

## GEORGIA — I'M GONNA MAKE YOU HAPPY

### *Georgia: I'm Gonna Make You Happy*

English convicts, militant Scottish Highlanders, German religious refugees, and slaves brought directly from Africa carved out in Georgia a harsh and often impoverished agricultural life.. Racial conflict and repression lasted in Georgia until late into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the state produced some of the stellar figures in Black music and American literary history, and nurtured the Sea Islands, where African-based ways of life and music-making went on relatively peacefully until the 1960s. These pioneering recordings made in the 1930s and 1940s feature Blind Willie McTell, Buster Brown, and great but lesser-known artists such as Reese Crenshaw, Camp Morris, the Smith Band, Sidney Stripling, Sophie Wing performing blues, ballads, folk ragtime, 19<sup>th</sup> century dance tunes, spirituals, and work songs.

### *Deep River of Song*

These field recordings of African-American music made by Alan Lomax and John A. Lomax for the Library of Congress from 1933 to 1946 capture a transformative period when black singers of the South and the Caribbean created a new musical language and thousands of brilliant songs that would captivate people throughout the world.

### *The Alan Lomax Collection*

The Alan Lomax Collection gathers together the American, European, and Caribbean field recordings, world music compilations, and ballad operas of writer, folklorist, and ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax.

**Recorded between 1934 and 1943 by John A. Lomax, Ruby T. Lomax, Alan Lomax, Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, Zora Neale Hurston, Lewis Jones, Willis James, and John Work. Compiled by Alan Lomax and Peter B. Lowry. Notes by David Evans, Ph.D. Series Editor: David Evans, Ph.D.**

Remastered to 20-bit digital from the original metal and acetate field recordings. These unique historic discs contain imperfections and surface noise typical of the technology of their era.

1. **BOLL WEEVIL** Blind Willie McTell
2. **DYING CRAPSHOOTER'S BLUES** Blind Willie McTell
3. **CAPTAIN HANEY BLUES** Camp Morris and group
4. **PO' LAZ'US** Male convict group
5. **LONGEST TRAIN I EVER SAW** Jessie Wadley, with John Wadley, Will Jones, and Felix Davenport
6. **OH LAWDY ME, OH LAWDY MY** Male convict group
7. **HAMMER RING** Paul Sylvester and group
8. **JUDGMENT** Camp Morris and group of six men
9. **JUST AS WELL GET READY, YOU GOT TO DIE** Blind Willie McTell
10. **ALL NIGHT LONG** Sophie Wing and mixed group
11. **I GOT TO CROSS THE RIVER JORDAN** Blind Willie McTell
12. **I'M GONNA MAKE YOU HAPPY** Buster Brown
13. **SALLY WALKER** Sidney Stripling
14. **COON CP'NT (COONJINE)** Sidney Stripling

15. **BREAKAWAY** Sidney Stripling
16. **SEVASSAFOOL (SEBASTOPOL)** Gus Gibson and Sidney Stripling
17. **JOHN HENRY** Reese Crenshaw
18. **FAST TRAIN** John Lee Thomas
19. **POOR JOE BREAKDOWN** Robert Davis
20. **WAR SONG** Buster Brown
21. **SOUTHERN RAG** James Sneed, J. F. Duffey, and Alvin Sanders
22. **SMITHY RAG** The Smith Band

## **INTRODUCTION** —*David Evans, Ph.D.*

Georgia's permanent settlement from the Old World dates from 1733. This British colony was intended as a buffer against Spanish encroachment from Florida and was inhabited initially by urban poor and convicts from England, a military contingent of Scottish Highlanders, and German religious refugees from present-day Austria and the Czech Republic. Slavery was outlawed until 1747, but the colony soon joined the Carolinas, Virginia, and Maryland in establishing this insidious institution. Many of Georgia's slaves were imported directly from Africa rather than "seasoned" in other New World colonies, and some illegal importation continued after the U. S. Constitutional ban of 1808 right up to the eve of the Civil War. Georgia also became a major market for the sale of slaves to other parts of the expanding South in the nineteenth century. Race relations remained tense in many parts of the state well into the twentieth century, and Georgia became a major arena for Populism, neo-Confederate revisionism, and the Civil Rights movement.

Most early settlement was along the Atlantic Coast and Sea Islands and up the Savannah River. Savannah, Darien, Brunswick, and Augusta were the most important cities of the colonial era. By the time of the 1790 U. S. Census, Georgia had a population of 82,548. With the explosive growth of the cotton economy soon thereafter and the extermination and forced expulsion of most of the Native American population, the interior of the state was opened to settlement by whites and their Negro slaves. Atlanta became the most important city in the state during the nineteenth century—a center for business, transportation, and communication, as well as for commercial music and entertainment in the twentieth century. Outside of Atlanta, however, much of the state's economy remained agricultural and extractive. Livestock, poultry, cotton, watermelons, peanuts, tobacco, pecans, peaches, sweet potatoes, sugarcane, rice, sorghum, soybeans, and corn are all among the state's diversified major agricultural products. Mining is important in the northern part of the state and timber cutting in the southern part, while Savannah and Brunswick serve as international shipping and fishing ports. Textile, paper, and turpentine industries draw directly on the products of the land. Most of the rich variety of black and white folk music in the state is closely tied to these products, industries, and activities, as several selections on this disc demonstrate.

Georgia has produced a significant number of figures on the cutting edge of literature and political life in America, including Joel Chandler Harris, Margaret Mitchell, Erskine Caldwell, General James Oglethorpe, L. Q. C. Lamar, Tom Watson, Eugene Talmadge, Richard Russell, Martin Luther King, Lester Maddox, Andrew Young, and Jimmy Carter. It has likewise contributed many important and innovative figures to American folk and popular music, such as Fiddlin' John Carson, Gid Tanner, Riley Puckett, Clayton McMichen, Blind Andrew Jenkins, and Earl Johnson in country music; Smith's Sacred Singers, Mosie Lister, Leroy Abernathy, Reverend J. M. Gates, and Thomas A. Dorsey in sacred music; Bessie

Jones, John Davis, Mabel Hillary, and many others in African American folk music; Ida Cox, Ma Rainey, Barbecue Bob, Blind Willie McTell, Curley Weaver, Buddy Moss, and Piano Red in the blues; Little Richard, James Brown, Otis Redding, Gladys Knight, and the Allman Brothers in rhythm and blues and rock and roll; Bernice Reagon in protest and women's music; and Johnny Mercer in popular music.

Despite the state's record of musical excellence and accomplishment and a substantial history of folkloristic and commercial recording, Georgia's music is generally not as well understood or as highly acclaimed today as that of Mississippi, Texas, Tennessee, or Louisiana. Atlanta's importance in blues, gospel, and country music in the first half of the twentieth century has been overshadowed by the rise of Chicago, Memphis, and Nashville in the last half of the century. Georgia has also had a broad variety of music, and while there are regional traditions such as the ring shouts of the Sea Islands and coastal region and the string bands of the mountains of North Georgia, the state as a whole lacks the easy identification with a particular style, such as Mississippi blues or Texas prison work songs (cf. *Mississippi: The Blues Lineage* and *Big Brazos* [Rounder 1825 and 1826] in the *Deep River of Song* series).

These recordings from Georgia, part of the collection of the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress, represent the fruits of three field trips by John A. Lomax, Ruby T. Lomax, and Alan Lomax (1934, 1935, 1940), and the work of several distinguished collaborators — Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, Zora Neale Hurston, Willis James, Lewis Jones, and John Work. In December 1934 John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax made the earliest trip, with Huddie Ledbetter (Lead Belly) acting as their driver and assistant. As was the case in most of the expeditions headed by John A. Lomax in the 1930s, they did much of their work with African American folk song in the prison systems of the South, surmising that there could be found the older styles of African American secular music with the least European influences. In Georgia they visited Bellwood Prison Camp in Atlanta (track 5), while John A. Lomax on his own recorded at the State Prison Farm in Milledgeville (tracks 4, 6, 7, 17). Lawrence Gellert, a collector of Negro protest songs, also recorded at Bellwood and possibly at Milledgeville around this time, but it is not known which collector was first on the scene.

In 1935 Alan Lomax joined Mary Elizabeth Barnicle and the African American folklorist and novelist Zora Neale Hurston on an expedition to Georgia and Florida, with Lomax and Barnicle continuing to the Bahamas later that year (cf. *Bahamas 1935: Chanteys and Anthems* [Rounder 1822] and the forthcoming *Bahamas 1935: Ring Games and Round Dances* in the *Deep River of Song* series). This was the first expedition the twenty-year-old Alan made independently of his father, and the recordings were made entirely outside the prison system. It was also the first of many fieldwork expeditions for Professor Barnicle, and probably the first ever in the United States in which black and white folk song researchers had worked together. Ms. Hurston was already a veteran fieldworker, and this would be her final formal collecting trip in the South. At Frederica on Saint Simon's Island, where they did the bulk of their Georgia collecting, resident folklorist Lydia Parrish, who had long been studying the local folkways, aided them. The three fieldworkers recorded not only the expected ring shouts, spirituals (track 10), work songs, and children's songs, but they obtained some of the only recordings ever made in the Sea Islands of secular instrumental music (track 19).

John A. Lomax returned to Georgia in 1940 with his wife, Ruby T. Lomax, and on a single day they made a remarkable series of recordings of the great 12-string guitarist Blind Willie McTell in Atlanta (tracks 1, 2, 9, 11) and prisoners at Cherokee Work Camp near Canton

(tracks 3, 8), about thirty miles north of Atlanta.

The Lomaxes wrote little about their Georgia fieldwork during these years and featured few of the songs in their published anthologies of American folk song, despite the evident quality of the material and the vivid personalities they encountered, such as McTell and John Davis. Alan Lomax evidently remembered his Georgia experience fondly, however, for in 1959 he revisited Saint Simon's Island and made recordings of ring shouts, spirituals, work songs, social dance songs, and children's songs from the Georgia Sea Island Singers, a group which included John Davis, whom he had recorded twenty-four years earlier (cf. *Georgia Sea Islands: Earliest Times* [Rounder 1712] and *Georgia Sea Islands: Biblical Songs and Spirituals* [Rounder 1713] in the *Southern Journey* series). Alan Lomax continued to work with the Georgia Sea Island Singers over the next few years, presenting them in concerts, and his sister Bess Lomax Hawes later collaborated with group member Bessie Jones on a book of children's game songs (*Step It Down*, Bessie Jones and Bess Lomax Hawes, Harper & Row, 1972) and a film depicting ring shouts and sacred songs (*The Georgia Sea Island Singers*, University of California, Berkeley, 1970).

In 1941, when Alan Lomax was in charge of the Archive of Folk Song, he learned about the remarkable folk festival held every March at Fort Valley State College in Fort Valley, Georgia, about twenty miles southwest of Macon. The festival drew local and regional performers in a full range of African American genres and styles and was an utterly unique type of event for the time. It enjoyed the attendance and participation of leading African American folklorists and musical figures of the day. Lomax arranged for John W. Work of Fisk University to record artists at the 1941 festival (tracks 13–16, 18, 22) and tried to make a similar arrangement for 1942, although no recordings exist from that year. Surviving correspondence suggests that the effort failed because the Library of Congress could not provide Professor Work with forty dollars in expense money in advance. In 1943 Lomax arranged for Lewis Jones and Professor Willis James of Spellman College to make recordings at this festival (tracks 12, 20, 21). Jones had recorded folk music with Lomax and John Work in Coahoma County, Mississippi, in 1941 and 1942 (cf. *Mississippi Saints and Sinners* [Rounder 1824] and *Mississippi: The Blues Lineage*, [Rounder 1825] in the *Deep River of Song* series).

Documentary recordings of Georgia's African American folk music have been made since the 1960s by many folklorists, including Art Rosenbaum, George Mitchell, Bruce Bastin, Peter Lowry, John Burrison, myself, and others. The traditions that have been uncovered are unusually rich and varied. They include the ring shouts of the Sea Islands, boat-launching songs, children's game songs, railroad and prison work songs, blues, ballads, spiritual and gospel songs, string band music, and fife and drum music. The ring shout is a sacred act in the form of a circular dance. It represents one of the oldest types of black religious expression in the United States and one with clear African musical links, while the blues and other secular traditions from the interior of the state often reveal elements of older styles and genres, such as folk ragtime, minstrel, and string band music.

Georgia is a large state, and commercial and folkloristic documentation of its African American musical traditions has only taken place in a limited number of locations. The blues, gospel, and rhythm and blues traditions of Atlanta, the Macon area, the Chattahoochie Valley, and Savannah have been fairly well covered, as have the ring shouts and work songs of Saint Simon's Island and adjacent coastal areas. The traditions of other regions of the state remain little explored or entirely unknown, however. Many of these regions are quite rural and

isolated and may yet preserve important elements of black American musical heritage. These recordings, made between 1934 and 1943 do not contain any the ring shouts, but they exemplify much of the remaining variety and quality of African American folk music in the state. —*The University of Memphis*

### **1. BOLL WEEVIL (AFS 4070-A1)**

Performed by Blind Willie McTell (vocal and 12-string guitar).

Recorded by John A. Lomax and Ruby T. Lomax at Atlanta, Georgia, on November 5, 1940.

Willie Samuel McTell was born blind near Thomson, Georgia, about thirty miles west of Augusta, probably in 1898. His parents soon split up, and around 1907 he was taken by his mother about seventy miles southeast to Statesboro, where he grew up, although he frequently visited his relatives in the Thomson area. Around the age of ten, he began playing guitar, learning from his mother, father, uncle, and another player in Statesboro. He played locally for food and tips, for both blacks and whites, and joined traveling shows during the 1910s. In 1920 his mother died, and he began living with his relatives in the Thomson area. From 1922 to 1925 he attended the Georgia School for the Blind in Macon, where he learned to read Braille and perhaps gained some further instruction in music. He had also begun making trips to Atlanta to visit relatives and play music, and for the rest of his life he would do much of his performing in Statesboro, Macon, the Thomson area, and Atlanta, but he also made frequent trips to other parts of Georgia, up and down the East Coast between New York City and Miami, and as far afield as Nashville, Memphis, Missouri, Arkansas, and California. He had some further study at blind schools in New York and Michigan, but by 1927 he was settled in Atlanta, which would be his home base until the end of his life. About this time he switched to a 12-string guitar, which would be his chosen instrument for the rest of his career.

McTell began making commercial records in October 1927, and over a ten-year period was in studios every year but one—in Atlanta, New York, Chicago, and Augusta, recording blues and a few spirituals for Victor, Columbia, Okeh, American Record Company, and Decca. During this period he performed at an amazing variety of venues, including private parties, recitals in the homes of church people, at ladies' club meetings, tobacco auctions, barbecue stands, store sales, theatres, medicine and minstrel shows, parking lots of drive-in restaurants, hotel porches and lobbies, stag parties, recitals for bathers on Florida and Sea Island beaches, school closings, church programs, in railroad and bus stations, turpentine camps, whisky stills, livery stables, gambling dens, and on the radio. He performed for black, white, and mixed audiences, mainly for listening rather than for dancing. Recording for John A. Lomax and Ruby T. Lomax in their Atlanta hotel room was thus nothing strange for him, and he handled the session with aplomb and his usual professionalism, despite being shaken up in an automobile accident the night before. John A. Lomax wrote the following account of his meeting with Blind Willie McTell:

While we were driving down the tortuous streets of Atlanta, Georgia, one night in October 1940, just as we passed a Little Pig stand my wife said, "There is a Negro man with a guitar." Back we swung into the pig stand yard. The guitarist proved to be Blind Willy McTell, whom a friend had already told us about not more than two hours before.

"Business isn't so good. I'll go along with you to your hotel," said Blind Willy McTell. After guiding him to the car, I told him I didn't know the way to the hotel.

“I’ll show you,” said totally Blind Willy. Between us and the hotel there were six or eight right-angled turns and two places where five or six streets crossed. Chatting all the while with me, Blind Willy called every turn, even mentioning the location of the stoplights. He gave the names of buildings as we passed them. Stored in his mind was an accurate, detailed photograph of Atlanta.

“Blind Willy,” I said when he agreed to come and play and sing for us in our hotel room at nine o’clock the next morning, “Uncle Billy Machree in Jasper, Texas, says that the Colored folks are a promising race. Don’t fail me.” He chuckled in instant understanding. The promise of taxi fare and a dollar cemented the bargain. Promptly on time he reported. He sang some interesting blues. His guitar picking was excellent. Declining to let me order a taxi to take him home (“I’ll have that much more money,” he said), he shuffled away from me across a busy street in the downtown district. I watched him until he was out of sight. The face of a blind person always tightens my heartstrings.

(Field notes, John A. Lomax, Library of Congress.)

McTell had not been in a recording studio since 1936 and would not record again until 1949, when he made his final commercial sessions in Atlanta for Regal and Atlantic Records. He made a final documentary session for an Atlanta record-store owner in 1956. His main venues in the 1940s and 1950s were the Pig’n Whistle drive-in barbecue stand and Blue Lantern Restaurant in Atlanta, although he still made occasional trips to Statesboro and Thomson and toured with a blind spiritual singing group. He also sang spirituals on the radio in the 1950s. In 1959, while staying with relatives near Thomson, he suffered a stroke, and he died on August 19 in a hospital in Milledgeville. He is buried at Jones Grove Baptist Church, near Thomson.

McTell’s 1940 session for the Lomaxes lasted two hours and filled five large discs with more than forty minutes of music and interviews. He spoke with accuracy and insight about his own life, his recording career, and the history of the blues and spirituals. Lomax recorded probably the broadest sampling of his repertoire of any of his sessions, obtaining blues, spirituals, a rag, ballads, and a popular song. He failed only in an attempt to elicit protest songs, with McTell replying that his experiences with white people had been good.

“Boll Weevil” is one of the best-known American folk ballads, sung by blacks and whites throughout the South. It was well known to John A. Lomax from fieldwork in his home state of Texas, where the ballad probably originated. This insect pest that devastated Southern cotton farms entered Texas from Mexico in 1892 and moved inexorably eastward, reaching McTell’s part of Georgia by the early 1920s. The ballad very likely traveled along with the insect, spawning numerous variant tunes and texts, and entering the emerging blues tradition. Its best-known form is a rhymed couplet with a one-line refrain (“Just lookin’ for a home, just lookin’ for a home”) set to a typical blues harmonic scheme. McTell’s version recasts the tune into something close to a blues but with an unusual ABB textual and melodic pattern. As the ballad moves eastward from Texas, the boll weevil tends to be transformed from a trickster who outwits the farmer into a verbally and physically abusive “badman.” McTell’s protagonist is extraordinarily aggressive, even by the standards of this song, and almost his entire text consists of a surly lecture by the boll weevil to the farmer. There can be little doubt that many black singers identified with this swarming itinerant black insect, taking vicarious pleasure in its devastation and indestructibility, even though it wreaked havoc on the lives of black and white rural dwellers indiscriminately. Since this recording followed immediately

upon Lomax's request for "complaining songs," it may have been McTell's subtle way of complying without giving the impression of having personal hard feelings.

**JAL:** *I'm going to talk on this. The songs and tunes played and sung on this record come from Willie McTell. They were played in Atlanta, Georgia, November the fifth, 1940, for the Folk Song Archive of the Library of Congress in Washington. All right, Willie. Play and sing.*

*Boll weevil, boll weevil, where you get your great long bill?  
"I got it from Texas, I got it from the western hills.  
I got it from Texas, I got it from the western hills."*

*Boll weevil, he told the fireman, said, "Don't you buy no more pills.  
Ain't gon' make enough money to pay your drugstore bills.  
You ain't going to make enough money to even pay your drugstore bills."*

*Boll weevil, he told the farmer, "Don't you plow no more.  
Ain't gonna make enough flour in your back door.  
You ain't gonna make enough flour to even put in your back door."*

*Boll weevil, he told the farmer, "Don't buy no Ford machine.  
You ain't going to make enough money to even buy gasoline.  
Ain't going to make enough money to even buy gasoline."*

*Boll weevil said to the farmer, "Don't buy no more pills.  
Ain't going to make enough money to even buy your meal.  
Won't make enough money to even buy your meal."*

*So now, boll weevil, boll weevil, where you say you get your great long bill?  
"I got it from Texas, out in the western hills,  
Way out in the Panhandle, out in the western hills."*

## **2. DYING CRAPSHOOTER'S BLUES (AFS 4070-B1)**

Performed by Blind Willie McTell (vocal and 12-string guitar).

Recorded by John A. Lomax and Ruby T. Lomax at Atlanta, Georgia, on November 5, 1940.

This is the first extant recording of this song by Blind Willie McTell, although his unissued 1935 Decca recording of "Dying Doubter Blues" might be an earlier version. He recorded it again in 1949 (Atlantic LP 7224) and in 1956 (Prestige International LP 1040). At this last session he gave the following statement about the background of the song.

I started writing this song in twenty-nine. I didn't finish it until 1932. Mr. Williams, his name was Jesse Williams. See, he got shot here on Courtland Street, and after he getting shot, I taken him home. Since he was sick about three weeks after I taken him home, sick from the shot, and so he give me this request. Then he wanted me to play this over his grave. That I did. See, I had to steal music from every whichaway to get it, to get it to fit. But I messed it up anyway, somehow or other, just to suit him. I finally played what he wanted. But he got everything he wanted but the women from Atlanta. He didn't get no women from Atlanta, 'cause, see, it was too far for them to come. He was buried in New York. I taken him there in an ambulance. Cost me two hundred—I think it was two hundred, two hundred and eighty-two dollars, I think,

and eighty-five cents, I think, that man charged me for taking him home. But he was able. His father give him anything he wanted. Give him everything he wanted but the women in Atlanta. He couldn't have the sixteen women, the twenty-two women out of the Hamilton Hotel. He didn't have that. He didn't have the twenty-nine out of North Atlanta. And he didn't have twenty-six off of South Bell, which we call Hill Street. That's where he hung out at, you know, during his women-loving time. After getting shot, I carried him home. I sit by his bedside every day, and he would tell me what he wanted. I would tell his daddy. So after he died, his daddy said, "Well, everything he want, I'm gonna get it." So he got everything about it but the women from Atlanta. So I have to play the "Dying Crapshooter's Blues." That's what I was supposed to name it.

What McTell reveals only obliquely in his statement that he "had to steal music from every whichaway . . . to get it to fit" is that his song is based largely on a composition of the same title by Porter Grainger that was recorded in 1927 by blues singers Martha Copeland (Columbia 14227-D), Annie McKinney (Vocalion, unissued), Viola McCoy (Cameo 1225), and Rosa Henderson (Pathé Actuelle 7335). McTell has personalized some of the song's details to his friend's situation and localized it to Atlanta. In fact, his next-to-last stanza, enumerating the women from Atlanta's underworld districts, appears to be original and has no counterpart in Grainger's composition. The song's origin does not rest here, however. Grainger's piece is actually a redaction of a folk ballad commonly known as "St. James [or St. Joe's] Infirmary" and recorded by numerous black and white artists, including Cab Calloway's hit version, between 1929 and 1931. It was known in oral tradition earlier, however, and a version called "Those Gambler's Blues" was printed in Carl Sandburg's *The American Songbag* in 1927. Oddly enough, Blind Willie McTell also knew a version of "St. James Infirmary" and recorded it in 1956 (Prestige Bluesville, unissued). Parallel versions, adapted to other segments of society, are known variously as "The Bad Girl's Lament," "The Sailor Cut Down in His Prime," "Tom Sherman's Barroom," "The Cowboy's Lament," and "The Streets of Laredo." All of the versions stem ultimately from an eighteenth-century British broadside ballad known as "The Unfortunate Rake" or "The Unfortunate Lad," which relates the death and funeral instructions of a young soldier cut down by syphilis.

**McTell (spoken):** *I will play this song that I made myself. Originated it from Atlanta. It's in three different marches of tunes.*

*Little Jesse was a gambler night and day.  
He used crooked cards and dice.  
He was a sinful boy, good-hearted but had no soul.  
His heart was hard and cold like ice.*

*Little Jesse was a wild, reckless gambler, won a gang of change,  
And a many gambler's heart he left in pain.  
Little Jesse began to lose his money, but he was all alone,  
And his heart had even turned to stone.*

*The police walked up and shot my friend Jesse down.  
Said, "Boys, I got to die today."  
He had a gang of crapshooters and gamblers at his bedside,  
But hear the words he had to say.*

*"I guess I ought to know how I wants to go."*

**Spoken:** *How you want to go, Jesse?*

*"I wants eight crapshooters for my pallbearers.*

*Let 'em all be dressed out in black.*

*I want nine men going to the graveyard,*

*But only eight mens coming back.*

*I wants a gang of gamblers gathered around my coffin side,*

*With a crooked card printed on my hearse.*

*Don't say the crapshooters are liable to grieve over me.*

*My life been a doggone curse.*

*"Send poker players to the graveyard.*

*Dig my grave with the ace of spades.*

*I want twelve polices in my funeral march,*

*High sheriff playing blackjack leading the parade.*

*I want the judge and solicitor who jailed me fourteen times.*

*Put a pair of dice in my shoes.*

*Let a deck of cards be my tombstone.*

*I got the dying crapshooter's blues.*

*"I want sixteen real good crapshooters,*

*Sixteen bootleggers to sing a song,*

*Sixteen buck riders gamblin',*

*With their cover-tents barred while I'm rolling along."*

*He wanted twenty-two womens out of the Hamilton Hotel,*

*Twenty-six off o' South Bell,*

*Twenty-nine women out o' North Atlanta.*

*Know that Little Jesse didn't pass out so swell.*

*His head was aching, heart was thumping.*

*Little Jesse went down bouncing and jumping.*

*Folks, don't be standing around Jesse crying.*

*He wants everybody to do the Charleston whilst he dying.*

*One foot up, a toenail dragging.*

*Throw my buddy Jesse in the hoodoo wagon.*

*Come here, mama, with that can o' booze.*

*He got the dying crapshooter's blues,*

*Passing out, with the dying crapshooter's blues.*

### **3. CAPTAIN HANEY BLUES (AFS 4074-B1)**

Performed by Camp Morris (vocal and guitar) and male vocal group.

Recorded by John A. Lomax and Ruby T. Lomax at Cherokee Work Camp, near Canton, Georgia, on November 5, 1940.

This is a group of traditional blues verses, adapted to the prison environment and mentioning the captain of the work camp. Such mentions were apt to bring a smile to the faces of prison supervisors, confirming their sense of absolute power in a way that might induce them to lighten up a bit on the prisoners. Although blues are normally a solo expression, it was inevitable that popular vocal quartets would try to adapt this genre. Groups such as the

Norfolk Jazz Quartette and the Dunham Jazz Quartette recorded a number of blues tunes in the 1920s, and quartet blues were heard occasionally through the 1930s and 1940s, with a resurgence in the 1950s among rhythm-and-blues groups such as the Midnighters, the Five Royales, and the Coasters. The tune of “Captain Haney Blues” is widely known as “Four O’Clock Blues” and by other titles.

**JAL:** *Wait a minute, wait a minute. This is Camp Morris leading this song about their captain.*

*I been down so long, down don't worry me, oh, Lord.  
I been down so long, down don't worry me, oh, Lord.  
Have you ever been down? You know just how I feel.*

*I got up this morning, blues all 'round my bed, oh, Lord.  
I got up this morning, blues all 'round my bed, oh, Lord.  
I went to eat my breakfast, and the blues was in my bread.*

*I say, “Hey, Mister Haney, don't work my man so hard, oh, Lord.”  
She said, “Hey, Mister Haney, don't work my man so hard, oh, Lord.”  
Says, “He's a little petty thief, and he never had a job.”*

*Well, I moaned, I moaned, I cried the whole night long, oh, Lord.  
Says, I moaned and I moaned and I cried the whole night long, oh, Lord,  
Thinking about my baby and my happy home.*

*I said, “Bye bye, baby, I'll see you some rainy day, oh, Lord.”  
I said, “Bye bye, baby, I'll see you some rainy day, oh, Lord.  
Say, it may be in June, and it may be the First of May.”*

#### **4. PO' LAZ'US (AFS 261-B2)**

Performed by a male convict group.

Recorded by John A. Lomax at State Prison Farm, Milledgeville, Georgia, on December 15, 1934.

This tune is the one commonly used for the ballad/work song “Po' Laz'us” (“Lazarus”) about a man hunted by the law, but the lyrics are entirely from a first-person point of view. John A. Lomax had already encountered the ballad in the Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia prison traditions and probably assigned the title automatically when he heard the familiar tune. One would be inclined to view this performance as a work song, but it was probably somewhat stylized to be sung outside of a work setting, for it seems much too fast-paced for any sustained work, and the harmony is too deliberate. This process of stylizing was evidently taking place in the 1930s (perhaps even earlier) in Southern prisons and would bear fruit in the 1940s and 1950s with quartet arrangements of work songs by groups such as Josh White's Carolinians and the Golden Gate Quartet, as well as solo blues performances by artists such as Lightnin' Hopkins, Smokey Hogg, Lowell Fulson, and Frankie Lee Sims. It's possible that the publicity surrounding Lead Belly's release from Louisiana's Angola Penitentiary and his concert debut stimulated this development. (Lead Belly was present, in fact, at this recording session, assisting John A. Lomax.) This piece by singers whose names were not recorded (perhaps deliberately) contains a considerable amount of protest and verbal aggression directed against the prison authorities. John A. Lomax wrote that he encountered

resistance to his recording efforts in the Georgia prisons because Northern writers had recently exposed conditions there.

*That old walker called me a nappy-headed devil.  
That old walker called me a nappy-headed devil.  
That ain't my name, Lord, Lord, that ain't my name.*

*You better mind how you treat a poor prisoner.  
You better mind how you treat a poor prisoner.  
You got him down, Lord, Lord, you got him down.*

*He liable to meet you coming through some dark alley.  
He liable to meet you coming through some dark alley.  
And blow you down (and cut your head), Lord, Lord, and blow you down.*

*And that old captain, captain called me lazy.  
That old captain, captain, he called me lazy,  
I done weaked down, Lord, Lord, I done weaked down.*

*I been rolling, rolling so hard and reg'lar.  
I done been rolling, rolling so hard and reg'lar.  
I done weaked down, Lord, Lord, I done weaked down.*

*You take this hammer, hammer, and give it to the captain.  
You take this hammer, hammer, and (Lord) give it to the captain.  
I'll work no more, Lord, Lord, I'll work no more.*

*Looky yonder—  
**Spoken:** Cut it off one time.  
Broiling sun turning over.  
**Spoken:** Stop.  
Looky yon ...  
**Spoken:** Go on.  
Looky yonder at the broiling sun turning over.  
Looky yonder at the broiling sun turning over.  
It won't go down, Lord, Lord, it won't go down.*

*I been rolling ever since soon this morning.  
I been rolling ever since soon this morning.  
I done got tired, Lord, Lord, I done got tired.*

*Every time I, time I smell gunpowder,  
Every time I, time I smell gunpowder,  
It make me mean, Lord, Lord, it make me mean.*

##### **5. LONGEST TRAIN I EVER SAW (AFS 253-A1)**

Performed by Jesse Wadley (leader), John Wadley, Will Jones, and Felix Davenport (vocals).  
Recorded by John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax at Bellwood Prison Camp, Atlanta, Georgia,  
ca. December 11–12, 1934.

This appears to be another stylized version of a work song, including a representation of the grunts of the workers. This balladlike tale of horror is commonly known under the title “In the Pines” and is found throughout the East Coast states and Appalachian region in both black and white traditions as a work song, banjo tune, and guitar-accompanied song. Two Atlanta bluesmen recorded guitar-accompanied versions—Charlie Lincoln in 1927 (“Chain Gang Trouble,” Columbia 14272-D) and Peg Leg Howell in 1929 (“Rolling Mill Blues,” Columbia 14438-D). In her dissertation Judith McCulloh studied 157 versions of this song, most of them collected from white informants and the earliest from 1917. She believes, however, that it may have been created in Georgia in the 1870s. “Joe Brown’s coal mine,” mentioned in the first stanza of this version, probably refers to mines operated at that time in Dade County in the extreme northwestern part of the state by Joseph Emerson Brown, who had served as Georgia’s governor during the Confederacy. Whether the song began as a ballad or work song, among blacks or whites, is impossible to tell. It displays extreme variation in text and tune from one version to another, and many versions may be composites drawn from several sources. There can be little doubt, however, that it was spread by miners, loggers, railroad workers, hoboes, prisoners, and itinerant musicians.

*The long—, uh huh, —est train, oh, buddy, that I ev—, buddy, that I ever seen. Uh huh.*

*The long—, Lord, Lord, —est train, uh huh, oh, buddy, that I ev—, buddy, that I ever seen, uh huh.*

*The long—, Lord, Lord, —est train, oh, buddy, that I ev—, buddy, that I ever done seen, uh huh.*

*It was ’round, ’round Joe Brown’s, ’round Joe Brown’s coal mine, uh huh.*

*The train, Lord, Lord, come by, oh, buddy, ’bout half, buddy, ’bout half past nine, uh huh.*

*The train, Lord, Lord, come by, oh, buddy, ’bout half, buddy, ’bout half past nine, uh huh.*

*The train, Lord, Lord, come by, uh huh, oh, buddy, ’bout half, buddy, ’bout half past nine, uh huh,*

*And never, never come by, never come by again, uh huh.*

*The prettiest, Lord, Lord, little girl, uh huh, oh, buddy, that I ev—, buddy, that I ever done seen, uh huh.*

*The prettiest, pretti—, Lord, Lord, little girl, uh huh, oh, buddy, that I ev—, buddy, that I ever seen, uh huh.*

*The prettiest, Lord, Lord, prettiest girl, oh, buddy, that I ever, buddy, that I ever done seen, uh huh,*

*Was ’round, ’round Joe Brown’s, ’round Joe Brown’s coal mine, uh huh.*

*Her eyes, eyes was blue, Lord, buddy, and her cheeks, buddy, and her cheeks were brown, uh huh.*

*Her eyes, eyes was blue, uh huh, oh, buddy, and her cheeks, buddy, and her cheeks was brown, uh huh.*

*Her eyes, Lord, Lord, was blue, oh, buddy, and her cheeks, buddy, and her cheeks was brown, uh huh,*

*And her hair, hair, it hung, hair, it hung way down, uh huh.*

*The train, Lord, Lord, had a wreck, uh huh, oh, buddy, at Four, at Four Mile Hill, uh huh.*

*The train, train, buddy, had a wreck, uh huh, oh, buddy, at Four, buddy, at Four Mile Hill, uh huh.*

*The train, Lord, Lord, had a wreck, uh huh, oh, buddy, at Four, buddy, at Four Mile Hill, uh*

*huh.*

*And killed, it killed Evelin—, killed Evelina dead, uh huh.*

*Her head, Lord, Lord, was found, uh huh, oh, buddy, in the drive—, buddy, in the drivin' wheel, uh huh.*

*Her head, head, Lord, was found, uh huh, oh, buddy, in the drive—, buddy, in the drivin' wheel, uh huh.*

*Her head, Lordy, and her head was found, uh huh, oh, buddy, in the drive—, buddy, in the drivin' wheel, uh huh.*

*Her body, body, it never, buddy, it never been seen, uh huh.*

**JAL:** *This work song and others properly accredited were sung by a quartet at—*

**AL:** *Bellmount.*

**JAL:** *Bellmount.*

**Others:** *Bellwood.*

**JAL:** *—Bellwood Prison Camp at Atlanta, Georgia, by a quartet composed of Jesse Wadley, leader; John Wadley, Will Jones, and Felix Davenport, through the courtesy of Captain Tyree, captain of this camp, for the Library of Congress in Washington.*

## **6. OH LAWDY ME, OH LAWDY MY (AFS 262-B3)**

Performed by a male convict group.

Recorded by John A. Lomax at State Prison Farm, Milledgeville, Georgia, on December 15, 1934.

This performance is paced more like a functional work song, and the voices are less coordinated and arranged than those in the previous two selections. The song is known in widely varying form, mainly in Southern white tradition, where it often occurs as a banjo or bluegrass tune. Like the previous song, however, it possibly originated among African American work crews. John A. Lomax recorded another version in a South Carolina prison a few days later. This particular recording has a text of great poignancy, as the prisoners dwell on images of comfort and rest far from their place of incarceration.

*Lord, I'm going to my shanty and lie down.*

*And it's oh, Lordy me, many a trouble, Lord, I see.*

*Lord, I'm going to my shanty and lie down.*

*And old black woman, you ain't never no more mine.*

*Old black woman, you ain't never no more mine.*

*If I set you in the shade, poor boy, give you all I made,*

*Old black woman, you ain't never no more mine.*

*Lord, I'm going where I never been before.*

*Lord, I'm going where I never been before.*

*And it's oh, Lordy me, many a trouble poor boy [have I] seen.*

*Lord, I'm going where I never been before.*

*Lord, I'm going where the chilly wind don't blow.*

*Lord, I'm going where the chilly wind don't blow.*

*And it's oh, Lordy me, and it's oh, Lordy my.*

*Lord, I'm going where I never been before.*

## 7. HAMMER RING (AFS 260-B3)

Performed by Paul Sylvester and group (vocals).

Recorded by John A. Lomax at State Prison Farm, Milledgeville, Georgia, on December 15, 1934.

All of the other versions of this work song were recorded in Texas prisons, and one must wonder whether group leader Paul Sylvester had done time in Texas previously or whether the song entered the Georgia prison system by some other route. Texas versions also describe Noah's building of the ark and often have this peculiar fast tempo that no work crew could have sustained for long. It's possible that songs such as this were sung for brief intervals for the purpose of impressing the guards with how fast the men could work and thereby defusing their anger, alluded to in the lyrics. This text conveys a sense of the dulling monotony of prison work, as themes of hammering and chopping and the prison officers riding succeed one another over and over again, broken only by the image of Noah building his great vehicle of escape..

*Oh, don't you hear the hammer? Hammer ring.*

*Oh, don't you hear the hammer? Hammer ring.*

*Oh, don't she ring lonesome? Hammer ring.*

*Oh, don't she ring lonesome? Hammer ring.*

*Oh, don't she ring lonesome? Hammer ring.*

*Captain Lawrence is a' ridin'. Hammer ring.*

*Lawrence, Lawrence is a' ridin'. Hammer ring.*

*And the axes is choppin'. Hammer ring.*

*And the bullies is a' jivin'. Hammer ring.*

*Oh, God told Norah. Hammer ring.*

*Won't you go build a ark, sir? Hammer ring.*

*How high must I build it? Hammer ring.*

*Build it forty-one cubits. Hammer ring.*

*Oh, ring, hammer. Hammer ring.*

*Oh, ring, old hammer. Hammer ring.*

*Oh, the warden's a' ridin'. Hammer ring.*

*Oh, the warden's a' ridin'. Hammer ring.*

*He's ridin' like he's angry. Hammer ring.*

*Lord, he's ridin' like he's angry. Hammer ring.*

*And the bullies is a' jivin'. Hammer ring.*

*And the bullies is a' jivin'. Hammer ring.*

*And the hammers a' ringin'. Hammer ring.*

*Oh, ring, hammer. Hammer ring.*

*Oh, ring, old hammer. Hammer ring.*

*Oh, it's ringin' in the building. Hammer ring.*

*Oh, it's ringin' in the building. Hammer ring.*

*Oh, it's ringin' in the wildwood. Hammer ring.*

*Oh, it's ringin' in the wildwood. Hammer ring.*

*Oh, ring, hammer. Hammer ring.*

*Oh, ring, old hammer. Hammer ring.*

*Oh, don't she ring lonesome? Hammer ring.*

*Oh, don't she ring lonesome? Hammer ring.*

*Oh, don't she ring lonesome? Hammer ring.*

*Oh, ring, hammer. Hammer ring.*  
*Oh, ring, old hammer. Hammer ring.*  
*Oh, ring, hammer. Hammer ring.*  
*Oh, don't she ring lonesome? Hammer ring.*  
*Oh, the hammer keep a' ringin'. Hammer ring.*  
*Lord, the hammer keep a' ringin'. Hammer ring.*  
*And the bullies keep a' jivin'. Hammer ring.*  
*And the warden keep a' ridin'. Hammer ring.*  
*Oh, he's ridin' like he's angry. Hammer ring.*  
*And the bullies keep a' jivin'. Hammer ring.*  
*And the axes talkin'. Hammer ring.*  
*And the chips is a' flyin'. Hammer ring.*  
*And the bullies is a' jivin'. Hammer ring.*  
*Oh, ring, hammer. Hammer ring.*  
*Oh, ring, old hammer. Hammer ring.*  
*Oh, don't she ring lonesome? Hammer ring.*  
*Oh, don't she ring lonesome? Hammer ring.*  
*Oh, the rider's a ridin'. Hammer ring.*  
*Oh, the rider's a' ridin'. Hammer ring.*  
*Oh, he's ridin' like he's angry. Hammer ring.*  
*Oh, he's ridin' like he's angry. Hammer ring.*  
*And the bullies is a' ridin'. Hammer ring.*  
*And the bullies is a' jivin'. Hammer ring.*  
*Oh, ring, hammer. Hammer ring.*  
*Ring, old hammer. Hammer ring.*  
*Oh, don't she ring lonesome? Hammer ring.*

**JAL:** *These two songs on this side of the record were led by Roland Zachary and Paul Lester, Sylvester respectfully, respectively, assisted by a group of men on the Georgia State Farm at Milledgeville, Georgia, on December the fifteenth, 1934. The songs were sung through the courtesy of Captain Lawrence in charge of that farm for the use of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.*

#### **8. JUDGMENT (AFS 4074-A1)**

Performed by Camp Morris and a group of six men (vocals).

Recorded by John A. Lomax and Ruby T. Lomax at Cherokee Work Camp, near Canton, Georgia, on November 5, 1940.

Spirituals could function as work songs, but this performance seems designed only for a religious and perhaps recreational purpose. John A. Lomax appears disappointed that group leader Camp Morris learned the song from the radio, expressing the opinion that it was not therefore indigenous to Georgia. Fortunately, he recorded this fine performance before asking Morris the song's source. By 1940 groups such as the Golden Gate Quartet and the Fisk University Jubilee Singers had regional and national radio programs of spirituals, and many quartets and choral groups made local broadcasts in fifteen- or thirty-minute time slots on Southern radio stations. Blues and other secular music were heard much less on the air until the advent of black-format radio stations in 1949. Except for a few surviving transcription discs and air checks, most of these broadcasts are lost forever, so we are lucky to have this secondhand version by a group of Georgia prisoners.

*I got a mother in the heaven, I know.  
How I love the Lord.  
Says, I got a mother in the heaven, I know.  
How I love the Lord.  
Judgment, judgment, judgment, judgment,  
Judgment day is rolling 'round.  
Judgment, judgment, judgment, judgment.  
How I love the Lord.*

*King Jesus died and in the heaven, I know.  
How I love the Lord.  
King Jesus died and in the heaven, I know.  
How I love the Lord.  
Judgment, etc.*

*Well, I've got a father in the heaven, I know.  
How I love the Lord.  
Well, I've got a father in the heaven, I know.  
How I love the Lord.  
Judgment, etc.*

**JAL:** *And what is your name?*

**Morris:** *Camp Morris.*

**JAL:** *Camp Morris was the leader of this song. Camp, where did you learn this song?*

**Morris:** *I learned it, uh, radio.*

**JAL:** *On the radio. It's not a Georgia song, then?*

**Morris:** *No sir, it's not a Georgia song.*

**JAL:** *All right. All right, Miss Terrill.*

## **9. JUST AS WELL GET READY, YOU GOT TO DIE** (AFS 4069-B1 and 4069-B2)

Performed by Blind Willie McTell (vocal and 12-string guitar).

Recorded by John A. Lomax and Ruby T. Lomax at Atlanta, Georgia, on November 5, 1940.

Blind Willie McTell performs this medley of three tunes (one instrumental and two vocals) as illustrations of a long-meter hymn and two spirituals. He later recorded the title tune as “You Got to Die” in 1949 (Atlantic LP 7224) and “Climbing High Mountains” as “Trying to Get Home” that same year (Biograph LP 12008). He associates this material with his parents’ generation, in the late-nineteenth century and obviously after Emancipation, since he speaks of them making money for their work in the fields. The untitled hymn at the beginning, however, is from an older layer of tradition. There seems to have been a practice of adapting such hymns to slide-guitar performance, as witnessed in recordings by Blind Willie Johnson, Charley Patton, and Jesse Fuller. The slide technique is perfectly adapted to represent the melismatic singing style used for these songs.

**McTell (spoken):** *I will demonstrate how our mothers and fathers used to wander about their work, when they used to sing those old-fashioned hymns. [Hums and plays guitar in an interpretation of a long-meter hymn.] Then you see 'em wandering around in their house early in the morning, cooking breakfast, trying to get ready to go to the field, try to make some of that old country money. And way back in them days I hear one old mother sing.*

*Lord, you just well to get ready, you got to die, you got to die.  
Just well to get ready, you got to die.  
It may be tomorrow; you can't tell the minute nor the hour.  
Just well to get ready, you got to die, you got to die.*

*Just well to live in union, you got to die, you got to die.  
Just well to live in union, [guitar completes the line.]  
May be tomorrow, Lord; you can't tell the minute or the hou— [guitar]  
Lord, you just well to [guitar], you got to die, you got [guitar]*

*Just well to love your enemies, you got to die, [guitar]  
Just well to love your enemies, [guitar]  
It may be tomorrow; you can't tell the minute nor the hour  
[Guitar] to get ready, you got to d— [guitar].*

**McTell (spoken):** *Way back in them days you see mothers and fathers wandering around the fields, singing.*

*I am climbing high mountains trying to get home.  
I am climbing high mountains trying to get home.  
I am climbing high mountains, Lord, I'm climbing high mountains.  
Climbing high mountains, trying to get home.*

*I am bearing the names of many, trying to get home.  
I am bearing the names of many, trying to get home, Lordy, Lord.  
I am bearing hard burdens, I am bearing [guitar]  
I am bearing hard burdens, trying to [guitar]*

#### **10. ALL NIGHT LONG (AFS 325-A1)**

Performed by Sophie Wing and mixed group (vocals).

Recorded by Alan Lomax, Zora Neale Hurston, and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle at Frederica, Georgia, ca. June 15–22, 1935.

Although this song does not break out in call-and-response shouting, it is the sort that easily could have done so, and often did on the Sea Islands. Performed by a large group in a predominantly heterophonic style, with some harmony and responsorial interjections, it seems to represent an old, possibly antebellum, layer in the spiritual song tradition. With its mention of Jesus' birth and death and the sun and moon, it may have been used in Christmas or Easter nighttime ceremonies. The leader's name is recorded as Sophie Wing, although she gives a different surname in her statement following the song.

*[...] night long.  
Jesus was born in Bethlehem, all night long.  
Jesus was born in Bethlehem, all night long.  
Lordy, who shall deliver poor me?*

*Oh, watch the sun, how steady she run, all night long.  
Oh, watch the sun, how steady she run, all night long.  
Oh, watch the sun, how steady she run, all night long.  
Lordy, who shall deliver poor me?*

*Oh, Jesus was born in Bethlehem, all night long. Good Lordy.  
Oh, Jesus was born in Bethlehem, all night long.  
Oh, Jesus was born in Bethlehem, all night long.  
Lordy, who shall deliver poor me?*

*Oh, didn't the moon went down in blood, all night long?  
Oh, Lordy. Oh, didn't the moon went down in blood, all night long?  
Oh, didn't the moon went down in blood, all night long?  
Lordy, who shall deliver poor me?*

*Oh, Jesus was born in Bethlehem, all night long. Good Lordy.  
Oh, Jesus was born in Bethlehem, all night long. Help me sing it, children.  
Oh, Jesus was born in Bethlehem, all night long.  
Lordy, who shall deliver poor me?*

*Oh, didn't they crucify my Lord, all night long?  
Oh, Lordy, didn't they crucify my Lord, all night long? Hallelujah.  
Didn't they crucify my Lord, all night long, children?  
Lordy, who shall deliver poor me?*

**Spoken:** *I'm Sophie Lemons from Simon Island, Georgia.*

#### **11. I GOT TO CROSS THE RIVER JORDAN** (AFS 4071-A2)

Performed by Blind Willie McTell (vocal and 12-string guitar).

Recorded by John A. Lomax and Ruby T. Lomax at Atlanta, Georgia, on November 5, 1940.

This is one of McTell's finest spiritual arrangements, demonstrating his sensitive touch on the guitar and his inimitable timing. He was one of the few 12-string guitarists to play without picks, which enabled him to draw out the full sound potential of the doubled strings. His instrument functions like a singing partner, often completing or filling in his lines. The song was obviously a favorite of McTell's, and he recorded it twice at this session. He later recorded it in 1949 as "River Jordan" (Regal 3280) and "I Got to Cross the River Jordan" (Atlantic LP 7224). It is a well-known spiritual in both black and white Southern tradition, often under the title "You Got to Walk That Lonesome Valley."

**McTell (spoken):** *Here's a song that I want to play that we all used to play in the country, old jubilee melody, "I'm Gonna Cross the River of Jordan."*

*I got to cross that ...  
Lord, I got to cross there for myself,  
There's nobody there can cross it for me.  
Lord, I got to ... there for my— [guitar completes the line]*

*And I got to meet my dear old mother.  
I got to meet her for my— [guitar]  
There's nobody here can meet her for me.  
Lord, I got to meet her for my— [guitar]*

*I got to stand my t— [guitar]*

*Lord, I got to stand there for myself.  
There's nobody here can stand there for me.  
Lord, I got to [guitar] there for my— [guitar]*

*Jordan River is [guitar]  
I got to cross there for my— [guitar]  
There's nobody [guitar] can cross there for me.  
Lord, I got to [guitar] there for myself.*

*And I got to face my dear Savior.  
I got to face Him for my— [guitar]  
There's nobody here can face Him for me.  
Lord, I got to face Him [guitar]*

*And I got to work for soul salvation.  
Lord, I've got to [guitar] there for myself.  
There's nobody here can work it out for me.  
Lord, I got to work out for my— [guitar]*

*So I got to meet my loving Father.  
I got to meet him for my— [guitar]  
There's nobody here can meet him [guitar]  
Lord, I got to [guitar] him for my— [guitar]*

*Ain't nobody here can [guitar]  
Lord, I got to stand there for myself.*

*So I got to lie in some old lonesome graveyard.  
I got to lie there for myse— [guitar]  
There's nobody here can lie there for me.  
Lord, I got to lie there for my— [guitar]*

## **12. I'M GONNA MAKE YOU HAPPY (AFS 8986-A)**

Performed by Buster Brown (vocal and harmonica).

Recorded by Lewis Jones and Willis James at Fort Valley State College, Fort Valley, Georgia, on March 5, 1943.

The Fort Valley State College Folk Festival was held every spring from 1940 to 1955. It was grafted onto the college's agricultural exhibition, called the Ham and Egg Show, held during the first week of March every year since 1915. It is not certain who originated the idea, but the festival had the vigorous support of college president Horace Mann Bond, director Edgar Rogie Clark, who later toured as a lecturer on African American folk song, and Frederick Hall, who had attended and observed the Eisteddfod festival in Wales. Willis Lawrence James of nearby Morehouse College in Atlanta, a noted collector, writer, lecturer, and interpreter of black folk music, was also instrumental in the organization of the festival. The program received further written endorsements from composer William Grant Still, writer Langston Hughes, and folklorists Thomas W. Talley, Louise Pound, and Howard Odum. Top prizes of ten dollars for best band and five dollars for the best of various solo instruments were offered to the performers, who came from the local area and as far as a hundred miles away. "Father of the Blues" W. C. Handy served as the head judge in the early years, along with Professors

James, John W. Work of Fisk University, and William L. Dawson of Tuskegee Institute. This was clearly one of the most formidable arrays of African American folk musicians, folklorists, composers, literary figures, and other intellectuals, along with sympathetic whites of similar backgrounds, ever assembled in the rural South. In 1943 *Life* magazine published a photo essay on the festival and the Ham and Egg Show.

Professor James had elicited the interest of the Library of Congress, possibly via John Work, who was planning a joint field project in Mississippi with Alan Lomax, to make recordings of the participants in the 1941 festival. Professor Work brought a recording machine from Nashville and filled seven discs with about thirty performances. After an unfortunate misunderstanding over expenses, which seems to have prevented recordings being made in 1942, Professor James and Lewis Jones filled eight discs with music at the 1943 festival, with a further fourteen discs made by James in August of that year.

Buster Brown apparently performed only at the 1943 festival, coming from his hometown of Cordele about forty-five miles to the south. He appeared both solo with his harmonica and as part of a four-member group that included drums, but he was only recorded solo. On stage he wore a white duck suit and demonstrated what was described as the “incredible feat of playing and singing at the same time.” This is not heard in his recordings in a literal sense, but perhaps it refers to his interjection of vocal whoops into his harmonica breaks. This technique of alternating blown and whooped notes or phrases was probably borrowed by harmonica players from the older panpipe (quills) tradition, through which it can be traced back to Central African musical practice. Quills were represented at one of the Fort Valley festivals, and the instrument and this playing technique have been noted or recorded across the Deep South and into Texas among African American musicians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Buster Brown’s more direct source, however, might have been harmonica player Sonny Terry, who used the whooping technique on many popular blues recordings accompanying Blind Boy Fuller and on a few recordings under his own name beginning in 1937. Brown clearly was listening to current blues records in this period, because his lyrics and vocal style in 1943 reflect influences from Fuller, vocalist Doctor Clayton, and singer/harmonica player John Lee “Sonny Boy” Williamson.

Brown was born in 1911 and played harmonica in the Cordele and Albany area before moving to New York City around 1956. In 1959, in an unlikely turn of events, his first commercial record, “Fannie Mae” (Fire 1008), became a number-one rhythm-and-blues hit, staying on the charts through the first half of the following year, even remaining for seventeen weeks on the pop charts. His records in succeeding years sold in smaller quantities, but he managed to sustain a performing and recording career through the 1960s, part of it in Chicago. He returned to New York and made his last recordings in 1972, dying in Brooklyn in 1976 after struggling with alcoholism in his last years. His “I’m Gonna Make You Happy” is related to a complex of folk songs known in black and white Southern tradition with a four-line verse structure containing repetition of the first line and a compound third line along with the usual refrain of “Oh, babe” or “Sugar babe.” The best known popular version was Little Walter’s 1955 hit “My Babe” (Checker 955), composed by Willie Dixon.

*I’m just a’ got to make you happy, babe.*

*Papa’s going to make you happy, oh, babe.*

*Papa’s gonna make you happy [harmonica fill*

*] Oh, mama, can’t you see?*

*I’m gonna make you happy, oh, babe.*

*I'm going to buy you a V-8 Ford, oh, babe.  
Going to buy you a V-8 Ford, oh, babe.  
I'm going to buy you a V-8 Ford; set steady, mama, just hold it in the road.  
Oh, baby.*

*Come take a walk with me, baby.  
Come take a walk with me, oh, babe.  
Come take a little old walk with me; oh, sugar, but can't you see?  
I'm gonna make you happy, babe, can't you see?*

*Left four this morning by the clock on the wall, oh, babe.  
Left four this morning by the clock on the wall, oh, babe.  
Four this morning by the clock on the wall; you must come at midnight or don't come at all.  
Oh, babe.*

### **13. SALLY WALKER (AFS 5161-B3)**

Performed by Sidney Stripling (vocal and banjo).

Recorded by John Work at Fort Valley State College, Fort Valley, Georgia, ca. March 6–9, 1941.

Little is known of Sidney Stripling, except that he came from Kathleen, Georgia, about fifteen miles east of Fort Valley. He may have only performed at the 1941 festival and is known to have died by 1945. His banjo style suggests that he was an older player, perhaps born in the nineteenth century. The chordal harmonic style with interpolated rolls and arpeggios was in vogue around 1900 and influenced the banjo style of early New Orleans and Dixieland jazz players. It is often played on a four-string banjo, which may be the type of instrument used by Stripling, and differs from the older five-string banjo style that features short melodic phrases, much offbeat playing, and extensive use of hammering and pulling-off techniques. Stripling made ten recordings at the 1941 festival, a remarkable mix of ballads, spirituals, blues, dance tunes, and children's songs. "Sally Walker" is of the latter category and stems ultimately from a British game song usually known as "Little Sally Water(s)." It is one of the most popular children's rhymes or games throughout America in both black and white tradition, perhaps because the game consists simply of a girl in the midst of a circle getting up to uncover her eyes and point out her beau. Stripling's text and many others, however, suggest something a bit more sinister, leaving it to the listener to imagine "the deed that she has done."

*Sally Walker, sitting in the saucer,  
Crying and weeping for the deed that she has done.  
Rise, Sally, rise; wipe your weeping eyes.  
Turn to the east; turn to the west.  
Turn to the one that you love the best.*

*Saddle up your horses; Sally, take a ride.  
Saddle up your horses, sweet bye and bye.  
Rings on your fingers, bells on your toes.  
Good time in your town, baby, everywhere you go.*

*Little Sally Walker, sitting in the saucer,*

*Crying and weeping for the deed that she has done.  
Rise, Sally, rise; wipe your weeping eyes.  
Turn to the east; turn to the west.  
Turn to the one that you love the best.*

**14. COON CI'NT (COONJINE) (AFS 5155-A2)**

Performed by Sidney Stripling (vocal and banjo).

Recorded by John Work at Fort Valley State College, Fort Valley, Georgia, ca. March 6–9, 1941.

This extremely important recording captures one of the seminal songs that ushered in the ragtime movement of the late nineteenth century. With its simple alternating two-chord structure, “Coonjine” was the perfect vehicle for neophyte guitarists, banjoists, and pianists to “keep up a racket” for dancers. Juli Jones Jr. (Will Foster) wrote in the *Indianapolis Freeman* in 1911:

Sometime along in the early eighties a triple combination of song, walk and dance by the name of “Coon Jine, Baby, Coon Jine,” sprang up among the roustabouts on the many boats and spread like wildfire. The song and dance found its way into the levee resorts, where all prosperous houses had old hand-me-down square pianos with a half dozen broken keys; yet these instruments were considered jewels in those days, as it only required a few keys to play the “Coonjine.” This is where the original ragtime started from—the quick action of the right-hand fingers playing the “Coon Jine.”

The coonjine is usually described as a lascivious dance in imitation of the shuffling walk of roustabouts on a swaying gangplank. Stripling’s tune is the one normally associated with this dance. A version was published by Fred Mack in sheet music in 1898, and pianist Georgia Tom Dorsey recorded “Kunjine Baby” (Vocalion 1450) in 1929 with Tampa Red and Frankie “Half-Pint” Jaxon under the name of The Black Hill Billies. Some folklorists have related the coonjine dance of the United States to an Afro-Caribbean dance called the *counjaille*, which turned up in and around New Orleans in the mid-nineteenth century. The latter is not especially associated with roustabout movements, however, and is described differently. If the two are related, the coonjine would appear to have undergone some sort of reinterpretation as it entered the roustabout context and then a popularization as part of the ragtime movement of the 1890s. It should perhaps be noted that the 1880s and 1890s were the era of “coon” songs and imagery in American popular culture. One scholar even suggests that the American dance got its name from the way a raccoon walks on a tree limb!

*I'm gwine to build me a new house sixteen stories high.  
When I get my new house done, I'm gwine to marry a wife.  
Mama don't 'low me to coonjine, papa don't 'low me to try.  
But every time I gets a chance, gonna coonjine anyhow.*

*Hey, baby, coonjine; hey, baby, coonjine.  
Mama don't allow me to coonjine.*

*I'm gwine to build me a new house sixteen stories high.  
Every story of my house be made of pumpkin pie.*

**15. BREAKAWAY (AFS 5161-A1)**

Performed by Sidney Stripling (vocal and banjo).

Recorded by John Work at Fort Valley State College, Fort Valley, Georgia, ca. March 6–9, 1941.

This piece, sung in a falsetto voice, appears to be a throwback to Stripling's youth, perhaps around 1900 or earlier, when he was first learning to play the banjo. With the four strings tuned to an open chord, he alternates between two harmonies, using a movable fingering position on the first and third strings, picking individual strings in a raggy syncopated manner. The tune, with its scat singing, appears to come from the play-party and square-dance tradition.

*De da da, etc.*

*Got a little girl in Baltimore.*

*Got a little girl in Baltimore.*

*She won't be here no more.*

*She won't be back here no more.*

*Got a little girl in Baltimore.*

*She won't be back here no more.*

*Yonder she goes thata* [banjo completes the line]

*Yonder she goes thata* [banjo]

*Yonder she goes thataway.*

*My little girl in Baltimore,*

*She won't* [banjo] *here no more.*

*De da da, etc.*

#### **16. SEVASSAFOOL (SEBASTOPOL) (AFS 5161- A2)**

Performed by Gus Gibson (vocal and guitar) and Sidney Stripling (banjo).

Recorded by John Work at Fort Valley State College, Fort Valley, Georgia, ca. March 6–9, 1941.

Despite their somewhat tentative collaboration, this duet by Gibson and Stripling is another very important recording, as it encapsulates the replacement of the banjo by the guitar as the primary “plucked lute” of African American folk music around the beginning the twentieth century. With the guitar came the blues genre and the slide style, usually played with a knife or bottleneck: Among the widespread proto-blues of the Deep South are tunes played in this style and spread by itinerant musicians, hoboes, and street singers, with titles such as “Poor Boy Long Way from Home,” “Paralee,” and “Blind Man Stood on the Road and Cried.” Gibson seems to make reference to all of these variants in his fragmented, allusive text. For the slide style, the guitar is normally in either “Spanish” or “Sebastopol” tuning. Both are open chords, the first in a G or A range and the second in a D or E range (actually, F in this recording). They are named after virtuoso instrumental pieces in the American “classical” parlor-guitar tradition of the nineteenth century, “Spanish Fandango” and “The Siege of Sebastopol,” which employ these special tunings. The latter tune is not documented in Southern folk instrumental tradition, but it has at least given its name to a widespread guitar tuning, sometimes also called “Vastapool,” “Vestibule,” and “Faster Feel.” Gibson plays in this tuning, which in the key of E would be (from high to low) E–B–G#–E–B–E. Stripling tunes the four strings of his banjo identical to the four highest of Gibson's guitar, the same

tuning that he used on “Breakaway.”

Dolphus “Gus” (perhaps Gustavus Adolphus) Gibson was mentioned in a festival program announcement as one of “our folk performers ... frequently astonishing in their virtuosity.” He was born on the first day of the twentieth century and lived virtually all of his life in Fort Valley, where he was found in musical retirement in 1974 by Bruce Bastin and Peter Lowry. He is definitely known to have played at six festivals between 1941 and 1953, and probably performed at virtually all of them over the fifteen-year run. He was a prizewinner in 1941, when he recorded this piece. Gibson began playing guitar around 1912, learning blues, rags, and church songs from other local musicians. He performed in the territory between Americus and Macon and did farm, railroad, and sawmill work.

*I don't know; I love you, gal.* [?]

*I don't know; I love you, gal.* [?]

*Poor boy long way from* [guitar completes the line]

*Paralee sat on the road and cried.*

*Paralee sat on the road and cried.*

*I love you, gal, so long.*

*Baby, my love, where you been so long?*

*Poor boy long way from* [guitar]

#### **17. JOHN HENRY (AFS 259-A2)**

Performed by Reese Crenshaw (vocal and guitar).

Recorded by John A. Lomax at State Prison Farm, Milledgeville, Georgia, on December 15, 1934.

“John Henry” is perhaps America’s best-known folk ballad and certainly one of its most beloved. Most people outside the singing tradition view it as the story of a spike-driving contest between the black laborer John Henry and a steam drill, ending with the triumph of man over machine but followed by the man’s tragic death from overexertion. These events are most often related to the construction of the Big Bend Tunnel in West Virginia between 1870 and 1872, with no certain evidence beyond the testimony to that effect contained in a number of the ballad texts themselves. This makes an attractive story, but the actual picture of the “John Henry” folk song is much more complex and confusing. The song was not collected until 1909, and most of the earliest versions are from white singers in the Appalachian Mountains, despite the fact that the protagonist is almost always viewed as black. In its tune and in some commonly sung lines of text, the ballad also has clear links to the British singing tradition, although its basic story is quintessentially American. However, many black folk guitarists born around 1900 or even earlier have cited “John Henry” as the first song they heard or learned to play, quite often in the slide style. The nonchronological narrative style of many versions also is more typical of the black American tradition. Many versions by black singers especially avoid mention of the heroic contest or make only vague allusions to it, as is the case with Reese Crenshaw’s version here.

Crenshaw’s performance is a typical slide-guitar rendition of the song. His text is an exaltation of the working man, juxtaposing images of family solidarity with John Henry’s assertions of his dignity to his boss. Combined with an excellent musical performance, this is folk poetry of remarkable power and integrity. There is no biographical information about the

performer.

*John Henry said to his captain,  
Said, "A man ain't nothing but a man.  
'Fore I let your steel drill beat me down,"  
Says, "I'll die with the hammer in my hand,"  
Says, "I'll die with the hammer in my hand."*

*John Henry had a little boy,  
And he held him in the palm of his hand.  
John Henry told unto his little boy,  
"Gonna be mama's little steel-driving man,  
Mama's little steel-driving man."*

*John Henry told his captain,  
"Don't see what in the world it can be."  
Says, "Them doggone mens don't do a thing, boys.  
You don't dog nobody but me.  
You don't dog nobody but me.  
You don't dog nobody but me.  
You don't dog nobody but me."*

*John Henry had a woman.  
Her name was Polly Ann.  
John got to the day he had to go home.  
"Honey, here's your steel-driving man.  
Honey, here's your steel-driving man.  
Honey, here's your steel-driving man."*

*John Henry had a woman,  
And the dress she wore was red.  
Says, she went down the track until she never looked back.  
Says, "I'm going where my man fell dead.  
Going where my man fell dead."  
Says, "I'm going where my man fell dead."*

#### **18. FAST TRAIN (AFS 5167-B1)**

Performed by John Lee Thomas (speech and harmonica).

Recorded by John Work at Fort Valley State College, Fort Valley, Georgia, ca. March 6–9, 1941.

John Lee Thomas from Griffin, fifty-five miles north of Fort Valley, was a prizewinner on harmonica at the 1941 festival. He also appeared in 1942 and 1945, playing a musical saw on the last occasion. His fine playing appears to be influenced by that of the great DeFord Bailey, who appeared weekly for about fifteen years prior to Thomas's performance on the Grand Ole Opry radio program from Nashville.

The harmonica entered black American musical tradition around the end of the nineteenth century. Many early pieces were imitations or interpretations of ambient sounds, such as hounds and other animals, trains, and crying babies. Almost every black harmonica player

through the 1940s knew a train piece such as this, but these declined in popularity as the harmonica became more of a band instrument and an accompaniment to blues singing. A close variant of Thomas's spoken introduction was sung by the I. C. (Illinois Central) Glee Club Quartet of Memphis on "Panama to Chi" (Okeh 8929), recorded in 1930.

**Spoken:**

*Anybody in hyar gwine anywhar,  
Better get your suitcase and get out o' hyar,  
'Cause the train in hyar gwine every whichawhar.  
All right, boy, get me coal in there. Let's go ride. She late on schedule now.  
Looky, looky, boy, looky.*

**19. POOR JOE BREAKDOWN (AFS 312-A2)**

Performed by Robert Davis (guitar).

Recorded by Alan Lomax, Zora Neale Hurston, and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle at Frederica, Georgia, ca. June 15–22, 1935.

The week that Alan Lomax, Zora Neale Hurston, and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle spent at Frederica on St. Simon's Island yielded not only the expected batch of spirituals (cf. track 10) but, perhaps unexpectedly, some secular instrumental music in blues and ragtime styles known locally as "jooking." Most of it came from the Davis brothers and their associates. These young men, like many others on the Sea Islands during the Depression, had sought work away from home in migratory occupations and as merchant seamen. It is very likely that at least some of their secular music reflects influences picked up on their travels, as the older traditions of the Sea Islands are almost all religious or related to work and children's activities. Robert Davis's "Poor Joe Breakdown," played in open G (actually G# here) or "Spanish" tuning (from high to low, D–B–G–D–G–D), in fact, displays the influence of recordings made by Atlanta 12-string guitarist Barbecue Bob (Robert Hicks) between 1927 and 1930. The listener will note that Davis plays the tonic and subdominant harmonies in this blues instrumental, but like many folk blues guitarists, seems to avoid any full expression of the dominant chord. Robert Davis died in 1953. His brother John, who also played guitar and was recorded more extensively in 1935, recorded again for Alan Lomax as part of the Georgia Sea Island Singers.

**20. WAR SONG (AFS 6987-B)**

Performed by Buster Brown (vocal and harmonica).

Recorded by Lewis Jones and Willis James at Fort Valley State College, Fort Valley, Georgia, on March 5, 1943.

Brown displays here his technique of seamless transition between singing, whooping, and harmonica playing, keeping up a continuous stream of sound so that the listener feels no breaks in the music. Guido van Rijn has recently studied all of the blues and gospel songs recorded on the subject of World War II, and has found that they universally and enthusiastically supported the American military effort. Buster Brown's lyrics are original except for the first line, which is taken from Blind Boy Fuller's 1940 recording of "When You Are Gone" (Okeh 05756), made in response to the military draft preceding America's entry into the war. In the second stanza, Brown expresses a sentiment commonly found in blues and gospel songs about war: that the world has gone crazy.

**Lewis Jones:** *This is Buster Brown and his "War Song."*

*Well, this war is raging; Uncle Sam is calling by one, two, and three.  
Yes, this war is raging; Uncle Sam is calling by one, two, and three.  
Know it's bad for us to grumble; we going to see what the end gon' be.*

*Yes, the bombs are fallin', poor people runnin' every whichaway.  
Yes, the bombs is fallin'; poor people runnin' every whichaway.  
It's got the whole world on a wonder; Lord, what's the matter with the cruel world today?*

*Well, the Germans keep coming; we keep marching forwards there.  
Yes, the Germans keep coming, but we keep marching forwards there.  
If we don't meet 'em on the ground, say, we'll be bound to meet them in the air.*

## **21. SOUTHERN RAG (AFS 6988-A2)**

Performed by James Sneed (vocal and washboard), J. F. Duffey (guitar), and Alvin Sanders (guitar).

Recorded by Lewis Jones and Willis James at Fort Valley State College, Fort Valley, Georgia, on March 5, 1943.

This trio performed at the festival in Fort Valley in 1942 and 1943, and Sanders returned in 1944 to perform "Southern Rag" with a pianist. Sneed was from Montezuma and Sanders from Henderson, both about twenty miles south of Fort Valley. The group played in the nearby town of Oglethorpe. Duffey and Sanders were peach-orchard workers. The tune and the guitar part of "Southern Rag" are found throughout the South in African American folk tradition, often under the title "Candy Man." The washboard was widely used on blues, ragtime, and even jazz recordings of the 1920s through the early 1940s. By 1943 it was well on its way to being replaced by drum sets, but it still held on in places such as rural Georgia.

*Oh, babe, oh, babe.*

**Spoken:** *Oh, yeah.*

*You don't like the way I do, show me the way to go home.*

*Oh, babe, oh, babe.*

*Oh, baby, oh, baby.*

*You don't like the way I [instruments completes the line]*

*You don't like the way I do, show me the way to go home.*

*Oh, babe, oh, babe.*

*Oh, baby, oh, baby.*

*I'm gwine back, I'm gwine back.*

*I'm gwine back, I'm gwine back.*

*You don't like the way I do, [instruments]*

*Oh, babe.*

## **22. SMITHY RAG (AFS 5165-A1)**

Performed by The Smith Band (guitar, mandolin, kazoo, string bass).

Recorded by John Work at Fort Valley State College, Fort Valley, Georgia, ca. March 6–9, 1941.

Clifford William Smith was a blind professional musician from Macon, Georgia, who was adept on guitar, mandolin, and banjo. It is not certain which instrument he plays on this recording, which Bruce Bastin has identified as a version of the 1918 popular tune "Hindustan." The Smith Band is known to have performed at the 1941, 1942, and 1945 Fort Valley festivals, and Smith returned in 1951 in the company of a washboard and jug player called Bamalama. In 1942 he was listed as a resident of Riverside, a hundred miles to the south. While he normally called Macon home, he claimed to have traveled with string bands "from Cuba to Canada." If this is true, he outdid his friend Blind Willie McTell, who boasted to John A. Lomax that he had traveled "from Maine to the Mobile Bay." McTell's former landlord in Atlanta in the 1950s, Emmett Gates, told me in 1976:

He'd go to Macon, too, sometimes. There was a fellow down there named Blind Clifford. They had it out, if he ever stopped and sung in front of your door, somebody in the family would die. Willie told me he [Clifford] was better than he was about going different places. Now him and Willie was good friends. But he's been dead two or three years. And he'd go down there. He'd catch the bus and go on down just like I or you would, and come on back. Blind Clifford stayed in Macon. I guess he was born down there. But he'd come up here and go up the street, you know, and beg money, you know, catch the bus and go on back. See, Willie never did do that.

Smith's instrumentation is that of a classic string band of the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, including even a bowed bass. The kazoo, possibly played by one of the other instrumentalists, functions as a substitute for the fiddle, which seems to have been in short supply in the Fort Valley area according to surviving festival documentation. In 1941, when this piece was recorded, chief festival judge W. C. Handy brought with him as guests the pianist/composers Joe Jordan and J. Russell Robinson. They were so moved by the Smith Band's performance that Handy took out his trumpet and played lead with them while the other two alternated on piano and members of the student audience danced.

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CREDITS

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Every effort has been made to make these historic recordings sound as good as they did when they were made in the field. All transfers were made from the original source materials using the Prism 20-bit A-to-D converters and the Prism 20-bit Noise Shaping System.

DEEP RIVER OF SONG

*Deep River,*

*Deep River, Lawd,*

*Deep River, Lawd,*

*I want to cross over in a ca'm time.*

—From *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, by John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax

More than half a century separates us from the performances in this series, and nearly all of the artists who gave them to us have “crossed over” in that time, leaving us these treasures in trust so that we might be delighted, informed, and edified by them. Each song tells its own story, but together they form an epic of a people seeking to ford a turbulent river of oppression and disadvantage, who gave us another life-giving river of untold depth and riches; a deep river of song from which all may draw.

It was this that John Lomax and his son Alan sought to preserve and document when they began their field recording for the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress in 1933, and it was this same river that Alan Lomax sought to replenish when he and Peter B. Lowry reviewed more than a thousand field recordings of black music made by the Lomaxes

in the South, the Southwest, Haiti, and the Bahamas.

Alan Lomax spent the summer of 1978 in Mississippi with John Bishop and Worth Long, shooting the program *Land Where the Blues Began*. “I discovered to my consternation that the rich traditions which my father and I had documented had virtually disappeared,” he wrote. “Most young people, caught up by TV and the hit parade, simply did not know anything about the black folklore that their forebears had produced and which had sustained and entertained generations of Americans. I resolved to try and do something about this situation, so far as I could.”

Lomax and Lowry eventually compiled 12 albums at the Library of Congress, with more planned; these were “organized in a way that might help to show blacks and other Americans the beauty, variety, the regional traits and African characteristics of this great body of song.” These albums bear witness to a transformative moment when a new singing language, new musical forms, and thousands of songs that belong in the first rank of human melodies were created. They evoke now-vanished musical worlds, showing how black style developed as settlement moved westward from the Carolinas to Texas, and how regional styles branched forth along the way.

“[This music is] a thing of very great beauty—a monument to the extraordinary creativity of the black people of North America,” Lomax wrote. “No song style exists anywhere that can surpass this material for sheer variety, originality, and charm. Yet its most genuine aspects are little known today and are fast fading out of currency under the pound of the media.” He hoped that this series could help “restore to the American consciousness, and especially African-Americans, a heritage that is about to be altogether lost.” Perhaps now, as we have crossed over into the 21st century, we are close enough to the “ca’m time” of songs and dreams for this restoration to take place.