



CLASSIC AFRICAN-AMERICAN BALLADS

from SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS



Smithsonian Folkways

CLASSIC AFRICAN-AMERICAN BALLADS

SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS/SFW CD 40191

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1. **Mouse on the Hill** 3:44/Warner Williams (*Arr. Warner Williams*)
2. **Casey Jones** 1:23/K. C. Douglas (*T. Lawrence Seibert—Eddie Newton*)
3. **John Hardy** 2:43/Lead Belly (*Arr. Huddie Ledbetter/TRO—Folkways Music Publishers, BMI*)
4. **Railroad Bill** 3:33/John Jackson (*Arr. John Jackson/Eyeball Music*)
5. **Stewball** 3:33/Memphis Slim and Willie Dixon (*Arr. Peter Chatman/ARC Music Corp.*)
6. **John Henry** 4:04/Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee (*Arr. Walter McGhee/Stormking Music Inc., BMI*)
7. **St. James Infirmary** 2:20/Snooks Eaglin
8. **Staggerlee (Stackolee)** 5:03/John Cephas and Phil Wiggins
9. **Lost John** 4:54/Convicts at the Ramsey and Retrieve State Farms
10. **Betty and Dupree** 3:45/Josh White
11. **Old Riley** 1:58/Lead Belly (*Arr. Huddie Ledbetter/TRO—Folkways Music Publishers, BMI*)
12. **The Race of the Jim Lee and Katy Adam** 2:27/Jazz Gillum, Memphis Slim, and Arbee Stidham
13. **The Titanic** 2:49/Pink Anderson
14. **Frankie and Johnny** 2:07/Big Bill Broonzy (*Arr. William Broonzy/Regent Music Corp.*)
15. **White House Blues** 1:59/Earl Taylor and the Stony Mountain Boys
16. **Louis Collins** 3:18/John Jackson (*John Hurt/Wynwood Music Co. Inc.—Zap Publishing Co., BMI*)
17. **Bad Lee Brown** 2:14/Woody Guthrie (*Arr. Woody Guthrie—Cisco Houston/Woody Guthrie Publications, BMI*)
18. **Luke and Mullen** 2:25/Horace Sprott
19. **Duncan and Brady** 3:00/Dave Van Ronk
20. **Gallis Pole** 2:45/Lead Belly (*Arr. Huddie Ledbetter/TRO—Folkways Music Publishers, BMI*)
21. **Boll Weevil** 3:04/Pink Anderson
22. **Delia's Gone** 3:45/Josh White, Jr.



AFRICAN-AMERICAN BALLADS

Barry Lee Pearson

The primary purposes of this collection are to reacquaint the listener with a relatively neglected body of African-American folksong and to document the black ballad tradition as a whole, presenting what one might consider the canon of African-American story songs. The study of these ballads was once central to American folksong scholarship, but over the past three decades, it has been overshadowed by interest in blues. Only the two best-known ballads, “John Henry” and “Staggerlee” (both included on this CD), have been the subject of book-length studies. This collection considers African-American ballads in a broad context, addressing such questions as when and where they were created, who composed them, how they differ from other American ballads, and how have they changed over the past century.

What is a ballad? Simply put, a ballad is a song that tells a story, comes in short verses (with or without a refrain), and is sung to a short, repeated melody. Although ballads may have other functions—as dance songs, for example—their key characteristic is storytelling. They are, or at one time were, narrative songs.

Whether or not a piece is traditional to a specific group can depend on several factors: did they compose it? do they sing it? and does it bear the signature characteristics commonly found in similar songs in the group’s repertoire? The majority of the songs on this CD fall into the first category: they are African-American compositions. But the CD includes four songs adopted from British traditions: a Child ballad, “The Gallis Pole”; and three British broadsides,

“Mouse on the Hill,” “Stewball,” and “St. James Infirmary.” Finally, there is “White-House Blues,” a song characteristic of the mountain string-band tradition, representing a shared black and white background, common property to whoever considers it a good song.

The African-American ballad-making era spanned roughly forty years, from 1885 to 1925, peaking between 1890 and 1910. Ballads were composed before 1885 and continued to be composed after 1925, but the major body of recognized ballads, especially those that became traditional, come from this period. The ballad-making epoch coincided with Jim Crow, spectacle lynching, the arrival of the boll weevil, and a decline in the quality of life for blacks in the rural South. It was the era of a great migration, which saw a transition from an agrarian lifestyle to an urban one when black Southerners moved northward, especially to St. Louis, Chicago, Detroit, and Harlem. Many black ballads, as products of these urban environments, provide glimpses of African-American city life at the turn of the century, but that view is generally from the bottom up, having little to do with the middle class or upper class. In fact, the songs were the bane of the uplift movement because

they portrayed lower-class street life and celebrated violence, anti-police sentiment, black-on-black crime, and saloon culture involving pimps, prostitutes, and other characters similar to those celebrated in today’s gangster rap.

Songsters

Railroad workers, convicts, itinerant guitar players, saloon piano players, and their audiences composed and sang African-American ballads. So did vaudeville stars, including Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith; jazz legends Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway, and Jelly Roll Morton; and blues stars Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, and Lloyd Price. White string-band artists, bluegrass players, and country stars including Charlie Poole, Bill Monroe, and Johnny Cash recorded them, as did folk-revival legends Woody Guthrie, Dave Van Ronk, and Bob Dylan. But one group of African-American musicians is most commonly associated with the ballad tradition: songsters—a term picked up from black folk speech by sociologist collector Howard Odum. He used it to refer to black singers who played instruments and knew a great number of songs. Today, we apply it to artists whose repertoires spanned the 19th

and 20th centuries and who played blues, spirituals, ragtime pieces, pop songs, and ballads. This generation included Furry Lewis, John Hurt, Henry Thomas, Charley Patton, Huddie Ledbetter, and Pink Anderson.

Early interpretations of black ballads were hampered by several factors. First, songs such as “Casey Jones” and “Frankie and Johnny” were reworked by white songwriters and were among the popular hits of the day; their popularity often led to the coexistence of both black and white versions of a piece. Second, ballad scholars had little experience with African-American artistic expression and approached black ballads with a decidedly Eurocentric bias: citing the lack of a cohesive chronological storyline, they misread improvisation as forgetfulness or confusion.

It wasn’t until the 1960s, when scholars trained in blues research began to look at black ballads from a blues reference point, that evidence of a separate system was put forward. Looking at black ballads from a more Afrocentric perspective, we see a great value placed on collective participation, improvisation, and personalization. Singers altered songs as they sang them to suit the contextual

demands of specific performances. Value was placed on each singer’s ability to personalize a song by making it his or her own version and tailoring that version to the needs of a dancing audience, making the song longer or shorter when necessary, talking about current events, talking to audience members, and, in many cases, having audience members talk back by way of singing their own verses, which were most likely comical or risqué.

Collective participation, dance, and improvisation shifted the emphasis on story line even further. Black ballads were used for dance, but they celebrated characters as in praise poems, and used allusion and satire, or ironic humor, filling the song with commentary about, or attitudes toward, events, rather than describing events. Other characteristics shared in African tradition were the use of songs for derision or social criticism, or to mock authority figures. For example, following the murder of a St. Louis policeman by Harry Duncan, black residents of St. Louis sang “Duncan and Brady” to protest the brutality of the police establishment, leading to mini-riots between singers and police. Other songs, the “Robert Charles Song” in New Orleans and “Two-Gun Charlie Pierce”

in Memphis, likewise celebrated resistance to the police, but were so violently suppressed that they are now forgotten.

Scholars, noting differences between many African-American ballads and Anglo ballads, came up with several terms to describe the former genre, the most lasting of which is *blues ballad*. Songwriter W. C. Handy, in a 1923 interview with folksong collector Dorothy Scarborough, coined this term, which implies a combination, hybrid, or transitional genre. In retrospect, it is unclear what he meant by it. He had taken an old murder ballad and changed it to a love song, adding it to a body of compositions and recompositions he was calling blues. Subsequent scholars applied it to African-American ballads such as “John Henry” and the couplet-chorus ballads “Stackolee,” “Frankie and Johnny,” “Delia,” “Railroad Bill,” “Boll Weevil,” and “White-House Blues.” They also applied it to story songs that used a blues format, like “Dupree,” and then to similar songs found in white traditions—songs characterized as loosely structured, allusive, more editorial than descriptive, and unconcerned with relating an objective, chronological storyline.

Though the term blues ballad has

meant different things to different people, its virtue lies in shifting emphasis away from viewing black ballads as weak performances of white ballads, to recognizing them as different genres of composition, which shared qualities associated with African-American aesthetics in general and blues in particular.

Black ballads cover a limited number of subjects, but like their Anglo-American counterparts are usually in some way concerned with death. Within the stated or implied storyline, somebody has to die, whether John Henry hammers himself to death, Casey Jones goes down with his train, Stackolee shoots Billy, Frankie shoots Johnny, Duncan shoots Brady, or 1500 passengers go down on *Titanic*. The songs on this CD fall into roughly eight categories, based on their subject matter. “John Henry” and “Casey Jones” are *occupational ballads*, though one could as easily classify the latter as an event song. “Staggerlee,” “Luke and Mullen,” “John Hardy,” “Duncan and Brady,” and perhaps “Louis Collins” are *bully ballads*, songs that focus on a fight between two tough guys or bullies. “Frankie and Johnny,” “Delia’s Gone,” and “Bad Lee Brown” are *murder ballads*, based on lover’s

quarrels. “Railroad Bill” and “Betty and Dupree” are *outlaw ballads*. “Stewball” and “*Jim Lee and Katy Adams*” are racing ballads, the former about a horse race and the latter about a steamboat race. “Lost John” and “Old Riley” are prison songs about escaped convicts. “The *Titanic*” and “White-House Blues” qualify as *event ballads*. Finally, “Boll Weevil” and “Mouse on the Hill” are *comic ballads*, featuring animal characters. Other categories, such as *bad-man ballads* and *protest ballads*, are also applicable, especially to the songs in this CD.

In this collection, all but five songs at some point in their history contained protest lyrics. Several, including “Duncan and Brady,” “Railroad Bill,” and “Staggerlee,” were overtly subversive. These political qualities were in line with the politics of Moses Asch and Folkways Records, which promoted a progressive agenda, including civil rights, and were committed to the idea of using art in the service of social action. The protest elements in African-American ballads dovetailed with topical protest songs of Josh White, Lead Belly, Woody Guthrie,

and other Folkways artists, especially during the 1960s, and they remain relevant. They not only spoke to turn-of-the-century conditions, but critique the Anglo-European ballad tradition, replacing a romantic tragic perspective with ironic humor. Looking back one hundred years, we see a musical form that is remarkably familiar: urban music that combines storytelling and improvisation, focusing on themes of street culture, protest, and violence.

To learn more about African-American ballads, look to the work of these scholars and collectors: Cecil Brown, Sterling Brown, Bruce Buckley, Norm Cohen, Harold Courlander, John Russell David, David Evans, W. C. Handy, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, John Garst, Kenny Goldstein, Robert Gordon, Guy Johnson, Lawrence Levine, John and Alan Lomax, Eleanor Long, Kip Lornell, Judith McCulloch, John Minton, Howard Odum, Paul Oliver, Frederick Ramsey, Jr., John Roberts, Dorothy Scarborough, Mary Wheeler, Newman White, D. K. Wilgus, John Work, and of course Moses Asch.



THE SONGS

1. Mouse on the Hill

Warner Williams, vocal and guitar. From *Blues Highway: Warner Williams Live with Jay Summerour*/SFW CD 40120, 2004.

Warner Williams was born in Takoma Park, Maryland, in 1930. His father, who played guitar and fiddle, performed for country dances before switching to religious music. He taught Warner, who began to play at age four, and all of his brothers and sisters to play. The Williams brothers played on the streets of Takoma Park and Washington, D.C., for tips. Warner later played for house parties, fish fries, and church services, and he held a full-time job for the local office of the National Park Service. A contemporary songster, he plays an eclectic mix of blues, country music, pop standards, and, in this case, one of the best-known British broadside ballads.

A song about a wedding between a mouse and a frog dates back to the end of the 16th century. Initially, it may have been understood as political satire. Brought to America by British settlers, it lost any political connotations and entered into both white and African-American folk tradition. It has been recorded by medicine-show musician Peg Leg Sam,

one-string guitarist and blues artist Lonnie Pitchford, various country artists, and Burl Ives, an Asch recording artist, singer, and actor. Most commonly known as “Froggie Went A-Courting,” it has many titles, some derived from refrain lines. It has become a children’s song of sorts, although most versions include bloody violence, when the frog uses his sword and pistol to kill his rivals. Williams’s version loses the frog altogether, replacing him with a tough mouse, thus avoiding the interspecies miscegenation of other versions. The first verse’s rhyme of “lives on the hill,” and “rough and tough like Buffalo Bill,” can be found in other African-American rhymes and songs, including Bo Diddley’s hit “Hey! Bo Diddley” (1957). The third verse also may come from “Hey! Bo Diddley”; the fourth verse switches to the first person (a characteristic of the blues tradition); and the final verse is a formulaic ending, announcing the song is over, though the story is unresolved. With even the title rewritten, “Mouse on the Hill” is a far cry from a British ballad.

2. Casey Jones

K. C. Douglas, vocal. From *K. C. Douglas: A Deadbeat Guitar and the Mississippi Blues*/Cook Records 5002, 1952.

K. C. Douglas (1913–1975) was born in Sharon, Mississippi, thirteen years after Casey Jones had wrecked his train, and thirteen miles from Vaughn, Mississippi, where the event had occurred. Initially influenced by his uncle, Smith Douglas, he learned to play guitar. He learned songs from blues legend Tommy Johnson, and the two worked together briefly at house parties and country jooks. In 1945, he moved to California and formed a band in Richmond. In 1948, he scored a regional hit with “Mercury Boogie” on Bob Geddins’s Down Town label. In 1956, for Sam Eskin, he did a field-recording session that was released on Cook Records. He later recorded for Bluesville and Arhoolie, and was active in the California blues-festival circuit. This a cappella recording came from the 1956 session.

One of the best-known folksongs in America, “Casey Jones” was copyrighted by a white songwriting team, Lawrence Siebert and Eddie Newton, in 1909

and touted as “The Only Comedy Railroad Song.” Their composition, however, was based on an earlier song, allegedly composed by Wallace Saunders, a black railroad worker. The ballad commemorates an event that took place in April 1900, when an Illinois Central train crashed into the rear end of another train. The engineer, John Luther Jones, from Cayce, Kentucky, was running the Cannonball Express from Memphis to Canton, Mississippi. Supposedly based on yet another train-wreck folksong, the ballad spread locally through Mississippi and Memphis and, according to folklorist E. C. Perrow, was widely known in the region by 1908. Several local blues artists, including Furry Lewis and John Hurt, recorded versions. Bessie Smith also recorded a version, titled, “J. C. Holmes Blues,” and even Robert Johnson had a version in his unrecorded repertoire, one that he called “One Thousand and Five on the Road Again.” The song has persisted in black and white traditions ever since, with versions recorded by artists as diverse as Fiddlin’ John Carson, Vernon Dalhart, Cow Cow Davenport, Burl Ives, Johnny Cash, and the Grateful Dead.

Finally, it is notable that the popular version was written as a comic song,

rather than as a romanticized tragedy, as are most Anglo train-wreck ballads. The use of ironic humor is a key feature of African-American ballads and blues. Black versions usually downplay the wreck, focusing instead on reactions to news of it, as in Douglas’s version. Other versions are even more flippant, as in “you got another daddy on the same damn line.” In this light, it’s easier to understand why the Jones family considered the piece an insult or a taunt.

See Norm Cohen, *Long Steel Rail: The Railroad in American Folksong* (1981).

3. John Hardy

Lead Belly, vocal and accordion. From *Lead Belly: Bourgeois Blues*/Smithsonian Folkways CD 40045, 1996.

Huddie Ledbetter (1888–1949) was born in 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 them, he was released in 1934 and went to work for them as a chauffeur. Moving to New York, he 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 1941, and recorded for Folkways off and on until his death.

In another recording of this song, he states that he learned it from Woody Guthrie, who in turn may have picked it up from the Carter family version or from A. P. Carter, who, according to Brownie McGhee, occasionally visited McGhee in New York. The song is based on an actual event, in which a black West Virginia railroad or mineworker killed a coworker over a gambling altercation and was hanged for the crime in 1894. A bad-man ballad, it has been widely collected from white singers as often as African-American ones. In some versions, John Hardy uses his last-will-and-testament verse to state his defiance, but just as often he gets religion and shows remorse. In this and other respects, the song seems more characteristic of white tradition, despite its subject matter. The most popular version of the piece was recorded by the Carter Family as “John Hardy Was a Desperate

Little Man,” on 10 May 1928. Since then, it has been covered by Flatt and Scruggs, Doc Watson, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, and Johnny Cash. This version shows Lead Belly’s touch on his first instrument, the accordion. The three-verse fragment was taken off an undated 12-inch glass disc. Glass was used for master-recordings during World War II, when shellac was temporarily unavailable.

4. Railroad Bill

John Jackson, vocal and guitar. From a live tribute to the *Anthology of American Folk Music*, Vienna, Virginia, October 1997. Archive collections.

Born in Woodville, Virginia, John Jackson (1924–2002) grew up in the Fort Valley in Rappahannock County, Virginia. He learned to play guitar and banjo from his father and other members of an extended and highly musical family. As he put it, “Everybody in the family played music; my mother, my father, aunts, uncle, my brothers and sisters. I had an aunt who played guitar and sang; my father played [guitar]; my mother blewed the harmonica and played accordion” (personal interview with author [2000]).

Besides his family’s musical environment, he was inspired and taught by a convict named Happy, who worked on a local road gang and was what Jackson later termed a professional musician. In his teens, Jackson worked the local house-party circuit until a fight in 1946 led him to give up music. In 1949, he and his wife, Cora, and family moved to Fairfax Station, Virginia, near Washington, D.C. In 1964, folklorist Chuck Perdue heard him playing and brought him to the attention of Chris Strachwitz, who recorded him on his Arhoolie label. Through the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, Jackson recorded for Rounder and Alligator, and played locally. He toured Europe and Asia, but never quit his day job, earning his living as a gravedigger and taking pride in the quality of his work. A self-described songster, he played blues, country songs, and ballads from the black and white traditions, pieces that he learned from 78-rpm records and local musicians. He learned “Railroad Bill” from his father, who told him legends about the outlaw.

“Railroad Bill” is a blues ballad based on the exploits of an Alabama turpentine worker named Morris Slater, who earned his nickname stealing goods from freight trains. His legend grew as he eluded the

law, killing a sheriff McMillan in 1895. In 1897, he was ambushed at a country store and shot to death. Nevertheless, his legend lives on, and like all major outlaw heroes, he is believed to have escaped the ambush. His story blends a historical person with folk legend, but his song tells little about the events of his life, focusing instead on his prowess with a pistol and his ability to outsmart and outfight the law. He was supposed to have had supernatural powers, which made him impossible to apprehend. Most versions focus on the protagonist, alternately poking fun at him and praising his exploits calling him bad or a desperado, making this a bad-man ballad as well as a blues ballad that became a dance song.

Jackson’s version uses the chorus “Let him ride,” rather than calling him bad, and brings in lines associated with “White-House Blues” or “Cannonball Blues.” It was recorded at a 1992 tribute concert celebrating the CD release of Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American Folk Music*.

See *The Harry Smith Connection*/ Smithsonian Folkways CD 40085.

5. Stewball

Memphis Slim, vocal and piano; Willie Dixon, bass. From *Memphis Slim: The Folkways Years 1959-73*/Smithsonian Folkways CD 40128, 2000.

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. In the 1930s, he moved to Chicago, where he became a mainstay on the 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, including Chess, United, and Vee Jay. He later branched into the folk market, playing the Newport Folk Festival and other festivals. He eventually settled in Paris, France. He composed 300 songs, including “Every Day I Have the Blues,” and recorded almost 500 songs.

Bassist Willie Dixon (1915-1992) had equally impressive credentials, primarily in Chicago, where he moved from Mississippi in 1936. After working

with several groups, he joined forces with Chess Records as musician, writer, and producer, and was responsible for numerous blues hits. He was active in bringing blues tours to Europe, and late in life founded the Blues Heaven Foundation to promote blues education.

The duo first recorded together for Miracle in Chicago in 1947, and began recording for Folkways in 1959, the year “Stewball” was recorded. The song originated as a 19th-century Irish broadside detailing a horse race between Skewball and Miss Grizzle, Miss Sporty, or simply the Gray Mare. In America, it was adopted into black traditions and widely collected from black singers, reminding us of the African-American presence in the horse-racing industry, including the use of African-American jockeys. It has been collected as a work song from African-American convicts, and this version reflects that tradition, which employs call-and-response, vocal blending, and the switching of lead vocals. The second verse has been read as a protest lyric.

6. John Henry

Sonny Terry, vocal and harmonica; Brownie McGhee, vocal and guitar; Gene Moore, drums. From *Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry Sing/Smithsonian Folkways* 40011, 1990.

Born Saunders Terrell (1911–1986) in Greensboro, North Carolina, Sonny Terry learned harmonica from his father. After losing his sight, he earned tips as a street musician in the Raleigh-Durham area and eventually teamed up with Blind Boy Fuller, with whom he first recorded in 1937. In 1938, he appeared in John Hammond’s *From Spirituals to Swing* concert series in Carnegie Hall. In 1942, he moved to New York, where he appeared in *Finian’s Rainbow*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and other stage productions, and formed a lifelong musical partnership with guitarist Brownie McGhee.

Walter Brown McGhee (1915–1996) was born in Knoxville, Tennessee. Primarily influenced by his father, he learned guitar as a boy. In the 1930s, he worked with a gospel quartet. In Durham, North Carolina, he met Blind Boy Fuller and his agent, J. B. Long,

who arranged for him to record for Okeh in 1940 and 1941. After Fuller’s death, McGhee recorded “The Death of Blind Boy Fuller,” and briefly took the name Blind Boy Fuller #2. He 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. Members of the New York folk-music scene, they participated in jam sessions with Woody Guthrie, Lead Belly, and Josh White, and first recorded for Asch in 1944.

“John Henry,” in all probability America’s best-known African-American ballad, and perhaps its best-known folksong, comes in multiple formats—as a railroad work song, as a fast dance-song, and as one of the early bottleneck (slide-guitar) songs. Most versions of it allude to a contest between John Henry, the steel-driving man, and a steam-powered machine. Although he wins the contest, he dies from his effort. The song is one of the most recorded and one of the most researched in American folksong history. Artists who have recorded versions of it include Lead Belly, Big Bill Broonzy, Walter Horton, Buster Brown, Hank Thompson, Bill Monroe, Uncle Dave

Macon, Johnny Cash, and the Ramsey Lewis Trio. Scholars who have tackled it include Louis Chappell, Norm Cohen, Richard Dorson, John Garst, and Guy Johnson. It has been the subject of cartoons, plays, novels, children’s books, and even a U.S. postage stamp.

The song is supposedly based on a historical event, but exactly when and where the event happened remains the subject of controversy. East Coast artists look to Talcott and Hinton, West Virginia, and the Big Bend Tunnel, where they have a statue, a museum, and a festival. More recent scholarship, by John Garst, argues for a site near Leeds, Alabama, places the event around 1887, and finds the original John Henry to have been a black Mississippi worker named John Henry Dabney. Folkways recorded an Alabama version from Livingston resident Rich Amerson, who in turn passed it on to Vera Hall and Cora Fluker.

Sonny Terry, who probably learned it from his father, first recorded it in 1938 as the “The New John Henry.” McGhee claimed he had learned it from his father: “First time I ever heard ‘John Henry,’ to really absorb it, he was playing with a pocket knife. Had it tuned in ‘vastapol’” (personal interview).

In this version, the duo shares the vocal lead. They repeat the last line four times, and the final verse eight times. Note here Henry telling the captain to “shut up.” A version by Pink Anderson has the protagonist warning the captain not to hurry him, and threatening to quit and work for another line. Elsewhere, “John Henry” has been collected with other protest lyrics.

7. St. James Infirmary

Snooks Eaglin, vocal and guitar. From *Snooks Eaglin: New Orleans Street Singer*/ Smithsonian Folkways CD 40165, 2005.

Fird “Snooks” Eaglin was born in 1936 and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana. When he was one and half years old, surgery for a brain tumor left him blind. At age six, he began to learn to play guitar, and he eventually played in church and on the streets. As a teenager, he performed with various New Orleans rhythm-and-blues groups, including the Flamingos, and played on various classic New Orleans recordings, including Sugar Boy Crawford’s “Jock-A-Mo.” He recorded for Folkways in 1958 before hooking up with Imperial in 1960 and Black Top in

1987. An excellent guitarist and vocalist, he continues to perform on the blues festival and club circuit and is currently living in post-Katrina New Orleans.

“St. James Infirmary” lives on as a folk and popular standard in genres ranging from jazz to bluegrass. It derives from “The Unfortunate Rake,” a British broadside ballad that dealt with the effects of a sexually transmitted disease and recounted the victim’s speculation about his funeral requirements. In the American versions, under such titles as “One Morning in May” and the “Bad-Girl Lament,” the protagonist becomes a woman who has led a dissolute life. Out West, it became “The Streets of Laredo,” but black tradition knows it as “Gambler’s Blues” and “St. James Infirmary.” It was recorded by jazz legends Louis Armstrong and Cab Calloway.

In 1958, folklorist Kenneth S. Goldstein put together an entire Folkways record, *The Unfortunate Rake*, consisting of 19 versions of the song sung by folk singers and folklorists. The recording demonstrated the process of variation and the vitality of a traditional ballad.

For more information, see *The Unfortunate Rake* (“St. James Hospital”) FS 3805.

8. Staggerlee (Stackolee)

John Cephas, vocal and guitar; Phil Wiggins, harmonica From *NCTA Archives*/ recorded in Washington, D.C., 1991.

John Cephas was born in 1930 in the Foggy Bottom neighborhood of Washington, D.C. His musical education began in church and at family social events. His guitar inspirations included his aunt Lillian Douglas, his cousin David Talliaferro, and his grandfather John Dudley, who introduced him to the country-house party circuit in rural Virginia. By the 1960s, he had quit playing and worked as a carpenter for the D.C. National Guard, but a chance meeting with piano legend Big Chief Ellis in 1976 sparked his interest in performing again. That same year, Cephas met Phil Wiggins at the Festival of American Folklife. The three formed a band called the Barrelhouse Rockers and began to work the festival circuit.

Phil Wiggins was born in 1954 in Washington, D.C. A self-taught harmonica player, he learned from listening to recordings of Sonny Terry, Little Walter, and both Sonny Boy Williamsons and by

jamming with local musicians, including Flora Molton. After Chief’s death, in 1977, they continued as a duo, representing the Piedmont Blues and the guitar-harmonica duet tradition at its best. Active in the festival circuit, and with recordings on Rounder, Alligator, and other labels, they are today’s leading exponents of the Piedmont blues.

The ultimate bad-man ballad, “Staggerlee,” like “Duncan and Brady” and “Frankie and Johnny,” is a St. Louis ballad, based on an actual event. On Christmas night in 1895, Lee Shelton and Bill Lyons were drinking together in a bar. An argument ensued, and each tried to destroy the other’s hat. Lyons pulled a knife; Shelton, a gun. Finally, Shelton shot and killed Lyons. Shelton, a local pimp, ran to his girl’s house, but was caught, tried, and convicted. Cecil Brown attributes the original composition to St. Louis songwriter and piano player Bill Dooley; Cephas, however, locates his version in New Orleans, and several New Orleans artists—Professor Longhair and Archibald—have recorded the piece. Despite its historical basis, the story has become a folk legend, with wide-ranging variants. In most versions of the story, a bad man or bully, Staggerlee, kills Billy

Lyons or De Lyons over a gambling dispute. In John Hurt's 1928 version, Stack is brought to trial and pays for his crimes. Other versions embellish or curtail the details of the narrative, focusing on the sheriff's and deputies' fear of Staggerlee, or adding motifs in which the bad man goes down to hell and competes with the devil. A rhythm-and-blues hit by Lloyd Price in 1959 served to fix the song as a rock and country standard. Stories and narrative poems about Staggerlee have been collected with some frequency, further indicating his status as a folk hero.

See Cecil Brown, *Stagolee Shot Billy* (2003).

9. Lost John

Convicts at the Ramsey and Retrieve State Farms. From *Negro Prison Camp Work Songs*/FW 4475, 1956.

This recording of unnamed prisoners was made in February 1951 near Houston, Texas. Folkways's most prolific artist, Pete Seeger, was one of a fieldwork group that included his wife, Toshi, fellow Folkways recording artist John Lomax, Jr., Chester Bower, and Fred Hellerman, who performed with Seeger in the Weavers, the most popular folk-revival band at the

time. In this somewhat unusual reversal, we have professional singers playing the role of fieldworkers recording a group of nonprofessional singers.

Worksongs coordinate group labor and are survival tools, which give their participants a psychological lift. As one worker told Seeger, "Oh, it makes the work go easier." Worksongs allow singers to focus on the song, not on the work, and thereby lend support to the individual and provide a sense of solidarity and a collective will to survive. They were once part of the Southern soundscape, but died out when machines replaced group labor. They remained in the prison farm systems through the 1950s, but today are essentially restricted to the military, in the form of cadence chants.

The legend behind this song dates back at least to W. C. Handy, a songwriter with a penchant for reworking folksongs into hits. He titled his version of "Lost John" "Long Gone." According to him, "Lost John" was being pursued by Joe Turner, who was known for collecting black workers for the prison farm by entrapping them in illegal gambling games. Under various titles, the song has been recorded by Jim Jackson, Papa Charlie Jackson, Little Hat Jones, Frankie Lee Simms,

Lightning Hopkins, DeFord Baily, Sonny Terry, and Merle Travis.

Despite Handy's embellishment, the more common story behind the song involves a prison trustee, famous for his ability to outrun the hounds, who is pitted against a new group of bloodhounds to test their tracking ability. Through a certain trick, climbing through a barrel in some versions, he outfoxes the hounds and gets away. In some versions, he winds up in Baltimore. This version combines elements of the "Lost John" narrative with other traditional prison songs recorded in Texas in a tour-de-force protest medley. We can note three linked cultural practices found throughout the diaspora: collective participation, overlapping call-and-response, and improvisation by a lead singer. In this song, the soloist's words are repeated line by line by the group in responsive fashion.

See Handy, W. C. 1941. *W. C. Handy: Father of the Blues*.

10. Betty and Dupree

Josh White, vocal and guitar. From *Josh White Free and Equal Blues*/Smithsonian Folkways CD 40081, 1998.

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 recording career in 1932, using the pseudonym Pinewood Tom. Among the blues and religious songs he cut for ARC and its subsidiaries over the next eight years, he had several hits, including "Blood Red River." He relocated to New York in the early 1930s and slowly dropped down-home blues in favor of a nightclub act. He appeared in theatrical productions and recorded folk and political songs through the early 1940s. He was popular through the 1950s and 1960s as a recording and touring artist on the folk and blues festival circuits.

White recorded "Betty and Dupree" several times for Asch and Folkways, and had a personal tie to the song. Fellow Greenville musician Willie Walker, who deeply influenced White, recorded a version of the song as "Dupree Blues" for Columbia in Atlanta in 1930. White, about 16 at the time, would have been familiar with Walker's version.

The event the song refers to would have been remembered in Atlanta. According to the research of John Garst, just before Christmas in 1921, Frank Dupree robbed

an Atlanta jewelry store and made off with a diamond ring. In the process, he killed a Pinkerton agent and wounded a bystander. He escaped to Chattanooga, Tennessee, and then on to Detroit, where he was captured. After a sensational trial and despite public sympathy (probably because both he and Betty were white), he was hanged in 1922. He was the last man to be executed by hanging in Georgia before the introduction of the electric chair.

Like Robin Hood and Jesse James, the outlaw story of “Betty and Dupree” appealed to consumers and singers alike. The song was recorded by Georgia White, Robert McCoy, Washboard Willie, Big Joe Duskin, and Brownie McGhee, and by the 1950s had become a rock-and-roll hit. Chuck Willis took it in 1958 and deleted the event that had inspired the story line. Possibly influenced by negative reactions to the violence in Lloyd Price’s 1958 version of “Staggerlee,” Willis’s version was turned into a schmaltzy love song with no theft, murder, or hanging. Dupree simply gives Betty a ring in exchange for her vow of a lifetime of married bliss. Willis’s kowtowing to public concern over teenage morals influenced later versions of the piece, including those recorded by Chick Willis and Muddy Waters.

Over the years, the ballad has had a blues audience, a folk-revival audience, and a rock audience, and it’s still going strong as a blues-revival standard. Unlike most of the songs on this record, it is constructed in a blues format. It is a blues that happens to tell a story, or at least once told a story.

See *Josh White, Society Blues* (2000).

11. Old Riley

Lead Belly, vocal and guitar. From *Lead Belly: Where Did You Sleep Last Night/* Smithsonian Folkways CD 40044, 1996.

For a time, Lead Belly (see track 3) was considered America’s most authentic folk singer. Through his life experiences, he picked up a wide range of musical traditions, which he later brought to Northern audiences. These included the prison folksongs that were a major part of his public persona. Having spent seven years in Huntsville Prison Farm in Texas and four years in Louisiana’s Angola Prison Farm, he knew many prison songs. Lurid accounts of his past in the press made him a musical celebrity, although he disliked the ex-convict role. He remains one of America’s major musical icons, and has been inducted into the Rock and Roll

Hall of Fame, but during his life he was the embodiment of the songster tradition, a man who knew as many children’s songs as he did prison songs, and was a repository of African-American ballads. He probably recorded more ballads than any other traditional African-American artist.

“Old Riley” appears to be two songs dealing with the same subject. At least that’s how the Lomaxes published it in *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly* (1936). “In Them Long Hot Summer Days” is categorized as work holler. “Ol’ Rattler” is called a worksong, and it was first released in the 1942 recording *Work Songs of the U.S.A.* This version, from 1947, begins and ends with the slower holler format sung unaccompanied, while the middle, “Rattler” part is accompanied by a twelve-string guitar, which moves along at too jaunty a tempo for a worksong. Field-recorded versions would be much slower, but Lead Belly’s upbeat version made the song attractive to folk-revival audiences.

The story in both songs tells of the convict Riley, who outran the famous convict-catching dog “Old Rattler.” Initially, Lead Belly and the Lomaxes had a monopoly on the song: Lead Belly recorded it repeatedly from 1935 to 1948, and the Lomaxes field-recorded another

seven versions at various Texas prisons from 1933 to 1942. In the 1960s, Bruce Jackson recorded it as sung by Texas inmates. Finally, Lead Belly’s version includes several repetitions of “being gone like a turkey through the corn,” a verse generally associated with the convict-vs.-hounds song “Lost John.” Today, the piece is well-known in folk-revival and country-music circles primarily as “Here, Rattler, Here.”

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

12. The Race of the Jim Lee and Katy Adam

Jazz Gillum, vocal and harmonica; Memphis Slim, organ; Arbee Stidham, guitar. From *Blues by Jazz Gillum Singing and Playing His Harmonica: With Arbee Stidham and Memphis Slim*, F 3826, 1961.

Born in Indianola, Mississippi, William McKinley Gillum (1904–1966) earned the nickname “Jazz” when he learned to play harmonica. Perfecting his skills as a jook and street performer in the delta, he joined the great migration and in 1923 moved to Chicago, where he teamed up with Big Bill Broonzy, who had moved to Chicago a year or two before. In 1934, Gillum began

his recording career working primarily with Lester Melrose. Gillum issued some 95 sides on the Bluebird and Victor labels over the course of 16 years. He worked with major Chicago artists, including Roosevelt Sykes, Washboard Sam, and Big Maceo Meriwether. With Sonny Boy Williamson (Number One), he helped make the harmonica a cornerstone of the Chicago blues sound. His 1961 Folkways session includes pianist Memphis Slim on organ and Arbee Stidham, an Arkansas-born guitarist, who had recorded from 1947 for various labels, including Victor and Checker. In 1966, Gillum was shot in the head during an argument.

Gillum first recorded a version of this ballad in 1939 under the title “Big *Katy Adams*.” The song is one of many commemorating races or other competitions among steamboats on the Mississippi and Ohio rivers. According to Mary Wheeler, author of *Steamboat Days* (1944), both the *Katy Adams* and the *James Lee* plied the Mississippi and the Ohio during the last two decades of the 19th century, and this is one of many songs that tell of the rivalry between these vessels. Charley Patton recorded a two-part “*Jim Lee Blues*,” Lucille Bogan recorded “*Jim Stack O’ Lee Blues*,” Will Weldon recorded “Big *Katy*

Adams,” and Mooch Richardson recorded “Big *Kate Adams Blues*.” Like “Betty and Dupree,” it comes in a blues format; however, it does not tell a story.

13. The *Titanic*

Pink Anderson. From Pink Anderson: *Carolina Medicine Show Hokum and Blues with Baby Tate*/FW 3588, 1984.

As a medicine-show performer, Pink Anderson (see track 21) had a stock of songs that would please all audiences. A true songster, he sang blues, comic songs, and ballads from black and white traditions, and danced, told jokes, and recited comic poetry.

Of all the tragic trainwreck and shipwreck ballads, “The *Titanic*” is the most spectacular. The sinking of the *Titanic*, on 14 April 1912, made a lasting impact in popular imaginations, as more than 1500 passengers and crew were lost in the North Atlantic. The event inspired songs ranging from gospel to comic parodies, and of course numerous ballads, most of which seized upon the theme of human hubris and the overwhelming power of God. This was part of a broader tradition of using tragic-event songs to remind

listeners to get on the right side of the Lord. “The *Titanic*,” however, added other elements: class, as in this version, and race, as in the version sung by Folkways artist Lead Belly. Other versions in black tradition were recorded by Rabbit Brown, Blind Willie Johnson, and William and Versey Smith; in the country tradition, Roy Acuff, Ernest Stoneman, the Carter Family, and Vernon Dalhart recorded versions of the song.

14. Frankie and Johnny

Big Bill Broonzy, vocal and guitar. From *Big Bill Broonzy: Trouble in Mind*/Smithsonian Folkways CD 40131, 2000.

The son of ex-slaves, William Lee Conley Broonzy (1893–1958) was born in Scott, Mississippi. As a youngster, he learned to play both the fiddle and the guitar, and he 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 *From Spirituals*

to Swing, a concert series in Carnegie Hall. In the early 1950s, he began to tour overseas with his good friend Lead Belly, and was among the first African Americans to take blues and black ballads 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, assisted by Yannick Bruynoghe. He began to record for Asch in 1956, but earlier material from radio transcriptions was published by Folkways.

“Frankie and Johnny,” also known as “Frankie and Albert,” or “Allen,” or just “Frankie,” is another St. Louis ballad based on an actual event and centered in black urban street life. One Sunday night in October 1899, prostitute Frankie Baker shot Albert or Allen Britt during a late-night altercation. She stood trial, but was acquitted because the shooting was judged self-defense. According to Cecil Brown, the song was composed by pianist-songwriter Bill Dooley, who, he suggests, composed “Stackolee.” The song became quite a hit, and over the years and under numerous titles it has been recorded by Charley Patton, Lead Belly, John Hurt, Coley Jones, Bessie Smith, Charlie Poole, and Johnny Cash. It has been field-collected countless times, been the subject

of a dissertation, and been turned into a play, an Elvis Presley film based on the song, and several other movies, including two films released by Republic Pictures. Ironically Frankie Baker was not lost into legend, but reappeared several times to sue Republic Pictures for using her story. Most versions of the song are replete with ironic humor, as in “I never shot him in the first degree; I shot him in his trifling ass.” Broonzy’s version is a bit more staid, and uses a formulaic ending, rather than resolving the story.

15. White House Blues

Earl Taylor and the Stony Mountain Boys: Earl Taylor, vocals and mandolin; Walter Hensley, vocals and banjo; Sam Hutchins, vocals and guitar; Vernon “Boatwhistle” McIntyre, bass. From *Classic Bluegrass* from Smithsonian Folkways Smithsonian Folkways 40092.

According to folklorist Jeff Place, Earl Taylor (1929–1984) was from Rose Hill, Virginia. He was active with several bluegrass aggregations, including the one organized by Jimmy Martin, and worked the Baltimore–Washington region from 1957. Mike Seeger, who

recorded extensively for Folkways with the New Lost City Ramblers, brought him to Folkways. Seeger was an active fieldworker and music scholar, who served as one of the main conduits through which bluegrass came to Folkways.

The Appalachian Mountains proved fertile ground for folksong collectors in search of ballads. The mountains were also central to the development of a string-band tradition that took place during interactions between black railroad workers, miners, and road-gang workers from the South on the one hand, and Anglo-German populations on the other. The mountain string-band tradition can be called an interracial form of music: symbolically, it involved the meeting of the Anglo-Irish fiddle and the African banjo, and literally it involved black and white musicians playing together. The result was new and racially ambiguous, a shared musical culture, in which blues ballads like “McKinley Blues” flourished.

The song commemorates an event, the assassination of President McKinley, in Buffalo, New York, in 1901. Anarchist Leon Czolgosz shot him twice, but only one bullet was found—which explains the meaning of the first verse. The second verse illustrates the type of variation

common to oral tradition. McKinley was shot with a .32-caliber Ivor Johnson gun. String-band performer Charlie Poole’s version called it “Iver Johnston gun,” which Taylor hears and recreates as “I got your gun.”

The song is similar to “Railroad Bill” (track 4) in its use of the couplet-and-chorus format. In contrast to the other songs on the CD, the breakneck speed of the song at first can be jarring, but such upbeat tempos were characteristic of early bluegrass and represent white artists’ initial difficulty with African-American rhythmic dynamics—which led to a tendency among white artists to use speed as a means of generating excitement. A quick comparison between “White House Blues” and John Jackson’s “Railroad Bill” illustrates this cultural difference.

These four verses are found in Charlie Poole’s 1926 Columbia recording, which was twelve verses long. Over the years, the song has become a bluegrass standard, recorded by such notables as Bill Monroe, Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs, Doc Watson, and Vassar Clements. It has been reworked as “Cannonball Blues,” versions of which have been recorded by the Carter Family, and by blues artists including Cow Cow Davenport and Roosevelt Sykes. Though

it’s only a fragment, this song tends toward ironic humor, rather than romance.

16. Louis Collins

John Jackson, vocal and guitar. (From a live tribute to the *Anthology of American Folk Music*, recorded at the Barns of Wolf Trap in Vienna, Virginia, 1997)

Mississippi John Hurt recorded this ballad for Okeh on 21 December 1928. He also recorded “Stack O Lee Blues,” “Frankie,” “Casey Jones,” and “Spike Driver Blues,” and is considered one of the finest songsters of all times. Hurt did not record again until he was rediscovered in 1963. During the folk revival, he was lionized and spent some time living in Washington, D.C. He later claimed he had composed the song after overhearing a conversation about a local killing. The song became one of his best-known during the 1960s, and served as a folk-revival standard. John Jackson met Hurt in 1963–1964, when Chris Strachwitz took him to see Hurt at the Ontario Place in Washington, D.C.

Jackson’s “Louis Collins” employs much the same melody and delicate finger-picking as Hurt’s version. It covers the same four verses, although Jackson begins

with the chorus. While it tells us little of the event or story, it remains an appealing blues ballad. This version comes from the 1997 Harry Smith Tribute concert.

17. Bad Lee Brown

Woody Guthrie, vocal and guitar. From *Woody Guthrie: Buffalo Skinners, The Asch Recordings*, Vol. 4/SFW 40103, 1999.

American music icon Woody Guthrie (1912–1967) was born in Okemah, Oklahoma. A self-taught guitarist, he worked with a family string-band in Texas. Relocating in California, he worked on radio shows and eventually became involved with social issues. In the 1940s, he moved to New York, where he blended musical performance and political activism into a prolific topical songwriting career. There, he was part of a musical community that included Lead Belly and Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, all of whom recorded for Folkways. In the 1950s and 1960s, he was considered the dean of the folk-revival movement, and he influenced many artists, including Bob Dylan and Jack Elliott. A prodigious songwriter, he was a musical sponge with a wide repertory of traditional songs. In

the 1950s, his health began to fail, and he died of Huntington's chorea in 1967.

Guthrie, who began to record for Asch in 1944, recorded numerous African-American ballads, including "Stackolee," "Poor Lazarus," and "John Henry," which he picked up wandering around the country and from his New York friends Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, Alan Lomax, and Pete Seeger. "Bad Lee Brown" is a lesser-known ballad than "Frankie" or "John Henry," but it still has been recorded by, and collected from, numerous singers, both black and white. Guthrie's version is similar to the version collected by John Lomax in Parchman Farm, Mississippi. It compresses the trial scene and refers to Jericho, rather than Lomax's Mexico. Other versions of the song include verses where the killer's sentence has him working in a coal mine, as does Mary Wheeler's version, collected from a roustabout on Betsy Ann, an Ohio and Mississippi packet. The song has many titles: "Little Sadie," "Late One Night," "Bad-Man Ballad," and "Cocaine Blues." It has been performed as a toast by medicine-show artist Peg Leg Sam.

18. Luke and Mullen

Horace Sprott, vocal. From *Music from the South, Vol 2: Horace Sprott*, 1 FA 4475

The son of ex-slave Bessie Ford, Horace Sprott (1890–c1990s) took his surname from the Sprott Plantation, where he was born and raised. He picked up old slave songs from his family, learned to play harmonica and guitar, and entertained at local frolics. In 1954, Folkways fieldworker Frederic Ramsey, Jr., was looking for singers around Marion, Alabama, where he encountered Sprott. Impressed with the diversity of Sprott's repertoire, he recorded him in seven sessions in April and May 1954. These recordings included blues, spirituals, work-songs, instrumentals, train imitations, and life-story narratives, all later published by Folkways; an unusual variant of the bad-man ballad "Railroad Bill," titled "One-Dollar Bill, Two-Dollar Bill"; and a bully ballad about a confrontation between two local tough guys, "Luke and Mullen." Ramsey considered Sprott a major find, like Lead Belly and Rich Amerson, and hoped to bring him to New York for a concert.

He appeared in a 1956 CBS television program, but despite the attention drifted back into obscurity.

Sprott told Ramsey he had learned the song in Mobile. When Ramsey asked if it was based on a real story, Sprott said yes, claiming the fight happened in the third year after surrender, about 1868. An obscure and fragmentary local ballad, it may commemorate some distant event. If Sprott's information is correct, it would be the oldest American-made product on this CD.

See Frederic Ramsey, Jr., *Been Here and Gone* (1960).

19. Duncan and Brady

Dave Van Ronk, vocal and guitar. From *Dave Van Ronk: The Folkways Years*, Smithsonian Folkways 40041, 1991.

Born in Brooklyn, New York, Dave Van Ronk (1936–2002) began performing with traditional jazz bands in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Throughout his career, he considered himself a jazz singer, rather than a folk-singer, but was nevertheless a central figure in the New York folk-music community. He first recorded for Folkways in 1959. In 1963, he formed a jug band with blues scholar

Sam Charters. He also recorded for Verve, Philo, Fantasy, Mercury, and MGM.

Van Ronk's repertoire and guitar style leaned heavily toward Piedmont blues, but he also recorded the black ballads "Betty and Dupree," "Spike Driver Moan," "Gambler's Blues," and "Duncan and Brady." Perhaps because of his political leanings, he had a particular affinity for the piece—a satirical celebration of the 1890 murder of a legendary policeman in St. Louis. "Duncan and Brady" may be less familiar than "John Henry," "Staggerlee," and "Frankie and Johnny," but it still had widespread popularity among blacks and whites, and is our best example of a subversive topical ballad. Initially used to taunt the St. Louis police force, it supposedly resulted in mini-riots when black tavern patrons would sing it.

Its origin and initial usage explain the song's ironic humor and satirical edge, and cast light on the meaning and function of such enigmatic, commonplace verses as "When the women heard that Brady was dead, they all go home and dress in red." A letter to archivist Robert Winslow Gordon noted that Brady was strict with the local prostitutes, and would not let them come downtown dressed in red. Folkways song-ster Lead Belly recorded several versions of the song.

20. Gallis Pole

Lead Belly, vocal and twelve-string guitar. From *Lead Belly: Bourgeois Blues*/Smithsonian Folkways 40045, 1997.

Child Ballad number 95, "The Maid Freed from the Gallows," is one of the best-known of all the traditional British ballads. Closely associated with white mountain traditions, it was collected by Cecil Sharp and Maud Karpeles. For Columbia in 1929, old-time country artist Charlie Poole recorded a version titled "Hangman, Hangman, Slack your Rope," and folksong collector, author, composer, and Folkways recording artist John Jacob Niles recorded a dramatically enacted version. The song employs a characteristic dialogue format using a form of repetition called "climax of relatives." Here, the protagonist—in some versions a man, in some a woman—asks a series of family members if they have brought money to pay off the hangman. In most versions, the parents are cold to the plea, but the lover comes through. In Lead Belly's version, the parents do what they can to help. One may well wonder where he learned the piece, because it wasn't in *Negro Folksongs*

as *Sung by Lead Belly* (1936). Folklorist Dorothy Scarborough, however, reported that the song was well-known among African Americans in the South, and was used by children as a game song, and Lead Belly had a huge inventory of children's game songs. The rock group Led Zeppelin had a hit with their version, "Hangman."

This version, recorded by Frederic Ramsey, Jr., from a 1948 radio broadcast, is unusual in several ways. In his other versions, Lead Belly tells his listeners what the song is about, introducing the plot line with a phrase like, "In olden days," but here he jumps right in. We hear a second voice break into the second and third verse, responding "uh huh," as in response to a sermon. Most dramatically, Lead Belly twists the plot. In most versions, the song ends when the true love brings the hangman's fee, securing the release of the protagonist. Instead, Lead Belly uses the song as a vehicle to improvise a text on the danger of false friendship—a stunning reinterpretation of the song. One can only wonder what instigated the change.

21. Boll Weevil

Pink Anderson, vocals and guitar. From *Pink Anderson: Caroline Medicine Show Hokum and Blues with Baby Tate Folkways*/FS 3588, 1984.

Born Pinkney Anderson (1900–1974) in Laurens, South Carolina, Pink learned guitar at age ten and danced in the street for tips. As a teen, he joined W. R. Kerr's Medicine Show, with which he performed until 1945. He first recorded in 1928 for Columbia with his musical partner, Simmie Dooley. 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. These recordings were published on Riverside and led to further recordings, for Folkways and Bluesville. Sam Charters recorded this selection with an Ampex recorder in 1961 in Anderson's living room in Spartanburg, South Carolina.

Songs about boll weevils 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 the source of so much agricultural devastation in an ambivalent manner, often employing ironic humor and showing sympathy for the tenacity of the bug and its family.

22. Delia's Gone

Josh White, Jr., guitar and vocal; Mark Davis, bass. From *The Fast Folk Musical Magazine*, Vol. 1, #6 ("Street Singing") SE106, 1982.

Joshua Donald White was born in 1940 in New York City, the son of Folkways recording artist Josh White. At age four, he began to perform with his father in New York, and continued working with him until age twenty. Over the years, his career has alternated between stage and screen on the one hand and music on the other.

In 1956, he recorded his first solo record, *See Saw*, for Decca. Throughout the 1950s, he worked extensively on television, but by 1961, in the wake of the folk revival, he switched to recording music for Mercury, Sonnet, United Artists, and Vanguard, and touring. In 1976, he moved to Detroit, Michigan. In 1983, the state proclaimed the 20th of April Josh White and Josh White, Jr., Day. Through

the 1980s and 1990s, he continued to work extensively, and acquired a remarkable list of musical, dramatic, and humanitarian credentials. He was the first artist invited to sing at ground zero after 11 September 2001. He continues to work with the major figures of the folk revival, and has recently released a tribute to his father: *House of the Rising Sun*, on Silverwolf Records.

"Delia's Gone" provides an example of an African-American song that migrated from the southeast to the Bahamas and back again. It is based on an incident that took place in 1900 on Christmas Eve, when Moses "Coony" Houston shot and killed Delia Green. Both were fourteen at the time, and Delia may have been a prostitute. Coony was arrested, found guilty of murder, and sentenced to life in prison, but he was paroled in 1913.

The ballad was field-collected in Georgia about 1906, and traced to Savannah by Library of Congress archivist Robert Winslow Gordon. Exactly when and how it got to the Bahamas are impossible to state. It returned to circulation during the folksong revival in the 1950s and 1960s via Bahamian banjo player Blind Blake Higgs, who recorded a version of it for Art Records in 1952. A mid-1950s

interest in calypso and other Caribbean music led to several recordings of the ballad by Folkways icons Josh White and Pete Seeger, and later by Harry Belafonte, who cemented the song in the revival songbook. Before the revival, Blind Willie McTell had recorded a version. More recently, the song has been covered by Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash.

The dramatic version by John White, Jr., is similar, both in words and performance style, to his father's 1955 Elektra recording.

As in Higgs's version, Delia provokes Coony by cursing him. Prefolk-revival field recordings show a couplet-and-chorus format, a blues-ballad-like organization, and frequent use of the chorus "one more rounder's gone," which was changed in the Bahamas to "one more round," making for a better drinking song and further illustrating the process of variation. In the Bahamas, the murderer's name was altered from Coony or Kenny to Dooly or, in this version, Tooley.

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Smithsonian Folkways

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CLASSIC AFRICAN-AMERICAN BALLADS

SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS/SFW CD 40191

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1. **Mouse on the Hill** 3:44/Warner Williams
2. **Casey Jones** 1:23/K. C. Douglas
3. **John Hardy** 2:43/Lead Belly
4. **Railroad Bill** 3:33/John Jackson
5. **Stewball** 3:33/Memphis Slim and Willie Dixon
6. **John Henry** 4:04/Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee
7. **St. James Infirmary** 2:20/Snooks Eaglin
8. **Staggerlee (Stackolee)** 5:03/John Cephas and Phil Wiggins
9. **Lost John** 4:54/Convicts at the Ramsey and Retrieve State Farms
10. **Betty and Dupree** 3:45/Josh White
11. **Old Riley** 1:58/Lead Belly
12. **The Race of the *Jim Lee* and *Katy Adam*** 2:27/Jazz Gillum, Memphis Slim, and Arbee Stidham
13. **The *Titanic*** 2:49/Pink Anderson
14. **Frankie and Johnny** 2:07/Big Bill Broonzy
15. **White House Blues** 1:59/Earl Taylor and the Stony Mountain Boys
16. **Louis Collins** 3:18/John Jackson
17. **Bad Lee Brown** 2:14/Woody Guthrie
18. **Luke and Mullen** 2:25/Horace Sprott
19. **Duncan and Brady** 3:00/Dave Van Ronk
20. **Gallis Pole** 2:45/Lead Belly
21. **Boll Weevil** 3:04/Pink Anderson
22. **Delia's Gone** 3:45/Josh White, Jr.

Classic African-American Ballads is an uncommon sampling of an important, historic, and engaging slice of America's black music heritage. The heyday of the black ballad tradition, 1890–1920, left a lasting strain of creativity and a monument to African-American life of the time. Ranging from songs created from the heritage of the English ballad, to social commentary vilifying abusive white authority figures, to “blues ballads,” this album reminds us of the richness and scope of African-American musical traditions. 66 minutes, 36-page booklet.



