When these recordings were made in 1939, the African-American music of several generations could still be heard in Mississippi. Fiddle and drum bands still played country picnics in some areas, black fiddlers and banjo players were interpreting old country reels, prisoners still sang work songs to make their chores lighter, and a capella spirituals were sung in many churches.

For Alan Lomax, this was "The land where the blues began," an extraordinary wellspring of song, music and poetry he has remained close to all of his life. He had made numerous field recordings of many styles of black music in Mississippi throughout the 1930's and 40's. By 1939, some of the oldest styles, like the work song, were waning, and it seemed like a good time to make the best possible recordings of them that he could.

The Yazoo River, Lomax wrote, runs west from the hills of northeastern Mississippi, then makes a dogleg curve south to join the Mississippi. The red, gravelly land along its westward curve is known as "the hills," a region which was settled early, farmed hard by Southern planters and rotted terribly through a century of careless handling. Along its southern course, west to the Mississippi, is the Yazoo Delta proper — fat, black cotton land receded from river floods by the levees and now divided into enormous, modern, factory-like plantations. William Faulkner gives us an epic image of this country in his novels.

Clarksdale, Mississippi, capital of the Delta, shares with Memphis the honor of being the home of the blues. Jelly Roll Morton and W.C. Handy both played there. Bessie Smith sang there and died there. Big Bill Broonzy, Muddy Waters, Robert Johnson, Charley Patton, the Mississippi Sheiks and hundreds of other known and unknown blues singers tried out their songs in its juke joints.

The river, then the railroad, then the state highways, and finally, radio and television brought new musical currents to the Delta so that a fresh style of music developed every ten or fifteen years. Each style more and more obliterated the one before it, and this is typical of the ever-changing, self-renewing flow of the African-American tradition.

The hill country to the north, however, has been a backwater in which various types of older music lived on. More and more the land was turned over to small Negro farmers, such as the performers in this disc. Thus in sleepy country neighborhoods between Como and Tupelo, folk musicians until recently played the vaude of the slave at country picnics.

Here, in the summer of 1942, Lomax found Sid Hemphill, an extraordinary blind musician, a maker of fiddles and drums, and a composer of

Lord, that
61 Highway,
it's the longest road I know,
She run from New York City,
run right by my baby's door.
scenes of ballads. Hemphill was the leader of a band of auto-harmonica vintage, including fiddle, drum, five-string banjo and harmonica tuned to a non-European, four-tone scale. Before the Civil War, harmonica was common to a wide area in the deep South, and it is likely that Hemphill's music was an echo from auto-harmonica days and ultimately from original African sources. In the summer of 1959, when this record was made, Hemphill was doubled over with age and his band had been broken up, but no country music could be held without his piping.

A tradition contemporary with Hemphill's, but somewhat later in time and more vibrant at that time, is represented in the fife-and-drum band of the Young Brothers. Ed Young, the fife, blouse tuxedo-like garments that bear a remarkable resemblance to West African dance playing. His brother Lonnie, whacks out off-beat rhythms on his drum that closely resemble patterns popular in the West Indies. This is a dance tradition that seems directly out of the march music of the fife-and-drum corps of the American Revolution.

The next oldest level of dance music can be found in the Prather Brothers' percussive use of fiddle and guitar. Their style of raggy singing was popular in the area before the blues appeared and demonstrates the strong two-way influence between black and white musicians found throughout the South. Harry O ther had run into other bands of the same vintage in Louisiana.

In the playing and singing of Fred McDowell, we come upon the blues people as they first emerged from the lower camp into country dances — a music much freer and more improvisational, both rhythmically and musically, than those recorded during the 20's and 30's. In John Dudley's blues, we meet a country musician of the sophisticated, yet completely folk, tradition of that later period. Dudley and Robert Johnson both came from Tenas County, Mississippi and belonged to the same school.

The spirituals sung here by Anderson Burton, Viola James and the members of their Mississippi church represent a style that crystallized around the same time as Fred McDowell's blues. Beginning in the mid-19th century, blacks and whites in rural areas would often meet outdoors to sing repetitive religious songs that would be built around stock phrases and themes. The performances would build to a extraordinary intensity. By the turn of the century, a distinct black spiritual tradition had developed that would influence later "gospel blues" styles of the 30's and 40's.

The prison work songs recorded at the Lambert State Penitentiary and Parchman Farm (where Dudley was incarcerated) probably reflect the oldest traditions and styles: work songs and field hollers. They reflect the song heritage of the West African, whose traditionally sung inspired, organized and manned all kinds of work activities. Songs like these were once sung all over the South, but they were the first in the then-segregated prison systems where Alan Lomax and his father John began documenting them in 1935. These improvised litanies were built around the rhythms that prisoners worked to everyday and were a means of making the time pass easier. The men gave voice to their feelings and frustrations, creating unique and riveting performances as they did so.

Lomax returned to this region in 1978 to shoot material for his American Roots series on PBS. At that time he was dismayed to find many of the singing traditions represented on this record all but gone. "The wellspring that has given the world so much is dying up," he stated. While current blues revival has brought much exposure to the urban Chicago style of blues, the older traditions of Mississippi remain a less well-known, less appreciated, and less understood area of American music.

In 1993, Lomax's The Land Where the Blues Began (New York: Pantheon), an account of his encounters with African-American musicians in Mississippi and reflections on Southern culture, was awarded the National Book Award for non-fiction. It contains lengthy descriptions of all of Lomax's work in Mississippi, including the 1959 field trip.

1. LOUISIANA
song by Henry Rackoff.
Recorded September 28, 1929 at Parchman Farm, Camp Number 7, Mississippi.

The field holler is the "deep song" of the black south. Every singer in the "pen," where almost everybody was a singer, had his own personal holler, blues, or monologue of his thoughts and fantasies, which single him out and gave him a sense of individuality. Here, Henry Rackoff announces his intention of "sleeping off" down to good old Louisiana when he has served his time at Parchman.

O I ever make it, baby, I be long gone.
O Captain said, "Henry, Henry along,"
O then the sergeant said "rise".
O if I had my $40 I wouldn't do either one.
O I'm goin' down in Louisiana,
don't you want to go? (2x)
O you look for me in Louisiana,
I be long gone. (2x)
O you can tell everybody that I'll be gone.
O I'll be by to see you, fire the autumn guns.
O I might be in a hurry — I can't stay very long.
2. "JIM AND JOHN"
performed by Ed Young, Jr., Lonnie Young St. and Lonnie Young Jr., drums. Recorded September 25, 1959 in Como, Mississippi.

The Young Brothers' Band had been active in the Como area playing at country picnics in the summer, until about five years before these recordings were made. Here they perform a wordless variant of one of their family compositions with the ladies of the house clapping in magnificent African rhythms. A one-phrase melody is varied playfully in its melodic and rhythmic aspects, creating cross rhythms with a powerful repeated accompanying rhythmic figure — an ancestor of the blues dance forms, but far older.

In "The Land Where the Blues Began" Lomax characterized Ed Young as a winsome, Pete-like figure who delighted in his music. This style of dance music is noted in the historical record — one of Thomas Jefferson's slaves is known to have organized a fife-and-drum group during the Revolutionary War — but how and why this music persisted here alone is uncertain. The pentatonic image associated with fife-and-drum music may have allowed Southern blacks to maintain it at a time when drumming by blacks was otherwise banned. Lomax felt that another important factor may have been that in the Mississippi hills country, many blacks owned their own land and thus had more freedom to maintain old ways.

3. "61 HIGHWAY BLUES"
Fred McDowell, guitar and vocal. Recorded in Como, Mississippi, September 25, 1959.

It was on Young's advice that Lomax sought out Fred McDowell, a friend and neighbor. This piece, one of the first that McDowell recorded for Lomax, concerns the north-south highway that runs from Chicago to Memphis to the Gulf, a road of adventure and escape for the blacks of the mid South. Fred McDowell of Como, Mississippi treats it in the free style of the old-time country bluenotes, sliding the bottleneck with his left hand to double the melodic part, and playing a complex African-like polyrhythm with his right hand. When he entered this performance in his field log, Lomax wrote a single word right next to it: "Perfect."

Lend, that 61 Highway, it's the longest road I know, (2x)
She run from New York City, Run right by my baby's door.

Well, there's some folks say they Greyhound bus don't run (2x)
Lend, just go to West Memphis, baby, Look down Highway 61.
I said please, please see somebody for me, (2x)
If you see my baby, tell her she's all right with me.

Lord, if I should happen to die, baby, before you think my time has come, (2x)
I want you to bury my body
Down on Highway 61.

3. STEWBALL
sung by Ed Lewis, leading a group of prisoners.
Recorded September, 1959 at Lambert State Penitentiary, Camp B, Mississippi.

The original is a leader-repsonse work song sung by Ed Lewis, a group of prisoners. The song was
recorded in September, 1959 at Lambert State Penitentiary, Camp B, Mississippi.

I saw the white horse, Molly's gone:
I saw the white horse, Molly's gone.

Well, I tapped on Kay's window.
And I tapped on the poor gal's door.
Well this is the answer that she give me,
And nigger, don't you talk no more.
No more, you talk no more.

Way out in East Colorado.
Where the timber grew tall.
You could win you lots of money
On that noble grey mare.

Chorus

There's a big day down in Jackson,
Don't you wish that you were there?
You could win you lots of money
On that noble grey mare.

Chorus

Say oh, Stewball and jockey rider,
And they paint him solid red.
And if it hadn't a horn for Molly,
Say oh, Stewball be might stumble.
And there go my life.

Chorus

4. PO' HOT BLUES
performed by John Dudley, vocals and guitar.
Recorded October, 1959 at Parchman Farm Dairy Camp, Mississippi.

In 1959 Louis found John Dudley serving his last few months at Parchman Penitentiary. He was in his
sixties. In his younger days he had played at all
the country juke joints in Tunica County, Mississippi, the area that gave rise to Robert Johnson's
extraordinary guitar style. Dudley's vocal play and
the complex guitar style of his guitar link him
directly to Johnson and other bluesmen of this
area, including Charlie Patton and Tommy
Johnson. His repertoire included a version of
Tommy Johnson's "Cool Drink of Water Blues"
available as "Cool Water Blues" in the Sounds of
the South Atlantic Records CD box set and a
version of Patton's "Chokalade Mill Blues" (track 21).

I'm a poor boy, and I'm a great long way
from home (5x)

Well, I telephoned my baby, please send me my rain.
Well, I'm glad to see my baby, please send me my ring.
I'm a poor boy and I got nowhere to stay.

Run here, baby, sit down on my knee, (2x)
Have any trouble, speak it all to me.

Chorus
It was soon one mornin' death come a-creepin' in the room, Oh my Lord, my Lord, what shall I do to be saved?
9. I'M GONNA LIVE ANYHOW 'TILL I DIE
performed by Miles Pratcher, guitar and vocals.
Bob Pratcher, fiddle. Recorded September 21, 1928 in Como, Mississippi.

Miles and Bob Pratcher raised watermelons, cotton, and corn way back in the woods near Como. In their middle years, they still provided dance music that made their neighborhood happy on Saturday nights.

There are a staggering number of blues recordings available, but only a relative handful of black string band musicians of this sort had ever been recorded up to this point, and indeed very few since this time.

I'm gonna live anyhow till I die,
Well, I'm gonna live anyhow till I die.
I'm gonna live anyhow till I die,
I'm gonna live anyhow...

Good-bye, Lord... (2x)
Sticks and stones, etc...

Good-bye, Lord, honey, what you do. (2x)

10. LITTLE SALLY WALKER
performed by Mattie Gardner, Ida Mae Towns, and Jesse Lee Pratcher, vocals and harmonica.
Recorded September 21, 1928 in Como, Mississippi.

Three ladies of the Pratcher connection here, recall a ring game of their childhood that has been popular in America and Great Britain for centuries.

Little Sally Walker
Sittin' in a cotton
Rise, Sally, rise,
Wipe your weepy eye,
Put your hand on your hip,
Let your backbone slip,
Shake it to the left.
Shake it to the right.
Shake it to the one
That loves you the best.

11. OLD DEVIL'S DREAM
performed by Sid Hemphill, vocal and guitar.
Lucius Smith, drums. Recorded September, 1929 in San Antonio, Mississippi.

Hemphill and Smith once had the leading hand for three counties around. In those days, this black variant on the Southern favorite, "The Devil's Dream," enveloped many a country dance. They recorded a similar version of it for Lomax in 1929.

Ride around
My old man's hound
When it rains, it pours
When he wakes, he howls

Won't you talk to me
I got a ring on my finger

12. ROLL AND TUMBLE
performed by Rose Hemphill, vocal and guitar.
Recorded September, 1929 in San Antonio, Mississippi.

Rose Hemphill, daughter of Sid Hemphill, sings this familiar blues theme with a scalding intensity, mounting each thought, each scrap of verse, each bitter memory on an unwavering phrase that burns the heart. Most blues are performed for amusement, with a smile. Rose, on the other hand, addresses us directly with her anguish.

Roll and tumble,
Till the end of time

13. MAMA LUCY
sung by Leroy Gary.
Recorded September 18, 1929 at Parchman Farm, Camp Number 7, Mississippi.

Another individually composed field holler, this time recalling an amusing exchange about a lady of easy virtue. Lomax recalled that it "caused giggles in the line at Parchman Penitentiary whenever Leroy Gary sang it."

Save me, Mama Lucy, doctor, don't you let her die,
O she can furnish me more under yonder

Gonna stand one string
Gonna sit on my hands and cry

Want with a woman, she won't do nothin' she says,
What you want with a woman, she won't do nothin' she says

Roll and tumble,
Till the end of time
10. SOON ONE MORNIN'
performed by Fred McDowell, vocals and guitar.
Recorded September 25, 1959
in Como, Mississippi.

This dramatic picture of struggle with death comes from the best period of the spiritual, the thirty years after the close of the Civil War. It became popular among quakers and among street evangelists, and is one of a few old-time songs still known and occasionally sung everywhere in the South.

It was one morning death come a-creepin' in the room, (Ch)
Oh my Lord, my Lord, what shall I do (to be saved)?

Well, bruh, bruh, I heard my Lord call, (Ch)
Oh, my Lord, oh, my Lord, what shall I do?

I'm gonna find right, gonna wait until Jesus comes, (Ch)
Oh, my Lord, oh, my Lord, what shall I do (to be saved)?

It was one morning death come a-creepin' in the room, (Ch)
Oh, my Lord, oh, my Lord, what shall I do!

Note: The words in brackets are not sung; McDowell plays the syllables on his guitar.

11. I'M GOIN' HOME
12. INTERVIEW

sung by Ervin Webb, leading a group of prisoners.
Recorded October, 1959 at Parchman Farm
Dairy Camp, Mississippi.

Lomax wrote, "The plantation, with its hours of hard work and loneliness, has been a song factory. Even in my last visit in 1959, I found three or four new pieces, among which this touching and noble song was, perhaps, the best. Ervin Webb, the composer, has added a fine new song to the national repertory." This is the first time the complete rendition by Webb and group has been released.

Well, go 'head marry don't you wait on me,
Well, might not want you when I go free.
17. FRED MCDOWELL'S BLUES
performed by Fred McDowell, slide guitar and vocal; Miles Pratcher, guitar; Fanny Davis, comb.
Recorded September 21, 1939
in Como, Mississippi.

McDowell's tune and text are similar to "Louisiana," the field holler that opens this album. The slower tempo of the vocals artfully contrasts with the accompaniment. The voice prolongs the last note of the phrase, so that the syncopations and delays in the two guitars can be heard at the same point the syncopation appears in work songs. The brooding descending melody is sung again, and again with small variations, to make a three phrase stanza, a distinctive blues form. The lead guitar then takes over the melodic role. Sometimes the third phrase of the tune brings in the punch line of the conventional blues form with a new text and rhyme for the first two lines, but often the text is simply repeated, as it might be in a field holler (as some country blues, one phrase may be repeated indefinitely). In fact these country blues are like field hollers set to an insistent, driving dance rhythm. McDowell is joined here by his sister, Fanny, playing a comb.

Chorus
I'm goin' down in Louisiana.
I'm gonna buy me a mule band. (2x)
I'm gonna take my baby
So she won't have no other man.

Lord, sometimes I wonder
What gonna come of me. (3x)

If the river was whiskey, honey,
I was a dancin' duck. (2x)
Lord, I would dive to the bottom
And I would never come up.

18. TRYIN' TO MAKE HEAVEN MY HOME
sung by Viska James, leading congregation at Independence Church.
Recorded September, 1939 in Tyre, Mississippi.

Viska James, then a woman in her middle, vigorous years, and the mother of a large family, was the best known and most popular spiritual singer in the Como area. Her song, sung here with congregation, is of 20th century origin.

Chorus
Oh Lord, Berta, Berta, oh Lord, gal - a-a-well. (2x)
Well, go ahead marry don't you wait on me. (2x)
Well, might as well come when I go free. (2x)
Well, now, raise 'em up higher,
Let 'em drop on down. (2x)
Well, don't know the difference -
When the sun goes down. (2x)
If the river was whiskey,
honey, I was a divin' duck,
Lord, I would dive to the bottom
and I would never come up.

Well, Berta in Nashville
And she livin' at ease, (2x)
Well, I'm on at Funchman,
Got to work or leave. (2x)
Oh, Alberta, Berta, Oh Lord, gal. (2x)
Well, now raise 'em up higher,
Let em' drop on down (2x)
Don't know the difference,
When the sun go down. (2x)
Oh, Alberta, Berta, Oh Lord, gal. (2x)

20. GERMANY BLUES
performed by Fred McDowell, vocals and guitar
Recorded September 25, 1939 in Thomasville, Georgia.

This piece uses a rhythm and accompaniment somewhat different than "Fred McDowell's Blues" (track 17) but is no less intense or accomplished.

Lord I'm gone away Baby,
don't you want to go? (2x)
Lord I'm gone somewhere Baby,
I ain't never been there.

Lord I seen my baby
stay out on that Prisco line (2x)
It ain't but the one thing,
Honey, that grieve my mind.

21. CLARKSDALE MILL BLUES
performed by John Dudley, vocals and guitar.
Recorded October, 1939 at Parchman Farm Dairy Camp.
Previously unreleased.

John Dudley's version of this piece owes much to Charlie Patton's (the first verse is closely copied from Patton's Paramount recording) and also to Tommy Johnson's "Big Road Blues." It's a strong performance nonetheless, and shows him to be within the emerging Mississippi Delta blues style of the 20's. As he notes in his interview with Leona, Dudley was most active in the middle and late 20's, and may well have crossed paths with some of the local legends in the making, like Patton, Tommy Johnson, and Son House.

Tell me where was you when that Clarksdale Mill burned down?
I was standing right there
with my face all full of fumes.
DIDN'T LEAVE NOBODY BUT THE BABY

sung by Mrs. Sidney Carter. Recorded September, 1959 in Senatobia, Mississippi.
Previously unreleased.

Sid Hemphill's daughter was a fine singer (hear her extraordinary performance of "Phamah" on Voices from the American South, Vol. 1 in this series). She loved to entertain her children with her large repertoire of songs. She closes the album with this plaintive, haunting ballad from the hill country.

Go to sleep you little baby (2x)
Your mamma gone away and your daddy gonna stay
Didn't leave nobody but the baby.

Original liner notes to Zion Delta... Blues and Spirituals (Prestige International 22510) adapted and expanded for this album.

21. LORD HAVE MERCY
performed by Fred McDowell, vocals and guitar, Recorded September 25, 1959 in Como, Mississippi. Previously unreleased.

Another of Fred McDowell's spiritual performances. Once again, he fleshes out lines of text with lines of slide guitar, using repetitive text to build an intense performance of surpassing beauty.

Well, Lord have mercy on me (2x)
Lord have mercy on me.

I'm so happy on my knee (2x)
Oh Lord...

Lord have mercy on me (2x)
etc.

22. IF IT'S ALL NIGHT LONG

performed by Miles Pratcher, guitar and vocal, Bob Pratcher, fiddle. Recorded September 25, 1959 in Como, Mississippi. Previously unreleased.

All of the Prachers' recordings for Lomax were marked by strong syncopation and considerable acceleration, both strongly African-American characteristics, although the latter is heard much less nowadays.

Could it be? Could it be?
You love somebody.

But you don't love me
Got the blues.
Can't be satisfied.
Got the blues.
Can't be satisfied.

If it's all night long...
Have your way.
Just have your way.
If it's all night long.

Oh Lord...
I'm goin' home,
O yes, I'm goin' home,
Lord,
Lord, I'm goin' home.