



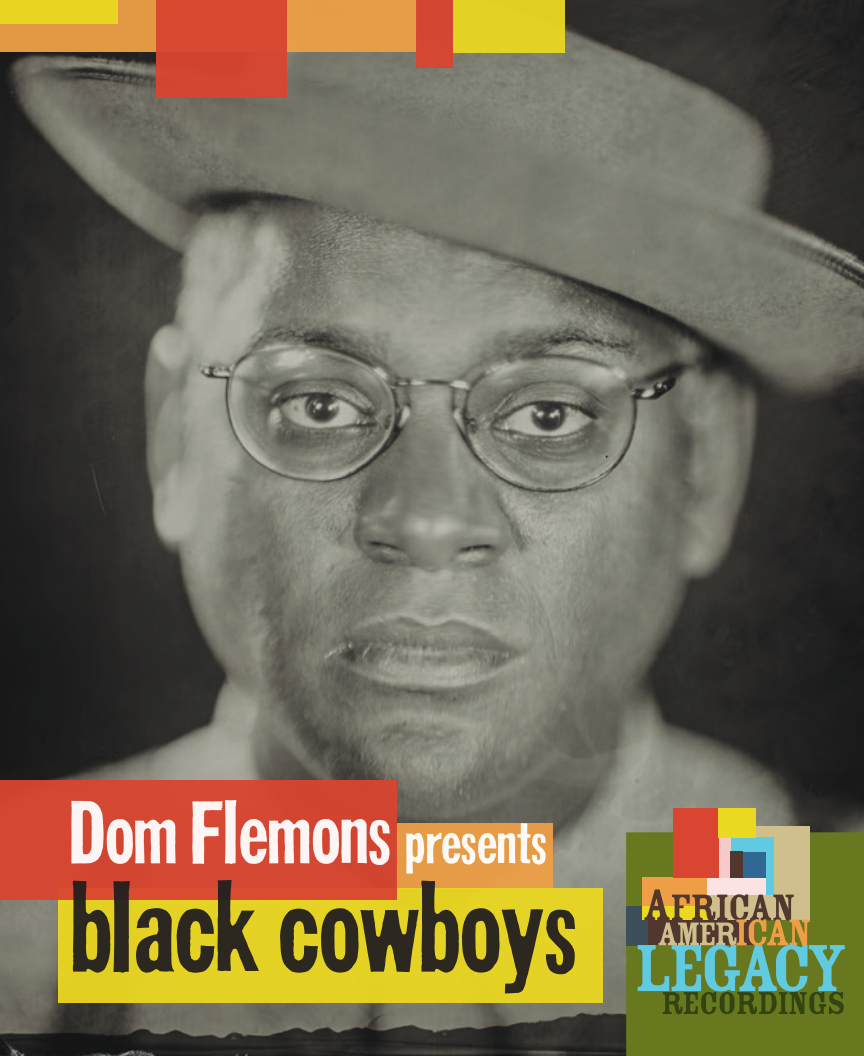
Smithsonian Folkways

**AFRICAN
AMERICAN
LEGACY
RECORDINGS**

NATIONAL MUSEUM of
AFRICAN AMERICAN
HISTORY and CULTURE

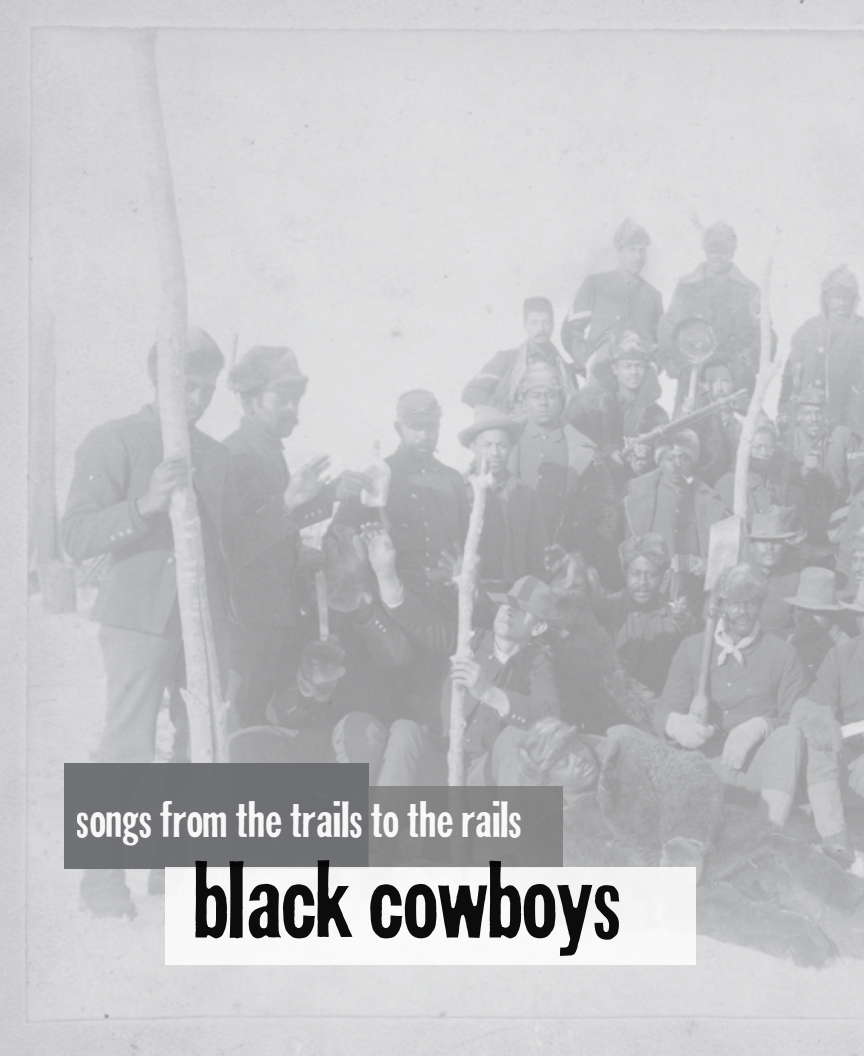
Dom Flemons presents

black cowboys



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**AFRICAN
AMERICAN
LEGACY
RECORDINGS**



songs from the trails to the rails

black cowboys

1. **Black Woman** Arr. by Dom Flemons/American Songster Music, ASCAP 1:41
2. **Texas Easy Street** Arr. by Dom Flemons/American Songster Music, ASCAP 3:52
3. **One Dollar Bill** Dom Flemons/American Songster Music, ASCAP 3:42
4. **Going Down the Road Feelin' Bad** Arr. by Dom Flemons/American Songster Music, ASCAP 2:38
5. **Tyin' Knots in the Devil's Tail** Gail Gardner 2:50
6. **Home on the Range** Brewster Higley-Daniel Kelley, Arr. by Dom Flemons/American Songster Music, ASCAP 4:32
7. **Ol' Proc** Wallace McRae 3:16
8. **John Henry y los vaqueros** Arr. by Dom Flemons/American Songster Music, ASCAP 1:59
9. **Po' Howard/Gwine Dig a Hole to Put the Devil In** Arr. by Huddie Ledbetter/John A. Lomax-Alan Lomax/TRO-Folkways Music Publishers, Inc., BMI 5:15
10. **Knox County Stomp** Arr. by Dom Flemons/American Songster Music, ASCAP 2:06
11. **He's a Lone Ranger** Dom Flemons/American Songster Music, ASCAP 3:41
12. **Steel Pony Blues** Dom Flemons/American Songster Music, ASCAP 4:34
13. **Little Joe the Wrangler** Jack Thorp 3:40
14. **Charmin' Betsy** Arr. by Dom Flemons/American Songster Music, ASCAP 3:58
15. **Goodbye Old Paint** Charley Willis, Arr. by Dom Flemons/American Songster Music, ASCAP 5:32
16. **Lonesome Old River Blues** Roy Acuff/Sony-ATV Acuff Rose Music, BMI 2:42
17. **The March of Red River Valley** Arr. by Dom Flemons/American Songster Music, ASCAP 1:57
18. **Old Chisholm Trail** Arr. by Dom Flemons/American Songster Music, ASCAP 2:06



Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

*This recording is part of the **African American Legacy** series, co-produced with the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.*

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Charles Henry Flemons (my father) on a horse in Texas with cousin Slick

black cowboys

songs from the trails to the rails

Dom Flemons, “The American Songster”

The cowboy is one of the premier icons of American cultural identity. Yet the lack of substantial images of black cowboys has limited the public’s perception of these incredible pioneers of the Old West. The acknowledgment of black cowboys through the songs and poems featured on this album helps to create a more diverse picture of the American West after the Civil War. As professor and author Mike Searles stated in a 2010 NPR interview, “Many people see the West as the birthplace of America. If they only see it as the birthplace of white America, it means basically that all other people are interlopers—they’re not part of what makes an American. But if they understand that African Americans were cowboys, even Native Americans were cowboys, Mexicans were cowboys, it really opens the door for us to think about America as a multiethnic, multiracial place. Not just in the last decade or century, but from the very beginning.”

With their new-found freedom in the 1860s, African Americans moved out West by the thousands, becoming sharecroppers, cooks, preachers, teachers, loggers, sawmill workers, miners, fur traders, soldiers, ranchers, and cowboys—although the story of the black cowboys actually extends back to the earliest days of North American colonization and continues into the present. According to the book *The Negro Cowboys*, “more than five thousand Negro cowboys joined the round-ups and served on the ranch crews in the cattlemen era of the West. Lured by the open range, the chance for regular wages, and the opportunity to start new lives, they made vital contributions to the transformation of the West. They, their predecessors, and their successors rode on the long cattle drives, joined the cavalry, set up small businesses, [and] fought on both sides of the law.” Many former slaves had experience working with cattle on their plantations, which made cowboy work a

natural fit. The dangerous work environment and long hours on the cattle trails required that the cowboys depend on one another; thus, a man was judged not by the color of his skin but by his work ethic. During the golden era of the open range, black cowboys—alongside the Mexican vaqueros, Native American, and white cowboys—herded close to six million cattle out of Texas. As they rode along the trails, the black cowboys saw the nation evolving not just for African Americans but for all Americans looking for the promises of freedom and wealth in the West.

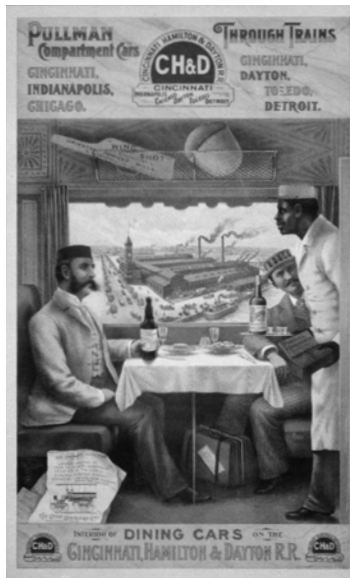
The cattle trails began to be less important and eventually fell into disuse after the Transcontinental Railroad connected the east and west coasts in 1869. As a consequence, many cowboys retired from their work on the ranch or trail and searched for opportunities in the bustling communities built on the train lines. The train became the dominant symbol of American progress—and at this point the story of the black cowboys takes a unique turn.

At the dawn of the 20th century, African Americans, including many of the black cowboys, found work on the Southern Railway as train assistants. The Pullman Company, owned by George Pullman, provided each “Pullman porter” with a black uniform, and they received training in a code of conduct that would be non-threatening to the company’s wealthy white passengers. While being a porter proved to be a step up from working on the range, discriminatory practices on the part of white passengers continued to plague the workers. Despite the prejudice and segregation of the era, though, the Pullman porters performed a valuable function as the main liaison between each “black” section of town along the railroad lines and the major cities. In this position, the porters provided goods and services, delivering black newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender* and the *Indianapolis Freeman*, and distributing 78 rpm “race” records to the audiences in the South. In 1925, the first all-black union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, was formed under the leadership of A. Philip Randolph. The solidarity created by the porters allowed them to unite as well as to raise the standard of living in the African American towns. Their leadership and connections with prominent African American figures, such as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., led them to be a catalyst for the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The story of the black cowboys transitioned into modern-day African American culture; these pioneers transformed the nation from the trails to the rails, bringing social change and progress everywhere they went.



Above: A thin, tattered Pullman sleeping car porter holding a piece of paper, "Tips, Daily Average on Each Trip," which shows a 70 percent reduction in tips between 1890 and 1900. In the inset he imagines how he looked when he was earning more. At the bottom the paper reads "Pullman Porter's Labor Union." The porter is appealing to the president of the railroad company to become a salaried employee. Ca 1901. Courtesy of Niday Picture Library/Alamy Stock Photo

Right: Pullman compartment dining car on the Cincinnati, Hamilton & Dayton RR, 1894. Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.



While many books have been written about black cowboys, only a few of their songs have been officially documented and recorded. The early documentation of folklorist John A. Lomax reveals that many of the most well-known songs in the cowboy repertoire were collected from the black cowboys. In his 1910 book *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* Lomax wrote, “Later, it is hoped that enough interest will be aroused to justify printing all the variants of these songs, accompanied by the music and such explanatory notes as may be useful; the negro folk-songs...in this collection, never before in print, as a rule have been taken down from oral recitation.” He went on to describe that many of these songs came about as a result of long hours on the range, the desire for amusement and relaxation around the cow camp. “As they rode round and round the herd, [they] improvised cattle lullabies which quieted the animals and soothed them to sleep. Some of the best of the so-called ‘doggie songs’ seem to have been created for the purpose of preventing cattle stampedes—such songs coming straight from the heart of the cowboy, speaking familiarity to his herd in the stillness of the night....” As these tunes on the range continued to spread between the cowboys by word of mouth, many variants were springing up in the saloons, ranches, and later vaudeville stages.

Dime novels, Wild West shows, and, later, Hollywood films gave rise to a reinvented version of the cowboy, romanticized and “white.” Such depictions in literature, films, and music excluded the black cowboys and the African American pioneers who helped settle the United States. Even though the African American roots in cowboy music had endured since the very early days of the frontier, they eventually disappeared from the contemporary narrative. Many of the songs themselves have been lost over the course of generations. Still, the legacy of the original black cowboy singer continues to live on with the songster tradition. These African American folk and blues singers, like Lead Belly and Henry “Ragtime Texas” Thomas, provide glimpses into a larger story that connects the past and future of cowboy music. As “The American Songster” I am continuing to preserve the traditional folk repertoire, and it is important to me to reclaim cowboy music as part of African American culture. In this album, the first of its kind, I present the diverse stories and repertoire of the songsters who kept the tradition alive throughout the course of American history.



Clockwise from top left:
 Rev. Raymond Flemons with guitar (my grandfather),
 Mamie Flemons (my grandmother), Honey Duley
 Flemons (my great grandmother)

Black Cowboys of the Old West

Jim Griffith, Research Associate, University of Arizona, Southwest Center

Despite what we may have learned from western novels and movies, there were, and still are, a lot of black cowboys in the United States. However, social reality being what it was in the old days, we know very few of these old-time cowboys by name, and very little about their lives. They make brief appearances in journals, books, poems, and songs, but most of them remain flat shadows on the stage of western history. Here are a few who appear in slightly more rounded form:



Addison Jones, “N***** Add,” was the highly respected trail boss of the LFD outfit of eastern New Mexico in 1889 (Thorp 1966, 3). Add had a reputation of being a “dictionary of marks and brands.” His skills were celebrated in “Whose Old Cow,” a poem in Add’s voice and written by N. Howard “Jack” Thorp, which appeared in Thorp’s seminal 1908 booklet, *Songs of the Cowboys*. According to Thorp (Thorp and Clark 1977, 285), when Add got married late in life, different cowmen all through that spread-out country in eastern New Mexico sent him wedding presents. As Add and his bride found when they picked up their gifts at the Roswell freight depot, these included no less than 19 cook stoves! (See also track 13 notes on Thorp.)

Nat Love, aka “Deadwood Dick,” is known mostly through his (possibly fictional) “autobiography.” He was born a slave and acquired his skills as a top hand after he left home to work as a cowboy. He earned his moniker in a Fourth of July celebration in Deadwood, South Dakota, by winning a timed contest in which he was supposed to rope, throw, bridle, saddle, and ride a wild mustang. He accomplished this in nine minutes flat. Having also won the rifle- and pistol-shooting contests on the same day, Love was awarded \$200 in prize money and the title of “Deadwood Dick” (*BlackCowboys.com*). (See also track 12 notes on Love.)

Bill Pickett (1870–1932) invented the rodeo sport of bulldogging. His technique was to leap off his horse, grab the steer by the horns, bite the critter on its lip, and throw it to the ground. Pickett worked from 1905 until his death for the Miller Brothers 101 Ranch Wild West Show out of Oklahoma, spreading worldwide the sport of bulldogging (though without the lip-biting) (*BlackCowboys.com*). (See also track 3 notes on Pickett.)

One black cowboy who achieved posthumous fame as a musician is **Charley Willis** (1847–1930), who in 1885 played and sang “Goodbye Old Paint” (track 15) on the jaw harp for Jess Morris, his boss’s 11-year-old son. Later on, Morris learned to play fiddle from a black horsebreaker named James Neeley, and worked out the song on that instrument. Although Morris went on to study classical violin, he kept up his fiddling skills as well, and became a well-known dance and contest fiddler in the Texas Panhandle. His version of “Old Paint,” the song he learned from Charley Willis, has been disseminated worldwide through sheet music and a Library of Congress recording (Wade 2012, 327–53).

Willis aside, we are only given brief references to black cowboy singers in historical

documents, contemporary literature, films, and albums. We read of “**Lasses**,” who sang “Walking John” (about a cutting horse) to Thorp in Add’s camp—though no text of the song survives. Then there’s the camp cook who sang “Home on the Range” for John Lomax’s recording machine in the red light district outside San Antonio (Lomax 1947). We know of “**Old Kentuck**,” a black guitarist and singer in Globe, Arizona, through his mention in Ross Santee’s book *Lost Pony Tracks*, and because his occasional appearances at the schoolhouse dances in nearby Dripping Springs were chronicled in the song, “The Mormon Cowboy” (Griffith 1995, 109–22).

*The music they brought with them I never shall forget
Was a colored man with his guitar, I can hear him singing yet.*

We find a little more information if we shift our focus from cowboys to African American musicians and singers in southwestern cattle country.

The best known of the musicians discussed here is **Henry Thomas**, aka “Ragtime Texas,” two of whose songs are featured on this disc (tracks 2 and 14). We know of him through the 23 issued records he made between 1927 and 1929, on which he accompanied his singing on guitar and panpipes, or “quills.” An itinerant musician, he rode the trains from East Texas as far north as Chicago, entertaining as he went. His recorded repertoire included reels, blues, ballads, gospel songs, and one monologue about riding the trains (McCormick 1974). Several of his performances are themselves composites made up of bits and pieces of other songs.

Charlie H. Williams, aka “Banjo Dick” (1849?–1920), was the son of a slave. Nothing is known of his early life except that he formed the Banjo Dick Mining Company (Arizona’s first all-black mining company) in Tucson, and then moved to Nogales, Arizona, after the company collapsed in the early 1890s. For many years he supported himself running a bootblack stand in that border city. He was a member of (and bugler and drummer for) Armory Company G, First Regiment Infantry, of the National Guard of Arizona. There exists a formal portrait of him in military uniform, holding a trumpet. Banjo Dick was also an expert banjo picker and singer who performed both “old plantation melodies”

and Mexican songs. He entertained at many public occasions on both sides of the border, including Mexican and American independence days, and his minstrel songs would “seduce the audience into non-stop gales of laughter” (García 2015). Sadly, we have no details about his repertoire.

A popular local character, Banjo Dick was known for entertaining children, both formally—as at a Children’s Ball at the Athletic Club in 1898—and informally, from his front porch. He ran for sheriff in 1906, described in the local paper as “a dark horse...a very dark horse candidate.” His response to this was that he was “the n***** in the woodpile.” When Williams died in May 1920, obituaries appeared in both the *Arizona* (Phoenix) *Republic* and the *Tombstone Epitaph*, remembering a well-loved and highly respected Arizona pioneer.

Moving closer to the present, Tucson, Arizona’s **Willie Walker** was born in Marshall, Texas, in 1902, and warmly remembered the string band musicians and early morning serenades of his youth. “About daybreak,” he told me, “they’d wake you up with music—real nice music, you know—and it’d stay on your mind all day.” Although Willie learned to play “Casey Jones” on the accordion his parents bought for him, he soon graduated to his first love, the mandolin. He played in several bands before his family moved to Chicago in the early 1920s. There he was exposed to the great jazz bands of that era and took up tenor banjo. He played dance music around the Southwest for most of his life, moving to Tucson with his wife Eleanor in the late 1960s. He was an annual participant at the Tucson Meet Yourself festival in the mid-1970s until his death late in that decade.

The musicians mentioned above represent the tip of a very large iceberg. The West and Southwest have been filled with musicians both black and white, who served their communities by making the music their audiences wanted to hear. Most of these individuals are lost to history; some, like Charley Willis, we know only through hearsay. In no case do we know their full repertoires. But what we do know is that African Americans—cowboys, musicians, and singers—added greatly to our western soundscapes and played an important yet largely forgotten role in creating our regional heritage. Thanks to Dom Flemons, this CD should bring at least a part of their contribution into focus.



Vania Kinard

Track Notes

1. Black Woman

Dom Flemons, vocal

This field holler was collected by John A. Lomax in the 1930s. The original singer, Vera Ward Hall, was introduced to Lomax by Ruby Pickens Tartt, a folklorist from Livingston, Alabama. Over the next few decades, John Lomax and his son Alan would record Hall extensively for the Library of Congress. Although this isn't considered a traditional cowboy song, it has familiar themes of ranching and the pain of leaving loved ones behind.

I chose this piece to honor the thousands of African American women who built churches, schools, and communities, bringing structure to the new territories. In the 1995 book *Black Women of the Old West*, author William Loren Katz writes, "It has been argued that since African American women were a tiny minority within a Western minority, omitting them [from popular culture, including books, music, and film] was hardly an act of dis-

crimination. Although few in number, they earned an honored niche in the saga of the wilderness. As the nation grapples with the history of its multi-cultural past, the story of the frontier African American women deserves a telling." These remarkable women included Bridget "Biddy" Mason, "Stagecoach" Mary Fields, Mary Ellen Pleasant, Sojourner Truth, and many other legendary trailblazers.



Right: Mary Fields, also known as "Stagecoach Mary" and "Black Mary" (ca. 1832–1914), was the first African American woman star route mail carrier in the United States. Courtesy of the Ursuline Convent Archives, Toledo, Ohio.



The Roping Contest at Deadwood, S. D.

Nat "Deadwood Dick" Love, 1854, "in my fighting clothes" in cowboy attire, holding carbine. Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

contained. Over the next several decades, a body of cowboy poetry and songwriting emerged, incorporating melodies that were both familiar and current to its listeners. This repertoire of cowboy styles developed side by side with the early blues music of the African American communities in the South. The blues tradition, which has roots in folk and African American vaudeville, includes master bluesmen such as Blind Lemon Jefferson and Lightnin' Hopkins, as well as the eclectic songsters Mance Lipscomb, Lil' Son Jackson, and Henry Thomas. These songsters were born into the diverse musical communities of East Texas, and their songs represent the combination of cowboy poetry and the blues.

2. Texas Easy Street

Dom Flemons, vocal and Fraulini Angelina 6-string guitar; Alvin "Youngblood" Hart, Stella 12-string guitar; Jimbo Mathus, mandolin and kazoo; Stu Cole, upright bass

This proto-blues, recorded by Henry "Ragtime Texas" Thomas in 1929, represents the long-standing tradition of songsters in Texas. In the 19th century "songster" meant a book of song lyrics to the popular tunes of the day. At the turn of the 20th century, the meaning of the term evolved, and a songster became a musician who could sing and play a variety of songs, just as the books

3. One Dollar Bill

Dom Flemons, vocal and Fraulini Angelina 6-string guitar; Alvin "Youngblood" Hart, Hawaiian-style guitar; Jimbo Mathus, mandolin and harmonica; Stu Cole, upright-bass

I wrote this song to capture the dynamic adventures of the black cowboy as portrayed by Hollywood westerns. The first film to feature an African American in

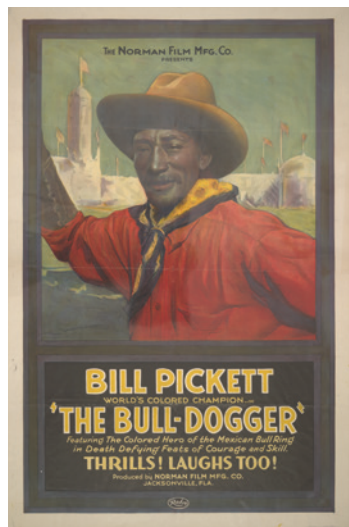
the lead role was *The Bull-Dogger* (1923) with legendary rodeo rider Bill Pickett. “Bulldogging” refers to a rodeo sport that has a rider (on horseback) chasing after a bull, leaping off the horse to catch the bull by the horns, and twisting the animal’s head so that it falls on its side. Pickett, a Texas-born cowboy, discovered a technique of biting the cow’s lip to render it helpless. This move gained Pickett international acclaim.

In the near-century following *The Bull-Dogger*, there have been a few other

examples of black cowboys in film. They range from Herb Jeffries’s *Bronze Buckaroo* (1939) to Mario Van Peebles’s *Posse* (1993). Other western films with African Americans in prominent roles include *Blazing Saddles* (1974) with Cleavon Little as the sheriff and *Buck and the Preacher* (1972), starring Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte. More recently, African Americans in the West have been portrayed by Jamie Foxx and Samuel L. Jackson in Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained* (2012) and *The Hateful Eight* (2015), respectively. Denzel Washington starred in the 2016 remake of *The Magnificent Seven*, the role Yul Brynner played in the 1960 film.

The public perception of black cowboys, and all the cowboys for that matter, was molded not only by Hollywood film images. As the old cow trails began to fade, dime novels began to appear with sensationalized pulp fiction featuring cowboys. At the same time Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West show dominated the vaudeville stages in the early 20th century. All the legends of the West and even the proud Native American chiefs either disappeared from the public eye or got swept up in the tide of commercialism that admired a nostalgic past.

Motion picture poster for *The Bull-Dogger* shows a portrait of African American cowboy Bill Pickett, 1923. Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.



4. Going Down the Road Feelin' Bad

Dom Flemons, vocal and Fraulini Angelina 6-string guitar; Brian Farrow, fiddle and background vocal; Dante Pope, cow "rhythm" bones and background vocal; Dan Sheehy, *guitarrón*

"Going Down the Road Feelin' Bad" is a favorite of the old-time string bands. Square dance music was a big part of the cowboy's life on the range when the instruments and the players were available. In an article written for the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1925, Will C. Barnes explained, "In the early days of the open range, with plenty of open saloons, every drinking place had a singer or two to attract customers and liven up matters. Often they were women who sang

in shrill, quavery voices, some highly sentimental, some sacred and many vulgar. The most satisfactory of these saloon singers were colored men, mostly from Texas, who played guitars, banjos or the violin, and sometimes possessed really musical voices. These singers did much toward keeping up the range songs and spreading them through the cow country."

5. Tyin' Knots in the Devil's Tail

Dom Flemons, vocal and original Hound Dog resonator guitar

This song exemplifies the great tradition of cowboy poetry in the Southwest. It was originally written in 1917 as "The Sierry



Left to right:
Dom Flemons, Dante Pope, Brian Farrow

Copyprint of a handbill produced by Benjamin Singleton to attract black settlers to Kansas. Courtesy of the Kansas Historical Society.

Petes” by rancher Gail I. Gardner. The title refers to the Sierra Prieta Mountains in Gardner’s hometown of Prescott, Arizona. In 2016, I had the great honor of meeting Gardner’s grandson, Gail Steigler, at the 32nd National Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada. He shared this poem from his grandfather and explained how it was one of the inspirations for the founding of the poetry gathering. In 2017, at the 33rd Cowboy Poetry Gathering, I met the legendary folk singer Ramblin’ Jack Elliott, who inspired my version of this song. He took his seat at the Late Night Concert and began to recite this poem, telling stories about his experience of learning it directly from Gail Gardner before Gardner died.

This song has influenced generations of cowboy poets including Jim Bob Tinsley, who wrote in his 1981 book, *He Was Singin’ This Song*, “The Fifes praise this Arizona cowboy song: ‘We like this song for two reasons: first, it is as fine a description of the process of roping and branding on the open range as can be found in print; secondly it is a classical ‘western’ treatment of the centuries-old Christian tradition concerning devil lore and the dance of death.’”



6. Home on the Range

Dom Flemons, vocal and original Hound Dog resonator guitar

John A. Lomax published his groundbreaking book *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* in 1910. Before he began working with the Library of Congress, he was drawn to the western ballads he heard on the cattle trails that passed by his family home in Texas. This deep appreciation was passed down to his son Alan, who continued his legacy. In the introduction to the 1999 album *Deep River of Song: Black Texans:*

Balladeers and Songsters of the Texas Frontier, Alan Lomax wrote:

The cries and songs on this record are perhaps the most direct evidence we have of black participation in the cowboy song tradition, although it seems unquestionable that this participation was rich and important. My father recalled a black bartender in San Antonio who sang "Home on the Range" into his little cylinder recorder in 1908, and it was this black variant, not any of its predecessors, that became our national western hymn.

7. Ol' Proc

Dom Flemons, recitation

This poem was written by contemporary cowboy poet Wally McRae and was introduced to me by musician Andy Hedges at the Cowboy Poetry Gathering in 2016. When I interviewed Andy about the poem, he told me, "I first heard Wally McRae recite 'Ol' Proc' on a live recording from the 1993 Cowboy Poetry Gathering. When I began putting together the show on the black influence on cowboy music for the 2016 gathering, I thought that 'Ol' Proc' would be the perfect introduction to the show, so I called up Wally and asked for his permission



Dom Flemons



From left to right: Dante Pope, Brian Farrow, Dom Flemons

to recite his poem. He graciously agreed and gave me some interesting background information on the poem, which was based on a true story from his childhood. I think ‘Ol’ Proc’ is a great example of the attitude most working cowboys have towards race and color. On the trail drives and ranches out West, a man was judged by what he could do, not by the color of his skin.” When I spoke to the legendary cowboy singer Don Edwards, he confirmed Andy’s assessment, saying, “They shared in the good times and rode out the bad. They were a band of brothers who lived by the code.... They were all known as vaqueros, the highest honor in cowboydom.”

8. John Henry y los vaqueros

Dom Flemons, cow “rhythm” bones; Dante Pope, cow “rhythm” bones; Brian Farrow, fiddle

I arranged this traditional tune to highlight the cow “rhythm” bones and the fiddle, which both have deep roots in the early African American minstrel shows. The traveling minstrel shows and ragtime were popular throughout the West, migrating with each new wave of homesteaders. These settlers, African American and white, lived and worked alongside the original cowboys, the Mexican vaqueros.

In his 1984 book, *A Southwestern Vocabulary: The Words They Used*, Cornelius C. Smith defines the vaquero:

Vaquero (vah-Kay-roh): A cowboy or cowhand. From the Spanish word for cow, vaca. Vaqueros were a mainstay of any rancho in the Spanish and American periods of the Southwest. They broke and rode the wild mestenos (mustangs), cared for the caballada, that band of saddle-horses so necessary for the operation of the ranch, and rounded up stock in the springtime for an annual rodeo. They did, in fact, do all the work required on a cattle ranch: herded stock on the open range, roped, branded, dipped, and performed whatever task the foreman assigned. Vaqueros were irreplaceable, the true heart and soul of the huge cattle spreads that once covered the Southwest.

The vaqueros played a major role in developing the West. Their advanced techniques and dress, crafted during the centuries of Spanish rule, became the standard for western cowboy practices.

9. Po' Howard/Gwine Dig a Hole to Put the Devil In

Dom Flemons, vocal and Deering Sierra Plectrum 4-string banjo

Huddie Ledbetter (“Lead Belly”) met John Lomax at the Angola Penitentiary in 1934 and proved to be his greatest discovery. Lead Belly’s recorded legacy for the Library of Congress (LOC) is a testament to the long-standing African American folk song tradition. His most well-known western theme song, “When I Was a Cowboy,” reinforces the connection between the blues, folk music, and cowboy poetry. After research into Lead Belly’s LOC archives, I found the songs “Po’ Howard” and “Gwine Dig a Hole to Put the Devil In” and thought they were a better reflection of the emotional journey of migrating out West. In an interview with Alan Lomax, Lead Belly told him that Po’ Howard was “the first fiddler after Negroes got freed from slavery times.” “Gwine Dig a Hole to Put the Devil In” is a song of civil disobedience that continues to be relevant today. I arranged these songs in a medley to simulate the style of prominent civil rights activist and folk singer Pete Seeger. The banjo and the lyrics combined pay a powerful tribute to the slaves who were emancipated.

10. Knox County Stomp

Dom Flemons, Fraulini Angelina 6-string guitar; Brian Farrow, fiddle; Dan Sheehy, *guitarrón*

This exuberant fiddle breakdown was recorded in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1929 by the Tennessee Chocolate Drops. Led by Howard “Louie Blueie” Armstrong, the tune is an amalgamation of square dance music and the blues. In this version, I incorporate the *guitarrón*, a traditional instrument of the Mexican string band tradition. I wanted to add this southwestern rhythm to evoke the free-flowing musical exchange between black cowboys and Mexican vaqueros on the range.

11. He’s a Lone Ranger

Dom Flemons, vocal and original Hound Dog resonator guitar; Brian Farrow, upright bass; Dante Pope, snare drum

I wrote this song to pay tribute to the story of Bass Reeves, who was born into slavery in 1838. He grew up in the “Texarkana” region of the South and lived with his mother and master on the plantation. As a young boy, he first encountered Native Americans while hunting for snakes and rabbits on the trails near his home. As he grew older, his master taught him how to ride a horse and shoot a gun to defend the plantation during the

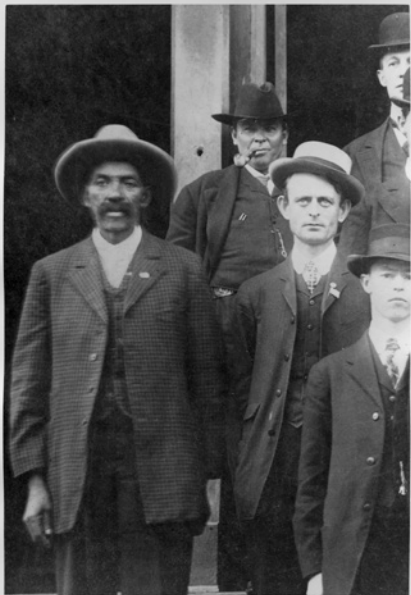
Top: Photograph from a 1945 film, *Three Songs by Leadbelly*. Courtesy of the Lead Belly Estate.

Bottom right: Bass Reeves (at left). Courtesy of the Research Division, Oklahoma Historical Society.

Bottom left: Nat Love as a Pullman porter (1854–1921). Courtesy of the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.



The Close of My Railroad Career



Indian Wars. When he became a young man, the master challenged him to a game of poker, with his freedom as collateral.

Reeves discovered that the master had been cheating and confronted him, knocking him unconscious. Reeves was forced to flee the planation and, during the time he spent as an outlaw, befriended and lived amongst the Cherokee Nation, learned their language, and became an expert at mapping out the Indian Territory.

In 1875 he was recruited by the “Hanging Judge” Isaac C. Parker to become a Deputy US Marshal, the first African American west of the Mississippi to hold that position. He was known as an expert rider, marksman, and master of homemade disguises. Bass Reeves scoured the Indian Territory for rustlers, rogue Indians, and bootleggers, bringing hundreds of criminals to justice. Bass later settled down in the town of Muskogee, Oklahoma, with his wife and family. He served as a police constable until his death in 1910 around the age of 70. The facts and folklore around Bass Reeves are extraordinary, and his legacy remains as the likely inspiration for the fictional character, the Lone Ranger.

12. Steel Pony Blues

Dom Flemons, vocal and Fraulini Angelina
6-string guitar

I wrote this song about the amazing life of Nat Love, known as “Deadwood Dick.” In 1854, he was born into slavery in Tennessee, and at a young age he made his way out West to work on a ranch in Holbrook, Arizona. By 1890, he retired from the ranch and began to work on the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad as a Pullman porter. In his 1907 autobiography he wrote:

It has always seemed strange to me that so many Americans rush off to Europe and foreign countries every year in search of health and pleasure, or to climb the Alps in Switzerland, and to view the scenery of the Old World, when our own North America, the New World, offers so many better opportunities to study Dame Nature in all her phases, and I always say to the traveling American, “See America.” How many of you have done so?... I have seen a large part of America, and am still seeing it, but the life of a hundred years would be all too short to see our country America, I love thee, Sweet land of Liberty, home of the brave and the free.

After ten years of being a traveling musician, I've had the great fortune of "seeing America," and Nat Love's words still ring true. In 2016 alone, I covered nearly 100,000 miles of highway, crossing every original cattle trail and Indian trading post along the way. I began my journey at the Gateway Arch of St. Louis, Missouri, following the path taken by Lewis and Clark, accompanied by their slave, York. I witnessed the grandeur of the redwood forest, the Rio Grande, and the glorious Grand Canyon in my home state of Arizona. I feel honored to have followed in the footsteps of Nat Love, in his great admiration for the United States.

13. Little Joe the Wrangler

Dom Flemons, vocal and Fraulini Angelina
6-string guitar-banjo

In 1908, Nathan Howard "Jack" Thorp published his songster, *Songs of the Cowboys*, which became the foundation of the cowboy repertoire. Jack Thorp chose to begin his book with an original song, "Little Joe the Wrangler," based on an event he witnessed on the range. In the beginning chapter of his autobiography, *Partner of the Wind*, he writes about his first encounter with black cowboys in the camp of Addison Jones, one of the few African American ranch foremen of the Southwest. One night, Thorp was drawn to the sound of the banjo



African American cowboys on their mounts ready to participate in horse races during the Negro State Fair, Bonham, Texas, ca. 1911-1915. Courtesy of the Erwin E. Smith Collection, Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.

accompanying the songs of the black cowboys around the campfire. He was inspired to document the songs of these cowhands and referenced their music in the same way one might now describe the blues: “maybe cowboy singing was an answer to loneliness. Maybe it was just another way of expressing good fellowship. Maybe it was several things. Something happened on the day’s work, funny or sad, and somebody with a knack for words made a jingle of it; if it was liked, others learned it and passed it on.”



Henry Thomas. From the collection of John Tefteller and Blues Images (BluesImages.com). Used by permission.

14. Charmin’ Betsy

Dom Flemons, vocal, quills, and 6-string banjo

“Charmin’ Betsy” is another song from the repertoire of Henry “Ragtime Texas” Thomas, an itinerant musician who hoboed by train from East Texas to Illinois, entertaining passengers along the way. The records he cut during the years 1927–1929 for the Vocalion and Brunswick labels in Chicago were advertised to communities in the South by African American newspapers, such as the *Chicago Defender*, and distributed by the Pullman porters, who served as liaisons between the record companies and the consumers. Thomas’s recordings incorporated the blues, ballads, gospel melodies, cowboy songs, and a monologue about his experiences riding on the trains. He was one of the few African American songsters to include the panpipes (“quills”) in his repertoire.

15. Goodbye Old Paint

Dom Flemons, vocal and original Hound Dog resonator guitar

This song was originally recorded by Jess Morris, who sang it into John Lomax’s recording machine in 1947. Jess was raised in the Texas Panhandle region, where his



A black cowboy and a banjo player. From the collection of Jim Bollman.

father was a trail boss on the XIT ranch, an establishment known for hiring many black cowboys. One of them, a former slave named Charley Willis, taught young Jess how to play the song on the jaw harp. A few years later, Jess learned to play the fiddle from another black cowboy named James Neely. Jess would adapt Willis's song to the fiddle and perform it for the rest of his life. While Willis never recorded a version of "Good-bye Old Paint," Jess would continue to tell the story of the generous black cowboy who helped begin his long musical career.

In the 2010 NPR story "Who Were the Cowboys Behind 'Cowboy Songs'?" Franklin Willis describes his great-grandfather by saying: "He had a knack for singing. He had a gift, if you will. His voice was real soothing to the cattle, and this is why they wanted him to participate in these big cattle drives, because he would sing to them [the cattle] and just make them relax." This enduring story reinforces the importance of recognizing the multilayered musical exchange that occurred among the working cowboys.

16. Lonesome Old River Blues

Dom Flemons, vocal and original Hound Dog Resonator Guitar; Brian Farrow, background vocal; Dante Pope, background vocal; Dan Sheehy, *guitarrón*

This song was originally recorded in the early 1930s by Roy Acuff and the Crazy Tennesseans, a popular act on the stage of the world-famous Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Tennessee. During that time, only one African American musician, DeFord Bailey, was featured on the program. I wanted to include this song on the album to recognize the African American influences on early country music.

As the recording industry came into full maturity in the early 1920s, the record companies began to sell music to their customers based on ethnicity, creating narrower and more exclusive consumer bases. “Race” records featured music that catered to the African American community and included blues, jazz, spirituals, and gospel music. The folk music tradition that defined pre-industrialized American culture began to fade as radio and mass media took over. Cowboy music, an elusively multicultural genre, was relegated to the “hillbilly” music category, intended for white audiences, so



Buffalo soldiers of the 25th Infantry, some wearing buffalo robes, Ft. Keogh, Montana, 1890. Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

that there were only a few rare cases of black songsters with the cowboy song tradition in their repertoires. Eventually, many black songsters would find a voice through the documentation of folklorists and enthusiasts who did everything in their power to make sure the music was preserved.

17. The March of Red River Valley

Dom Flemons, fife and marching bass drum;
Dante Pope, snare drum

I decided to adapt the classic cowboy song “Red River Valley” into a traditional fife-and-drum melody—a style of music that originated in Mississippi and is only played by a few African American tradition bearers living today—to honor all the African Americans who have served in the military from the Revolutionary War to the present day. Among these remarkable men and women were the original pioneers of the American West, the “buffalo soldiers.” These troops consisted of over 5,000 African Americans who were assigned to the 9th and 10th Cavalry Regiments and the 24th and 25th Infantry Regiments. The name was given to them by the Native Americans they fought during the Indian Wars of the early 1840s. An 1879 article from the *Sonoma Democrat* states, “The

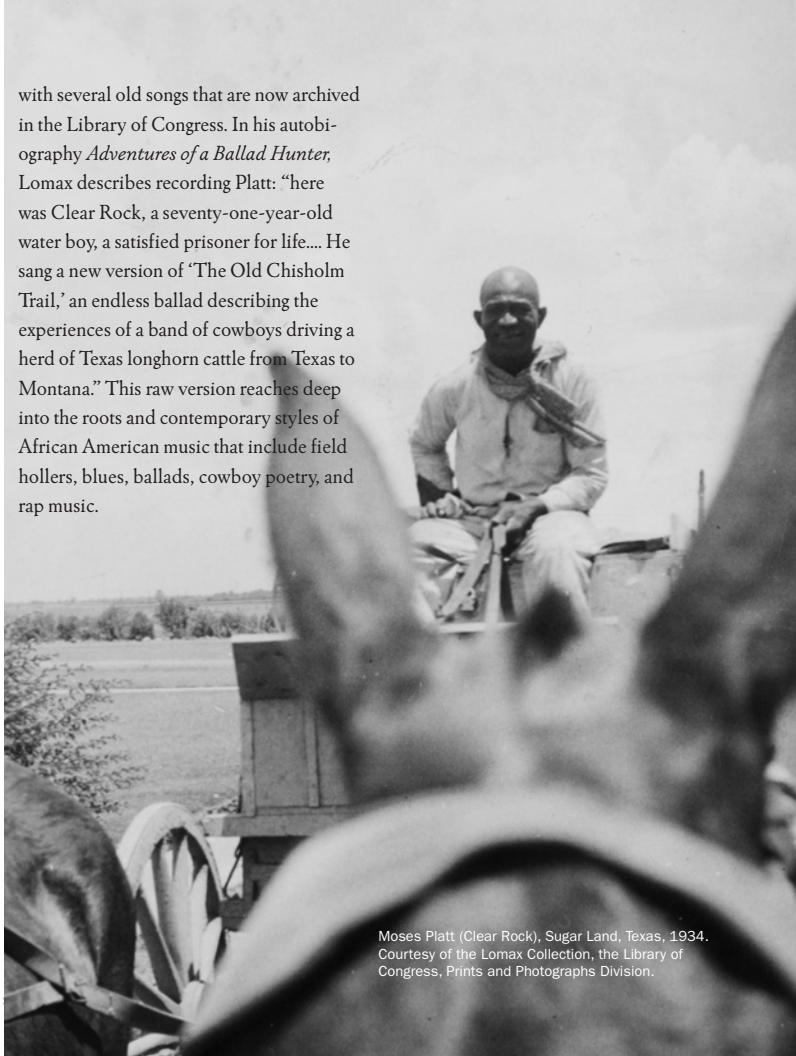
Indians call the colored troops buffalo soldiers on account of their kinky hair.... They never scalp them, and dislike fighting them, because when they kill them the braves have nothing to show for their prowess.” According to the National Park Service, the troops relentlessly “garrisoned forts, protected settlers and railroad crews, guarded mail and stage routes, built roads and forts, strung telegraph lines, and generally kept the peace.” They faithfully served the country despite the obstacles they faced socially, politically, and economically, and remain an important part of American history.

18. Old Chisholm Trail

Dom Flemons, vocal

This iconic song commemorates the 150th anniversary of the Chisholm Trail, the first major cattle trail in the United States. Its namesake, a half-Scottish/half-Cherokee man named Jesse Chisholm, grew up trading furs and serving as an interpreter for the Native American tribes in the years before the Civil War. The version presented on this album was recorded in 1934 at the State Penitentiary in Sugar Land, Texas, by John Lomax. In the prison, he met an African American inmate named Moses “Clear Rock” Platt, who provided Lomax

with several old songs that are now archived in the Library of Congress. In his autobiography *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*, Lomax describes recording Platt: “here was Clear Rock, a seventy-one-year-old water boy, a satisfied prisoner for life.... He sang a new version of ‘The Old Chisholm Trail,’ an endless ballad describing the experiences of a band of cowboys driving a herd of Texas longhorn cattle from Texas to Montana.” This raw version reaches deep into the roots and contemporary styles of African American music that include field hollers, blues, ballads, cowboy poetry, and rap music.



Moses Platt (Clear Rock), Sugar Land, Texas, 1934.
Courtesy of the Lomax Collection, the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

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Suggested Viewing

The Blues According to Lightnin' Hopkins. 1970.
Documentary film.

A Well Spent Life. 1972. Documentary on Mance Lipscomb.

Ken Burns's *The West*. 1996. Documentary series.

Suggested Listening

Cowboy Poetry Classics. Smithsonian Folkways.

Cowboy Songs, Ballads, and Cattle Calls from Texas.
Library of Congress.

*Deep River of Song: Black Texicans: Balladeers and
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Lead Belly, The Library of Congress Recordings.

Lead Belly, The Smithsonian Folkways Collection.

Mance Lipscomb, *Texas Songster*. Arhoolie.

Carl T. Sprague, *Cowtrails, Longhorns, and Tight
Saddles: Cowboy Songs 1925–1929*. Bear Family.

Henry “Ragtime Texas” Thomas, *Texas Worried
Blues*. Yazoo.



From left to right: Dante Pope, Brian Farrow, Dom Flemons

About

The photographs presented in this album include family photos from Dom Flemons's personal collection, historical photos from various archives, and tintype photographs shot by Timothy Duffy using an original early 20th-century Deardoff 11x14 tintype studio camera. In the image that accompanies track 1, Dom's wife Vania Kinard brings to life a striking black western woman. Musicians Brian Farrow and Dante Pope join Flemons in re-creations of images of iconic black cowboys accompanying tracks 4 and 8.

Dom Flemons is originally from Phoenix, Arizona, and currently lives in the Washington, D.C., area. Known as "The American Songster," his musical repertoire covers nearly 100 years of American folklore, ballads, and tunes. A music scholar, historian, record collector, and a multi-instrumentalist, Flemons is an expert player on the banjo, fife, guitar, harmonica, percussion, quills, and rhythm bones. He has performed with Mike Seeger, Joe Thompson, Martin Simpson, Boo Hanks, Taj Mahal, Old Crow Medicine Show, Guy Davis, and others. For the past ten years, he has toured the nation and the world presenting traditional folk and roots music to diverse audiences. Flemons has performed solo at Carnegie Hall, Cecil Sharp House, the Grand Ole Opry, the opening ceremony for the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, National Cowboy Poetry Gathering, and Newport Folk Festival, and represented the United States at the 2017 Rainforest World Music Festival in Kuching, Malaysia.

In 2005, Flemons co-founded the Carolina Chocolate Drops. They won a GRAMMY for Best Traditional Folk Album in 2010. They were inducted into the North Carolina Music Hall of Fame in 2016, and are featured in the Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture.

In 2014, Flemons released a critically acclaimed solo album, *Prospect Hill*, through Music Maker Relief Foundation. In 2016, Flemons released a duo album with British musician Martin Simpson titled *Ever Popular Favourites* on Fledg'ling Records. He launched a podcast, "American Songster Radio," on WUNC Public Radio and filmed two instructional DVDs through Stefan Grossman's Guitar Workshop. In 2017, Flemons was featured on David Holt's *State of Music* on PBS and performed as bluesman Joe Hill Louis on CMT's

original hit television show Sun Records.

Alvin “Youngblood” Hart is a GRAMMY-winning blues artist from Oakland, California, with roots in the Mississippi Delta. Hart has recorded several albums combining elements of country blues, western swing, R&B, and rock ‘n’ roll. Still considered one of the finest practitioners of country blues, he tours the world playing solo as well as with his bands Muscle Theory and the South Memphis String Band with Jimbo Mathus and Luther Dickinson.

Brian Farrow, originally from Omaha, Nebraska, is a young, up-and-coming bassist and fiddler based in the Washington, D.C., area. He has been touring with Dom Flemons for the past three years and continues to develop a strong repertoire of early American jazz and old-time string band music. In previous years, he has worked with the Hackensaw Boys, Spirit Family Reunion, and local artists in the DC area.

Dan Sheehy is a highly decorated folklorist and ethnomusicologist and the former director of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. A 2015 NEA National Heritage Fellowship recipient, he has received many accolades, including five GRAMMYs and a Latin Grammy. In addition to his folkloric work, he co-founded Mariachi Los Amigos, the longest-running mariachi ensemble in the Washington, D.C., area. He also co-produced this recording.

Dante Pope grew up in Chicago, Illinois, where he learned drums, piano, and vocals. He trained with the Fisk Jubilee Singers until he left for a career as a staffer on Capitol Hill. Currently based in the Washington, D.C., area, Pope continues to perform with local musicians in styles ranging from gospel and jazz to R&B and teaches music. He has performed with Dom Flemons on several occasions, including the opening ceremony for the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Jimbo Mathus is a self-styled multi-instrumentalist, producer, and co-founder of the Squirrel Nut Zippers. He has produced dozens of idiosyncratic and enigmatic albums covering a wide spectrum of American music. He continues to tour worldwide with a variety of groups from his bands, Tri-State Coalition and the South Memphis String Band with Alvin “Youngblood” Hart and Luther Dickinson, and the newly re-formed Squirrel Nut Zippers.

Stu Cole is a world-renowned bassist known for his work with the Squirrel Nut Zippers and the Knock-Down Society.

Credits

Produced by Dom Flemons and

Dan Sheehy

Tracks 1, 4-18 recorded by Pete Reiniger;

tracks 2 and 3 recorded by Bronson Tew

All tracks mixed by Pete Reiniger

Mastered by Charlie Pilzer, AirShow

Mastering, Takoma Park, MD

Annotated by Dom Flemons, Jim Griffith,
and Vania Kinard

Cover artwork by William Matthews

Tintype photos by Timothy Duffy

Family photos courtesy of Dom Flemons

Executive producers: Huib Schippers and

Atesh Sonneborn

Production manager: Mary Monseur

Edited by Carla Borden

Art direction, design, and layout by

Visual Dialogue

Dom Flemons' website:

theamericansongster.com

Smithsonian Folkways is: Madison Bunch,

royalty assistant; Cecille Chen, director

of business affairs and royalties; Logan

Clark, executive assistant; Toby Dodds,

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marketing, and customer relations; Beshou

Gedamu, marketing assistant; Will Griffin,

licensing manager; Tony Harvin, director

of marketing, sales, and licensing; Meredith

Holmgren, program manager; Fred Knittel,

online marketing; Helen Lindsay, customer

service; Mary Monseur, production

manager; Jeff Place, curator and senior

archivist; Pete Reiniger, sound production

supervisor; Huib Schippers, curator and

director; Sayem Sharif, director of financial

operations; Ronnie Simpkins, audio spe-

cialist; Atesh Sonneborn, associate director;

Sandy Wang, web designer and developer;

Brian Zimmerman, fulfillment.

Acknowledgements

I dedicate this album to our newborn daughter Cheyanne Love.

A special thanks to my wife Vania, whose unwavering support and grace continue to inspire me. Thanks to the many wonderful people who made this album possible: the Flemons and Kinard families, Alvin “Youngblood” Hart, Jimbo Mathus, Stu Cole, Brian Farrow, Dante Pope, Dan Sheehy, Dial Back Sound Studio, Airshow Mastering, Pete Reiniger, Charlie Pilzer, Bronson Tew, Smithsonian Folkways, the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering, Ramblin’ Jack Elliott, Andy Hedges, Don Edwards, Hal Cannon, Gail Steigler, Jim Griffith, Stephen Winick, American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, Scholastic, Southern Folklife Collection, NPR, PBS, and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

About Smithsonian Folkways

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Dom Flemons.
Photo by Timothy Duffy.

Dom Flemons presents

black cowboys

- 
1. Black Woman
 2. Texas Easy Street
 3. One Dollar Bill
 4. Going Down the Road Feelin' Bad
 5. Tyin' Knots in the Devil's Tail
 6. Home on the Range
 7. Ol' Proc
 8. John Henry y los vaqueros
 9. Po' Howard/Gwine Dig a Hole to Put the Devil In
 10. Knox County Stomp
 11. He's a Lone Ranger
 12. Steel Pony Blues
 13. Little Joe the Wrangler
 14. Charmin' Betsy
 15. Goodbye Old Paint
 16. Lonesome Old River Blues
 17. The March of Red River Valley
 18. Old Chisholm Trail

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