Big Bill Broonzy
Sings Folk Songs

1. **Backwater Blues** 2:47
2. **This Train** 2:57
3. **I Don't Want No Woman (To Try to Be My Boss)** 3:05
4. **Martha** 4:57
5. **Tell Me Who** 3:39
6. **Bill Bailey** 1:53
7. **Alberta** 2:09
8. **Goin' Down This Road** 2:19
9. **Tell Me What Kind of Man Jesus Is** 2:12
10. **John Henry** 4:42
11. **Glory of Love** 3:22

Recorded by Moses Asch and W.F.M.T.
Song texts and background notes byCharles Edward Smith
Cover Design by Ronald Clyne
Digitally remastered by Dr. Toby Mountain at
Northeastern Digital Recording, Inc.
Previous Folkways issue: FA 2328

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PIANIST: "OF COURSE IF YOU JUST WANT THE COMMON CHORDS..."
BIG BILL: "WELL, I'M ONLY A COMMON BLUES SINGER..." quoted in Melody Maker (London)

"I suppose Bill made more friends in this country than any American singer since Armstrong first came here," wrote Max Jones in Melody Maker. "This is because that was the peak of Broonzy’s European tour of 1951. ‘Now, regrettably, he is dead. And it is unlikely that we shall ever hear the old-time country style of blues performed ‘at all again.’ And in his own country, Time (9/1/58) paid him a tribute and gave him an epitaph: ‘Big Bill’s been around a long time, been whippin’ verse, winning me a little money by reciting Big Bill Broonzy songs. He was no $1.10 an hour job man at Folke Hall, men’s dormitory, Iowa State College.

Some of Bill’s newly acquired fans resented his having to take a menial job, particularly after a mop-and-pan "jag" snapshot of Bill in overalls with a mop in his hands. Many listeners, in the least misguided, zeal. After all, there was then no "Blues Singer in Residence" seehere, nor is there likely to be. Meanwhile, the year or so at Iowa State gave Bill a breathing spell in which he regained confidence in himself and brought new strength to his blues. In a special way this period of relative security, in which he sang informally for such as cared to listen and only slightly more formally, on occasion, was fruitful. He dug into his past for half-forgotten songs from his country background—so little of which had been used up to that time in recordings—and this helped him prepare for his first London concert, the brief year of limited success that followed.

By the time the depression was over a new generation of Negroes had grown up in the North, of parents who had migrated north around the time of the first World War. Following the Supreme Court decisions on segregation, which reflected a new wave of concern for human rights as well as economic necessity, and the enthusiasm for blues from the colonies to statehood, country blues would achieve a broader, more balanced audience. Meanwhile, old styles of blues and country blues singing were temporarily in eclipse. And though Bill found audiences in small clubs of Chicago’s South Side, few from these audiences in small clubs who could afford to come to the concerts that gave blues a place of respect in American folk music. In an article published in 1951 on Bill’s "soul-movin’ music," The New Yorker, when Bill was in New York, he was quoted as saying, "I was the only one who had a voice by making it contribute to the resultant timbre—just as a jazz musician will sometimes compensate for a flat (bad note) by fitting it into the overall arrangement."

As will be obvious to the listener, some titles of Side 2 were taped at a concert and with Pete Seeger, whose instrumental style (usually a 5-string banjo as lanky as himself) is as distinctively his as his own singing voice that joins in the singing of "John Henry." The first side is generally of a more intimate quality than the recording for Folkways but he was also singing for friends and this mood is sustained from "Backwater Blues" to the three blues, diverse in the Broonzy songbook. The second side is Bill Broonzy’s own hootenanny, the good meat of it sandwiched between a fine and rowdy "Bill Bailey" and an amusing--one might say folk-ler-izer version--of a pop song. The meat is, as they say, of the best, country-cured Mia, "Goin’ Down This Road," "Tell Me What’s Wrong With Me," "John Henry" has that steel and sinew in the singing.

Bill sang his way through the depression, using an old levee camp hooker for the first line of his "WPA Rag"—"Oh I feel like hollering but the backwash is up to my chest." And money running out before the depression was over, worked on a street-paving job in Chicago. John Hammond brought him to New York for the "Spirituals to Swing" concert late in the 1930s but though this brought recognition of Big Bill as a folk artist, the new audience for Negro blues (as well as folk music in general or jazz) were not large enough to count for much economically. At the end of the next decade he was given a living wage of $1.10 an hour maintenance job at Folley Hall, men’s dormitory, Iowa State College.

The album, The Artistic Life of Bill Broonzy, by Alan Lomax (1962), is the fondest memory of his of his most important years. It is a remarkable document. You can glimpse the blues and this helps to sustain the singer and those who listen. In a social context the blues may be called "boy"-not, by the way, unique in the South—a song with the title "I Wonder When I’ll Be Called a Man" (In The Country Blues, FS 2334) makes sense.

Whether he was working for others or helping the family in the cotton field, music was never far away from Bill’s thoughts. Having an uncle who sang and a father who sang, helped—how did he figure he’d some day shout the blues? ‘I’d go out in the woods and get up on a stump and sing. Boys thought I was crazy. They’d say, ‘Boy, you’re the craziest guy in Langdale!’ In these days track-lining gangs had a singer who’d lead them through the work songs. This seemed a lot more important to a youngster than field hands chopping rust-purple cotton stalks to the rhythm of their songs. A man who later became his friend in Chicago, John Estes, was such a singer. ‘I was then run off of the track by the crew, the men who worked under John Estes’ singing and he would let me sing with him some times.’

"Backwater Blues" is sung with deliberation and restraint, to his own very fine guitar accompaniment. Though Bill must have seen his water on the tracks. He has a genuine emotion that is more than one, his most vivid recollection of working on the levee—after all, he was young then—was his "Big Bill Blues) getting back to camp in the dark after a night of cotton, catching his mule and getting out on the levee.

"I may never run my train off the track," Harriet Tubman, the great leading spirit of the Underground Railroad, once wrote, "and I never lost a passenger." What, or if not the gospel train spiritual was ever used as a signal song on that trail-blazing track to freedom, it has certainly been put to a wide variety of uses since. Greats like the Harriet Tubman singers, and groups of singers and helped raise funds for the small struggling Negro colleges. Rosetta Tharpe—still going strong in her nineties—had a song with that sturdy voice of hers—sang it at Cafe Society (N.Y.), wearing an evening gown and playing a gaudy guitar. And the gospel train is still running with mules rolling to today’s rhythm in the ways of black and white—"Everybody ride it is treated just alike . . ."

Two other songs in this album belong in the spiritual and gospel tradition. One is the plain-tive "Tell Me What Kind of Man Jesus Is"—"Spoke to the wind, Wind stopped still..."--and the other is a song that’s been around since slavery days. In countless versions it has alternated between sacred and secular. Woody Guthrie is to be deprecated for getting the migrants out of the dustbowl, and by now it’s as familiar as almost anything in the folk repertoire. Which is it should be. When it’s sung as Bill does it, it sounds like it wears well!

In this album many facets of Bill’s voice and guitar technique, such as those mentioned in Melody Maker, are displayed. There is perhaps another delivery of a blues, an almost classical use of blues techniques in some performances of Side A, a loose, more broadly "country" presentation on some tracks of Side B. But though the listener may be unprepared for the fusion of voice and guitar—e.g., the worry ing of tone and the "second voice" of guitar on the "women" blues—there are also special qualities...
This train don't carry white, this train (3)
Everybody ride it is treated just alike.
This train is bound for Glory, this train.
Repeat verse one.

I DON'T WANT NO WOMAN (TO TRY TO BE MY BOSS)

Chorus.
I don't want no woman—ah—to be my boss,
Yes, she'll put your head in a trough—feed you like you's a hoss.

Now, she'll tell you when to go to bed—tell you when to get up,
Tell you where to go and if you say something she'll tell you to hush.
I don't want no woman—ah—to be my boss
Yes, she'll feed you in a trough—feed you like you's a hoss.

Now, she want to know when you come—want to know when you go
Want to know what you're doin', boy, you been out with your so-and-so.

(Chorus)
Now, when you come home she'll watch you get into bed,
She'll watch you and she'll tell you, boy, where to put your head.

(Chorus)
Now, the next woman I get—I gotta be the boss,
I want her to understand so that I won't be double crossed.

(Chorus)

MARATHA

I got a gal named Marthy and she lives up on the hill (2)
Yes, she ain't so good lookin', Lord, but she gives poor Bill a thrill.

Now, in my dreams I can see Martha come tiptoein' down the road (2)
Now, when I see her walkin'—I declare—she sends my very soul.

So now, don't cry Martha—come here and let Bill dry up your tears (2)
I haven't been gone 18 months, baby, I know it seems like a million years.

I didn't leave home, Marthy, 'cause I wanted to be away from you (2)
Now the other men want to protect their women, Marthy, and I had to go to protect you too.

I'm on my way home, now, Marthy, I'm comin' home to stay (2)
Now, if you give me a chance, Marthy, I'll make up for every day.

TELL ME WHO

Now, tell me who, baby, who that been foolin' you (2)
Tellin' you you're 5 feet 7, baby, and you's pretty too.

Now, they been tellin' you your hair had ocean wave,
But when you come home to me, baby, you look like one of the rats that stayed.

(Chorus)
Gal, you got them cutie legs, baby, them model thighs,
Great big head, baby, and them bedroom eyes.

Goin' down the road

Goin' down the road now feelin' bad, baby.
Goin' down the road feelin' so low and bad,
I ain't gonna be treated thisaway.

I'm tired of eatin' your cornbread and beans,

These two dollar shoes is killin' my feet . . .

Takes a ten-dollar shoe to fit my feet . . .

Repeat verse one

I'm goin' where the chilly wind don't blow . . .

I'm goin' where the weather suits my clothes . . .

Verse one.

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