

CLASSIC BLUES

FROM Smithsonian Folkways Recordings



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SIDE A

1. **Old Jabo** 2:14
   Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee
   (Walter McGhee/Figs. D Music, Inc. obo Stormking Music)
2. **Mule-Ridin' Blues** 3:46
   Big Bill Broonzy
   (Bill Broonzy)
3. **Joggie Boogie** 3:27
   Memphis Slim and Willie Dixon
   (Peter Chatman/BMG Platinum Songs obo Memphis Slim Music)
4. **Black Woman** 1:27
   Vera Hall
   (Vera Hall-Ruby Tartt/Unichappell Music Inc.)
5. **Mercury Blues** 2:21
   K.C. Douglas
   (Robert L. Geddins-K. C. Douglas/BMG Rights Mgmt obo Tradition Music Co.-BMG Rights Mgmt obo B Flat Publishing Co.)
6. **Ran the Blues Out of My Window** 2:57
   Roosevelt Sykes
   (Roosevelt Sykes/Leric Music Inc.)
7. **Leaving Blues** 2:23
   Lead Belly
   (Huddie Ledbetter-Alan Lomax /Folkways Music Publishers Inc)
   (Adapted with additional material by Huddie Ledbetter)

SIDE B

1. **One Dime Blues** 3:46
   Etta Baker
   (Arr. Etta Baker/Lucky Guitar Music, ASCAP)
2. **County Farm Blues** 2:11
   Son House
   (Edward James "Son" House Jr./Sondick Music, BMI)
3. **Clog Dance (Stomping Blues)** 2:02
   Champion Jack Dupree
   (Champion Jack Dupree)
4. **Boll Weevil** 3:06
   Pink Anderson
   (Pink Anderson/Lucky Guitar Music, ASCAP)
5. **Nickel's Worth of Liver** 2:43
   Edith North Johnson and Henry Brown
   (Edith North Johnson/Madison Leisure Corp, ASCAP)
6. **Don't Leave Me Here** 2:43
   Big Joe Williams
   (Big Joe Williams/Stormking Music Inc., BMI)

SIDE C

1. **Jimmy Bell** 2:20
   Cat Iron
   (William Carradine)
2. **Candy Man** 2:35
   Reverend Gary Davis
   (Arr. Rev. Gary Davis/Chandos Music c/o Downtown Songs LLC)
3. **Beer Drinking Woman** 2:32
   Memphis Slim and Willie Dixon
   (Peter Chatman/Songs of Universal, Inc.—Wabash Music Company, BMI)
4. **Come Go Home with Me** 3:55
   Lightnin' Hopkins
   (Sam Hopkins-M. McCormick/Figs D Music, Inc.—Sanga Music Inc, BMI)
5. **Careless Love** 3:23
   Josh White
6. **I Asked Her If She Loved Me** 2:55
   Henry Townsend
   (Henry Townsend/Prestige Music Co, BMI)

SIDE D

1. **Rising Sun** 2:43
   Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry
   (Walter McGhee/Stormking Music Inc, BMI)
2. **Pony Blues** 3:28
   David "Honeyboy" Edwards
   (Charley Patton/EMI Longitude Music Co., BMI)
3. **Vicksburg Blues** 4:02
   Little Brother Montgomery
   (Eurreal "Little Brother" Montgomery/Prestige Music Co, BMI)
4. **Vastapol** 2:11
   Elizabeth Cotten
5. **Drifting Along Blues** 2:59
   Lonnie Johnson
   (Lonnie Johnson/Wixen Music Publishing, Inc obo Lonesome Ghost Blues, BMI)
6. **Oh Baby, You Don't Have to Go** 2:49
   The Chambers Brothers
   (Jimmy Reed/Conrad Music—The Seeds of Reed Music, BMI)
7. **Don't Lie Buddy** 2:20
   Lead Belly and Josh White
   (Arr. Josh White)

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Produced by Barry Lee Pearson

SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS: FIFTY YEARS OF BLUES

BARRY LEE PEARSON

Folkways and the early labels run by Moses Asch came to blues midway through the last century, although interest in the folk roots of popular musical forms led Asch to record and document African American music dating back much earlier. Reflecting the philosophy of its founder, Moses Asch, Folkways worked from a set of principles different from those guiding the hustling postwar rhythm-and-blues labels that were then catering to the demands of African American consumers. Asch considered his recordings educational products as well as entertainment, and many of his recordings were designed for library use. He was receptive to markets other companies neglected, and Folkways published a remarkable assortment of recordings, including spoken word, poetry, city street sounds, world music, avant-garde art music, jazz, old-time country, rock, Yiddish, Cajun, and blues.

In 1941, Lead Belly was the first "blues" artist Asch recorded, but Asch didn't put out his blues repertoire. Instead, he issued an album of Lead Belly's children's songs, and then a worksong set. Obviously, these markets were needier. Finally, in 1944, Asch put out a compilation titled *Blues*, and from then on, blues was central to his catalogues.

Folkways' contributions to blues history also included major reissue projects: Frederic Ramsey Jr.'s *Jazz*, Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*, and Samuel Charters's *Country Blues*. These LPs effectively democratized access to America's musical past by making blues recordings of the 1920s and 1930s available in the 1950s and 1960s. The same spirit influenced the publication of field recordings, homemade recordings, and other documentary treasures with limited sales potential, but of immense historical value because they helped contextualize blues in community settings, along with other forms of African American expression, such as religious songs, worksongs, and even folktales.

The attention Folkways paid to blues and pre-blues forms in the South had a political dimension. The prevailing mindset of the New York critics who helped shape the Folkways philosophy understood blues to be a precursor to contemporary popular jazz, and compartmentalized it as such in the past, far away in the deep South. Rather than viewing blues as a living, dynamic tradition, the early emphasis was on so-called primitive or folk blues, at the expense of more progressive forms of the blues tradition, more in tune with what African American audiences preferred. Moreover, the Left valued blues as a form of protest, even though overt protest was rare in the blues tradition. Here again, little credence was given to Black working-class taste, and a counter-aesthetic prevailed, valorizing protest songs, worksongs, primitive blues, and other archaic forms.

Fortunately, the cadre of blues artists who formed the backbone of Folkways blues understood their New York audience. Josh White was a committed political activist deft at protest songs. Both Lead Belly and Big Bill Broonzy had extensive repertoires and Southern work experience and were quick to recognize what materials the audience at the Village Vanguard or Café Society preferred. More importantly, White, Lead Belly, Broonzy, Memphis Slim, and Willie Dixon were men of stature, and able spokesmen for the blues, adept at interpreting their art across race and class lines. Moreover, the philosophy of Folkways was animated by a progressive activist attitude toward race-related issues in an era of almost complete segregation, and Folkways blues artists were relatively free to express themselves unencumbered by studio intervention.

Folkways promoted the idea that every voice deserves to be heard, and in this way was effectively preaching cultural diversity by musical example at a time when many Americans were locked in cages of conformity, both musically and politically. If nothing else, Folkways offered options when few options seemed available. Despite its romanticism and political agenda, it offered white Americans access to blues. And while it never enjoyed a huge market among either white or Black record buyers, it played a role in popularizing the idea that music could be a political force.

Folkways blues succeeded in meeting the needs of a distinct record-buying public, and in many cases helped artists extend their careers by winning over new audiences for their music. This sampler is designed to accomplish three things: first, to survey the role of Folkways in documenting the blues tradition; second, to showcase some of the treasures of the Smithsonian, bringing to light rare—even legendary—records which have been generally unavailable until now; third, to provide access to the Smithsonian Folkways collection by serving as a menu highlighting samples of what the archives has in its holdings. If you like some of what you hear, you might want to order more of the same.

These songs span 51 years and are drawn from a variety of sources—field recordings, studio productions, radio transcriptions, and live performances. They cover a range of regional styles, including East Coast, Delta, Southwest, St. Louis, and Chicago blues, performed by many of the most widely known figures in blues history, but also by artists unknown outside their home communities until Folkways put them on the cultural radar screen.

The majority of these songs deal with typical blues subjects: the vagaries of life, the fragility of human relationships, and the power struggle between men and women. But there are also protest vehicles, such as Son House's "County Farm Blues," and Cat Iron's anticlerical "Jimmy Bell." And there are funny songs replete with ironic blues humor fit for a jook house audience's good-time dance-party. Blues are tools for helping us get through life, forged in hard times, but powerful enough to bring on the good times. As piano player Roosevelt Sykes, one of the artists featured here, explains:

"Now some people don't understand. They think a blues player has to be worried, troubled to sing the blues. That's wrong. I'll put it this way: there's a doctor, he has medicine. He's never sick, he ain't sick, but he has stuff for the sick people. So the blues player, he ain't worried and bothered, but he's got something for the worried people. Doctor ... you can see his medicine, you can see his patient. Blues ... you can't see the music, you can't see the patient, because it's soul. So I works on the soul, and the doctor works on the body."

Rejecting the notion that all one needs to sing blues is a worried mind, Sykes understands blues are an art form and a professional skill that involves reaching out to touch people. His blues provide medicine for the soul, as do the blues of the other contributing artists.

TRACK NOTES

SIDE A

1. OLD JABO

SONNY TERRY AND BROWNIE MCGHEE

Sonny Terry, vocal and harmonica; Brownie McGhee, guitar; Gene Moore, drums
From *Sonny Terry: The Folkways Years 1944-1963* SFW CD 40033

Born Saunders Terrell (1911–1986) in Greensboro, North Carolina, he learned harmonica from his father. After losing his sight, he earned tips as a street musician in the Raleigh-Durham area, eventually teaming up with Blind Boy Fuller, with whom he first recorded in 1937. In 1938, he appeared in John Hammond's "Spirituals to Swing" concert in New York. In 1942, he moved to New York, where he appeared in stage productions such as *Finian's Rainbow* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and formed a lifelong musical partnership with Tennessee-born guitarist Brownie McGhee. He first recorded for Folkways in 1944, and went on to record eight albums for the label. Considered one of the finest harmonica players ever, he was named a National Heritage Fellow in 1982.

"Old Jabo" was recorded in 1957. It is a reworking of an early Old Town 78 RPM recording titled "Uncle Bud." Uncle Bud is a traditional folk hero known for his sexual prowess, and is the subject of naughty children's songs. Folklorist Zora Neale Hurston sang a version with the verse: "Uncle Bud is a man in full,/ His nuts hang down like a Jersey Bull." See also *Red River Blues*, Bruce Bastin (1986).

2. MULE-RIDIN' BLUES

BIG BILL BROONZY

Big Bill Broonzy, guitar
From *Big Bill Broonzy: Trouble in Mind* SFW CD 40131

The son of ex-slaves, Broonzy was born Lee Bradley or William Lee Conley Broonzy (1903–1958) in Altheimer, Arkansas. As a youngster, he learned both fiddle and guitar, and played for dances in Arkansas until 1918, when he was drafted into the army. Returning from France, he moved to Chicago, which remained his home until his death. In 1927, he began a recording career that would last 30 years, issuing hundreds of sides for dozens of labels. In 1938 and 1939, he appeared in John Hammond's "Spirituals to Swing," and was booked in Café Society in 1939 and 1940, returning to Chicago in 1941. A star in the Chicago club scene in the early 1950s, he began to tour overseas and, with his good friend Lead Belly, was among the first African Americans to take blues to Europe. He often appeared on radio in New York and Chicago. Toward the end of his life, he wrote the first Delta blues autobiography. He began to record for Asch in 1956, but earlier material from radio transcriptions was also published by Folkways.

"Mule-Ridin' Blues" comes from a 1956 session with radio personality Studs Terkel, who can be heard laughing in the background. Alternatively titled "Hey, Bub," "Mule-Ridin'," or "Mule Ridin' Talking Blues," and unlike the talking blues popularized by Woody Guthrie and other country artists, Broonzy's song harkens back to the early days of blues, when spoken words were accompanied by a rhythmic guitar. Such songs deal with railroad themes, personal feelings, or humorous bits, as is the case in this "talking blues."

See also *Big Bill Blues*, Big Bill Broonzy and Yannick Bruynoghe (1964).

3. JOGGIE BOOGIE

MEMPHIS SLIM AND WILLIE DIXON

Memphis Slim, piano; Willie Dixon, bass
From *Memphis Slim: The Folkways Years 1959-1973* SFW CD 40128

Born John Len Chatman in Memphis, Tennessee, Memphis Slim (1915–1988) was inspired by his father, who played the piano and guitar. He learned piano at age seven and was playing on Beale Street in his teens. Early on, he emulated Roosevelt Sykes, succeeding him as the house pianist in Memphis's Midway Cafe, and following him to Chicago in the late 1930s, ending that decade as a mainstay on the Chicago tavern circuit. He recorded for Okeh in 1940, and several months later he recorded for Bluebird.

With his band, the House Rockers, he recorded for several R&B labels, and in 1947 recorded with bassist Willie Dixon (1915–1992), who had come from Vicksburg, Mississippi, and was one of the key architects of postwar Chicago blues, working with Chess Records as musician, songwriter, and producer.

Memphis Slim and Willie Dixon began recording for Folkways in 1959, the year "Joggie Boogie" was recorded. The two also toured together during the early 1960s, working clubs and festivals in the United States and Europe. Slim branched out into the folk market, playing the Newport Folk Festival and other festivals. He eventually settled in Paris, France. He wrote 300 songs, including "Every Day I Have the Blues," and recorded almost 500 songs. From Memphis to Chicago to Paris, he was the most successful expatriate blues ambassador.

"Joggie Boogie" is a rollicking piano boogie animated by Dixon's string-snapping solos. It's listed in blues discographies as "Joogie Boogie," which makes more sense because it obviously rhymes, as in boogie-woogie. In 1927, Edna Winston recorded "Joogie Blues," and before that, W. C. Handy wrote "Jogo Blues," explaining that *jogo* came from the Gullah term for "colored." Quite possibly the term connects to *jook*, as in piano player Walters Roland's 1933 recording "Jook It, Jook It." Other musicians claim "jookin" was a dance style, or a way of playing music in African American style. But whether *joggie* or *joogie*, "Joggie Boogie" still cooks.

See *I Am the Blues*, Willie Dixon and Don Snowden (1989).

4. BLACK WOMAN

VERA HALL

Vera Hall, vocal
From *Jazz, Volume 2, The Blues* Folkways 2802 Folkways 4417.

Adele "Vera" Hall (ca. 1901–1964) was a treasure trove of African American folk song, especially spirituals. Born in Payneville near Livingston, Alabama, she came to the attention of local folk music enthusiast Ruby Tartt, who in turn introduced her to John and Alan Lomax, who were collecting folk songs in the South. Between 1937 and 1940, they recorded her extensively. In 1948, Harold Courlander found her working as a domestic in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Courlander was an ethnomusicologist and writer who edited Moses Asch's Disc Ethnic series. He coined the name Folkways for the new label and supervised its ethnic series. During the late 1940s, he did substantial fieldwork in Alabama, leading to a multivolume series, *Negro Folk Music of Alabama*. Rich Amerson, a local singer and storyteller, was the centerpiece of the series, and had earlier recorded for the Lomaxes. He also sang a much longer version of "Black Woman" and is the likely source of Hall's version.

5. MERCURY BLUES

K.C. DOUGLAS

K.C. Douglas, vocal and guitar
From *K.C. Douglas: A Dead Beat Guitar and the Mississippi Blues*
Cook Records 5002

K.C. Douglas (1913–1975) was born K.C. Clanton in Sharon, Mississippi. Influenced by his uncle, Smith Douglas, he learned to play guitar, picking up repertoire from recordings of his idol, Tommy Johnson, whom he met playing the streets of Jackson. The two played together briefly, but Johnson's penchant for drinking ended their relationship. Douglas moved to California in 1945 and formed a band in Richmond. In 1948, he first recorded "Mercury Blues" for Bob Geddins's Down Town label. Though it was a regional hit, he did not record again until 1954. This version was field-recorded by Sam Eskin in Oakland in 1956. Douglas later recorded for Arhoolie and Bluesville and was active on the California festival scene. This very rare Cook album bore the inscription "Street Corner Blues about Women and Automobiles." Like Jackie Brenston's "Rocket 88," "Mercury Blues" was a tribute to consumer culture rather than a sexual metaphor and was later covered by rockers Steve Miller and David Lindley. The Cook Collection was acquired by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings in 1991.

6. RAN THE BLUES OUT OF MY WINDOW

ROOSEVELT SYKES

Roosevelt Sykes, vocal and piano
From *Blues by Roosevelt "The Honeydripper" Sykes* SFW CD 40051

The "Honeydripper" (1906–1983) was born in Elmar, Arkansas, but moved to St. Louis when he was three. Orphaned by age seven, he moved to Helena, Arkansas, and grew up with his grandfather. At age 15, he began playing piano at various Southern jook-joints and roadhouses. In the late 1920s, he returned to St. Louis, where Jesse and Edith Johnson heard him at their Deluxe Music Shop. Johnson steered Sykes to Okeh Records, where, according to Sykes, "I started making records 19th of June 1929. I had been playing eight years or so before I started recording. The first number I made was a hit, '44 Blues,' and every record I made was a star ever since."

Over the years Sykes recorded for dozens of labels under an assortment of names. He was a major player in St. Louis in the 1930s, in the Chicago band scene in the 1940s, as an R&B star in the 1950s, and as a blues revival star in the 1960s and 1970s. All the while, he never stopped recording and remained a consummate professional until the end of his life. "Ran the Blues Out of My Window," which should be titled "I Run Blues Out My Window," is a remake of Sykes's 1936 Decca recording "The Cannonball," which in turn derives from Cow Cow Davenport's "Cow Cow Blues."

7. LEAVING BLUES

LEAD BELLY

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar
From *Lead Belly Legacy: Volume 1, Where Did You Sleep Last Night*
SFW CD 40044

Huddie William Ledbetter (1888–1949) was born in Shiloh near Freeport, Louisiana. Moving back and forth between Louisiana and Texas, he learned to play accordion, guitar, and piano. In Texas he worked with Blind Lemon Jefferson. In 1917, he was convicted of murder but was pardoned in 1925. Five years later, he was in prison in Angola, Louisiana, where John and Alan Lomax encountered him in 1933. After recording extensively for the Lomaxes, he was released in 1934 and went to work for them as a chauffeur. Moving to New York, he toured with the Lomaxes and recorded for ARC in 1935, Musicraft in 1939, and Bluebird in 1940, although his race records were never very successful. He first recorded for Asch's label in May 1941, and recorded for Folkways off and on until his death. While he is most remembered as a songster, he was also a notable blues singer, whose soulful voice and booming 12-string guitar were highly effective. "Leaving Blues" comes from a WNYC radio broadcast acetate recorded in New York on 13 March, 1941. It shares several verses with Bumble Bee Slim's 1935 Vocalion recording "Bricks in My Pillow."

See *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly*, Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell (1992).

SIDE B

1. ONE DIME BLUES

ETTA BAKER

Etta Baker, guitar
From *Blues Routes: Blues & Jazz, Work Songs & Street Music: Heroes & Tricksters* SFW CD 40118

Etta Baker (1913–2006) was born in Collettsville, North Carolina. She moved to Chase, Virginia, in 1916, and back to North Carolina in 1923. She grew up in a profoundly musical family, literally learning from the cradle. She recalled:

"Well, I lacked two months of being three years old and my mother and father never did have to say, 'Etta, it's time to get up.' I was awakened with my daddy on the banjo or either the guitar. So that's all it took to get me out of the bed. And I would get up at four o'clock, four-thirty, and sit and listen to my dad. And I was such a nuisance to him until he would take time to show me the different chords on the guitar. And I would follow around, I'd stand up between his knees and come up between him and the guitar and watch over the top. And that's all the lessons that I ever had about my music was from my father."

Her mother played harmonica and guitar, and her sister, Cora, also played guitar. As a youngster Baker also played fiddle. The family played for frolics, house parties, and other community events. In the summer of 1956, she recorded several instrumental selections that were released on the Tradition label and included "One Dime Blues." This version, however, comes from a live recording made 36 years later, in 1992, at The Barns of Wolf Trap in Vienna, Virginia, as part of folklorist Nick Spitzer's Folk Masters Series. Baker originally learned the piece from her brother-in-law, Quince Philips.

Known throughout the South, "One Dime Blues" is usually a vocal associated with Blind Lemon Jefferson. Baker's version is a guitar instrumental, a common Carolina tradition in which women prefer playing instrumentals. Elizabeth Cotten comes from the same background. Baker was named a National Heritage Fellow in 1991.

2. COUNTY FARM BLUES

SON HOUSE

Son House, vocal and guitar
From *Son House & J.D. Short: Blues from the Mississippi Delta*
Folkways 2476

Eddie James House Jr. (1902–1988) was born in the plantation community of Riverton, north of Clarksdale, Mississippi. His father was a musician, but quit when he joined the church. House also showed interest in the church, and became a Baptist pastor. By 1927, inspired by local guitarist Willie Wilson, he became interested in the blues, learned the guitar, and put the church aside. In 1928, he was jailed for shooting a man to death, but was released within a year on the condition that he leave Clarksdale. He settled near Lula, and took up with blues musicians Charley Patton and Willie Brown, with whom he attended a Paramount recording session in 1930. There he recorded three two-sided songs, each

a classic, and other sides. He continued to work with Patton and Brown until Patton's death, in 1934. In 1941, folklorist Alan Lomax recorded him at a country store near Lake Cormorant and returned the next year for yet another session. Moving to New York in 1943, House worked as a Pullman porter but was "rediscovered" in 1964 and began recording again and touring the folk-festival circuit. With Charley Patton and Robert Johnson, whom he taught, House is one of the seminal figures in Delta blues. This field recording was done by Alan Lomax for the Library of Congress, in collaboration with Fisk University, in Robinsonville, Mississippi, in July of 1942. It is a rare protest blues, possibly elicited by Lomax.

See *The Land Where Blues Began*, Alan Lomax (1993).

3. CLOG DANCE (STOMPING BLUES)

CHAMPION JACK DUPREE

Jack Dupree, piano; probably Nora Lee King, shouts;
unknown percussionist
From *Asch Recordings, 1939-1945, Volume 2* Folksingers AA 4

Born William Thomas Dupree (1909–1992), Champion Jack took his *nom de blues* from his boxing career of roughly 100 bouts. Born in New Orleans, he was orphaned as a youngster and learned piano as a teenager from local musicians. In the 1930s, he left New Orleans and relocated to the Midwest. He began recording in 1940 for Okeh. In 1942, he recorded some sides in New York with Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, sides that were later issued on Folkways. That same year he was drafted and sent to the Pacific, where he was captured and spent two years in a Japanese prison camp. He returned to New York in 1944, and had a session for Asch Records in May 1944, when he recorded "Clog Dance" ("Stomping Blues"). He also recorded for various R&B labels and in 1959 moved to Europe, where he continued to record extensively.

According to Mary Lou Williams, who was at the session, Dupree may have been drunk, explaining the song's abrupt ending. Whatever the truth, Peter Goldsmith, author of *Making People's Music: Moe Asch and Folkways Records*, describes the performance as a "magnificently inventive piano blues." Gospel and blues singer Nora Lee King, who recorded a blues with Mary Lou Williams, is the suspected vocal, and the percussion—drums, a box, a suitcase, someone's foot—is anyone's guess.

4. BOLL WEEVIL

PINK ANDERSON

Pink Anderson, vocal and guitar
From *Pink Anderson: Carolina Medicine Show Hokum and Blues with Baby Tate* Folkways F 3588

Born Pinkney Anderson (1900–1974) in Laurens, South Carolina, Pink learned guitar at age ten and danced in the streets for tips. As a teen, he joined W.R. Kerr's Medicine Show and remained with them until 1945. He first recorded in 1928 for Columbia with his partner, Simmie Dooley. Along with guitarist Baby Tate, he continued the medicine show circuit through 1958. In 1950, Folkways recording artist Paul Clayton found him playing a county fair and recorded him in Charlottesville, Virginia. This performance was published on Riverside, and led to further recordings for Folkways and Bluesville. This selection was recorded in Anderson's living room in Spartanburg, South Carolina, by Samuel Charters in 1961, using an Ampex recorder.

Renowned as a songster with a wide repertoire of ballads, Anderson also knew blues, and his 1928 Columbia issues were both titled blues. Songs about the boll weevil were recorded by Ma Rainey, Charley Patton, and Kokomo Arnold as blues, and by Lead Belly, Vera Hall, and others more as folk songs or ballads. Such songs usually portray this agricultural pest in an ambivalent manner, often employing ironic humor, showing sympathy for the tenacity of the bug and its family.

5. NICKEL'S WORTH OF LIVER

EDITH NORTH JOHNSON AND HENRY BROWN

Edith North Johnson, vocal; Henry Brown, piano
From *The Blues in St. Louis, Volume 2, Henry Brown and Edith Johnson, Barrelhouse Piano and Classic Blues* Folkways 3815

Edith North (1903–1988) was born in St. Louis and remained there throughout her life. In 1925, she married Jesse Johnson, owner of the Deluxe Music Shop and a talent scout for Okeh Records. Working in the shop, the unofficial headquarters for the St. Louis blues community, she met various artists, such as Roosevelt Sykes, and became a talent scout herself. Despite her husband's opposition, she was determined to make records, cutting her first sides for QRS in 1928. In 1929, she cut ten sides for Paramount, including her hit "Nickles [sic] Worth of Liver" No. 1 and No. 2, accompanying herself on piano. In 1929, she recorded with Roosevelt Sykes, and her "Honeydripper Blues" may be the source of his stage name. She also recorded with Count Basie for Vocalion.

Henry Brown (1906–1981) came from Troy, Tennessee. After moving to St. Louis, he began to learn piano, and during the 1920s he worked around the Deep Morgan district of St. Louis with guitarist Henry Townsend and trombone player Ike Rodgers, with whom he recorded in 1929. During the war, he served in the army as an entertainer. Later, he worked on the Mississippi riverboat *Becky Thatcher*. His recording career resumed in the 1950s, and he recorded for several labels through the 1960s. Samuel Charters field-recorded this collaboration in a St. Louis blues enthusiast's basement in May 1961.

This song pairs barrelhouse piano and classic vaudeville blues in a humorous piece alternating pleas and threats of violence between lovers. Despite her supplication, she appears to hold the upper hand. But it's useful to remember that in blues, violence is often threatened but seldom enacted and is more a game between competitors.

6. DON'T LEAVE ME HERE

BIG JOE WILLIAMS

Big Joe Williams, vocal and guitar
From *Mississippi Big Joe Williams and his Nine-String Guitar* SFW CD 50052

Joe Lee Williams (1903–1982) was born in Crawford, Mississippi. He learned guitar as a youngster, and by the 1920s was hoboing throughout the South as an itinerant bluesman, playing for tips wherever he could. He referred to himself as "a walking musician," and his lifelong travels took him from the Delta to New Orleans, St. Louis, Chicago, the West Coast, and overseas to Europe. He made his first recordings in St. Louis in 1935 for Bluebird, accompanied by guitarist Henry Townsend, and recorded for Bluebird for ten years. Around 1957, he began work as a folk blues artist, and recorded for Bob Koester's Delmar in 1958. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, he often lived in a back room at Koester's Jazz Record Mart in Chicago. His roommate, harmonica player Charlie Musselwhite, claimed he helped spark the Chicago blues revival: "There was a little bar down the street called Big John's. They asked Joe to come down and play. They thought Joe was kind of like a folksinger. They didn't know what they were getting into."

Through the 1960s and 1970s, he recorded extensively for various labels and continued to play up to his death. His music was distinctive, in part because he played in open G, or Spanish, tuning, but he also added extra strings, doubling the first, second, and fourth. Moreover, he was one of the most percussive guitar players ever. More than any other recording artist, he embodied the concept of guitar as drum, bashing out an incredible series of riffs for over 60 years.

"Don't Leave Me Here" was a mainstay of his repertoire, modeled on "Baby Please Don't Go," a song he recorded back in 1935, which in turn stems from the Mississippi Parchman Farm worksong, "Another Man Done Gone," recorded by Vera Hall in 1940. In fact, verses 4 and 6 come from "Another Man Done Gone," illustrating how a worksong can evolve into a jook-joint blues. Bob Koester produced the piece in Chicago in 1961.

SIDE C

1. JIMMY BELL

CAT IRON

Cat Iron, vocal and guitar
From *Cat Iron Sings Blues and Hymns* Folkways F 2389

William Carridine (1898–1958) was born in Roxie, Mississippi, but his background remains obscure. Frederick Ramsey Jr. found him in Natchez, Mississippi, in 1958. A local jazz musician steered Ramsey to Carridine's home, and helped find a guitar for him, as Carridine had none. At first reluctant to play the blues, he did several spirituals before consenting to backslide into blues. Altogether he recorded six religious songs and six blues for Folkways. Fellow Natchez musician Elmore Williams recalled, "He's dead. I knew him in the 1950s. I used to watch him. He didn't play professionally, played just for fun and going for all those nickels and dimes; played street corners...mostly played blues. They wanted that old—used to call it gut bucket—low-down blues."

As to his mysterious name, Ramsey may have misheard the Southern Black pronunciation of Carridine, which he interpreted as Cat Iron. After all, Ramsey was friends with Lead Belly and knew of an Iron Head, so why not Cat Iron? Moreover, anyone looking at early Folkways song transcriptions can see how hard it was for New Yorkers to piece together song lyrics. Not only did they find the dialect formidable, but they seldom knew much about context. One well-meaning transcriber heard Memphis Minnie's classic line, "I want to be your chauffeur," as "I want to be your shoebox."

Ramsey described "Jimmy Bell" as a blues ballad, and it has a narrative quality unusual in the blues tradition. It is also more overtly anticlerical than most blues, akin to Son House's "Preachin' Blues," but most closely resembles Charley Patton's "Elder Green Blues," and is one of Folkways' legendary field recordings.

2. CANDY MAN

REVEREND GARY DAVIS

Reverend Gary Davis, vocal and guitar
From *Gary Davis: Pure Religion and Bad Company* SFW CD 40035

Born in Laurens, South Carolina (1896–1972), Davis learned harmonica, banjo, and guitar as a youngster. He claimed he first heard blues in 1910 when he was in Greenville, working with Willie Walker's string band. In the early 1920s, he relocated to North Carolina, and by 1926 was in Durham. He spent a number of years as a singing preacher before teaming up with Blind Boy Fuller in Durham. In 1935, Fuller's manager, J.B. Long, took Davis to New York, where he recorded several blues and some religious material. Around 1943, he moved to New York, where he became a minister and a religious street singer. During the 1940s, he reunited with Durham cronies Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee. In 1945, he recorded two songs for the Asch label. In the 1950s he became part of the New York folk music scene, recording for Riverside, Folkways, Stinson, and other labels. Through 1971, he was a major folk revival artist and brilliant guitarist. His later repertoire was that of a songster, and his version of "Candy Man" shows this side of his musical character. Davis claimed he'd heard the song in 1905 in a carnival show. It became a staple of the folk music revival, as did John Hurt's version, and everybody who could make a C-chord tried it out. This version was recorded by Fred Gerlach and Tiny Robinson in New York in 1957 and was originally issued on the Folk Lyric label.

See *Red River Blues*, Bruce Bastin (1986).

3. BEER DRINKING WOMAN

MEMPHIS SLIM AND WILLIE DIXON

Memphis Slim, piano and vocal; Willie Dixon, bass
From *Memphis Slim: The Folkways Years 1959-1973* SFW CD 40128

A child prodigy, Slim was a central figure in the most important eras of the blues: Memphis's Beale Street in the 1930s; Chicago in the 1940s, working with artists such as Big Bill Broonzy and Sonny Boy Williamson No. 1 as an R&B headliner with his House Rockers band in the 1950s; a folk revival headliner in the late 1950s and early 1960s; and a blues ambassador to France through the 1960s, the 1970s, and the 1980s. "Beer Drinking Woman" was a mainstay in his repertoire, and he first recorded it for Bluebird in 1940. This version was recorded in New York 19 years later.

Bassist Willie Dixon (1915–1992) had equally impressive blues credentials, primarily in Chicago, where he moved in 1936. After working with several musical groups, he joined forces with Chess Records as a musician, writer, and producer, and was responsible for numerous blues hits. He was also active in bringing blues tours to Europe, and late in life he founded the Blues Heaven Foundation to promote blues education.

This recording comes from a stage in both men's careers when they worked as a duo. "Beer Drinking Woman" is another narrative blues in which a woman wins the finance-romance game.

For more information on Dixon, see *I Am the Blues*, Willie Dixon and Don Snowden (1989).

4. COME GO HOME WITH ME

LIGHTNIN' HOPKINS

Lightnin' Hopkins, vocal and guitar
From *Lightnin' Hopkins* Smithsonian Folkways 40019

Sam Hopkins (1911–1982) was born in Centerville, Texas. As a youngster, he learned guitar from his brother, and at age eight met and played with blues legend Blind Lemon Jefferson. As a teen, he accompanied his cousin, Texas Alexander, playing jooks and fish fries. ln 1946, he recorded for Aladdin Records in Los Angeles with a drummer nicknamed Thunder Smith, and received his own *nom de blues* so they could be Thunder and Lightning. Although a down-home artist, he was a substantial rhythm-and-blues star, recording constantly through the mid-1950s. During the 1960s, he moved away from the Texas club circuit and worked the folk revival, playing festivals. In 1959, fieldworker Samuel Charters, not fully aware of the extent of Hopkins's recording career, caught him at home, recording him at 2303 Hadley Street in Houston, Texas. Like "Beer Drinking Woman," "Come Go Home with Me" is a narrative, alternating spoken word commentary with sung verses in an improvised portrait of tavern culture, this time focusing on dance, and replete with competitive boasting and threats.

See *The Country Blues*, Sam Charters (1975, first published in 1959).

5. CARELESS LOVE

JOSH WHITE

Josh White, vocal and guitar
From *Josh White Free and Equal Blues* SFW CD 40081

Josh White (1914–1969) was born in Greenville, South Carolina, where as a child he was lead boy for several blind blues and gospel artists. He began his own prolific recording career in 1932, using the pseudonym Pinewood Tom. He had several hits, including "Blood Red River," among the blues and religious songs he cut for ARC and its subsidiaries over the next eight years. He relocated to New York in the early 1930s, and slowly dropped down-home blues in favor of a nightclub act. He appeared in several theatrical productions, and recorded various folk and political songs through the early 1940s. In 1944, he recorded for Asch, primarily folk and protest material, but also this version of "Careless Love." A brilliant guitarist who used to change broken guitar strings in mid-song without missing a beat, White was a star on the club circuit. "Careless Love," a song equally popular among Blacks and whites, evolved from a ballad to a blues, and was recorded by Blind Boy Fuller, Lead Belly, and others.

See *Josh White: Society Blues*, Elijah Wald (2000).

6. I ASKED HER IF SHE LOVED ME

HENRY TOWNSEND

Henry Townsend, guitar and vocal; Tommy Bankhead, guitar
From *The Blues in St. Louis, Volume 3, Henry Townsend and Tommy Bankhead* Folkways 3816

Henry Townsend's (1909–2006) story takes us along the well-traveled road connecting Delta and St. Louis blues culture. "I was born in Shelby, Mississippi. That's not too far below Memphis, and of course with migrating parents, we came through Memphis, Carruthersville, Cairo, Illinois, to St. Louis, and that's where I started my career as a young kid." Inspired by his father, who played accordion and guitar, he learned guitar and later piano. His guitar hero was Lonnie Johnson, and his piano idols were Roosevelt Sykes and Walter Davis. Townsend was at home with the St. Louis piano–guitar duet tradition, and recorded for Columbia in 1929, for Paramount and Victor in 1931, and for Bluebird from 1933 to 1937. He worked the club scenes in St. Louis with Robert Johnson, Walter Davis, and others. Samuel Charters recorded him and a second guitarist, Tommy Bankhead, in the Technisonic Studio in St. Louis in 1961, originally for Bluesville. Charters noted that it was the first time he had ever recorded anyone playing electric instruments, a meaningful statement at the time, because the term "folk" automatically and unreasonably meant acoustic. The prejudice against electric instruments derived in part from an unwillingness to consider contemporary electric blues as authentic folk music. Despite some 1940s recordings of electric guitar, Folkways was part of the conspiracy against electric instruments until the 1960s. Charters also went on to do outstanding recordings of electric blues bands in Chicago in the late 1960s. "l Asked Her If She Loved Me" is a fine representative blues with no resolution, but ending on a hopeful note that things can be worked out. Townsend was named a National Heritage Fellow in 1985.

See *A Blues Life*, by Henry Townsend as told to Bill Greensmith (1999).

SIDE D

1. RISING SUN

BROWNIE MCGHEE AND SONNY TERRY

Brownie McGhee, vocal and guitar; Sonny Terry, harmonica; Coyal McMahan, maracas
From *Brownie McGhee: The Folkways Years 1945-1959* SFW CD 40034

Walter Brown McGhee (1915–1996) was born in Knoxville, Tennessee. Primarily influenced by his father, he learned guitar as a young boy. In the 1930s, he worked with a gospel quartet. In Durham, North Carolina, he met his idol, Blind Boy Fuller, along with Fuller's agent, J.B. Long. Long arranged for McGhee to record for Okeh in 1940 and 1941. Following Fuller's death, McGhee recorded "The Death of Blind Boy Fuller," and briefly took the name Blind Boy Fuller #2. According to McGhee: "I started recording for everybody, using different names—Blind Boy Fuller Number Two was on Columbia. I was Henry Johnson on Decca, and Spider Sam on Atlantic, and I was Tennessee Gabriel on Circle. Then when I played piano, I was Blind Boy Williams." In the early 1940s, he moved to New York and teamed up with harmonica ace Sonny Terry, working with him into the mid-1970s. McGhee recorded several rhythm-and-blues hits including "Baseball Boogie" (1947), and worked with various bands, but his greatest success was with Terry on the folk festival and nightclub circuit.

An active member of the New York folk music scene, he participated in jam sessions with Woody Guthrie, Lead Belly, and Josh White, and founded a music school, Home of the Blues, in Harlem. He first recorded for Asch in 1944 and thought very highly of him. "Rising Sun" comes from a 1955 session, and is a version of "Red River Blues," probably the best-known Piedmont standard. Josh White recorded it as "Blood Red River" in 1933, and Blind Boy Fuller called his version "Bye Bye Baby" in 1937.

See *Red River Blues*, Bruce Bastin (1986).

2. PONY BLUES

DAVID "HONEYBOY" EDWARDS

David "Honeyboy" Edwards, vocal and guitar
From *Honeyboy Edwards: Mississippi Delta Bluesman* SFW CD 40132

Honeyboy Edwards (1915–2011) was born in Shaw, Mississippi, and first learned guitar from his father. A 1929 encounter with Tommy Johnson further inspired him to take up the blues life, and at age 17, he apprenticed himself to Big Joe Williams, who took him on the road to New Orleans. During the 1930s, he met Charley Patton and Robert Johnson. In 1942, he recorded for Alan Lomax and the Library of Congress, but primarily made his living as a walking musician, working off and on with Big Walter Horton, Sonny Boy Williamson, and Little Walter, the three greatest harmonica players in blues history. In Chicago in the late 1940s, he worked the Maxwell Street Market and small blues clubs, returning South during the winter. Finally, in the mid-1950s, he made Chicago his permanent home. Although he made several records, they did not sell well. But during the 1960s, he began to work the revival circuit, and in 2002 was named a National Heritage Fellow, partly because of his role as a blues historian. He learned "Pony Blues" from Charley Patton, who had recorded it for Paramount in 1929. As for Patton, Edwards remembers him as a hell-raiser: "Every Saturday night he'd play for a country dance, he'd fight. He used to break up his own dances." This version was recorded for Folkways by Verna Gillis in 1979.

See *The World Don't Owe Me Nothing: The Life and Times of Delta Bluesman Honeyboy Edwards*, David Honeyboy Edwards (1997).

3. VICKSBURG BLUES

LITTLE BROTHER MONTGOMERY

Little Brother Montgomery, vocal and piano
From *Little Brother Montgomery: Farro Street Jive* Folkways 31014

Eurreal Montgomery (1906–1985) was born in Kentwood, Louisiana. His father owned a barrelhouse in the Kent Lumber Company, and Little Brother learned from the visiting piano professors. Leaving home at age 11, he worked from New Orleans to Chicago. He moved to Jackson, Mississippi, in the early 1930s, and returned to Chicago in 1942. He first recorded for Paramount in 1930, producing a two-sided hit, "No Special Rider Blues," and his first recorded version of his classic, "Vicksburg Blues." From that point on, he recorded for Bluebird in 1935–36, and various other labels. He first recorded for Folkways in 1960, singing both blues and religious songs. He worked the Chicago club circuit for 40 years and continued to record extensively.

One of the most beautiful blues ever composed, "Vicksburg Blues" was his signature song. Although musically similar to "44 Blues," a barrelhouse standard, it has a delicate, wistful touch, marking Little Brother as one of the finest blues pianists and vocalists ever.

See *Deep South Piano: The Story of Little Brother Montgomery*, Karl Gert Zu Heide (1970).

4. VASTAPOL

ELIZABETH COTTEN

Elizabeth Cotten, guitar
From *Freight Train and Other North Carolina Folksongs and Tunes*
SFW CD 40009

Born near Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Libba (1893–1987), as she was called, learned to play her brother's guitar at the age of eight or nine. In the 1940s, she moved to Washington, D.C., and eventually found work with the Seeger family. Fieldworker, musician, and Folkways recording artist Mike Seeger first recorded her for Folkways, on *Elizabeth Cotten: Folksongs and Instrumentals with Guitar* (FW 3526) in 1958. The inside notes, also written by Seeger, were titled "Negro Folk Songs and Tunes." This historic album, followed by two more on Folkways, launched her late-life career as a performing artist. A major figure in the folk revival of the 1960s, she was especially loved by the Washington, D.C., folk music community.

The story behind the song's title is a bit complicated. The term *vastapol* stems from the Crimean seaport Sevastopol, made famous in the Crimean War, spawning an open-tuned parlor guitar piece titled "The Siege of Sevastopol." This, in turn, led to the word Sevastopol being applied to a guitar tuning—open E tuning or open D tuning, sometimes also referred to as "cross key." "Sevastopol," along with "Spanish" or open G tuning, is very popular among blues artists, including several on this sampler, including Son House and Big Joe Williams. Cotten's instrumental is a country blues in open E tuning, composed of traditional blues riffs and played in her own two-fingered, upside-down, left-handed style.

5. DRIFTING ALONG BLUES

LONNIE JOHNSON

Lonnie Johnson, vocal and guitar; Blind John Davis, piano; drummer unknown
From *Asch Recordings 1939–47, Volume 1: Blues, Gospel, and Jazz* Folkways AA1

Alonzo Lonnie Johnson (1894–1970) may well be the greatest guitarist associated with the blues tradition. A multi-instrumentalist, he was equally at home in a jazz band or a hokum band, or as a blues soloist. Born in New Orleans, he played in the saloons of Storyville. Following a brief stint in Europe, he returned to New Orleans to find that his entire family, except for one brother, had died of the flu. He moved north, relocating in St. Louis and Chicago, playing with various bands. He recorded extensively as a sideman, working with such greats as Duke Ellington. He began working with Okeh in 1925 and stayed with them through 1932. He was a member of Okeh's house band, and often accompanied other vocalists.

After Okeh, he worked for Decca and for Bluebird, until 1944. He then recorded a session for Disc in the summer of 1946 before moving over to the King label, where he scored a number one R&B hit, "Tomorrow Night." He recorded for Folkways again in 1967. Along with Scrapper Blackwell and B. B. King, he is one of the most innovative and influential blues guitarists. Robert Johnson admired his work greatly, supposedly claiming that his middle initial, "L," stood for Lonnie instead of Leroy.

Blind John Davis (1913–1985) went from Mississippi to Chicago, where he worked taverns and speakeasies, recording for Bluebird and Vocalion as a soloist and as a sideman for Big Bill Broonzy and Sonny Boy Williamson No. 1, as well as Johnson.

This piece, which may also be titled "Drifting Alone Blues," is reminiscent of Charles Brown's 1946 hit, "Drifting Blues." The themes of homelessness and travel permeate blues, especially in its early days, when itinerant musicians would use songs to plead for a little help and professional bluesmen from Lonnie Johnson to Robert Johnson would use the songs as vehicles for seduction.

For more information see *Bluesland*, edited by Pete Welding and Toby Byron (1991).

6. OH BABY, YOU DON'T HAVE TO GO

THE CHAMBERS BROTHERS

George Chambers, bass; Willie Chambers, guitar; Lester Chambers, vocals; Joe Chambers, guitar; Brian Keenan, drums
From *The Original Chambers Brothers: Groovin' Time* Folkways 31008

The Chambers Brothers achieved fame as a rock band in the late 1960s, and their 1968 hit "Time Has Come Today" can still be heard in television commercials. Their musical roots, however, were formed by their birthplace, in Flora, Mississippi, on the edge of the Delta, and from the family gospel tradition. George, Willie, Lester, and Joe grew up in a sharecropping family, cutting their musical teeth at the Mount Calvary Baptist Church. The eldest brother, George, got out of the army, disembarking in Southern California, and his brothers soon joined him. By the early 1960s, they were performing locally, applying their gospel quartet harmonies to folk songs and blues as well as straight gospel. In 1965, they began to perform in the New York area, playing the Newport Folk Festival and adding drummer Brian Keenan. In 1967, they signed with Columbia. The original band broke up in 1972, but the brothers continued to pursue musical careers as soloists or session players while maintaining the Chambers Family Singers, a gospel choir. "Oh Baby, You Don't Have to Go," originally recorded as "You Don't Have to Go" by fellow Mississippian Jimmy Reed for VeeJay in 1953, has become a staple among blues and rock bands. This cut was originally issued on the Riverside label.

7. DON'T LIE BUDDY

LEAD BELLY AND JOSH WHITE

Josh White, lead vocal and guitar; Lead Belly, chorus, comments, and 12-string guitar
From *Josh White: Free and Equal Blues* SFW CD 40081

On 25 November, 1941, Lead Belly and Josh White began an extended run at the Village Vanguard. White had done a benefit concert with Lead Belly the year before, and they worked together on Alan Lomax's and Nicholas Ray's CBS radio show, "Back Where I Come From." The two complemented each other: Lead Belly was animated and slightly dangerous, a celebrity of authenticity, and White was handsome, articulate, and polished. While they usually sang solo, "Don't Lie" is one of their crowd-pleasing duets.

The format features White's boastful solo vocals, eliciting affected surprise and mocking commentary from Lead Belly, with both joining in on the rousing chorus. The lyrics are traditional fragments, some associated with worksong traditions, and the whole effect is one of a woofing or bragging contest, in much the same way Big Bill Broonzy's "Mule-Ridin' Blues" was a bit of a lying contest.

See *Josh White Society Blues*, Elijah Wald (2000), and *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly*, Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell (1992).

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Compiled and annotated by Barry Lee Pearson

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