, and English Barclay are just a few of the companies he recorded for. And he was on the festival circuit, performing not only at blues clubs but the major festivals of the 1960s, such as the American Folk Blues tours. Slim held down several extended residencies at the Mars Club and Les Trois Mailletz Club in Paris for a decade beginning in 1962.

Life was good in Europe; nonetheless he maintained strong ties with the United States. He was booked for several weeks into the Village Vanguard (a noted New York City jazz club) in 1965, and followed that immediately with a featured appearance at the Newport Jazz Festival and a recording session for the [Victoria] Spivey record company in Brooklyn. Slim did a swing through the western United States in the summer of 1966, performing at the Both/And Club in San Francisco, Los Angeles' Ash Grove, and the Monterey Jazz Festival. Throughout the late 1960s and 1970s he returned to the United States for a well-planned series of club dates, concerts, and—quite often—recording sessions.

During the later years of his life Memphis Slim's music changed very little. He remained a proficient blues pianist and a plaintive vocalist. His European oeuvre from the 1970s and 1980s suggests that he was a smooth, polished performer who knew exactly the right mixture of boogie woogie, a few pop tunes, and a slow blues or two to keep the crowd satisfied. His repertoire was not static, but he continued to perform old favorites—"Mistake in Life," "Every Day I Have the Blues," "Outskirts of Town," "Mother Earth," "Beer-Drinking Woman," and "Walkin' the Boogie"—that appear on many of his recordings from the European period.

And he was appreciated in Europe in ways that he never had been in the United States. When he was in Paris, Chatman often had a Rolls Royce chauffeur him to his club dates. He worked in the film industry, scoring a French film, *A Nous Deux La France*, in 1970, and appeared in two others: *The Sergeant* and *Carry It On*. In 1987 the French Government bestowed upon him the title "Commander of Arts and Letters," and in the month before his death the United States Senate countered with the title of "Ambassador-at-Large of Good Will." His death of a heart attack on February 24, 1988, left behind an impressive recorded legacy and the respect and admiration of his fellow musicians and his fans on several continents. As a final tribute Chatman was inducted into the Blues Foundation's Hall of Fame in 1989.

Memphis Slim and Moses Asch: An Informal Memoir | Raeburn Flerlage

Two of my favorite people were Moses Asch, the head of Folkways Records, and Peter Chatman—known around the world as Memphis Slim, the famed blues pianist and singer. It was Moe who arranged my first meeting with Slim, and it came as a complete surprise. I'd done some promotional and other work for Folkways during the previous four years, but nothing related to artist and repertoire. So when Moe's telegram came in August 1959, it was totally unexpected. He was asking me (not telling me) to visit Slim at the Pershing Hotel in Chicago before he took off for Europe, and to come up with notes and photos for his new Folkways LP.

Of course Moe knew I'd been dabbling in photography for two or three years. I had attended the Art Institute of Chicago and was currently at the Institute of Design. He also knew I had good equipment—2 Leica M3's with multiple lenses and a Rolliflex, among others. But when he'd looked at my work, he thought I was suited for "fashion photography"! (I'd taken a lot of shots of pretty girls in pretty dresses.) He also knew I was comfortable in the Black community and that I'd known a great many performing artists through newspaper interviews I'd conducted—with Marian Anderson, Louis Armstrong, Burl Ives, Sidney Bechet, and Paul Robeson—and through my association with *People's Songs* in the late 1940s, where I'd interviewed Lead Belly, Josh White, Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Big Bill Broonzy, and others. But I had never photographed a performing artist outside of a few experimental ballet shots and coverage of the Bayanihan troupe.



But the job was a godsend. It brought me in contact with one of the most memorable people in my life. Memphis Slim was an immensely tall, handsome, cordial, urbane, sophisticated, understanding, charming, and cooperative fellow. Also he was perceptive, intuitive, and inventive—quite a range of attributes!

For the photo session he had all the lights and “atmosphere” set up in the Pershing Lounge, although he wasn’t performing there at the time. (He never mentioned that fact to me, then or later. He’d just worked it out with some of the hotel employees.) And he established an immediate rapport with my companion as well as with me. (I’d brought a young Chicago schoolteacher, a fine classical pianist, with me.) Throughout the long afternoon and evening, as Slim performed endlessly for the two of us, and as he and my friend exchanged both technical observations and friendly glances, I was able to shoot from all angles, all distances, with and without tripods, using the lights that Slim had set up.

The result was a vast set of prints that carried my career into the several decades that followed. The shots of Slim at the piano with “an audience of one” in the background became key photos in several blues spreads over the years, including the book reviews of Charles Keil’s *Urban Blues*. Moe sent one of the shots to Hughes Panassie of *Le Jazz Hot* in Paris, and they were later picked up around the world. Several of my friends think I’ve never done anything better, which is a sort of left-handed compliment at best, isn’t it?

One of the greatest nurturers of talent in our times was Moses Asch. I never thought I’d be honored not only by his friendship, but his feeling that I had a talent worth “nurturing.” Moe Asch not only gave me a bonus for the Memphis Slim job, but eventually began to think of me as “the official Folkways blues photographer” in the Midwest. And my second undertaking for the famous label came just five months

later, on January 17, 1960. I was to photograph and interview singer/guitarist Arbee Stidham, and again a strong element of surprise was involved. It turned out that Stidham’s sponsor—or “mentor”—was none other than my new friend Memphis Slim.

I’d been haunted for weeks by the memory of Slim’s astonishing fingers. Slim himself—at 6’6”—could appropriately be described as “elongated,” but his magnificently long, flexible, supple fingers (I thought of them as spidery) expanded the meaning of the word beyond any accepted norm. Why hadn’t I photographed them? Why not a portrait of those fingers alone? Of course, if caught only in available light as they danced and gyrated across the keyboards, the results might be a “study in blur,” and although I had nothing against that visual depiction of action, it wasn’t what I had in mind for the unforgettable extensions of the Memphis Slim persona. So for this shoot I took a strobe. The job may have been to photograph Arbee Stidham, but the star of the show once again was Memphis Slim. Digits triumphant!

Folkways, by which I mean Moe Asch, gave me many more assignments. There was Ella Jenkins as well as the bluesmen Big Joe Williams, Little Brother Montgomery, Jazz Gillum, and Willie Dixon, among others. And there were the covers of Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry, Frank Hamilton, Horton Barker, and the Pete Seeger “Rainbow Quest” series that won design awards in 1960 and 1961. But none “made history” like the Memphis Slim session did.

When I remember the days with Moe Asch and Memphis Slim, what I remember is what they meant. I think back to the folk music revival and the blues rebirth and realize that these things couldn’t have happened without Moe. And, for me, Memphis Slim was his advance agent.

Song Notes

1 JOGGIE BOOGIE | Willie Dixon, bass; Memphis Slim, piano from Folkways F-2385

Bass player Willie Dixon and Memphis Slim collaborated on several albums issued by Folkways in the early 1960s. Their association went back to the 1940s, when Slim was playing piano around Chicago and Willie Dixon was leader of the Big Three Trio. Dixon enjoyed a long career as an A & R man around Chicago, a composer of many blues songs, and the solid anchor under many of the recordings by blues artists ranging from Otis Rush and the Five Breezes, to Johnny Shines. Dixon's string bass playing, along with Slim's inventive right hand (in the style of Albert Ammons), are the highlights of "Joggie Boogie."

2 I LEFT THAT TOWN—HARLEM BOUND | Memphis Slim, piano and vocal from Folkways F-3535

Inspired perhaps by Jimmy Rodgers' fine 1954 Chess record, *Chicago Bound*, Slim begins with a slow, out-of-tempo instrumental introduction before settling into a loping, moderate pace. The song (first recorded by Slim in 1947) is about first leaving Memphis, then East St. Louis, and finally Chicago, with "Harlem on my mind." This mecca of Black culture attracted hundreds of thousands of Black Americans during the Great Migration, and by the time these recordings were made in 1960, Slim was ready to relocate. The theme of migration echoes throughout blues music, and Slim's

lyrics about wanderlust are not unusual. Few blues musicians, however, carried it the point of becoming expatriates, as Chatman was for over twenty-five years.

Started out in Memphis in nineteen and thirty-two/Played a little blues and a little boogie, too.
But I left that town/Yes, I left that town,
Lord, I Left dear Old Memphis,/You know I'm Harlem bound.

I came to East St. Louis in nineteen and thirty-four,/Girls down there didn't want to let me go.
But I left that town,/Yes, I left that town,
I left dear Old East St. Louis,/You know I'm Harlem bound.

Now I'm in Chicago, doing mighty fine,/Still have Harlem on my mind.
I'm gonna leave this town. (2x).
Leaving Old Chicago/You know I'm Harlem bound.

3 KEY TO THE HIGHWAY | Jazz Gillum, vocal and harmonica; Arbee Stidham, guitar; **Memphis Slim, piano** from Folkways F-3826

This selection features Memphis Slim in his role as accompanist. William "Jazz" Gillum is the band leader, harmonica player, and vocalist; along with electric guitarist Arbee Stidham, they form a trio with roots back to the 1940s. Like Chatman, Gillum recorded for Bluebird, though Gillum debuted in 1934. "Key to the Highway" is a blues standard first recorded by pianist Charles Segar in February 1940 and quickly covered by Jazz Gillum and another Chicago-based bluesman, Big Bill Broonzy. This fine and understated performance benefits not only from the leader's heartfelt singing but from Slim's quiet and sensitive accompaniment.

I've got the key to the highway/Built out and bound to go.
I'm gonna leave here running/Because walking is most too slow.

I'm going back to the border/Honey, where I'm better known.
Because you haven't done nothing/But drove a good man away from home.

Give me one more kiss, mama,/Just before I go.
'Cause when I'm leaving here,/I won't be back, no more.

When the moon peep o'er the mountain,/Honey, I'll be on my way.
I'm gonna walk this highway/Until the break of day.

Well, it's so long, so long baby/I must say goodbye.
I'm gonna roam this highway/Until the day I die.

4 CHICAGO RENT PARTY | Memphis Slim, vocal and piano; Jump Jackson, drums from Folkways F-3536

Perhaps encouraged by Moses Asch (who heard Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter mesmerize audiences with his own spoken introductions), Slim sometimes on his Folkways records told stories of his past about musicians with whom he was associated, about racism in the South, and about women that he'd known. Over a Yancey-esque bass line, Chatman describes his days playing for the rollicking house parties held to raise rent money. Slim also mentions a few of the blues greats—such as Big Bill, Washboard Sam, Curtis Jones—with whom he worked when he arrived in Chicago in the late 1930s. This piece is kicked along by Jump Jackson's drumming and ends on an unexpected decrescendo.

Spoken:

Back in nineteen and thirty-seven, we call it the Chicago house rent party blues. That was before Jimmy Yancey got fancy and got a job at the White Sox ball park. Later on, when Mr. Bill Veeck taken over, the one and only Mr. Jump Jackson and his band had his combo there. Things were better then. Way back in 1937, if you couldn't play this piano, you couldn't get a job in Chicago at the house rent parties. But old Jump Jackson, he had it made. He's a man that beat his way through the world. . . playing drums.

Well, in the wee morning.... You know, one thing, back in those old house rent party days, we didn't make no money, but we had a whole lot of fun! Me and Jimmy Yancey, Big Bill Broonzy, Tampa Red, Arbee Stidham, Jump Jackson, Washboard Sam, Curtis Jones, Big Maceo. . . I could name a million of guys. We were all friends. If we had one piece of bread we had twenty people, we would break it into that many pieces. Those were the good old days.

5 STEWBALL | Willie Dixon, vocal and bass; Memphis Slim, vocal and piano from Folkways F-2385

This contemplative version of the late 19th-century ballad about the famous horse race between Molly and Stewball is set in Dallas, Texas. During the race Molly stumbles, enabling Stewball to take the lead and quickly win. According to this version, the legendary Stewball ran so fast that "he left his shadow behind." The duo has come up with an interesting vocal arrangement—the early lines are taken by Slim with the responses supplied by Dixon, then they swap places. The last line is shared between the two vocalists, whose low-pitched voices mesh quite nicely.

There's a big, day in Dallas,/And I wish I were there.
Spent my last hundred dollars,/On the iron grey mare.
See her travel, all day long, long, long/See her travel, all day long.

Well, I don't mind horse racing,/If it wasn't for my wife.
Old Stewball, he may stumble,/Ran away with my life.
Wife and baby, left behind, my wife and baby, left behind, left behind.

Old Stewball was a black horse,/Just as slick as a mole.
He had a ring round his poor shoulder,/And it shine just like gold.
Like gold, like gold,/He had a ring round his poor shoulder/And it shine just like gold.

Old Stewball was a race horse,/But the poor horse was blind.
He ran so fast down in Texas,/He left his shadow behind.
Behind, behind,/He left his shadow behind.

Old Stewball he was a race horse,/And Old Molly, she was too,
Old Molly, she stumbled,/And Old Stewball, he flew.
Around the racetrack/All day long, long, long. (2x)

6 THE DIRTY DOZENS | Memphis Slim, piano

Previously Unissued—CDR #610, #3, RR 2938

This is clearly Slim's take on "The Dozens." The piece is taken at a brisk tempo and with a drive that is typical for this song. The tune is unmistakable, and anyone familiar with the song can almost hear the ribald lyrics, which may be why Chatman expunged the vocals from this version.

7 BEER-DRINKING WOMAN | Willie Dixon, bass; Memphis Slim, vocal and piano

from Folkways F-2385

This song was long-time favorite of Chatman's, who first recorded it in October 1940 (Bluebird 8584); he kept coming back to it throughout his career. Its initial impact was sufficient for Jimmie Gordon to record his own version for Decca Records exactly one year after Slim committed his to posterity. Both Slim's version and Gordon's are slow-tempo, very deliberate pieces. Memphis Slim must have known many women during his career, but this particular beer-drinking woman took Chatman for so much money that he ends the key lines with the refrain "I don't want to see her no more."

I walked into a beer tavern,/To give a girl a nice time.

I had forty-five dollars when I entered/When I left, I had one dime.

Chorus: Wasn't that a beer-drinking woman,/Don't you know man, don't you know.
She was a beer-drinking woman,/And I don't want to see her no more.

When I spent down to my last dime, she said, "Darlin', I know you not through."

I said, "Yes, little girl, and the trumpet belongs to you."

Chorus

Now she'd often said, "Excuse me a minute,/I've got to step around here."
And every time she came back,/She had room for another quart of beer.

Chorus

8 WALKING BLUES | Arbee Stidham, guitar and vocal; Memphis Slim, piano; Jump

Jackson, drums

from Folkways F-3824

Another veteran of the Chicago blues scene since the 1940s, Stidham and his bandmates were reunited in this session that was almost certainly arranged by Memphis Slim. Stidham began his career with RCA Victor in 1947 and by 1955 had recorded for a variety of small and large labels including SIW and States. A creative songwriter, Stidham was an expressive vocalist and modestly talented guitarist—a true journeyman who occasionally turned in strong performances. "Walking Blues" is a casual, medium-tempo piece with lyrics about lost love that are drawn both from traditional verses and Stidham's own imagination. One of its greatest strengths is a very nice 24-bar solo by Memphis Slim about three-quarters of the way through the song.

I'm gonna leave here walking,/Keep on talking to myself. (2x)
I've gotta find my baby,/Before she find somebody else.

I'm gonna find my baby,/I'm gonna admit I've done her wrong. (2x)
I'm gonna fall down on my knee,/I'm gonna beg her to come back home.

I'm gonna find my baby,/Don't think she can't be found. (2x)
I walk up and down the highway/Until my mustache drag the ground.

I'm gonna find my baby,/I don't care where she go. (2x)
Well, I walk from Chicago/Way down to the Gulf of Mexico.

9 PINETOP'S BOOGIE WOOGIE | Memphis Slim, piano and vocal

from Folkways F-3535

This is Memphis Slim's fine rendition of Pinetop Smith's classic piece that was first recorded in 1928. It is not a slavish copy, but a nice interpretation of Smith's barrel-house piano that creates some of the feel of the style of live performance at a Chicago rent party in the 1930s. Slim mixes the type of humorous narrative that Pinetop Slim himself used on the original recording (and which Chatman apparently also enjoyed)

with three passages of straight blues singing. It's a very effective performance that sounds both comfortable and emotionally satisfying.

I know you folks have all heard the "Pinetop Boogie Woogie." This is Mr. Pinetop, playing the "Pinetop Boogie Woogie." When I tell you to stop, I want everybody to hold it. And when I tell you to boogie, I want you to break your leg. Now, stop, hold yourself. Now, boogie! That's what I'm talking about. Boogie! Now swing that woman with the red dress on. Bring her on up here to Mr. Pinetop. Let her sit down on that piano. Yes, hey! Gonna boogie all night long. One more time now. Boogie! Ahhss, I want to tell you something now.

My gal's got a heart/Like a rock cast in the sea. (2x)
She can love everybody and mistreat poor me.

Well, I cooked her breakfast,/Even carried it to her bed. (2x)
She would take one bite, throw a piece back at Pinetop's head.

I don't want no woman if she can't help me to rob and steal. (2x)
You liable to wake up in the morning and you won't have a decent meal.

I comb her hair, even manicure her fingernail. (2x)
And every time I get into trouble, she lets me go to jail.

Hold yourself. Now get it. Ahh, slow and easy, that's the way it go!

10 SAN JUAN BLUES | Memphis Slim, piano from Folkways F-3535

Jelly Roll Morton always claimed that New Orleans jazz was spiced with a hint of a "Spanish tinge." Jimmy Yancey's slower blues piano bass lines reflected some of the same influence—a distinctive dotted rhythm that recurred later in American music. Surprisingly, early rockabilly utilized a similar rhythmic pattern in the middle 1950s, especially in Memphis. Memphis Slim uses it very effectively on "San Juan Blues." This is a straightforward blues number in its harmonic patterns, but the dotted rhythm employed by Chatman's left hand is quite striking, and the contrast between this and most of his other duple meter pieces makes for a nice change of pace.

Pack my suitcase/I'll be on my way. (2x)
Gotta find my baby/Leaving town today.

Leaving in the morning/Sure do hate to go. (2x)
But they tell me my baby/She's down by Mexico.

Bye, bye people/I'll be on my way. (2x)
Gotta find my baby/I'm leavin' town today.

11 PRISON BOUND | Memphis Slim, piano and vocal from Folkways F-2387

Leroy Carr cast a large shadow in the blues world of the late 1920s and into the 1930s, and many of the pianists working during this decade from Honey Hill to Black Bob owe a part of their style to this Indianapolis-based musician. Carr was often paired with guitarist Scrapper Blackwell, and their recording of "How Long Blues" became an immediate, long-lived hit as soon it was realized in 1928. It is doubtful that Chatman knew Carr personally, so it is quite likely that he learned this song directly from the Carr/Blackwell collaboration, which was released early in 1930 by Vocalion, or from another recorded source. In either event, Memphis Slim manages to recreate some of the pathos of the original record without slavishly imitating either Carr's piano or his laconic yet forceful vocal style.

Early one morning,/The blues came falling down. (2x)
All locked up in jail,/Now I'm prisoner bound.

When they had my trial,/Baby, you could not be found. (2x)
Too late, mistreatin' mama,/Your daddy's prisoner bound.

All last night,/I sat in my cell alone. (2x)
I was thinking of you, baby,/And my happy home.

Baby, you may never/See my smiling face again. (2x)
But you must always remember/That I have been your friend.

Sometimes I wonder,/Why don't you write to me? (2x)
Now if I've been a bad fellow,/I never did intend to be.

**12 IF THE RABBIT HAD A GUN | Memphis Slim, piano and vocal; Matt Murphy, guitar
from Disc LP-105**

This unusual title is taken from the song's chorus and is another relaxed, friendly collaboration that benefits from Murphy's quiet chordal accompaniment. The two men first performed and recorded together early in 1954 when Murphy was part of Slim's r&b band—Memphis Slim and his Orchestra—which catered to a Black audience. This song neatly combines the themes of love and mistreatment with a chorus that suggests a masculine (and rural) perspective with which many of their older listeners could identify.

Don't take advantage of me, baby,/Because I'm in love with you.
Someday one will come along/And break your heart in two.

Chorus: One-sided love, sure God ain't no fun.
You know there wouldn't be so much hunting/If the rabbit had a gun.

You always run around,/Stay out all night.
But when I do the same thing, baby,/You want to start a fight.

Chorus
So let's call it quits, baby,/You know it better that way.
Because what you sow,/You got to reap one day.

Chorus

**13 BACKWATER BLUES | Memphis Slim, piano and vocal
from Folkways F-2387**

The Mississippi River flooded so often during the first two decades of the 20th century that it inspired many blues songs. Artists as diverse as Lonnie Johnson and Barbecue Bob recorded songs about the floods. This version is a reworking of Bessie Smith's classic 1927 recording for Columbia about personal losses and tragedies

resulting from a flood. The song is enduring enough that it has been recorded many times since its initial release by Ruby Smith, Duskey Daily, and LaVern Baker, among others. The strength of "Backwater Blues" lies in its poignant, graphic, and sad imagery as well as Chatman's understated but sorrowful rendition.

Well, it rained five days,/Skies turned dark as night. (2x)
Trouble taking place/In that low, low land at night.

You know it thundered and lightnin'/And the wind began to blow. (2x)
You know there was thousands of people/That didn't have no place to go.

I'd rather be a catfish/Swimming in the deep blue/And to meet a floating boat, behind a submarine.
I'd rather be a catfish/Swimming in the deep blue sea.
Than to go back to that country/And be treated like they want to treat poor me.

Backwater blues told me to pack my things and go. (2x)
Because my house is washed away/And I just can't live down there no more.

**14 YOU NAME IT | Memphis Slim, piano; Matt Murphy, guitar
from Disc LP-105**

Matt Murphy and Memphis Slim enjoyed a particularly close association during the early 1960s. They had performed together as early as 1954, but they got even closer when they collaborated on some of the "packaged" blues tours that brought musicians like Sonny Boy Williamson, J.B. Lenoir, and Little Brother Montgomery to play for appreciative European audiences. For many younger blues fans—Eric Clapton, John Mayall, and Mick Jagger among them—this was the first time they were able to hear their heroes in person. Because the recording sounds so impromptu, one can imagine that, after the two men completed this casual instrumental, the two men said "you name it" to Moses Asch, and that's what he did.

15 M & O BLUES | Memphis Slim, piano and vocal
from Folkways F-2387

Enigmatically entitled "Mojo Blues" when this song was originally released on Folkways, it is really a fine and true version of Walter Davis' "M & O Blues." Davis, a pianist who spent much of his adult life in St. Louis and Chicago, traveled in the same circles as Chatman did during the 1940s. He recorded many sides for Victor and Bluebird during his long career; some of them, such as "Why Should I Be Blue" and "Santa Claus," are among the most introspective and spellbinding blues recordings. Slim's version is much like the original—originally released by Victor in 1930—in its slow tempo, its use of a minor key, and its convincingly mournful tone.

My baby's gone/And she won't be back no more. (2x)
She left me this morning,/She rode that M & O.

But that's all right,/Can't stand the way you do. (2x)
You're driving me mad,/Sugar, to worry you.

There is one thing/I just can't understand myself. (2x)
Ever since my baby left me,/I don't want nobody else.

When she left, she bought a ticket/Just as long as she was tall. (2x)
She never really knew how much I loved her/Or else she wouldn't have left at all.
My baby's gone.

16 EVERY DAY I HAVE THE BLUES | Memphis Slim, piano and vocal; Willie Dixon, bass
Previously Unissued—CDR #616, #5, RR 3067

This live recording probably comes from the 1960 Village Gate sessions featuring Pete Seeger. Most of the selections spotlight Seeger's traditional and protest songs; Chatman and Dixon accompany him on several songs. "Every Day I Have the Blues" is one of many Memphis Slim and Willie Dixon selections that were recorded at the Village Gate but not issued on Folkways. This version—often associated with Joe

Williams and B.B. King—is noteworthy for Slim's mournfully convincing singing and inventive right hand. Dixon's active bass playing behind Slim, which really kicks this song along, is even more effective than usual.

Every day, every day I have the blues. (2x)
It ain't about the girl I've got,/You know it's you I hate to lose.

Nobody loves me/And nobody seems to care. (2x)
Speaking of bad luck and trouble,/Well, you know I've had my share.

I'm gonna pack my suitcase,/I'll be moving on down the line. (2x)
I know that nobody's worrying,/Well, it ain't nobody crying.

17 JUST A DREAM | Memphis Slim, piano and vocal
from Folkways F-2387

It's surprising that this clever song, which was written and initially recorded by Big Bill Broonzy in 1939, has not been more widely performed by blues musicians. A semi-topical and sardonic piece, "Just a Dream" was originally played by Broonzy with the accompaniment of a small ensemble. Memphis Slim transforms it into a blues that features his own heartfelt vocal and sparkling piano accompaniment.

Chorus: It was a dream,/Lord, what a dream I had on my mind. (2x)
And when I woke up this morning,/Nothing right could I find.

Dream I'd gotten married,/Started me a family,
My wife had twelve children,/And they all look like me.
But it was a dream,/Lord, what a dream I had on my mind.
When I woke up this morning,/Not a child could I find.

Dream I played lottery,/And I played the horses too.
I won so much money,/Well, I didn't know what to do.
But it was just a dream,/Lord, what a dream I had on my mind.
Ay, because when I woke up this morning,/Not a penny could I find.

Chorus

Dream I went to the White House,/And I sat in the president's chair.
He take me by my hand,/”Memphis Slim, I’m so glad you’re here.”

But it was just a dream (a nightmare),/Lord, what a dream I had on my mind.
Ay, when I woke up this morning,/No children, no money, nothing could I find.

18 MIDNIGHT SPECIAL | Pete Seeger, banjo and vocal; Memphis Slim, piano and vocal; Willie Dixon, bass and vocal
Folkways F-2450

This brief, lively, and informal performance once more highlights Chatman’s ability to accompany a variety of musicians in disparate contexts. “Midnight Special” is closely associated with Lead Belly, whom Seeger knew very well from the time they met in the late 1930s until Ledbetter’s death in 1949. Moe Asch rarely recorded and released “live” albums on Folkways, but he issued a series of three records of *Pete Seeger at the Village Gate*—Folkways F-2450, F-2451, and F-2386. These April 1960 recordings document a typical Seeger “hoot” from this period, and the previously released contributions of Chatman and Dixon are limited to a brief set of duets and two songs (“TB Blues” and “Midnight Special”) on which they assisted Seeger.

Well, you wake up in the morning,/You hear the ding-dong ring.
Go marchin’ to the table,/You see the same damn thing.
Knife and fork are on the table,/And nothing in my pan.
You say anything about it,/You’re in trouble with the man.

Chorus: Oh! Let the midnight special,/Shine her light on me.
Oh! Let the midnight special shine her ever-lovin’ light on me.

Yonder come little Rosie,/How in the world do you know?
I can tell her by her apron/And the dress she wore.
Umbrella on her shoulder,/Piece of paper in her hand
Goes a-marchin’ to the Captain,/Says, “I want my man.”

Chorus

Now you go down to Houston,/You’d better walk right,
Boy, you’d better not stagger,/And you’d better not fight.
Or Sheriff Benson will arrest you,/He will take you down.
And if the jury finds you guilty,/You penitentiary bound.

Chorus

19 THE BELLS | Memphis Slim, piano
Folkways F-3535

An up-tempo blues, “The Bells” kicked off the second Memphis Slim Folkways album, *Memphis Slim and the Real Honky Tonk Sound*, which was issued in 1960. This solo album serves as a retrospective of his career and includes some of the themes about trains (“The Train Is Gone”), troubles with women (“Sail On, Little Girl”), and alcohol (“Whiskey Drinking Blues”) commonly found in blues songs. “The Bells” is a simple and strong instrumental effort that also looks towards Slim’s own roots.

20 MEAN OLD FRISCO | Memphis Slim, piano and vocal; Matt Murphy, guitar
Disc LP-105

The title originally assigned to this song—“Me and My Frisco”—is a mis-hearing of the title for the Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup recording that has endured among blues singers since he first recorded it for RCA Victor in 1942. Crudup was an influence on the young Elvis Presley and a popular singer among Black record buyers during the 1940s and 1950s. Memphis Slim almost certainly knew him in Chicago, but Crudup’s recorded version of “Mean Ole Frisco” was so popular that this version almost certainly derives from the disc. Like so many blues, it’s rife with allusions to travel and migration in addition to its many references to railroads.

Now that mean old Frisco,/Low-down Santa Fe (2x)
Take my woman away,/Well, then it blew back after me.

Lord, I wonder, will she ever call my name? (2x)
She don’t love me no more,/Ain’t that a crying shame.

Well, I was standing, yes, lookin',/Watching that Southern whistle blow. (2x)
She didn't catch that Katy,/Wonder where'd my woman go.

Lord, I ain't got no/Special rider here. (2x)
I'm gonna leave,/Cause I don't feel welcome here.

My mother, she told me,/And my papa told me too. (2x)
Son, every woman grin in your face,/Well, she ain't no friend to you.

Lord, I ain't got no/Special rider here. (2x)
I'm gonna leave,/Cause I don't feel welcome here.

21 THE GIMMICK | Memphis Slim, organ Previously Unissued — CDR #610, #22, RR 2937

The Hammond organ, popular among jazz keyboardists like Jimmy Smith and Jimmy McGriff during the 1950s, was a secondary instrument for Memphis Slim. He occasionally recorded on it during the 1960s using a light touch similar to what he had on the piano. This medium-tempo instrumental may be marked as a gimmick on the Folkways archival tape box, but it's a solid blues that brings a different timbre to Chatman's characteristic sound.

Other Recordings by Memphis Slim

- The Bluebird Sessions 1940-41*. RCA 66720.
Chicago Blues. Folkways 3536.
If the Rabbit Had a Gun. Disc 105.
Memphis Slim at the Village Gate. Folkways 2386.
Memphis Slim and the Real Boogie-Woogie. Folkways 3524.
Memphis Slim and the Real Honky Tonk Sound. Folkways 3535.
The Real Folk Blues. Chess/MCA 9270.
Songs of Memphis Slim and "Wee Willie" Dixon. Folkways 2385.

Other Related Recordings

- Barrelhouse Buck. *Barrelhouse Buck*. Folkways 3554.
Dupree, Champion Jack. *The Woman Blues of Champion Jack Dupree*. Folkways 3825.
Gillum, Jazz. *Blues by Jazz Gillum (with Memphis Slim)*. Folkways 3826.
Jazz Vol. 10: Boogie Woogie, Jump and Kansas City. Folkways 2810.
Mean Old World: The Blues from 1940 to 1994. Smithsonian Collection of Recordings 110.
Montgomery, Little Brother. *Blues*. Folkways 3527.
Montgomery, Little Brother. *Farro Street Jive*. Folkways 31014.
Piano Blues. Folkways RBF 12.
Seeger, Pete. *Pete Seeger at the Village Gate Vol. 1 (with Memphis Slim and Willie Dixon)*. Folkways 2450.
Seeger, Pete. *Pete Seeger at the Village Gate Vol. 2 (with Memphis Slim and Willie Dixon)*. Folkways 2451.
Seeger, Pete. *Sing Out with Pete (with Memphis Slim and Willie Dixon)*. Folkways 2451.
Speckled Red. *The Barrelhouse Blues of Speckled Red*. Folkways 3555.
Stidham, Arbee. *Arbee's Blues*. Folkways 3824 (with Memphis Slim).
Sykes, Roosevelt. *Blues by Roosevelt "The Honeydripper" Sykes*. Smithsonian Folkways 40051.
Townsend, Henry. *The Blues in St. Louis, Vol. 3*. Folkways 3816.

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Kip Lornell is a Professorial Lecturer of Africana Studies, American Studies, and Music at the George Washington University and a Research Associate at the Smithsonian Institution. The author of six books about American vernacular music, he has also published 60 articles and produced or compiled three dozen albums, mostly of African-American traditions. In 1997 Lornell was awarded a Grammy for his work on the liner notes to the reissue of the *Anthology of American Folk Music* (Smithsonian Folkways SFW 40090).

Raeburn Flerlage is a respected photojournalist based in Chicago. Early in his career, Flerlage worked in a variety of jobs -- as a newspaper columnist, interviewer, record reviewer, broadcaster, industrial music director, and lecturer. While he often wrote, spoke about, or played recordings in the course of his work, he considers the moment when he began his career as a music business insider to be when he took up with *People's Songs* in 1946 as a concert promoter. Over the next several years he got to know Moses Asch, who was then running Disc Records and later founded Folkways Records.

Flerlage credits Asch with launching his freelance career as a photographer, writer, producer, annotator, and promotional representative. Asch offered him a wide array of assignments beginning in 1959 and extending into the 1970s. His photographs have appeared on album covers and in books and magazines around the world for more than 30 years.

Flerlage has worked with extraordinary musical artists, including Marian Anderson, Pete Seeger, Paul Robeson, Louis Armstrong, Woody Guthrie, Big Bill Broonzy, Muddy Waters, and many others.

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About Smithsonian Folkways

Folkways Records was founded by Moses Asch in 1948 to document music, spoken word, instruction, and sounds from around the world. In the ensuing decades, New York City-based Folkways became one of the largest independent record labels in the world, reaching a total of nearly 2,200 albums that were always kept in print.

The Smithsonian Institution acquired Folkways from the Moses Asch estate in 1987 to ensure that the sounds and genius of the artists would be preserved for future generations. All Folkways recordings are available on high-quality audio cassettes or by special order on CD. Each recording is packed in a special box along with the original LP liner notes.

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings was formed to continue the Folkways tradition of releasing significant recordings with high-quality documentation. It produces new titles, reissues of historic recordings from Folkways and other record labels, and in collaboration with other companies also produces instructional videotapes and recordings to accompany published books and other educational projects.

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