

### *Blues in the Mississippi Night*

This is the story of the birth of the blues from the mouths of three great bluesmen — Big Bill Broonzy, Memphis Slim, and Sonny Boy Williamson — who lived the epic of America's last frontier, when the lands of the Mississippi Delta were being reclaimed from the river by levees built by men and mules. Their songs and stories pinpoint the origin of the blues in the feelings of the African-Americans who inhabited a now-forgotten world of exploitation and anomie. They take us into the savage levee camps and prison farms, where forced labor from sunup to sundown was the order of the day, and where the pistol and race prejudice ruled. Few black men before them had ever dared to tell this story, and few have since told it with more eloquence.

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### *The Alan Lomax Collection*

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

1. LIFE IS LIKE THAT 2:56 Memphis Slim, Big Bill Broonzy, and Sonny Boy Williamson
2. CONVERSATION BEGINS 3:33 Big Bill Broonzy, Memphis Slim, Sonny Boy Williamson
3. LONG METER HYMN 1:07 Unidentified leader and congregation
4. CONVERSATION CONTINUES 1:06
5. I COULD HEAR MY NAME A-RINGIN' 3:39 Sonny Boy Williamson, Memphis Slim
6. CONVERSATION CONTINUES 1:53
7. RATTY SECTION :10 Memphis Slim
8. CONVERSATION CONTINUES 2:18
9. I'M GOIN' TO MEMPHIS/MATTIE WON'T WRITE :25 Memphis Slim
10. HAVE YOU EVER BEEN TO NASHVILLE? 1:23 Memphis Slim
12. CONVERSATION CONTINUES 3:59
13. STAGOLEE 2:20 Big Bill Broonzy, Memphis Slim, Sonny Boy Williamson
14. O 'BERTA 1:29 Bull and group
15. CONVERSATION CONTINUES 1:19
16. MURDERER'S HOME :47 Jimpson and group
17. CONVERSATION CONTINUES :22
18. DON'T YOU HEAR POOR MOTHER CALLIN'? 1:18 Hollie Dew, Bull, and group
19. CONVERSATION CONTINUES :37
20. SLOW LONESOME BLUES 1:13 Memphis Slim
21. CONVERSATION CONTINUES 5:38
22. ANOTHER MAN DONE GONE (*Beginning*) :39 Vera Ward Hall
23. CONVERSATION CONTINUES 1:56
24. ANOTHER MAN DONE GONE (*Conclusion*) 1:00 Vera Ward Hall
25. CONVERSATION CONCLUDES 7:03
26. FAST BOOGIE 2:26 Memphis Slim
27. BLACK, BROWN, AND WHITE BLUES 2:25 (*Previously unreleased*) Big Bill Broonzy

THE STORY OF THESE RECORDINGS —*Alan Lomax*

Listeners, remember that these recordings were made almost sixty years ago on a little portable disc machine. We were unable to remedy all of their technical defects, but we feel that the authenticity, the relaxed naturalness, and the unforced candor of this session more than compensate for an occasional bit of rumble or swish. Here, three great bluesmen sing and talk their hearts out as they search for the meaning of the songs they love. Their account brings us to the very source of a big river of the blues, which now uncoils in the ear of the whole world. Certainly some of their yarns are the stuff of legend, but they contain an inner core of truth that illuminates the experience of African-Americans in the South in the first years of this century.

Big Bill Broonzy, Memphis Slim, and Sonny Boy Williamson tell this story. All were born and reared in the Mississippi Delta, the land where the blues began. This enormously fertile world of river bottomland and tangled forest, of gigantic floods and water moccasins, cotton plantations, levees, and steamboats, lies south and west of Memphis along the Mississippi and its tributaries. A free and easy frontier atmosphere still prevailed in this river-bottom country well into the thirties, when we folklorists were finding and recording singers like Muddy Waters and Leadbelly and the Delta blues were being waxed by commercial companies in the North. In the Delta country, a system of levees (earthen dykes) had begun to contain the yearly floods so that huge tracts of rich, alluvial soil could be cleared and cultivated for cotton. Roads and railroads were rolling in to serve the giant new plantations. It was a vast dirt-moving, land-clearing operation that required a generation of black axemen and muleskinners. The higher pay drew thousands of workers from the farms into the construction camps, affording them a freer and more exciting way of life. Yet in this new, industrialized setting, "a man was just a face," his life was worth less than the mule he drove, and between jobs he often found himself a hobo — a "poor boy a long way from home." These black Delta laborers were among the first Americans to experience the sense of anomie that now hangs over so much of industrial civilization, and that is doubtless why their blues appeal to so many today.

*When a woman's blue, she hangs her head and cries,  
When a man gets the blues, he grabs a train and rides.*

For these men, wanderers from job to job and from woman to woman, love was difficult; a stable family life almost impossible. They felt like the little boll weevil — nobody wanted them. They walked down the rows of shanties singing the blues, hoping some woman would take them in:

*I ain't got nobody to feel my care.  
The freezin' ground was foldin' bed last night.  
If you ever been down, know just how I feel,  
Feel like an engine, ain't got no drivin' wheel.*

They had the low-down blues, the dirty and mistreated blues, the broke and hungry blues, the loveless blues, the evil-hearted blues. Having severed their ties with their home counties, where they understood local patterns of prejudice and where they were known to be the children of good old "so-and-so," they got the Memphis Blues, the Fort Worth Blues, the East St. Louis Blues, the Chicago Blues, the Southern Blues, and the Goin' North Blues.

*In come a man name Billy Gesseff,  
He was so bad he was scared of hisself.*

The Delta was, in a sense, the last American frontier. In many areas, right up through the thirties, the gun was still the law. Blacks and whites both were armed. The bosses gave orders with their hands on their six-guns. In the camp tents and bunkhouses, the blacks fought and often killed each other over gambling, over women, over nothing, and no peace officer could come on the premises to make arrests.

The repressive lawlessness of the post-Reconstruction era dominated the lives of blacks. The saying was, "Kill a mule, buy another one; kill a nigger, hire another one." A man leaving his plantation or small town home and taking to the road looking for a job might be arrested anywhere for vagrancy and sent to the chain gang for a few months. Again he might be picked up by a labor recruiter, taken deep into the forest, and held virtually at gunpoint at forced labor. There were less dramatic fates, but the threat of prison and the penitentiary loomed for any black man without connections to some influential white person. Since most of the African-American working class was close to illiterate, the South enclosed them like a dark prison in which they were lost and, in a very real sense, trapped.

Nonetheless, their rich cultural background lit up this darkness. Employing their complex heritage of dance, melodic improvisation, and ensemble forms of Old World origin, African-Americans revoiced the instruments and reshaped the dance music of their white neighbors. Like their African ancestors, they used songs to ease their labor in the hot sun, singing together in inspiring unison when the work could be done rhythmically. When they were handling animals or plowing, they recalled the plaintive, free-rhythmed, highly ornamented work songs with which their forebears had spurred on their draught animals. The levee camp holler, sung in its myriad forms by thousands of muleskinners, is the most clearly African tune we have found in black American folklore. It is not only the essential Delta song; it also enshrines the basic elements of the blues' melodic style. At some point, Delta instrumentalists composed accompaniments for these lonesome tunes, and from this discovery the blues were born.

The blues proper has always been dance music. The early blues were performed for the slow drag dance in which couples pressed belly to belly together, grinding their hips in a sort of vertical intercourse. This dance was looked upon as scandalous by proper Delta folk, but it suited the Delta honky-tonk crowd.

The dance tradition of the Delta was rich with African influence. The Mississippi backwoods picnic dancing to the fife and drum precisely matches similar amusements in West Africa. In Mississippi, a rural drumming tradition and the playing of the single-string diddley-bow preserved the bilateral and polyrhythmic African instrumental playing style. It lived on in the syncopated, heavy bowing of Delta fiddlers, the double thwacking of Delta banjo pickers, the bottleneck style of Delta guitar players, and the strongly left-handed approach to the piano, which provided instrumental commentary to the bluesman's improvised lyrics. "Talk to me, sing back to me," he said to his guitar, and if he was a good picker, he could make it sing his verse back to him with all of its nuances. With his feet beating out drum rhythms on the shanty floor, one blues musician could make the music for a dance that might last 'til Monday morning.

As the dance crowds got bigger, moving from shacks on the cotton row, to the crossroads bar, to the small town dance halls and ballrooms, orchestras grew in size and volume and the piano and electrification were added. However, until Chicago producers came to dominate blues recording sessions, the country blues styles endured. It can still be heard in many parts of the Deep South today.

Until the blues emerged full-blown, most African-American music had been choral. The key model was the ring shout, in which all the participants sing, clap, and dance collectively. In the Delta, where the individual had drifted away from his home community, the solo styles of the holler and the blues became the cherished expressive form. The bluesman's role was to voice the ironies, disappointment, heartbreak, and suppressed anger which plagued the black community. Many early singers drew on their acquaintance with Southern white lyric songs and ballads in devising the new forms. Early blues sometimes ran to multiple repetitions of a single line. A favorite form was the two-line stanza of the levee camp song, but other forms broke up the phrases in complex and syncopated ways. The three-phrase form became standard only in the urban blues of Chicago, fostered by the Chicago recording industry. But improvisation in lyrics, melodic variation, and a changeful vocal and instrumental style gave every singer a chance to put his own stamp on the blues. This put him in an enviable position. As one singer said, "If I wanted any woman, all I had to do was play hard and she'd come up and kiss me, and her own husband couldn't drag her home." Often the bluesman had to run for his life. Death by violence has been the fate of many famous bluesmen, from Robert Johnson on.

It was our good fortune that soon after the blues became a fully developed form they were put on commercial records. The early records had fabulous sales for that time, and the blues singers and composers, now having a means for making money and perpetuating their art, rushed to make thousands of records. A whole school of semi-professional musicians arose, and their records document the great migration in the years after World War I when blacks moved north in search of better opportunities. The morality and the old neighborly ways of Southern rural and small town life, those that had supported women and children, were swept aside. This was the period when female blues singers like Bessie Smith began to sing the woes of women in a world of "careless love." The new urban blues voiced the sorrow and violence of this period in a fashion that

was often brutally realistic. Nonetheless, after each bitter and ironic verse, the audience rejoiced, often roaring with laughter. Their troubles had been voiced with wit, and, relieved of their melancholy, they felt freed of restraints and could give themselves up to the pleasures of the evening.

When I traveled in the South as a young man collecting folk songs, I felt that the Southern system of black oppression resembled that of the fascist regimes against which America was then beginning to struggle. I realized that a black man who wore the wrong expression on his face or did not move off the sidewalk to accommodate a white man might be subjected to terror just like a radical or a Jew in Germany. Few people spoke of these things, least of all blacks, because they were afraid of being reported. They kept a smiling face toward the world because any other expression could get them into trouble. And trouble could lead from bad to worse, and in the worst cases to violence and death .

Amazingly, most Southern whites believed that blacks were happy with their lot. Well-informed Southerners insisted that their black servants and laborers were contented because, when asked, the blacks said they were — they knew better than to say anything else. In fact, these wishful white folks were deceived by the lively interactive mannerisms of African-American culture. The sanguine masks blacks wore to win white approval convinced most Southern whites that nothing was wrong.

I was convinced, however, that my Southern white friends were fooling themselves. I felt that Southern writers, like Faulkner and Wolfe, were party to this Southern myopia. Thus, timidly, I began, when no whites were present, to introduce myself formally to blacks, shaking hands and addressing them with normal terms of respect. In a couple of places, the "law" heard of my outlandish behavior and threatened me with jail for "callin' a nigger 'Mister.' " But I was soon rewarded as blacks began to speak more candidly with me.

In those years I had started to do extended biographical interviews on the portable disc recording machine, as I had heard my colleagues in the former Soviet Union were doing. Among these were the life story of Leadbelly and the recorded biography of Jelly Roll Morton. The tape machine made this work easier. By the late forties I had put together a sizable batch of taped interviews with African-Americans in Mississippi, in which they candidly discussed their problems. I played this tape for Hodding Carter, the crusading editor of the *Greenville Press*. He was moved and astounded by what he heard, but he warned, "Alan, I want to give you one piece of advice. Lock those tapes in the trunk of your car and head for the Mississippi line, because if they catch you with them here I don't know what I would be able to do for you."

During those years I would drive to Chicago to revel in the atmosphere of the South and West Side blues joints. I visited Big Bill Broonzy in his rented room, lit by a single lightbulb hanging at the end of a flyspecked wire, and watched as he wrote lyrics for his next blues session with a stub pencil on a school tablet. Bill struck me as being as wise as he was big, warm, and talented. He introduced me to Memphis Slim and Sonny Boy

Williamson. Over a midnight bottle of bourbon, I learned that Memphis and Bill had grown up in the Arkansas River bottoms, and I delighted them by singing some snatches of Arkansas prison work songs that I knew. Perhaps they assumed that I had served time in the Arkansas state pen, as apparently they had. Anyhow, the conversation took a warmer turn and they agreed to do a blues concert in the Midnight Special series I was then producing at Town Hall in New York.

When they came to the city, they slept at my place in the Village in order to save hotel money. They played with my daughter Anna and sampled our Southern cooking. That night, the trio tore the house down at Town Hall, discovering a new audience that appreciated their Delta music. The moment seemed right for a productive recording session, and they were eager for it. I took them to Decca, where we had a whole studio to ourselves that Sunday. I put my little one-celled Presto disc recorder on the floor and sat at their feet, flipping the discs. There was only one microphone. We had a couple of drinks.

Memphis began with "You got to cry a little, die a little," and when the last golden chord died away, I said, "Listen, you all have lived with the blues all your life, but nobody here understands them. Tell me what the blues are all about." That was the last thing that I said for two hours. My Chicago friends began a conversation with each other that grew more intense as the afternoon wore on. I think that they really forgot that I was there as they talked, played, and sang together. It was almost as if the Mississippi night had closed in around us while they created a sort of one-act play about the strange events and the sorrows of Delta life.

Big Bill, a powerful man of great intellect and noble presence, was older than the others and played a Socratic role, gently drawing his young friends into deeper levels of the drama. Memphis Slim, then one of the finest boogie pianist in the world, bore a mood of worldliness and affability, and occasionally offered humorous counterpoint to Bill's graver observations. Sonny Boy, with all his madcap gifts was a little simple, and his two friends would gently kid him so that he, with great delight, could take the comic role in the play.

They began with the blues as a record of the problems of love and women in the Delta world. They explored those problems' causes in the stringent poverty of black rural life. They recalled the challenges of life in the Mississippi work camps, where the penitentiary stood at the end of the road waiting to receive the rebellious. Then, overwhelmed by the absurdities of the Southern system they had described, they laughed their way to the end.

Here, at last, black working-class men had talked frankly, sagaciously, and with deep resentment about the inequities of black life in America. They had put on record the unknown Southern story, with all of its violence, tragedy, and absurdity, exposing things that Twain didn't know and Faulkner didn't tell us. To me it seemed that a new order of documentation had emerged, in which members of a tradition presented their own cases to each other — unscripted, unprompted, and without an intermediary. But Big Bill and

his friends had a different reaction.

When I played the records back, they were terrified, and begged me never to tell anyone they had made them. "You don't understand, Alan. If these records came out on us, they'd take it out on our folks down home — they'd burn them out and Lord knows what else." They insisted that I never reveal their identity. And so, in BBC broadcasts, in articles, and on the original United Artists edition of this recording, I disguised the location of the session and gave my friends fictitious names. Only now that all three are dead do they receive credit for having brought into vivid and terrible light their stories of the land where the blues began.

As we staggered out into the Sunday afternoon sunlight, somehow the subject of space flight came up. Bill and his buddies began to sound off about what the people on the moon would be like. "Man," said Big Bill, "They gonna be so ugly, if you threw 'em into the Mississippi River, you'd skim ugly for six months!" "That's right," said Sonny Boy, "They got feet comin' out of their ears and eyes comin' out of their toes, and their mother would cry if she looked at 'em!" They kept on in their tomfoolery until we were all weak with laughter, like actors after a big evening in the theater. But they had had a bellyful of reporting the truth. They caught the first thing smoking to Chicago, and I heard no more from them for many years.

The interview appeared in a semi-fictionalized form in *Common Ground* (Summer 1948, pp. 38-52) under the title *I Got The Blues*.

#### INTERVIEW TEXTS AND SONGS

Here follows the full text of the three-way conversation between Big Bill Broonzy, Memphis Slim, and Sonny Boy Williamson on this recording. Editing has removed external noises, disturbing pauses, and the like. Some field recordings of African-American folk songs have been added for illustrative purposes.

#### 1. LIFE IS LIKE THAT

**Memphis Slim, piano and vocal; Big Bill Broonzy, guitar; Sonny Boy Williamson, harmonica.**

*You got to cry a little, die a little,  
Well, and sometimes you got to lie a little.*

#### **Chorus:**

*Life is like that,  
Well, that's what you've got to do,  
Well, if you don't understand,  
Peoples, I'm sorry for you.*

*Sometimes you'll be held up,  
Sometimes held down,*

*Well, and sometimes your best friends  
Don't even want you around, you know... (Chorus)*

*There's some things you got to keep,  
Some things you gotta repeat,  
People, happiness, well,  
Is never complete, you know... (Chorus)*

*Play it, boys! Lay on that guitar for me!*

*Sometimes you'll be helpless,  
Sometimes you'll be restless,  
Well, keep on strugglin',  
So long as you're not breathless. (Chorus)*

**Big Bill Broonzy:** Well, some people say that the blues is a cow wanta see her calf, but I don't say it like that. I say it's a man that's got a companion, and she turn him down, and things like that happens, you know — and that's where I gets the blues from — when I wanta see my baby and wanta see her bad, and something happens, I can't find her — and that gives me the blues. So what do you think about it, boy? You got something to say about the reason why you have the blues?

**Sonny Boy Williamson:** Well, I tell you, Bill, it really worries me just to think, I used to have a sweet little girl, you know, named Estelle. You know, and we used to go to school together and we nach'ly grew up together, you know, we grew up together. In other words, I wanted to loved her, and axed her mother for her, and whereat she turned me down, and that cause me to sing the blues. See, I couldn't get her, see... I thought, that's the reason that I thought of "Little Schoolgirl," see, 'cause me and this girl used to go to school together, you know, and then er, uh, well, her parents thought I wasn't the right boy for her, you understand? And wouldn't make her happy and everything, and so they turned me down. And then I just got to sitting down thinking, you understand? And then I thought of a song, and I started to drinkin' and then I started to singin'... That's the way.

**Big Bill:** What was you drinkin'?

**Sonny Boy:** Ah well, you know at that time out in the hills, like that, you couldn't get this good whiskey, you had to drink what you could. I was drinkin', you know, some of that white corn whiskey, you know, made out of the real corn, you know?

**Big Bill:** I know what you mean.

**Sonny Boy:** And so that give me the blues... and I started.

**Big Bill:** OK. Well, now what d' you think about it?



**Memphis:** Well, about the blues — blues have helped me a lot. I mean, I still have the blues but... when I have troubles, blues is the only thing that helps me. I mean, that's the only way to kind of ease my situation. If I have lots of troubles, for instance, rent situation, and so forth and so on like that, the blues the only thing that gives me consolation.

**Big Bill:** Well, what about the places where you didn't have to pay rent — just go on a plantation?

**Memphis:** Well, I still had troubles.

**Big Bill:** Yeah, I know that.

**Memphis:** [Laughing] I mean, women troubles and so forth and so on like that. Blues is the only thing that, you know, I can consider.

**Big Bill:** Well, the thing I think about the blues is — it didn't start in the North — in Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, wha'soever it is. It didn't start in the East — neither in the North — it started in the South, from what I'm thinkin'.

**Memphis:** Blues started from slavery.

**Sonny Boy:** Yeah.

**Big Bill:** And it's what poor people... they got their, they got their rent and their grocery bill and everything all combined together at the same time — that's the way they paid it — they didn't know nothing, anything about rent and those things in those days.

**Memphis:** But you agree with me that blues help a man out. I mean... [Big Bill: Yeah, for the feeling... you, yeah, you can express your... ] ...you can sing and play the blues; you feel much better, if your wife left home and left you... something like that...

**Alan Lomax:** Yeah, but why did they start in the South?

**Big Bill:** Yeah, I agree, I agree on that. But the thing about it is this, eh... about your — it helps you, yeah, it helps anybody to explain what are they feeling. [Memphis: Expressing your feeling, yeah... ] Yeah, that's the whole... that's it. But the main thing is why the blues — why a fellow that uh, gets a hold of the blues — why do he have the blues?

**Memphis:** Well uh, the blues, and, uh — to my idea now — the blues, and the spirituals are somewhat on the same order, I mean if you have troubles, if you have troubles, you go to church and you sing and you feel happy... [Big Bill: That's right.] And, I mean, you get a little consolation there...

## 2. LONG METER HYMN

Unidentified leader and congregation, vocal. Recorded Rose Hill Baptist Church, Greenville, Mississippi, February 6 or 7, 1948.

*Solo: And pitied every groan...*

*Chorus: And pitied every groan...*

*Solo: Long as I live where trouble rise...*

*Chorus: Long as I live where trouble rise...*

**Sonny Boy:** Well, I tell you — here, here's my point. I think that er, uh, we colored people have had so much trouble, we's one nation that is, uh, we, uh... tried to be happy anyway — you ever noticed that? It's because we have never had so much, you understand, and you understand? We just try to make the best of life, do the best we can, you understand? [**Big Bill:** That's right.] We don't have nothing, but we try to be jolly anyway. We... don't let nothing worry us too much, you understand? And then we just — we go to them country suppers and... When I used to have a dollar in my pocket, I, I thought I was rich man, you know? You know, er uh, we, we never was uh, at least I wasn't — I never was use to so much and I all — I always had to work, you know? And I never did have so much — always had to work. [**Big Bill:** I understand] I, I 'member we cleaned up a whole bottom, you know, bottom with willows... [**Big Bill:** New ground, they call it.] Thick, yeah, uh huh, willows was thick and I stalled four mules to a wagon, you understand, four mules, you know, out in the bottom cleaning it up. We had to clean it up in the winter so that we could work it that summer, you understand?

**Big Bill:** Now what kind of songs, what kinda — did you have the blues down on places like that? What kind of blues did you sing down there?

**Sonny Boy:** Of course I did. I'll sing one of the songs that I made up when I was cleaning up this new ground down there. Here we go.

**Big Bill:** OK.

## 3. I COULD HEAR MY NAME A-RINGIN'

**Sonny Boy Williamson, vocal and harmonica; Memphis Slim, piano.**

*Lord, I could hear my name, my name a-ringin'*

*All up and down the line.*

*Lord, I could hear my name, my name a-ringin'*

*All up and down the line.*

*Now, I don't believe I was doin' nothin'*

*But gradually throwin' away my time.*

*Now, I know you don't love me, don't love me no more. (2)*

*I believe you lyin' to me when you say you love me,*

*I believe you love Mr. So-and-So.*

*(I believe I go back down to Mississippi somewhere...)*

*Well, I know you don't love me, you don't love me no more. (2)*

*I believe you lyin' to me when you say you love me,*

*I believe Estelle fell in love with Mr. So-and-So.*

**Big Bill:** And uh, the thing has come to showdown, and we really want to know why, and how come a man have the blues. I worked on levee camps, extra gangs, road camps, rock camps, and rock quarries and every place, and I hear guys singin' un-hmm, un-hmm this and mmmm that, and uh, I want to know and I want to get the thing plainly that the blues is something that's from the heart — I know that. And whensoever you hear a fellow singing the blues, I always believed it was really a heart thing, from his heart, you know, and is expressing his feeling about how he felt to the people — and that's the only way he know to say those things. I've known guys that wanted to cuss out the boss and he was afraid to go up to his face and tell him what he wanted to tell him, and I've heard them sing those things — sing words, you know — back to the boss, just be behind the wagon, hookin' up the horses or somethin' or 'nuther — or the mules or something. And then he'd go to work and go to singin' and say things to the horse, you know, horse — make like the mule stepped on his foot — say, "Get off my foot, goddam it!" or something like that, you know, and he meant he was talkin' to the boss. "You son of a bitch, you." Say, "You got no business on my ... stay off my foot!" and such things as that — that's the point.

**Memphis:** Yeah, blues is kind of a revenge, you know. You wanta say something, and you wanta, you know, signifyin' like — that's the blues, like a, you know, we all fellers, we had a hard time in life and like that, and things we couldn't say [**Big Bill:** That's right.] ...or do, so we sing it. [**Big Bill:** That's right.] I mean we sing...

**Big Bill:** Well, how do you... express those things, those words you sing? How do you sing a thing like that?

**Memphis:** Well, uh, like a friend of mines I know were down working on the railroad long years ago — I don't remember when it was — but he sang some songs for me, a little number called...

#### **4. RATTY SECTION**

**Memphis Slim, vocal.**

*O ratty, ratty section*

*O ratty, ratty crew,*

*Well, the cap'n gettin' ratty, ratty boys,*

*You know I'm gonna rat some too.*

Well, he couldn't speak up to the cap'n and the boss, [**Big Bill:** That's right] he wasn't doing anything, [**Big Bill:** That's right] he was laying out sleeping, but still had to work,

so it gave him the blues, and he couldn't speak his mind, so he made a song of it. He sang. [**Big Bill:** That's right.] Still, I say signifyin' and getting your revenge through songs.

**Big Bill:** Only thing I know really about a levee camp, 'cause I worked on levee camps, and I work on, uh... road camps, where they's buildin' roads, you know, and we put rocks down and where we built uh... you know, build it up — you know what I mean, and then we have graders that go along and grade it, and we fill up the holes and the sinks and things with slips and wheelers and stuff like that on the road, and then the rock gang come along and they put down sand rocks... [**Memphis:** Yeah.] ...you know those... know what I mean. Well, the only thing is a different between a levee camp and a prison farm is that a levee camp you can go from one levee camp to another when you get ready, you could run off, run — you could get away. [**Memphis:** Yeah, you could run off.] They didn't have no pay day there, you, you go and draw — what they call? Uh, you draw your... allowance, you know, and you get so much a week, and after that allowance is up, that's all you got, see? Maybe sometime you didn't get no pay at all.

**Memphis:** Yeah, and the most of us didn't know how to read and write and figure, [**Big Bill:** That's right, that's true too.] so they charged us what they wanta. [**Big Bill:** That's right.] They charged us \$25 for a side of... side meat or something like that, [**Big Bill:** That's right, yeah] and we had to stay there 'til we paid for that and we didn't know how much we were getting — maybe we get 25 cents a day... [**Big Bill:** That's right.] ...or something like that. [**Big Bill:** That's right.] So when we get ready to leave, says, "Well, you owe me \$400." [**Big Bill:** That's true, yeah.] I mean, for eating and sleeping.

**Big Bill:** And then, if you — suppose, suppose you be working a team of mules, and one of them get his leg broke and they have to kill him — that's *your* mule.

**Memphis:** Then you work the rest of your life.

**Big Bill:** That's your mule. You bought that.

**Memphis:** Until you slip off. You bought that —

**Big Bill:** Well, what you gonna say? If you say anything, maybe you go like the mule did!

**Memphis:** Huh...

**Big Bill: (Sings)** *Well, I'm here today, O Lord,  
But tomorrow I may be gone.  
Yes, I'm here today,  
But tomorrow gone.*

Can't you sing one of them things? You know that's the way, that's the way we used to

holler down there — how'd you used to do that?

**Memphis:** Well, I tell you, uh, levee camps and prison farms used to sing a song about...

## 5. I'M GOIN' TO MEMPHIS/MATTIE WON'T WRITE

**Memphis Slim, vocal.**

*I'm goin' to Memphis when I make parole,  
Stand on the levee and watch the big boat blow...*

You know what I mean?

**Big Bill:** Yeah, that great, that's good.

**Memphis:** They used to sing, used to sing that number, used to sing...

*Lord, I wonder what got the matter, Mattie won't write.*

You know, numbers like that, and, uh, in Nashville, Tennessee, used to sing...

## 6. HAVE YOU EVER BEEN TO NASHVILLE?

**Memphis Slim, vocal; Big Bill Broonzy, guitar.**

*Well, have you ever been to Nashville (3)  
Well, have you ever been to Nashville, (3)  
O Lordy, the Nashville Pen?*

*Boys, if you don't stop your stealin' (3)  
O Sonny — you goin' back again.*

*Yonder come Alberta (3)  
O Lordy, how in the world do you know?*

*I can tell by the apron (3)  
O Lordy, and the dress she wore.*

See, Bill, that's what I mean, that's part of the blues. [**Big Bill:** That's really good.] That's how the blues started.

**Bill:** You know, the way we lived in those, in those tents and things like that, and the food we had to eat was, uh, I, I, you know, it was, it was just really scrap food from what other people had refused, that they didn't want. [**Memphis:** Yeah.] Such as, you know what I mean, old bags of beans and stuff that they couldn't sell...

**Memphis:** Yeah, they take all that stuff and put it in a pot. [**Big Bill:** That's right.] And

they had a name for it in the camp I was on: "La-la-lu. If you don't like it, he do." [**Big Bill:** Yeah, yeah, that's right, yeah.] But you like it... you know what I mean? You might not like it when you first get there, but you like it.

**Big Bill:** You know what I mean, you see, they have those big truck patches they call 'em down there... [**Memphis:** That's right.] ...gardens, and things like that, and they just go out and pull up, uh, greens, you know, by the sacksful, you know... [**Memphis:** That's right.] ...and take 'em to the lake or creek or whatsoever you call it and...

**Memphis:** ...And shake 'em off and throw 'em in the pot...

**Big Bill:** Shake it in the water and throw it in the pot — in one of them big 52-gallon pots, you know, and cook all of the stalk and the, and the root.

**Memphis:** And if you found a worm in there and say, "Captain, here's a worm in my greens..." "Well, what the hell you expect for nothin?" [**Laughter**]

**Big Bill:** Yeah, yeah, I hear them say that. That's right, yeah, yeah.

**Memphis:** Here you go!

**Big Bill:** Yeah, that's true, too. Man...

**Memphis:** Some feller over along the table say, "Gimme that piece of meat!" You know, one of those things. [**Laughter**]

**Big Bill:** Yeah, yeah. You ever heard talk about the...

**Memphis:** I mean, they seem to got a kick out of it...

**Big Bill:** Well, in them times, what do you know? You don't know no better.

**Memphis:** They got a kick out of it! A lot of fun!  
"Gimme that piece of meat! Don't throw that away!"

**Big Bill:** You ever see, ever see those guys they call table-walkers?  
He get up from way down the other end of the table and walk right down through the table and pick up what you got, you know what I mean.

**Memphis:** Well, those guys, those guys, those guys... they were what you call tough people, I mean, they know they gonna get a whippin'.

**Big Bill:** Pull that .45 out and walk the table.

**Memphis:** Yeah, he knew he gonna get a whippin'. I mean, he pull that .45 on us, and when the white man comes, the white man whip him with his .45 on him... [**Big Bill:** Whip him, yeah, yeah.] He didn't... white man wouldn't have no gun or anything. [**Big Bill:** Naw, that's right.] He just come and say, "Lay down there, feller, I'm gonna whip you."

**Big Bill:** Yeah, and he lay right down...

**Memphis:** And he whip him, and then he get up and probably knock his gun outta his scabbard... [**Big Bill:** Yeah, holster, that's right.] ...and so he pick up his scabbard after he get his whippin', put his gun back on and go on back to work. [**Big Bill:** That's right.] And come on out there and kill one of us or something.

**Big Bill:** Yeah, yeah, yeah — that happens.

**Memphis:** In the meantime, about it... if you were a good worker, you could kill anybody down there, so long as he's colored. [**Big Bill:** Yeah.] You could kill anybody — you could go anywhere.

**Big Bill:** Yeah, you mean long as, long as you killed a Negro?

**Memphis:** Yeah, as long as you killed a Negro.

**Big Bill:** Yeah, that's right, that's right.

**Memphis:** You could kill any Negro — if you could work better than him — don't kill a good worker... [**Big Bill:** No, no.] ...and you were sorry... [**Big Bill:** Yeah, that's right, yeah.] 'Cause you go to the penitentiary.

**Big Bill:** What about... those guys that come out on those, on levee camps and extra gangs...

**Memphis:** Hustlin' around?

**Big Bill:** Yeah. They'd call 'em dudes and uh... card sharks and things.

**Memphis:** Well, a lot of those fellows, they made good levee camp workers out of 'em, [**Laughter**] you know — those dudes and sharks. A lot of them — they'd catch 'em. And 'course, a lot of these dudes and sharks was bad. [**Big Bill:** That's right.] They come around and they win your money and they kill you and they get away with it.

**Big Bill:** Well, I know one — they call him Mississippi. He was a dude, and and a, and a worker killed him, a boy named Albert. Well, the story is that this guy Mississippi, he came into All Time, Arkansas — that's the name of the town — and he was going with this boy's wife, Albert's wife, her name was, name was Pinky, and so he went to the

barrelhouse that night, come in there that night about 12 o'clock. He came in the barrelhouse and a gang of us was in there drinking and playing and going, and somebody hollered, say, "Look out, here's Mississippi!" So we all ranged — some of us runnin' in the back, and runnin' outside, and in the woods and different places. So, I heard him say that "I ain't come here to raise no sand with nobody but Albert." Say, "I come here to get Pinky out. I'm goin' home and sleep with her tonight." And she kept hollerin', say that she didn't wanna go with him, she wanted to go home with her husband. [**Memphis:** Yeah.] So, but anyway, he made her get out of there and go home and go to Albert's house where Albert had for Pinky to stay. So he went on to this house, and carried Pinky on there, and him and Pinky went to bed, and Albert seed those, see this window open, see, see Mississippi laying there asleep, you know. And he just crawled in the window, and went in there and shot him right through the head, killed him dead there, see.

## 7. STAGOLEE

**Big Bill Broonzy, guitar and vocal; Memphis Slim, piano; Sonny Boy Williamson, harmonica.**

*(Sings): I remember when I was a little boy,  
Sittin' on my mother's knee,  
She often told me the story  
About that bad man, Stagolee.*

*She says, Son, he was a bad man,  
He's the baddest man I know.  
Well, he killed Billy Lyons —  
Blue steel .44.*

*It was late last night  
Thought I heard my bulldog bark.  
Stagolee and Billy Lyons,  
Squabblin' in the dark.*

*Say they drug poor Billy Lyons  
All up and down old Murray Street.  
Poor boy was bloody  
From his head down to his feet.*

*Stagolee told Miz Billy Lyons,  
"You don't believe yo' man is dead —  
Why don't you look around the corner,  
See what a hole he have in his head."*

*Tom Devil, he asked his daughter,  
"Who can this bad man be?"  
Said, "It musta be the bad fellow*



*Called old Stagolee."*

### **8. O 'BERTA**

**Bull and group, vocal and hoes. Recorded by Alan Lomax, Parchman Farm, Mississippi,**

#### **(Chorus)**

*O' Berta, Lord gal,*

*O' Berta, Lord gal.*

*Well-a, ain't that 'Berta comin' down that road,*

*Well-a*

*Walk like 'Berta but she, she walk too slow.*

*Well-a, she walk too slow, baby,*

*She walk too slow, well-a*

*She walk like 'Berta, baby (buddy?), but she, she walk too slow,*

*Well-a*

#### **Chorus**

*Well, I bin callin' 'Berta for the, the whole day long,*

*Well-a, how can she hear me when she,*

*She ain't at home, well.*

*She ain't at home, baby,*

*She ain't at home, well,*

*How can she hear me when she, she ain't at home, well.*

#### **Chorus**

*Sally, when you marry, marry a railroad man...*

**Big Bill:** I been around where they have prisoners, and have them chained together. And uh, some of them, some chain gangs they just have chains with a big ball hung to their legs, and they make 'em work. And I've heard of chain gangs where they put a chain or rope or something on a guy and tie him to a stake, and they let him work 'til he get out to the length of that rope or that chain or whatsoever they have to him, they then pull that stake up and put him to another stake, then they let him work on around like that, see.

**Memphis:** If a feller, if a feller go to Cummins, and he get — they give them some of the longest time, you know. They give them a hundred years or 50 years or 75 years, or something like that. Well, after he was there a certain length of time and became used to it, they would make a trusty out of him, and give him a gun, he'd be a guard, he'd guard the short timers that had — they call them short timers — that had three to ten years, like that, see.

**Big Bill:** Alright, down there they whoop them down there, they whoop the prisoners down there... they... really lash them down there.

**Memphis:** Well, we're still referring to...

**Bill:** Cat-o-nine tails.

**Memphis:** We are still referring to the blues, so... Well, that give you the blues.

**Both:** Yeah, that's blues.

**Big Bill:** Right on... that's right.

**Memphis:** Down South is where the blues came from.

**Big Bill:** That's right. But where — the point... I'm trying to talk about is those fellows that they got down there, on them chain gangs with big balls hanging on their legs, can't go any place, unless there's a guard right over them and all that kind of stuff. Those fellows have the blues, too!

## 9. MURDERER'S HOME

Jimpson and group, vocal. Recorded by Alan Lomax, Parchman Farm, Mississippi, 194X.

*I ain't got long, O Mama,  
Ain't got long, I ain't got long, Lord,  
I ain't got long at the murderers home.  
Pray for me, O Mama,  
Pray for me,  
You can pray for me.  
Lord, I got a long hold over,  
I can't go free.*

**Memphis:** Yeah, well, I remember a friend of mine were down there — of course, he was in a much badder place than what you're talking about. He was a — it was so tough down there that they didn't put these things on them. They let them go. They want — they tell 'em to run, you know, "Run!"

**Big Bill:** The dogs is there to catch you or to track you — to watch wherever you run to.

**Memphis:** That's right, the dogs track you, the dogs track you down.

**Big Bill:** ...if you try to get away.

## 10. DON'T YOU HEAR YOUR MOTHER CALLIN'?

Hollie Dew, Bull and group, vocal. Recorded by Alan Lomax, Parchman Farm,

Mississippi, 194X

*Don't you hear your poor mother callin'?*  
*Don't you hear your poor mother callin'?*

*Now, callin' you, now Lord, she callin' you.*  
*Boys, she call like her house on fire. (2)*

*Burnin' down, now Lordy, burnin' down.*  
*You better run along home to your Mama. (2)*

*Run, boys, run my Lawdy, run, boys, run.*

**Memphis:** All the blues originated from such stuff as that.

**Big Bill:** That's what I mean about the heart part, you see. You singin' from the heart...  
[**Memphis:** That's right, that's right.] ...and the way you feel. It's not the way for nobody to play behind you.

**Memphis:** From experience... [**Big Bill:** Yeah.] ...and things you want to do, or want to know.

**Big Bill:** Things that have really happened to you, you know what I mean?

**Memphis:** That's right — that's the blues.

**Big Bill:** And, of course, you take, some people haven't had no hardships, and they don't understand how it is with the poor man that *have* had...

**Memphis:** Yeah, for instance...

**Big Bill:** ...And still having' em...

**Memphis:** For instance, classic and...

**Big Bill:** Yeah, that's it, see...

**Memphis:** ...Stuff like that and people like that... [**Big Bill:** Take the...] ...they don't know what blues is so... [**Big Bill:** That's it, see.] ...they couldn't play the blues even if they wanted to.

**Big Bill:** That's right.

**Memphis:** I mean, it takes a man that have the blues, to play the blues...

**Big Bill:** Well, you gotta be blue to sing the blues, it's true, yeah.

**Memphis:** That's right.

## 11. SLOW LONESOME BLUES

**Memphis Slim, piano.**

**Memphis:** You know, they passed a law in Arkansas — no hitchhiking. [**Big Bill:** Yeah.] And one afternoon I were hitchhiking, trying to get a ride to Little Rock, and so a feller by the name of Mr. Cuff, he was the baddest feller down through... [**Big Bill:** Yeah, yeah, he's a tough guy now] in the latter part of Arkansas. So he say, "What are you doing hitch-hiking here, feller, er, boy?" I say, well, say, "I am trying to get home to work." He say, "Where you work at? Who you work for?" I say, "I work in Hughes for Mr. Charlie Houlin." So he say, "Come on, I'll take you there." You know what I mean? [**Big Bill:** Yeah.] Any other time... [**Big Bill:** Yeah, yeah, he'd a whipped any other man] ...don't be working, you'd a got a whipping...

**Big Bill:** That's right. Yeah, that's right.

**Memphis:** ...and went to jail and went to the levee...went to the farm.

**Big Bill:** Went on the farm and work for no pay.

**Memphis:** That's right. So but since I was working for Mr. Charlie Houlin, he taken me to Mr. Charlie.

**Big Bill:** Yeah, he was scared, he even scared to bother you because you was one of his men.

**Memphis:** Right... he taken me in his car. [**Big Bill:** That's right.] He also gave me a drink [**Big Bill:** That's right.] Yeah.

**Big Bill:** They'll do that. [**Memphis:** Yeah.] [**Alan's laughter**] They'll do that, too.

**Memphis:** That's right. About Charlie Houlin... See, he was really a friend, I mean, we thought so anyway that time, to Negro people.

**Big Bill:** Well, that's, that's the man that we all run to in time of... just like...

**Memphis:** ...When someone mistreated us. [**Big Bill:** Loran, or some of those guys...] Otherwise, he was considered the mercy man. [**Big Bill:** Yeah, yeah.] I remember, I remember an incident happened in Hughes, Arkansas. They had a feller there named Charlie Homan that were running a honky-tonk.

**Big Bill:** That's right, barrelhouse, they call it.

**Memphis:** And uh, he had a lot of property there, you know, he had a lot of property there, he bein' a colored feller. So they hired a sheriff there, and uh, so this sheriff were living in one of Charlie Homan's places, houses. He wouldn't pay Charlie no rent, he were just staying there, and so every time that Charlie would ask him for some rent, he'd whip him. [**Big Bill:** Yeah.] So, he happened to be, as they say, one of Mr. Charlie Houlin's Negroes. So, so, Charlie Homan finally got up enough nerve to go tell Charlie Houlin, so Charlie Houlin tell the police, say, "Saturday evening at one o'clock, meet me, I'm killing you or you kill me." And I mean, that's no joke, that's what happened. So he met him that evening and he told him, say, "Well, I came to kill you — you been messing with one of my Negroes." So the police went to get his pistol, and Charlie Houlin shot him through the heart. So they pulled him over out the street and let the honky-tonk roll on.

**Big Bill:** Honky-tonk roll right on...

**Memphis:** Yeah, let the honky-tonk roll on.

**Big Bill:** Well, I — I've been in places that was, uh, levee camps. I've been in places where they have, um, you know, they have they dances, and they barrel-houses, what they call it, and Negroes all be in there gambling, you know, and they shoot a Negro down, you know what I mean, and uh, some little short guy be standing 'round the crap table, and the crap table is high — he can't get up there, and have to pull him up... [**Memphis:** Stand on him, stand on him.] ...pull that dead man up there, and stand on him and still keep shooting dice, see. [**Memphis:** That's right, that's right.] And I've heard Loran come around and say, "If you boys keep yourselves out the grave, I'll keep you out the jail." [**Memphis:** That's right.] Say, "If you kill a nigger, I'll hire another nigger," you know what I mean? "If you kill a mule, I'll buy another one." [**Memphis:** Yeah, Yeah.] You know, one of those things... You ever heard of that?

**Memphis:** Yeah, that occurred to me. On the levee camp they used to say, you know, when fellers would be so tired from carrying logs or something like that, you know, clearing a new ground, he say, "Burn out, burn up. Fall out, fall dead." [**Big Bill:** Yeah, yeah.] Yeah, just keep rolling, that was the best you could do. Work yourself to death or either you were a good man — that was all to that.

**Big Bill:** That's right, that's right. I have heard of those things, too.

**Memphis:** Burn out, burn up. [**Big Bill:** Um-hmm.] Fall out, fall dead. [**Big Bill:** That's right.] Yeah, so we had a few Negroes down there that wasn't afraid of white peoples and talk back to them. They called those people crazy...

**Big Bill:** ...crazy people. [**Memphis:** Yeah.] I wonder why did they call them crazy because they speak up for his rights.

**Memphis:** Yeah, they called them crazy.

**Big Bill:** Well, they do that, you know. I had an uncle like that and they, and they hung him. They hung him down there, because they say he was crazy and he might ruin the, the other Negroes. [**Memphis:** That's right.] See? And that's why they hung him, see, because he was the man, that if he worked, he wanted pay. And he could figure as good as the white man, and he had a good education as some of the white — better than some of the white people down there. Because a lot of them... [**Memphis:** Yeah.] ...down there would come to him for advice.

**Memphis:** Yeah, I think the white people there were just about, almost as dumb as we were.

**Big Bill:** I remember, I remember one time, my auntie, she had a baby, had a boy, see, he was about two or three, about two or three years old, yeah. And the white man come up there one day and he told him, he says, "Say, Jerry," he says, "I want you to get that woman out there and put her to work." Says, "There's no woman here sits up and don't work, sit up and in the shade, but Miz Anne." And my uncle say, "Well, who is Miz Anne?" He says, uh, "Miz Anne is my wife." He say, "Well, I'm sorry, mister. My wife is named Anne, too," say, "and she sits up in the shade. She don't come out in the field and work." He say, "She gotta come out — no nigger sits up there without working." He say, "Well, that's one Miz Anne is a Negro and she ain't going to work in the field," and he jumps off his horse. Well, he whipped him — my uncle whipped him, and run his horse on away, and then beat him up and run him away from there. So then he went to town and got a gang and come out there after him that night, and he shot all four, five of them, and they got away and so then they finally caught him, and they hung him. Yeah. About fifty or sixty of them come out there and got him and killed him. That was on account of he was protecting for his own wife, because he didn't want his wife to work out on the plantation; on the farm. His wife had a baby there at the house she had to take care of and she was expecting another one pretty soon, and he [the plantation owner] said that she wasn't, she wasn't too good to work because she was a Negro — she could work as good as any other Negroes on the place. That was the whole story about that.

## 12. ANOTHER MAN DONE GONE

**Vera Ward Hall, vocal. Recorded in New York City, 1948.**

*Another man done gone, (5)*

*He's from the county farm. (4)*

*I didn't know his name...*

**Big Bill:** The main thing about it — I've seed, I've seed this happen, too, in the South, that one boy down there he was, it was a white guy was liking the same girl that this colored boy was liking, and he told this colored boy not to marry this colored girl because he wanted her for hisself, and the boy told him that he loved her and he was going to marry her. He say, "Well, you can't get no license here." So the boy run off, him and the

girl, and went off to another town and they got married and they come back there and the man asked them was he, was he really married to her. And he said, "Yes." So the girl figured that if she show him the license, he would leave her go. So she showed him the license. Then they went up there and got him and killed him. And uh, then come back and got her and she was in family way; was expecting a baby, and they killed her. And then they went and killed his daddy and they killed his mother and then one of his brothers — he went out to fight, to try to protect them, and they killed him. So they killed twelve in that one family. That was in 19... 19... 1913. The boy was named Andrew, Andrew Belcher, that's the one they killed. The whole family was Belchers. That was at a place they called Londale; Londale, Arkansas. That's out from Goulds, from Goulds, Arkansas, out in, way out there in the woods. Killed the whole family out there. See, now the main thing they'll do down there, just like if uh, if I got three brothers — I go to work and do something to the white man and they can't catch me, they'll catch the other brothers.

**Memphis:** Anybody in the family.

**Big Bill:** Yeah, you see? And in the meantime, all the time you could do these things and get away and run off, but why do sumpin nuhther and get your whole family killed? You know what I mean? So that's what they know they got on you, see? And if they... if you got a family, they got a girl in the family that they like, you just want to let him have her, because if you don't he liable to do something, you know, that's outrageous, because when they see a Negro woman they like, they gonna have her if they want her.

*Another man done gone (4)*

*He's from the county farm (4)*

*I didn't know his name (4)*

*He had a long chain on. (4)*

**Big Bill:** What they, what they call a bad Negro is a Negro that... will really fight his own people.

**Memphis:** Anybody anywhere.

**Big Bill:** See? Then the Negro that will fight the white man, they call him crazy, they don't call him bad, see? Because, uh, fact of the business, they say he's gone nuts. The, the white man will call a Negro a bad seed among... just like you plant a seed... You know what I mean?

**Memphis:** Oh, yeah. He'd ruin the rest of the Negroes.

**Big Bill:** Ruin the rest of the Negroes... [**Memphis:** Yeah.] You understand the point that I mean now? Well, he would open the eyes of a lot of Negroes, tell 'em things that uh, that they, you know, they didn't know.

**Memphis:** Otherwise he was a smart Negro...

**Big Bill:** And he'd go around and get the *Chicago Defender* and bring it down there, you know what I mean, get it down through there and read it to the Negroes.

**Memphis:** Yeah, speaking of *Chicago Defender*, I were, I were in a place called Marigold, Mississippi. And you know, I, they had a restaurant in there and in the back they had a peephole. [**Big Bill:** Yeah.] And I thought they were gambling back there or something, and I went back there to see whether they was gambling. In fact, I was kinda stranded, I wanted to go back there and shoot a little crap... [**Big Bill:** Yeah.] ...and make me a little stake. And you can imagine what they were doing back there. They were reading the *Chicago Defender*, and they had a man on the door, with a...

**Big Bill:** A lookout man.

**Memphis:** Yeah — a lookout man on the door with a peephole. [**Big Bill:** Yeah, yeah.] And if a white man or something come in the restaurant, they'd stick the *Defender* in the stove, burn it up, and start playing checkers. [**Big Bill:** Yeah.] That's the way they had to smuggle the *Defender* down there. [**Big Bill's laughter**] That's what they really call a bad Negro, a Negro that had nerve enough to smuggle the *Chicago Defender* down in the state of Mississippi where they didn't allow them to put 'em off there.

**Big Bill:** Um-hmm. You see, that's what makes 'em so t'each'ous 'til today, because he have been denied in so many places until if a... gang is in a place and they say, "You fellers get back," or "get over there," or "don't stand there," or something like that, they figger right straight that you — you pointing out to the Negro, see? And a lot of times they don't mean that, they don't, they... really mean, they don't want nobody standing in that place, but the Negro thinks right straight that they... they preferrin' to him, because he's black.

**Sonny Boy:** Well, I'll tell you what happened to me... [**Big Bill:** Um-hmm.] I remember my mother, she brought a mule from uh, uh, they called him Captain Mack. You know, he's the boss of the county road...

**Big Bill:** Where was that?

**Sonny Boy:** That's in Jackson, Tennessee.

**Big Bill:** Jackson, Tennessee.

**Sonny Boy:** Um-hmm, he's the boss, he — we got it down there, the county road, you know, they take you out on trucks, you know, and you build bridges, and you dig ditches, and things like that, you know. 'Course they didn't use no chains. But, er, uh, he sold my mother a mule, so by me bein' young and everything, mother gave me the mule, and naturally — young boys, you know — I'd run the mule. 'Course, the mule, he was a nice lookin' mule. Well, finally, the mule, he got mired up in the bottom, you understand, and



the mule died... [Laughter]

**Big Bill:** Wait, wait. Wait a minute... mired up...

**Memphis:** Is that the mule you married?

**Sonny Boy:** [Stuttering]

**Big Bill:** What d'you mean — mired up?

**Sonny Boy:** The mule got mired up — let me finish this. [Laughter]

**Big Bill:** But wait now, wait — in mud, in mud...

**Sonny Boy:** In quicksand.

**Memphis:** Is that the mule you bought the hat for?

**Sonny Boy:** And the... the mule mired up and he died. And so, er, uh, this Cap'n Mack, he told mother, that, er uh, he was just crazy, said, "I'm just crazy to get that damn boy out there on the county road, I'm gon' do him just like he did that mule." And mother had to scuffle to keep me offa there. Every, every little move I'd make... See, he wanted me, he's gon' to — I thought he'd done sold the mule and she done paid him for the mule, but he gon' do me like I did the mule. He say I kill the mule.

**Big Bill:** Well, uh, how old was you then? You was young then?

**Sonny Boy:** Oh, I was young — I was around fourteen years old.

**Big Bill:** Fourteen years old then, huh? That word, that word. We'll go back to that word — uh-uh — what they say? Uh, "Kill a nigger, we'll hire another'n. Kill a mule, we'll [Sonny Boy joins in.] buy another'n." See, those things, all those things comes into that same word, see. Then fact of the business, eh, back in, back in those days a Negro didn't mean no more to a white man than a mule.

**Sonny Boy & Memphis:** Didn't mean as much.

**Sonny Boy:** Didn't mean as much as a mule.

**Big Bill:** You'll agree to that.

**Sonny Boy:** Now I agree to that.

**Big Bill:** Yeah, well, that's the point, that's the point we gettin' to now. You see, now you take a mule, they sell the mule. All right, then, and there was times they sold a Negro,

too. See, see? What they looked at was just a face — of a black man. I know a man at my home, they called him Mister White. That was out on a plantation — well, he had his own place there, it was about fifty or sixty miles of his place as square, you know what I mean? From one side to another'n, you know? And, uh, all his fences around his place was white. Trees, he painted them white, up as far as he could get. And all the cattle — uh, the sheeps, the goats, and the hogs, and cows, and mules, horses, and everything on his place was white. And any time that his cow, or his goat, or whatsoever it was have a black goat or a black sheep, or a black calf, a black colt, anything like that, he'd give it to the niggers. **[Laughter]** He didn't want, he didn't want nothing on his plantation black. You see, he didn't want no Negro to even come through his place. See? The highway, the Government highway, went through his plantation. And he... bought land around his plantation and built a road out to so Negroes couldn't come through his plantation at all — come all the way around, you know? See? Well, that state highway went right through, right through his place, but they didn't want no — didn't no Negroes come through there, see? When you git to there, when you git to that sign where it said, "Negro Turn," see, this is the main highway, well it says here, "Negro Turn," well, you turn off there, see, and went around his plantation, see. Well, anytime it was a calf or anything like that born on his place was black — he'd call up chickens, even down there black chickens; he had all white chickens, you know, his black chicken, chicken hatch off some black chickens, well he'd take 'em and find some Negro and give 'em to him, you know, see, and get 'em off his place. And I've known, uh, I've known, uh, it was a Negro and a white man standin', uh, well, it was right at a railroad crossing, you know, just as you get in town like where they cross the railroad track? And it was a two... negro and a white man standing there, you know, lookin', just standing there, talking. The white man was tellin' the Negro what he wanted him to do. And uh, it was a Negro was comin' drivin' a wagon with a gray mule and a black mule to the wagon, see. So this Negro drove up to the crossing, and the rail was kinda high there, see, and the wheel hit the rail, and uh, the mules was tryin' to pull over and he kept saying, "Giddup, giddup." So uh... the white man holler up there, ask him, says, "Hey," says "Do you know that's the white mule you talkin' to?" He say, "O yes, sir! Giddup Mister Mule!" **[Laughter]** But he wouldn't hit that, wouldn't hit that gray mule, you know. Wouldn't hit that gray mule. "Giddup, Mister Mule" — to the gray mule, you know. But the black mule, he'd hit the black mule, you know, sayin', hollerin', "Giddup, Mister Grey Mule — Mister, Mister Mule," you know, to the gray mule.

**Memphis:** Bill, what about that uh... Prince Albert tobaccah, you know?

**Big Bill:** Well, I do, I've heard of that in Louisiana.

**Memphis:** You couldn't, you know, if you go in a store, you didn't say, "Gimme a can of Prince Albert." Not with that white man on that can.

**Big Bill:** Well, what would you say then?

**Memphis:** Gimme a can of Mister Prince Albert.

**Big Bill:** Mister Prince Albert.

**Sonny Boy:** Good tobacchah!

**Memphis:** Mister Prince Albert tobacchah... That's what you say... I mean...

**Big Bill:** What was that at?

**Memphis:** That were all down through Arkansas, down... Gould, Dumas, Yonquipin...  
[Laughter]

**Big Bill:** Yonquipin, Yonquipin... [More laughter]

**Sonny Boy:** What?

**Memphis:** Yonquipin...

**Sonny Boy:** Get away! [More laughter]

**Big Bill:** Did you ever hear talk of Goatshead?

**Memphis:** Naw. No. Goatneck, you mean.

### **13. FAST BOOGIE**

**Memphis Slim, piano.**

### **14. BLACK, BROWN, AND WHITE BLUES** *(Previously unreleased)*

**Big Bill Broonzy, guitar and vocal.**

This little song that I'm singin' about,  
Brother you know it's true.  
If you're black and gotta work for a living  
This is what they will say to you.

#### **Chorus:**

They say if you's white, should be all right,  
If you's brown, stick around,  
But if you's black, well brothers, get back, get back, get back.

I was in a place one night,  
They was all having fun.  
They was all buyin' beer and wine  
But they would not sell me none. **(Chorus)**

Me and a man was workin' side by side,  
This is what it meant:  
He was making a dollar an hour,  
They was paying me fifty cent. **(Chorus)**

I helped build this country,  
I fought for it too.  
Now I guess you can see  
What a black man have to do. **(Chorus)**

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### **SINGER BIOGRAPHIES —Matthew Barton**

#### **BIG BILL BROONZY**

"When you write about me, please don't say I'm a jazz musician. Don't say I'm a musician or guitar player. Just write Big Bill was a well-known blues singer and player and has recorded 260 blues songs from 1925 up 'til 1952. He was happy when he was drunk and playing with women; he was liked by all the blues singers, some would get a little jealous sometimes but Bill would buy a bottle of whiskey and they all would start laughing and playing again..."

Big Bill Broonzy's self-composed epitaph is like one of his songs — direct but warm, funny but ironic, self-effacing but proud, wistful but resolved; yet it only begins to tell the story of a man whose life and art transcended musical and national boundaries. Born William Lee Conley Broonzy in 1893 on a cotton plantation near Scott, Mississippi, he grew up there and in Arkansas, steeped in the Delta Blues style as well as the earlier African-American styles of the rural South. His first instrument was the fiddle and he often played with local musicians including a banjo-playing uncle. But he also learned much of his music as a manual laborer, first singing behind a plow on his father's farm, then later raising his voice to join other men in work songs as they laid track for the Cotton Belle Railroad Line. By 1915, Big Bill was married and trying farming for a living, occasionally playing his fiddle at local dances. In 1916, however, a drought wiped him out and he briefly worked as a coal miner until he was drafted in 1917. A two-year hitch in the army gave him a glimpse of the world and a desire to leave the South. "Keys to the Highway," probably his most famous composition, reflects both Bill's travels and the lot of the itinerant black laborer in the post-Reconstruction South:

*I got the keys to the highway,  
I'm booked out and bound to go.  
Got to leave here running,  
Walking's got most too slow.*

Arriving in Chicago in 1920, Bill worked as a Pullman Redcap and in the steel mills of Gary, Indiana, playing music on the side. Laying aside his fiddle for the more fashionable guitar, Bill picked up some extra money in local joints and at rent parties, and he began to record in the late twenties. In spite of painful early experiences with unsympathetic producers and sidemen, he persevered to become one of the most prolific of blues recording artists. As his popularity grew, he began to earn a bit more money from his music, though, like other black artists, he received no royalties for records he sold.

Bill's songwriting combined elements of mainstream pop and down-home blues. He often wrote complex texts that made extensive use of wordplay and double entendre, but the depth of feeling in his words came from the Delta country tradition. His songs could be world-weary but warm, like "The Sun's Gonna Shine in my Back Door Some Day," or they could be bitter and ironic, like "Romance Without Finance." He did well with racy numbers too, such as "Take Your Fingers Off It." On some songs, he combined all of these elements and more, reflecting the hopes and frustrations of Southern black immigrants like himself. In "Just A Dream," he sang:

*I dreamed I had a million dollars,  
Had a mermaid for a wife.  
I dreamed I wonned the Brooklyn Bridge,  
On my knees shootin' dice.  
But it was a dream, just a dream I had on my mind,  
'Cause when I woke up, baby, not a penny could I find.*

Bill's appearance at the historic Spiritual to Swing concert in 1939 didn't change things much for him. He was still playing at the joints in Chicago, picking up a recording fee here and there and working various day jobs. After appearing at Alan Lomax's Midnight Special concert series at New York 's Town Hall in 1946 with Memphis Slim and Sonny Boy Williamson, Bill started playing a bit more in front of white audiences. A performance at Iowa State College found him steady work as a janitor there in the late forties, a time when blacks were turning away from the blues. The urban folk revival brought him a new audience more interested in the traditional songs of his rural background than in his urban blues. That environment gave him a chance to record some of the pointed social commentaries that mainstream record companies had passed up, such as "When Will I Get to Be Called a Man" and "Black, Brown, and White," as well as to publish his autobiography, "Big Bill Blues." Big Bill found an audience abroad too, successfully touring England and Europe, South America, Africa, and Australia from 1951 to 1957.

Bill would lose first his voice, then in 1958 his life, to cancer of the throat. As the epitaph he wrote for himself in 1952 suggested, he had been a well-loved man all his life, and his funeral was attended by throngs of friends and admirers, including some of the greatest musicians and singers in the world.

MEMPHIS SLIM

Not long after the 1946 "Blues in the Mississippi Night" sessions, Big Bill Broonzy told his sideman and protégé, "You don't need Big Bill or no other blues singer, just get you some good musicians to play with you and you'll be Memphis Slim just like I'm Big Bill."

Memphis Slim was born Peter Chatman in Memphis in 1915, a member of a founding family of the blues that included Lonnie and Sam Chatman of the Mississippi Sheiks, blues guitarist Bo Carter, and, it is said, Delta Blues great Charlie Patton. Memphis grew up next door to a honky-tonk and began teaching himself piano at the age of seven, honing his skills in Arkansas roadhouses in his teens, and eventually making his way to Memphis' fabled Beale Street.

In the teens and twenties, Beale Street was a thriving center of entertainment. The party never stopped, and there was a 24-hour-a-day demand for musicians and entertainers. The customers came from the labor camps and plantations of the Delta. Blues was their music, and they made Beale Street the capital of the blues. Record companies with "race" series arranged regular sessions for local players like Furry Lewis, Memphis Minnie, and the Memphis Jug Band. But when young Peter Chatman arrived in the early thirties, times were changing. Jukeboxes were replacing live music and Memphis Slim eventually took to the road, playing rural joints and roadhouses, probably spending some time in work camps and possibly even prison, which he alludes to on this album. In 1937, he moved north to Chicago, joining the best black musicians of his generation and countless other immigrants.

At this time, the influence of the Beale Street great, Roosevelt Sykes, was still strong in his playing. By the time of the "Blues in the Mississippi Night" sessions, he had been Big Bill's accompanist for over five years. "When Big Bill really got the blues," Slim once remarked, "he didn't give a damn for bars or measures, you just had to follow him." Slim's own masterful style was well in place by now. His wonderful hands spanned twelfths on the keyboard with ease, his mellow voice sang the blues with mature authority.

Slim placed a few hits on the R&B charts in 1949 and 1950, but, like most blues artists, he received little recompense, and recording fees were mainly a supplement to other income. By the end of the decade, even these sources of income were drying up as the black audience lost interest in the blues. By this time, the white audience that had greeted Slim, Big Bill, and Sonny Boy at Town Hall in New York had grown on both sides of the Atlantic, and Slim started finding work in coffeehouses and clubs that were booking folk music. After his appearance at the 1959 Newport Folk Festival, Louis Armstrong's manager Joe Glaser booked a European tour for Slim in 1960. Like Big Bill before him, and many other great African-American musicians, Slim was greeted by enthusiastic crowds across the continent.

He settled in Paris for good in 1962, eventually taking a French wife and living in the

Bois de Boulogne. He played throughout Europe, recorded for French and German record labels, and appeared frequently on television, eventually starting his own booking agency and setting up nightclubs in Paris and Tel Aviv.

Few bluesmen of his generation matched his success. Slim became a wealthy man and a celebrity in Europe, but never losing the warmth, the charm, and the infectious chuckle heard in his recordings. He accepted fame with relish, touring Africa and the Middle East for the U.S. State Department as an "Ambassador of the Blues," but he kept his home in Paris until his death in 1988.

### SONNY BOY WILLIAMSON

Born in Jackson, Tennessee, in 1914, John Lee Williamson picked up the nickname "Sonny Boy" as a teenager when he hoboed around the South with guitarist Sleepy John Estes and mandolin player Yank Rachell. He arrived in Chicago in 1934, already a veteran of the road and a mature stylist.

He was the first blues harmonica player to achieve commercial success and his playing set the standard for a generation of blues harp blowers that included Little Walter, Junior Wells, Big Walter Horton, James Cotton, and Rice Miller — the "other Sonny Boy Williamson."

Big Bill once said of Sonny Boy that he could play his harp and sing at the same time. Sonny Boy seamlessly intertwined his voice with the sweet and torrid cries, sexy rhythms and earthy growls he drew with ease from his instrument. This ability, combined with a seemingly limitless gift for improvisation, put him in great demand as a sideman to stars like Big Bill and Big Joe Williams. On his own, he became one of the most extensively recorded and most popular commercial blues artists, but since the industry and its producers customarily pocketed the royalties of bluesmen and other black artists, Sonny Boy could be found frequently in Chicago's Maxwell Street market, playing for tips from passersby.

He was a key figure in the development of the urban Chicago blues style. The echoes of his country background were strong in pieces like "Groundhog Blues" and "Bad Luck Blues" (a variation on the lyrics of "I Could Hear my Name Ringin'," he performs on this album). The work of Sonny Boy and his followers made the harmonica a staple of the Chicago Blues sound. The addition of this wind instrument essentially gave the music a more African texture and pointed the way for blues bands of later years. The records he played on, like Big Joe Williams' original "Baby Please Don't Go" and his own "Good Morning Little Schoolgirl" became standards.

But although Sonny Boy's abilities as a musician gave him a source of income other black Chicagoans did not have, it also placed him at the center of a dangerous milieu where bluesmen often caught fists, knives, and bullets. Sonny Boy reveled in the violent life of the honky-tonks and juke joints where his blues flourished. Friends warned him to play in safer surroundings and, especially, to stop carrying on with the women who

pursued him. On June 1, 1948, while returning home from playing at the Plantation Clubland, an unknown assailant, possibly a jealous lover, attacked him, piercing his temple with an ice pick. His wife found him collapsed on the stairs to their apartment. She was accustomed to his hard drinking and did not notice the barely perceptible but fatal wound. She put him to bed, and did not realize he was dead until the next morning.

## **CREDITS**

*Blues in the Mississippi Night* was recorded by Alan Lomax, New York City, March 2, 1947. This album was originally released by United Artists in 1959 and reissued in 1990 by Rykodisc.

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[DNS : *LOC photos*:

**1. Reproduction Number:** LC-USZ62-38540 (b&w film copy neg.)

**Call Number:** LOT 7414-E, no. N137 <P&P>

(African American convicts working with shovels, possibly the singers of "Rock Island Line" at Cummins State Farm, Gould, Arkansas, 1934]

**2. Reproduction Number:** LC-USZ62-94754 (b&w film copy neg.)

**Call Number:** PGA - Sala-- (B size) [P&P]

(Mississippi River steamboats at night)

**4. Reproduction Number:** LC-D4-39524 (b&w glass neg.)

**Call Number:** LC-D4-39524 <P&P>

(Steamboats and levee from the Memphis customhouse)]