In 1933 John A. Lomax made the first of his field-recording trips through the American South. He visited notorious Southern penitentiaries – among them Sugar Land in Texas; Angola in Louisiana; Parchman Farm in Mississippi – in search of anachronistic strains of African American folk-song preserved outside the influence of the radio, the phonograph, and cross-pollination with whites. Accompanied by his son, Alan, John Lomax recorded the songs of timber and ground-clearing gangs, chants of the road and railroad crews, solo field hollers, comic songs, blues, and spirituals. By late 1934, they had recorded dozens of singers and hundreds of songs – "poetic expressions," as Lomax described them, "of pungent wit, simple beauty, startling imagery, extraordinary vividness and power."

"Jail House Bound," a production of West Virginia University Press, collects the earliest of the Lomaxes' prison recordings – made between July and December 1933 in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee – and draws on new remasters from the fragile original acetate discs. The album is introduced and annotated by noted American music scholar Mark Allen Jackson (author of Prophet Singer: The Voice and Vision of Woody Guthrie).