BIG BILL BROONZY

interviewed by
STUDS TERKEL

introduction by
Charles E. Smith

PLough-HAND BLUES
C.C.RIDER
BILL BAILEY
WILLIE MAE BLUES
THIS TRAIN
MULE RIDIN', TALKING BLUES
KEY TO THE HIGHWAY
BLACK, BROWN AND WHITE
JOE TURNER. NO. 1
FOLKWAYS
FG 3586

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from one section to another, especially where the words were code for an escape to freedom via the Underground Railroad. Big Bill used all sorts of blues, even though not of the same kind, and by so means with the same degree of secretiveness.

The blues were less secretive than the spirituals, less apt to have hidden meanings for one thing, the share-cropper had at least a little more privacy. Big Bill was not a share-cropper, but a man who owned his own people that he would not permit himself to sing music that suggested to others, however indirectly, anywhere he was, the presence of slave plantations, whose overseers and slave managers had appointed that of prison farms, to conduct a certain amount of research into their own lives, and see if their blues had any sad stories. He also is a great guitar player of uncles, and the blues gradually took on characteristics of their own.

Folk music, by and large, is unwritten music, existing outside of formal education, one must admit, in a lesser musical environment, and that goes as far as the poetry of folk lyrics, words and phrases, melodic themes and in blues basic riffs, were utilized where they could be most useful, regardless of origin. Thus, a popular blues such as "The Man Who Sold The World" by Bob Dylan, for example, goes on all the time, and because of it our folk music is rich and deep.

Blues singers found dignity and paths in the commonplace of everyday life, almost by accident, sometimes in situations shabby and worldy (e.g. the failing blues of H. Sea), but often, as in Beale Street's Backwater, in urban settings (e.g. the obscure blues of type, in settings at present personal and universal. Thus, the whole tragedy of a single bluesman, in the song-songs of Joe Turner, the white-blues-black-blues, that sing of the meaning of freedom, of our common humanity.

( Included in both Big Bill sets,)

In his talk with Studs Terkel, in one of these two sets of songs by Big Bill Brown and, in his book, "Big Bill Brown's Great American Vocal Blues," he describes the sound of Big Bill's voice and discusses the impact of his music on society.

I was born in Mississippi and was partly raised in Arkansas," wrote Big Bill in "Big Bill Blues," "and traveled the streets of Chicago for a few years before I got to be fifty years old." And elsewhere, too, for Big Bill Brown and his fans, the blues are a source of pride, and his music is a part of American culture, both inside and outside the United States.

In Paris he gave his first concert in 1953 -- he was well known for his performances in other European countries -- and while there he made a record of Blues, Brown and White. When he returned to the United States, his fans told him he should return to the blues, and was one of the bluesmen who was received with enthusiasm. The blues were considered to be a part of African-American culture, and Big Bill Brown is considered to be a great bluesman.

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"Big Bill's first instrument was a home-made violin, made out of a cigar box. He also played mandolin at one time. But it is difficult to think of him without his guitar, plucked and strummed with his thumb sometimes with ominous repeated phrases, as in Joe Turner, sometimes with rich stop-time accompaniment, or at other times rhythmically. At times the guitar sings out on its own, answering a phrase, a melody, and often he solos on guitar, as he did for decades long. Also we played and sang long enough to get them dancing then we could stop singing and just hit on the strings and say to them, 'Sound, coun-
try,' and they would say all night long. That's how I learned to play a guitar and sing, and I got so
that I could play four or five different styles without singing." ('Big Bill Blues') Big Bill played some Hop songs for us, to show what the music was like in the old times, but the men don't use them in their own work; Big Bill is strictly a country blues man.

In the blues -- and that means first of all the country blues -- one finds the most important single sources for the root music of jazz. It is remarked that good jazz singers get their kicks in a way through blues and plan-
ing, a tone and a rhythm. The possibilities of the human voice are limited in blues and country blues by the vocal blues, which, as noted, were so much a part of the singing music of a sort of separate world. But to the blues singer himself the voice was an in-
strument, to be used or even left out, even training; he was a song and didn't feel he had to train with the finger-print of the singer's craft, the breath-control, the time sense.

The sense of wonder, of discovery, was perhaps the greatest heritage that the country blues passed on to the urban blues and, hence, to jazzmen in their search for an instrument. It was in a way of blues and plan-
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One aspect of blues and spirituals that was a basic in-
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portant, but of tonal-Rhythmic accent and suspense that derives from the blues, and mixture of blues and por-
table adaptability and verse from song to song. His best songs are corn songs; pieces of blues style that is relatively good conscious are commonplace by comparison. He draws freely on stylistic devices translatable alike to a Pilgrim Congregational Church and in the blue south -- melismatic vibrato, a swaying falsetto, the tonal-Rhythmic matrix of his style could have some principally from only one source, that which is commonly called Afro-American.

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Big Bill went literary on us a couple of years back and
out, with the help of J. B. Douglas, a book published in England. ('Big Bill Blues,' Cassell, London, issued 1951.) This was such an admirable and admirable project that, when I revisited it for the New York Times, I could not help but wonder just how it was put together. Polkamy put his tent along the things were said that I was, and I think Bill still there. Of course I was thrilled by his won-
derful personality. I really came to know him very well in 1953 -- we both were in Paris -- and it was then I persuaded him to write. He was quite enthusiastic about it. I was glad to insist on the fact that there was no tape-recorder used, such as the publici-
ty mentioned. Big Bill would type or write the songs out in longhand. Of course, I had to do a lot on all that -- putting, things together, ordering stuff, and of course, also translated it into French. The main thing in my idea was to try to transliterate, his way of spelling, even his accent." The result is, as I said in the Times, was worth the effort.

"I've travelled all over the USA," Big Bill tells us, ('Big Bill Blues,' Cassell, London, issued 1951.) "Big Bill sang in Mexico, Spain, Persia, Japan, England, Holland, Italy, Africa, Belgium, France, Cypress, and it's all-time blues alive. I'm going to keep going on as long as Big Bill is still living."

"The blues style of phrasing is one of the basic
styles of jazz, perhaps the basic style, and may be traced directly to the country blues style discussed above."
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